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## From Plans to Substance: EU-Russia Relations During the British Presidency

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## Abstract

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**M**oscow's relationships with both Brussels and London have been bumpy. Nonetheless, recent progress in EU-Russia relations suggests the potential for refashioning the 'strategic partnership' in a more realistic manner. The UK's priorities are to build on the successes of the Luxembourg presidency and convert plans into practical projects. There are a number of difficulties however, including continuing differences in values and potential clashes of interest. These are likely to be exacerbated by problems in the policy-making structures on both sides. Although the chance exists to add momentum to the relationship, progress will be slow and small scale.

# Introduction

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Two main camps exist in the EU regarding policy towards Russia: 'friends of Russia' and 'Russia realists'.<sup>1</sup> The first group, including France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece, seeks to pursue good relations with Russia. The latter group, including most of the other member states, pursues a more critical approach to Moscow. The United Kingdom (UK) is one of only a few member states that are considered 'in between' – critical of Russia, but also interested in developing good practical relations. London considers Russia to be important to the UK as the EU's largest neighbour, a major energy supplier, as a nuclear power and a key player on proliferation issues, 'but hindered by social problems and underdeveloped legal and market infrastructures'.<sup>2</sup> Often Britain has taken a back seat in EU-Russia relations. Nonetheless, the UK recognises that the EU's relationship with Russia, particularly considering the enlargement process, 'is of vital importance to both the EU and Russia alike', and thus will seek to 'build strong EU relationships with Russia'.<sup>3</sup>

Moscow has voiced concern that the UK's published priorities for the presidency do not include Russia.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the Russian foreign policy establishment considers London an important partner on the international stage and that the UK carries weight in the EU. Alexandr Yakovenko, spokesman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), recently stated

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<sup>1</sup> The paper draws on a series of interviews with officials in Paris, Brussels and London in June and July 2005.

<sup>2</sup> UK International Priorities: A Strategy for the FCO. Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2003, p. 27 <[www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)>.

<sup>3</sup> Prospects for the EU in 2005. Presented to Parliament in February 2005, p. 23 <[www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)>; UK International Priorities, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Priorities for the UK Presidency of the EU 2005, presented to Parliament in June 2005 <[www.eu2005.gov.uk](http://www.eu2005.gov.uk)>. However, this should be compared with the UK Presidency Priorities set out by Tony Blair to the European Parliament on 23<sup>rd</sup> June which included Russia and the Ukraine.

that Moscow 'appreciates the efforts of London in strengthening Russia's cooperation with the [EU] ... its integration into international structures and its full participation in their activity'.<sup>5</sup> Another Russian official has suggested that in the current situation, it is the best constellation that the UK now has the Presidency.<sup>6</sup>

## The London-Moscow Relationship: an Uneven Partnership

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Britain and Russia have a bumpy relationship. London and Moscow are considered to work well together in multilateral formats – particularly in the United Nations (UN) – and have worked closely together in the G8. However they also have differences, well illustrated by their disagreements over the Iraq war. Bilaterally, there are also positive and negative elements. Britain is one of the largest foreign investors in Russia, particularly in the oil and gas sector. In the last two years, for example, BP and Shell have invested over \$13 billion in Russia.<sup>7</sup> Economic ties have boomed since 2002. Added to this, Britain's Department for International Development (DFID) has a number of social development projects in Russia. Since 2000, DFID has invested approximately £24 million per year<sup>8</sup>, particularly in combating HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis in Russia.

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in "Russia & Britain – partnership if Foreign Policy", RIA Novosti, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2005 <[www.rian.ru](http://www.rian.ru)>.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the author in Brussels, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Joint Conference by the Prime Minister and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2003; Press release – Sir Stephen Brown's Speech to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Russian Petroleum Congress, Moscow, 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2005 <[www.britishembassy.gov.uk](http://www.britishembassy.gov.uk)>.

<sup>8</sup> Russia: Country Strategy Paper, 2001-2005. p. 7 <[www.dfid.gov.uk](http://www.dfid.gov.uk)>.

London and Moscow cooperate on a range of security issues. There is a joint working group on terrorism which is considered to work well, and a number of defence related projects and high level meetings have taken place. For instance, the UK sends officers to the Russian-run UN Monitoring Officer's Course training camp at the 'Vystrel' training centre. In 2003, London and Moscow signed an agreement whereby Britain would provide £50 million to assist the dismantling of decommissioned nuclear submarines.

However, diplomatic points of conflict also exist. The highest profile problems are over the UK's granting of asylum to those Russia accuses of criminal or terrorist activities. The rejection by the UK courts of Russia's extradition attempts has led to Moscow regularly accusing London of double standards.<sup>9</sup> Boris Berezovsky and Akhmed Zakayev are the highest profile cases, but similar cases include the broadcast by Channel 4 of an interview with Shamil Basayev.<sup>10</sup> There is the possibility that there will be efforts to extradite former YUKOS executives who have sought refuge in Britain, which may ensure that such difficulties simmer on. Moreover, in May 2005, Nikolai Patrushev, Director of the FSB, voiced concerns about the activities of Merlin, a UK-based Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO),<sup>11</sup> of working against the interests of Russia on behalf of the British government, an accusation strongly denied by Britain.

Diplomatic criticism is not all one-way. Britain is usually frank in airing its concerns about the state of democracy, rule of law and judicial system in Russia, and Moscow's lack of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Tony Blair has been reluctant himself to criticise developments.

Indeed, of late, the official line has been that recent remarks by Vladimir Putin on human rights had been encouraging and Britain is interested in hearing how Vladimir Putin planned to pursue this.<sup>12</sup> But other officials and parliamentarians have been more critical. In 2004, there was concern about the nature of the elections in Chechnya, where all the serious candidates were ruled out, the nature of the Russian presidential elections in which it was felt that Vladimir Putin ensured that no serious media criticism appeared. The government has also shown concern about human rights violations such as the abuse of prisoners, as well as the promotion of officials with a security service

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<sup>9</sup> 'Russia & Britain – Partnership in Foreign Policy', RIA Novosti, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2005 <[www.rian.ru](http://www.rian.ru)>.

<sup>10</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Merlin has been working in Nizhni Novgorod, helping those affected by tuberculosis.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in "Tony Blair Arrives in Russia to Meet Vladimir Putin", *Mosnews*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2005 <[www.mosnews.com/news/2005/06/13/blairarrives.shtml](http://www.mosnews.com/news/2005/06/13/blairarrives.shtml)>.

background to influential governmental positions.<sup>13</sup> Such criticisms are also raised officially in the bilateral relationship, most recently on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2005. There has been political criticism of the trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the head of Yukos, and representations made about the necessity for international fair trial standards and the independence of the Russian judicial system.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Such concerns have been widely reported throughout the main UK press. For example, see 'Britain to voice doubts on Putin: As Minister Visits Russia, worry surfaces on authoritarian rule', *The Guardian*, 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Hansard, House of Commons, 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2005.

## EU-Russia relations: A New Start?

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EU-Russia relations have also been bumpy recently. Frustration on both sides over the lack of practical substance in the relationship combined in 2003 and 2004 with frictions caused by clashes of interest in the common neighbourhood to sour the atmosphere. And frustrations have continued this year: border agreements between Russia and Estonia and Russia and Latvia have still not been concluded – Russia pulled out of the agreement with Estonia in early July.

There may be change in the wind, however. Officially, the Luxembourg presidency was one of the most positive in recent times. The most prominent success was the (belated) signing of the Road Maps for the Four Common Spaces.<sup>15</sup> Experts have criticised the Road Maps for being vague, ducking the main action points and failing to address the values gap in relations.<sup>16</sup> However, officials and a small number of experts on both sides are cautiously optimistic, arguing that it is illustrative of a more systemic approach, offering a *tour d'horizon* in every sphere of the relationship. It includes a number of concrete commitments and adds a more developed political dimension to the legal foundations of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). Perhaps most importantly given the friction of 2004, it acts as a political 'clearing of the decks' and an opportunity to start afresh.

There were other encouraging signs, though, such as the second convening of the Permanent Partnership Council (PPC) at foreign minister level, viewed positively by both sides. A new format has also been introduced:

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<sup>15</sup> See [www.europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/russia/summit\\_05\\_05/index.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/russia/summit_05_05/index.htm)

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Emerson, M. *EU-Russia: Four Common Spaces and the Proliferation of the Fuzzy*. CEPS Policy Brief No.71. May 2005 <[www.ceps.be](http://www.ceps.be)>; Report prepared by scenario group of Russian experts, led by Sergei Karaganov entitled 'Russia-EU Relations: The Present Situation and Prospects', cited in CEPS Neighbourhood Watch, Issue 5, June 2005. See the text in Russian <[www.svop.ru/upload/images/report2.pdf](http://www.svop.ru/upload/images/report2.pdf)>.

the first human rights consultations took place on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2005. The meeting was considered by officials on both sides to have been successful, since it provided a depoliticised forum for the discussion of human rights concerns of both sides – the EU's concern about Russian action in Chechnya and Russian concerns about the treatment of Russian minorities in the Baltic States. Another encouraging sign was the progress on socio-economic development in the North Caucasus. An EU investigation mission visited the region in April and has allocated some 20 million Euro for investment in the region.

So some grounds for optimism exist. These are admittedly small signs, but they do show that tricky questions which for so long remained at best 'off the agenda', at worst real problem points, are being addressed in a more realistic manner. In the light of both the poor state of the relationship in 2004 and also British priorities for the next six months, they take on added importance.

## British Priorities: From Plans to Substance

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London is seeking to play an active role during its presidency and carry forward the inherited agenda in an effective way. The UK's position coincides well with the new, more realistic approach adopted by the EU following the reports of the Commission and Council in 2004. Although there are some differences of nuance – London may want the EU to take a tougher position on a number of issues with Russia – there are few gaps between UK policy towards Russia and that of the EU. Rather than introducing new elements, the UK is seeking to develop the practical side of the relationship and begin to implement the Road Maps. London wants to focus on four main areas.<sup>17</sup>

The first is the Russia-EU energy dialogue. Launched in 2000, this has stagnated: there are inherent difficulties in this area caused by differing approaches. The EU approaches the issue from a liberal free market perspective and 'buyer', whereas Russia approaches the relationship from the position of 'seller' and with increasing state control over the market. Moreover, the EU has limited input into energy relations with Russia – most of the main discussions are held between member states themselves and Russia. Nonetheless, the energy relationship is a key interest of both Russia and the EU, and London wants to revitalise and enhance this dialogue.

London also wants to press on with the nascent socio-economic cooperation in the North Caucasus and develop the human rights consultations begun in March. The EU now wants to take the consultations forward in format and substance. In format, the EU would like to widen the field of involvement on the Russian side and involve more of the Russian decision-making chain –

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<sup>17</sup> 'British Ambassador: Russian-EU summit due this fall', RIA Novosti, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2005 <[www.russiacourier.com/eng/news/2005/07/01/2116](http://www.russiacourier.com/eng/news/2005/07/01/2116)>.

at the first meeting, Russia was represented by MID. The EU side would like to see other elements of the Russian elite involved. In substance, the EU would also like to begin to develop the dialogue. The first meeting amounted to an exchange of views. The EU would like to convert this into a longer exchange with greater development of detail.

According to EU officials, the UK also has been trying to develop cooperation in countering organised crime, focusing on the resurrection of the Organised Crime Action Plan of June 2000. Little progress has been made on these plans, but officials note that London has sought to cross-reference the Action Plan with the Road Maps to determine areas of continuing mutual interest. Areas identified include cooperation against trafficking in humans and drugs and hi-tech crime.

Britain also wants to focus on areas in external security, particularly in terms of enhancing the dialogue in two main areas. First, it wants to enhance the dialogue in the Political and Security Committee (PSC), by making meetings themed. Second, London wants to develop the dialogue over the common neighbourhood, particularly on Moldova and Georgia.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Lynch, D. 'Shared Neighbourhood or New Frontline? The Crossroads in Moldova', *Russie.Cei.Visions*, n.2, April 2005 for further details <[www.ifri.org/files/Russie/lynch\\_anglais.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/files/Russie/lynch_anglais.pdf)>.

## Obstacles

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There are clear obstacles to the positive development of the relationship, however. The difference in values is a major problem. As noted above, most experts have remained sceptical about the Road Maps because of this divergence, criticising them particularly for failing to address it. Common values provide the basis which holds the relationship together: common interests are an important feature, but interests change – it is the commonality of values that acts as the glue in a relationship on those occasions when interests do not coincide.

Douglas Alexander, Minister of State (Europe), has asserted that the UK will ensure democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.<sup>19</sup> The differences in values seem set to remain a key feature of Russia-EU relations.

This is particularly important given the potential differences in interests that may become more prominent in the near future<sup>20</sup>. This lies not just in the fact that some of Britain's key priorities include involvement in the North Caucasus, which is very sensitive for Russia. Simply, the UK supports a number of EU policies which are contentious in the overall relationship. Experts note that the UK, along with several 'Russia realist' member states, particularly the Baltic States, favours a more robust approach towards monitoring the Russo-Georgia border. Further examples include strong UK support for both enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), policies which have generated concern and opposition in Russia.

This may become even more sensitive with the recent appointment of Vladimir Chizhov to the position of Russia's Permanent Ambassador to the

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<sup>19</sup> Hansard, the House of Commons, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2005.

<sup>20</sup> For a more in depth examination of how interests differ, see the author's 'Russian Perspectives of Russia-EU Security Relations', CSRC Paper 05/38, Autumn 2005 <[www.da.mod.uk/CSRC/documents/Russian/](http://www.da.mod.uk/CSRC/documents/Russian/)>.

European Communities.<sup>21</sup> Although there are those who believe that his appointment will add weight and momentum to the relationship by enhancing Russia's decision-making chain in Russia-EU relations, it should be noted that Chizhov has consistently been an opponent of ENP. This was predominantly because ENP was considered to act as a gravitational centre in Europe, drawing states closer to Brussels and isolating Russia. Moreover, the relationship in the common neighbourhood has been complex, illustrated by the difference of approach over how to address the Moldovan conflict.<sup>22</sup>

This links to another big obstacle that stands in the way of developing the relationship at present: the decision-making apparatus. Problems lie at two interconnected levels. First, there is a continuing lack of effective mechanisms to ensure progress in the relationship. The PPC has not worked as effectively as hoped, largely because of disagreements about how it should meet. Moscow wants a 25+1 format whereas the EU wants to maintain the Troika format. Moreover, there are gaps in the operational mechanisms: EU experts have noted that there is no effective mechanism for converting the political guidelines into practical success.<sup>23</sup>

The second problem lies in decision-making processes on either side. Despite efforts to improve unity among EU member states, there are still major divergences in their approaches to Russia. Some states, such as Italy, for example, are more willing to overlook problems – particularly on issues such as Russian actions in Chechnya and in the values divergence – than others, particularly the new Eastern and Central European member states, who want to adopt a tougher line. The inability of the EU to pursue a unified line also undermines its ability to develop the relationship practically.

On the Russian side, there are also perceived to be problems, particularly the approach of some of the main Russian institutions to the relationship. Although President Putin has invited the EU to become involved in the social and economic development of the North Caucasus, few others in the Russian establishment support such intervention. Also, experts on the EU side note problems with the coordination of Russian positions and particularly the commitment of the coordinating institution, MID, to enhancing the relationship.<sup>24</sup> This has had an impact in two interconnected ways.

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<sup>21</sup> Chizhov was formerly Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

<sup>22</sup> See Lynch, D. 'Shared Neighbourhood or New Frontline? The Crossroads in Moldova', *op.cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Interview with the author, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with the author, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2005.

First, MID is not considered to be an effective coordinator – EU experts argue that it does not use its role as coordinator to ‘oil the wheels’ of the relationship between the relevant Russian ministries and the EU. This creates a dual problem: the different agendas proposed by various Russian Ministries are not effectively coordinated and proposed to the EU and therefore cannot be effectively developed. Moreover, it means that there is little chance that information will spread back out to the relevant ministries after agreements to develop any progress. Second, MID itself is perceived to be a recalcitrant partner, at times indeed adopting an adversarial and petty point-scoring approach to negotiations. Russian priorities are often delivered late to the EU, leaving very little time to develop the detail of a proposal and convert the proposal into substance. EU experts note that this perceived approach is contributing to increasing frustration on the EU side and the growth of the ‘Russia realist’ group.

## Prospects & Proposals

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Optimism should be therefore cautious. Since the UK has never been clearly in either the 'Russia realist' or 'friend of Russia' camp, it is considered by some EU officials to have credibility in both camps: London could be quite successful in gathering support among other EU member states and developing a coherent approach to Russia. This is not least because there is widespread consensus that plans need to be converted into practical action: one of the UK's main aims. Moreover, Britain and Russia have similar priorities and experience in working together in some of these, and Britain's working approach so far has generated optimism among Russian officials. Britain, in the words of one official, seems to under-promise and over-deliver.<sup>25</sup>

But even optimistic assessments of the Road Maps recognise that they only serve as a basis and that all the practical work lies ahead. Officials on both sides note that goals should not be set too high, and practical progress will be on a very small scale.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the priorities for the next six months are among those that have been the most sensitive or difficult in Russia-EU relations: the visa regime, the North Caucasus, human rights and the common neighbourhood. Although improvement in these areas would mark significant progress, there are dangers inherent in addressing them, most evidently in the potential hardening of the contrast between values.

The difficulties in the decision-making mechanism may undermine the coincidental interests. These difficulties also contribute indirectly to the enlargement of the 'Russia realist' group, the growth of which will increase the pressure to take a tougher line with Russia. So what should be done? The British Presidency should actively try to engage Russia more effectively in two ways.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with the author, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Interviews with the author, Brussels, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2005.

**Consolidating the mechanisms for the relationship.** Recently founded, they should be used to widen the interaction with Russia Ministries.

1/ *An energy PPC.* It is not clear at the time of writing that an energy PPC will be held – the UK should make every effort to ensure that it does. This is a priority for both parties, one of few where interests really do coincide. The opportunity should be taken: it may not be as easy to convene an effective PPC on the environment.

2/ *Human rights consultation.* The next consultation is scheduled for the 8<sup>th</sup> September. The UK should keep one eye on the future and not rush in to address Chechnya too aggressively. The UK should attempt to develop the results of the first meeting into both continuing and more detailed dialogue. But this is a fragile arrangement. Russia is sensitive on these issues, and does not approach them with real enthusiasm. The potential exists for Russian retrenchment and the collapse of such a forum as an effective mechanism.

3/ *The Northern Dimension (ND) format.* The ND has faded since 2002. However, it was one of the most successful projects for Russia-EU cooperation, not least because it was the only format where Russia felt involved as an equal partner.<sup>27</sup> This becomes increasingly pertinent with EU enlargement. The EU is working on a third ND Action Plan, to be prepared and finalised in 2006.<sup>28</sup> If the UK adds its weight to the ND and helps to revitalise it, it could provide a solid platform for adding substance to the relationship. An ND Ministerial meeting is pencilled in for later this year. The UK should ensure that the meeting takes place and seek to regenerate Russian interest in the project.

**Preparing the reshape of EU-Russia relations.** One of the stated British priorities for the summit in October is to launch early consideration of the shape of EU-Russia relations after 2007.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For an excellent overview of the ND, see Sergounin, A. & P. Joenniemi, *Russia and the European Union's Northern Dimension. Encounter or Clash of Civilisations?* Nizhni Novgorod, Linguistic University of Nizhni Novgorod Press, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Multiannual Strategic Programme of the Council, 2004-2006, prepared by the six presidencies (Ireland, Netherlands, Luxembourg, UK, Austria & Finland), December 2003, p.21 <[www.europa.eu.int](http://www.europa.eu.int)>.

<sup>29</sup> Prospects for the EU in 2005. The UK Presidency of the European Union, Presented to Parliament June 2005, p. 22 <[www.eu2005.gov.uk](http://www.eu2005.gov.uk)>.

1/ *Think about the PCA.* This is an important issue, but its renegotiation will be complex and thorny. London should not become distracted by what will be protracted and difficult negotiations, but continue to use the time after the summit to begin to build a bank of successful projects. Successful projects – even very small scale ones – on a bilateral London-Moscow level could be translated across to the other EU member states and provide a basis for Russia-EU practical cooperation. Britain's experience in establishing cooperative projects with Russian governmental and civil organisations may be beneficial.

2/ *Publicise achievements.* Some substantiated projects would generate momentum to follow up the Luxembourg Presidency, and feed into the longer-term framework of the relationship. It would also provide a constructive platform to begin renegotiating the PCA in 2006. London should also ensure that *all* practical achievements are publicised effectively and widely. Cooperation on non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction exemplifies why this is necessary. At present, despite its importance and encouraging statements made by EU officials,<sup>30</sup> it remains remarkably low profile, particularly in Russia.

It is crucial for both Russia and the EU – and continental stability in the long run – that their relationship begins to develop more positively after the difficulties of late 2003 and 2004. Although the establishment of cooperation at the professional level remains vulnerable to political vagaries, the building up of a reservoir of successful projects will have a snowball effect, contributing to a more upbeat political atmosphere. For the near future, expectations should be restrained: there are unlikely to be major achievements by the summit planned for the 4<sup>th</sup> October. The focus should instead be on the practical progress made by the end of December, however, and by then there may well have been some further small steps taken.

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<sup>30</sup> See [www.europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/cfsp/npd/index.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/cfsp/npd/index.htm)