

Russia and EU have changed and need a new agreement

05/10/2005 21:54

MOSCOW. (Nikolai Kaveshnikov, for RIA Novosti.) - The greatest achievement at the Russia-EU summit was not understanding on specific matters, but Europeans' acceptance in principle of Russia's initiative to formulate a comprehensive agreement that would replace the 1994 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PSA).

"An updated legal basis corresponding to modern realities is required," said President Vladimir Putin, commenting on the outcome of the summit.

The 1994 agreement no longer corresponds to present-day realities, above all current relations between Russia and the European Union. Back then Russia made the first moves in forming a democratic political system. Having just started the creation of a market economy, it suffered a severe economic crisis. Today Russia has a stable market economy, which for all the structural imbalances, demonstrates a high growth rate. A democratic political system has been formed and functions steadily. Of course, this democracy is very young and its imperfections are obvious against the background of the progress this country made.

But the European Union has changed too. In 1994, it comprised 12 countries, which had just drawn up a program of establishing an economic and currency union and were making the first attempts to pursue a common foreign policy. Today the EU includes 25 countries. It has a common currency and has worked out a concept of a common foreign policy and security. The EU has created instruments for implementing these policies and it has gained considerable experience in doing so. However, as the countries of Central and Eastern Europe joined the EU, it entered a period of profound and painful transformation. Contradictions within the Union intensified, as revealed by difficulties involved in the ratification of the EU constitution and differences of opinion as regards the future development of the EU.

The PSA was an important agreement for its time. It set a new political framework for relations between Russia and the EU, and formulated a principle of strategic partnership. Though largely declarative, this partnership creates a general favorable background for the development of relations. A system of joint institutions based on PSA concepts is functioning quite effectively. Contacts within these institutions have been gradually increasing mutual trust. Following

the agreement, a number of important accords have been signed -- on police cooperation, cooperation in science and technology, a multilateral program of nuclear security, and others. For a few years now an intensive energy dialogue has been taking place. In May 2005, the roadmaps for the four "common spaces" were signed. Though they are nothing more than a declaration of intentions and contain too many general words, still they charted a direction for further cooperation.

But the past years have also revealed many shortcomings in the PSA wording. In the first place, formally covering three spheres - economics, politics and culture - the PSA devotes little attention to the latter two. The political dialogue that is really going on concerns numerous subjects not mentioned in the agreement. The format of this dialogue has changed after the creation of the EU-Russia Permanent Partnership Council.

In regards to trade, the PSA copies the GATT/WTO provisions. During the early 1990s it was an important step forward, but in a couple of years, after Russia joins the WTO, this part of the agreement will lose all meaning. More importantly, the chief purpose of the agreement - that is, to assist Russia in carrying out economic and political reforms - has become outdated. Today Russia-EU relations are based on the principle of cooperation between equal partners and partial integration in some sectors of the "common spaces."

When the agreement has become obsolete, relations between Russia and the EU have turned into a series of declarative ambitious projects and tough bargaining over a multitude of specific issues. In fact, the existing mechanism of relations leads to the constant creation of all types of crises.

Such a situation plays into the hands of the political opponents in Europe, who gain from demonizing Russia and for whom the only way of strengthening their own positions in the EU is to preserve the image of Russia as an unpredictable and potentially unfriendly country.

This new agreement would help get rid of illusions and define areas of practical cooperation on the basis of common or close values. It is a positive step in the right direction that Moscow initiated negotiating a new agreement. It means that its former policy of passive "responding to arising problems," is over.

The time is ripe for launching a new debate on the prospects of relations with the EU. The European Union is currently concentrated on its own problems that require major efforts and considerable funds. Russia for the first time in modern history has a chance to offer its initiative to its European partners, to work out

its concept of a future agreement and determine an agenda of the talks reflecting Russia's interests.

Russia needs a full-scale strategic partnership with Europe, because Europeans are consistently encouraging Russia to continue its economic and political modernization. Such a position of the European partners may seem irritating but it helps overcome the existing opposition of a part of Russian society and bureaucracy.