

Common interests - divergent expectations?

Following the historically significant EU-enlargement Russia and the European Union are now geographically closer to each other. This proximity is reflected in the political perceptions of the newly-declared "strategic neighbourhood". How are we to deepen the EU-Russia partnership? From the 20th to the 22nd of June 2004 the Policy Planning Staffs of the German, French and Russian Foreign Ministries met with representatives from politics and business as well as a number of scholars for a trilateral conference at the German Council on Foreign Relations on the "Perspectives of the EU-Russia relationship after EU-enlargement". Plenty of topics made for exciting and interesting debates. The three days were filled with talks about civil society, economic co-operation and security policy. Russia's foreign policy, particularly with respect to the European Union, attracted strong attention. In the background stood the questions in how far the Russian Federation would allow itself to be integrated into EU-structures, and whether the European Union itself can even be said to represent a homogeneous entity. Many issues in EU-Russia relations remain unclear. For Russia EU-Europe is a complicated matter. A partnership between the EU and Russia would be ideal for the stability of Europe as a whole. But critical voices warn against a potential enmity.

The first panel dealt with the question of common European values taking into account civil society and cultural aspects. The growth of a civil society in Russia stood at the centre of the debate. French and German referents worried about certain tendencies in Russia's current development. Russia was called a "democracy without a democratic society": whereas in Western Europe the state is influenced by society, the Soviet tradition of a society dominated by the state appears alive and well in today's Russia. Russian participants conceded that the Russian society is passive. But according to surveys the Russian people show themselves much more open to a rapprochement with Europe than the ruling elite. Yet the choice of western values remains selective: Russians want to live like Europeans, but according to Russian rules. A Russian political scientist said that the social and political systems of Russia and the EU, respectively, are simply not compatible. Others argued that there are no divergent values - only domestic practices differ. Is Putin's project of modernisation compatible with the Russian establishment's suspicion of western values? Despite many controversies the participants agreed on the important transformatory influence that Russia's dialogue with the EU has on the country and on Russian society.

A second panel on the relationship between state and economy found surprising similarities between Germany, France and Russia. All three countries see themselves confronted with the challenges of globalisation, and everywhere the fine tuning of the economy, using subsidies to support certain sectors, is too high, while the setting of a rough framework is ne-

glected by decision-makers. In every country the question remains whether the state is at all needed in the workings of the economy and whether politics is not ever more economy-oriented. Especially in the case of Russia, according to some referents, there seems to be a dangerous development from a steered democracy to a steered economy. Putin demands from Russian entrepreneurs that they should pay attention to national interests, but this leads to the incapacitation of economic decision-makers. Also, the authoritarian process of modernisation has led to the development of business, not of society. At a certain level of economic development the rule of law is simply required. A national interest in the economy is certainly legitimate but the sort of control that is practised in Germany, France and Russia remains problematic. The Yukos-case in Russia can be regarded as a symbol for many unsolved questions, especially for the main question: what role does the state have in a modern economy?

Controversies were to be expected in the panels on EU-Russia co-operation in Central-Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. Referents of all three countries discussed the Russian and EU-concepts of their respective "near abroad". Whereas the 4 common spaces are a symbol for the fact that Russia and the EU need each other economically and share an interest in stability, it is not yet clear how the new central-east European component of the enlarged EU will influence relations and how the 4 spaces on foreign and security policy, research and education as well as law and inner security can be filled. There are more than enough practical problems. Kaliningrad, Moldavia, Georgia, Belarus, NATO-enlargement, the common threat of international terrorism or North Korea all demand co-operative solutions. But co-operation is often hampered by different expectations. EU-Europe is mainly criticising Russia's special position with respect to its "near abroad". Russian participants warned the EU against "geopolitical ambitions" in the post-Soviet space.

The news about an attack of Chechen rebels in Ingushetia provoked a fierce debate on the issue of Chechnya. Even though Europe does not want to question Russia's territorial integrity, it criticises violations of human rights and the lack of a political process. Russian referents pointed out that while the EU often raises such objections, it could not offer concrete solutions itself. Russia and the EU, according to one participant, are ultimately partners and competitors, in the same way as the US and the EU. But zones of crisis like Southern Caucasus or Iraq can only be stabilised together. Security is after all the basis for any kind of democratisation. It was argued that in some regions - especially in Central Asia - the maintenance of existing regimes is necessary in order to guard against radical Moslems gaining power.

The debates on foreign policy made clear what was openly admitted by some participants: neither Russia nor the EU have a clear strategy with respect to the world's crisis zones, let alone a common approach. Moreover the EU is asking itself where its interests and means end. Since the 11th of September Russia sees the United States as a foreign policy priority. European Projects, like the ESDI, are either not taken seriously by the Russian side or are regarded as an even bigger threat than NATO-enlargement. Finally, equality and prestige for Russia - indispensable for effective co-operation - are maybe easier achievable in the military than the economic field. The participants agreed that problems, which are likely to grow, have to be confronted in common by an enlarged European Union and the Russian Federation.