

The Munich speech as a watershed in the Russia-West relations

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The future of the EU-Russia relations forms the core of Russia's foreign policy with the West. It will depend not only on the ability of the two partners to resolve their differences, but also on the international context. The two partners do not exist in a vacuum and their political will and readiness to find compromises will be strongly influenced by the trends in Russia's relations with the West. From this point of view the Munich speech of president Putin can be regarded as a certain watershed in Russia's relations with the West. It was assessed by many Western political analysts as a kind of ultimatum. But it was not so much an ultimatum but rather a message to Russia's partners. Undoubtedly, the Munich speech reflects a creeping deterioration of the Russia-West relations. This can be explained by four reasons.

First; Russia's course to reconsider the model of the Russia-West relations established in the 90s and based on unilateral concessions of Russia is not acceptable now. Russia's Western partners who got accustomed to a low profile foreign policy of Russia of the 90s regard this turn with suspicion. But the fact is that notwithstanding the underlying reasons, Russia feels getting stronger both domestically and internationally while her partners are passing through a difficult period of reassessment of their previous positions.

Second; The New American Mission concept of the USA which on many occasions demonstrated total disregard to international law, arms control, positions and interests of its partners. In this connection, Russia has some bones to pick with the European NATO members, most of whom are members of the European Union, which explains the turn of the Russian military policy against NATO expansion in Europe. Why was Europe so

diffident when the US wrecked the disarmament treaties which formed the basis of global security? All the European states, including Russia, had ratified the nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT), which the US has not ratified. Why didn't the European allies bring any pressure to bear on the US over this issue? It is now obvious that if the Treaty had come into force the situation with North Korea would have been different. The West, including the EU countries, has lost all interest in the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE Treaty). The fact that Poland and Czech Republic are considering the issue of hosting elements of the American ABM system, even though this concern is exaggerated in Russia, is universally perceived in a negative sense.

Third; Rivalry in the CIS space. Lack of strategic goals in the relations with Russia, along with an active policy of EU and NATO eastward enlargement, inevitably strengthened and continue to strengthen the protective and "great power" sentiments within the Russian political elite, and its fears that the West is about to "squeeze" Moscow out of the zone of its vital interests – the CIS. The expansion of the EU, initially perceived as an objective process in the development of the post-bipolar Europe, today is increasingly perceived by many in Russia as a source of new challenges, and not only in connection with the Kaliningrad problem (the territorial integrity of Russia, passenger and cargo transit, etc), but also rivalry throughout the post-Soviet space.

Traditionally Brussels presented the enlargement of the EU and NATO to the East as mutually complementary processes. Although membership of NATO is not a precondition for membership of the EU according to the Copenhagen Criteria, the latest wave of European Union enlargement to the post-communist countries of Central Europe shows that de facto it has become the necessary precondition for the EU membership. First these countries become part of the security system of the West and only then can they count on membership in the EU. With regard to the CIS the continuation of this practice will give rise to serious problems in the relations with Russia and strengthen confrontation trends in Europe. In other words, the proclaimed principle of mutual "complementarity" of

the enlargement of the EU and NATO is openly and dangerously at odds with Russia's interests in the post-Soviet space. It provides a justification for the anti-Western policy of those forces in Russia which now say bluntly that one of the main goals of national security is confronting and defending Russia against NATO which is expanding towards our borders and may absorb Ukraine, Moldavia and Georgia.

Fourth; The last but not least – Russia's domestic evolution. Russia is being judged by its partners by the highest standards of democracy which do not exist even in the leading EU countries not to mention the new members. The wide spread stereotype is that there is a gap in values between Russia and the EU. It looks that the gap is not in values but rather in democratic experiences of Russia and EU countries. Russia came out of the USSR only 16 years ago while the EU countries enjoy centuries of democratic experience. Democracy was developing in these countries in a natural and consistent way expanding from above to wider layers of population. Russia after the collapse of the USSR had to resolve many problems at once - to create a democratic foundation for its institutions and promote market economy reforms. Looking back in time one cannot but recognize that the first decade of its transformation was very uneven but at the same time one should recognize that we have already achieved a lot. During these 16 years we passed through the stage of the initial accumulation of the capital, the stage of the oligarchic capitalism and entered the stage of the state monopoly capitalism that the EU countries had passed 50-60 year ago.

How should one deal with a Russia that is far from perfect? It would be worthwhile to remember the advice given by George Kennan in 1951 in his article "America and the Russian Future" where he predicted the collapse of the USSR: " when Soviet power has run its course, or when its personalities and spirit begin to change (for the ultimate outcome could be one or the other), let us not hover nervously over the people who come after, applying litmus papers daily to their political complexions to find out whether they answer to our concept of "democratic." Give them time; let them be Russians; let them

work out their internal problems in their own manner. The ways by which peoples advance toward dignity and enlightenment in government are things that constitute the deepest and most intimate processes of national life. There is nothing less understandable to foreigners, nothing in which foreign interference can do less good. There are, as we shall see presently, certain features of the future Russian state that are of genuine concern to the outside world. But these do not include the form of government itself, provided only that it keep within certain well-defined limits, beyond which lies totalitarianism."