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RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: THREE QUESTIONS CONCERNING NEW PRINCIPLES IN BILATERAL RELATIONS

VALDAI DISCUSSION CLUB REPORT

MOSCOW, 2016

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We would like to thank **Fyodor Lukyanov**, Academic Director of the Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club, Chairman of the Presidium of Foreign and Defense Policy Council and drafting group member, as well as the participants of the situation analysis held under his direction on February 11, 2016, for their contribution to the preparation of this report and for their views on the main issues concerning Russian-EU relations:

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We are also grateful for the comments and suggestions by **Tatiana Romanova**, St. Petersburg University Associate Professor and Jean Monnet Chair Professor as well as all participants of the seminar “Russia and The European Union: Exploring New Principles of Relations” and the conference “Beyond the Deadlock: What Future for the EU – Russia Relations?” held in Rome in cooperation with the Institute of International Affairs (IAI) on April 18, 2016, and especially Dr. Ettore Greco, Dr. Nathalie Tocci, Dr. Riccardo Alcaro and Dr. Paolo Calzini for their contribution.

The main author and drafting group members take full responsibility for the contents of this report.

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Where are we now?

By all estimates the relations between the Russian Federation and the European Union have reached the lowest point. What both sides saw 20 years ago as an important and mutually beneficial project has been ruined by the military and diplomatic crisis concerning Ukraine. That crisis was, in turn, the result of a long period of stagnation and mutual misunderstanding.

The first signs of this appeared as early as the beginning of the last decade. The EU was at that time preparing for the largest geographic expansion in its history. When Russia called on the European Union to take its interests into account, the EU offered only a formal bureaucratic response and was either unable or unwilling to engage in a serious discussion with Moscow. In effect,

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All possibility for preserving the “strategic partnership” paradigm in a form as it was established in the early 1990s is now lost. However, the experience of the last 20 years is very valuable, primarily for the lessons we can glean from it and the opportunity it affords for making a fresh

start. The main conclusion to be drawn from such a failure is the need for a realistic and sober approach and for both sides to stop holding out hope that their counterparts will somehow change and become more amenable for interaction.

Why did the hopes that Moscow and Brussels shared early in their relations fail to bear fruit? Without delving into a deep philosophical analysis of world order and European development, it is enough to say that the Russian Federation and the European Union have changed considerably since they signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1994.

On one hand, the political structure of the European Union underwent radical changes. Attempts by the EU to transform from an economic block into a political union resulted in a pattern by which it could only form a unified foreign policy based on the lowest common political denominators. What’s more, the attempt to become one of the world political centers reduced its ability to take into account the interests of

neighbors, including Russia. The erosion of its internal balance of power proceeded with increasing speed, giving rise to a succession of institutional crises. The current migration problems have served as a further catalyst to that negative trend.

On the other hand, Russia gradually recovered from the breakdown of the 1990s and formed new political and economic state structures. Following a brief period during which it was ideologically oriented exclusively toward the West, Russia became painfully disillusioned first by its

own inability to comply with the “proper” criteria, and later by those criteria themselves. Thus, Russia began searching for its own identity in an increasingly uncertain external environment. Moscow began focusing on a “pivot to the East” as a way to diversify its foreign political and foreign economic relations. At the same time, within Russia it became increasingly clear that the development model adopted after the collapse of the Soviet Union had exhausted its usefulness, while building a

The system that emerged in Europe after 1991 was inherently unstable because it failed to satisfy the interests of all its participants. The West – as personified by the EU on this continent – was fully satisfied with the results of the Cold War. Russia did not consider that state of affairs entirely fair, but it was forced to endure it as long as it was weak. However, as Russia rebuilt its military and political might, it started to voice its dissatisfaction in increasingly clear terms.

Attempts by the EU to transform from an economic block into a political union resulted in a pattern by which it could only form a unified foreign policy based on the lowest common political denominators

modern, effective and sustainable socio-economic system turned out to be difficult. The current crisis is a result of a period of stagnation that began back when oil prices were still high.

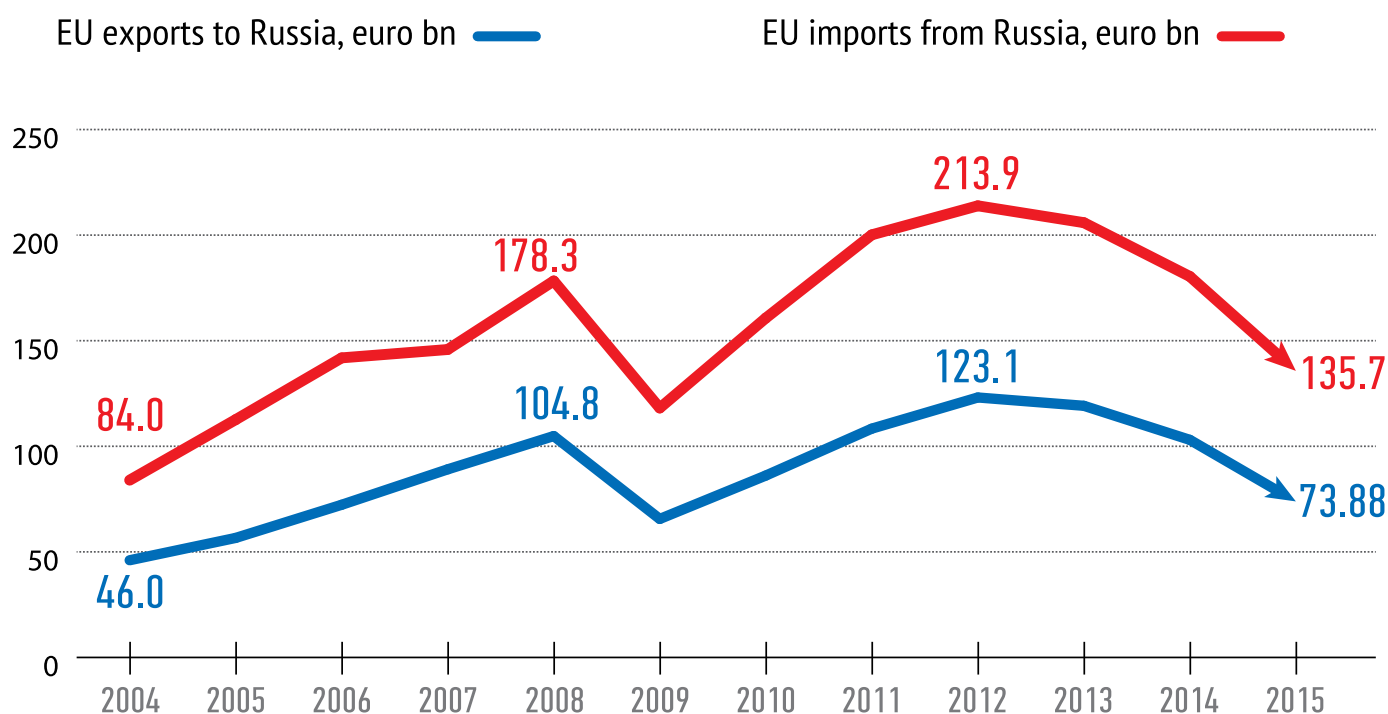
As Russia and the EU were changing, both the desire and opportunities for cooperation diminished, while tensions began to rise. It is a trademark and essential element of EU policy that it interferes in the internal affairs of its partners, thereby making the European Union itself an unreliable neighbor and reducing otherwise meaningful negotiations to little more than diplomatic maneuvering. The recent decision to apply so-called “sanctions” against Russia has further exacerbated the situation and will carry long-term consequences.

The European Union essentially applied toward Russia the same approach it used for candidate countries (obviously, without membership prospects). Brussels expected Moscow to adapt to the axiological and economic dominance of the EU. The European Union considers the values that have developed there in recent decades under

very specific, if not entirely unique conditions to be universal and to reflect the full gamut of European cultural and ideological traditions. Russia at first tried to “subscribe” to the proposed formula, and later to make slight adjustments to it. Neither attempt succeeded, but the EU has not felt it necessary to alter its approach.

The impossibility of separating the EU as a political and economic entity from NATO as a military and political structure (with few exceptions, the same states are members in both) proved an additional complication. For years, Moscow received assurances that the expansion of both structures would strengthen cooperation as well as heal and “pacify” the anti-Russian phobia espoused by some of the new member states. In reality, though, just the

EU exports to Russia and EU imports from Russia



Sources: Eurostat

opposite happened. Rather than the new states toning down their rhetoric, the rest of Europe moved closer to them in terms of its perception of Russia.

Ukraine proved the infeasibility of such an approach.

Both sides are now very irritated with each other and there is a temptation to suspend relations and to limit them to a minimum number of purely practical issues. However, the fact of their mutual dependence remains, as does the potential for highly productive and necessary for both sides cooperation. Therefore, simply “slamming the door shut”

seems like an excessively radical option. Especially given the objective, though declining, economic interdependence. What is needed is a serious, dispassionate and professional search for new institutional and procedural models.

What's more, the attempt to become one of the world political centers reduced its ability to take into account the interests of neighbors, including Russia

Moscow long sought to detach the EU from the NATO-U.S. “conglomerate” and to promote the European project as a reasonable alternative to the expansion of the Western military and political bloc. However, the events concerning

A range of processes inside the European Union offer hope that it might become more amenable to reengaging in talks. Priorities in the EU are changing. The international situation has become extremely dangerous. A united Europe has a dire need to strengthen its boundaries and stabilize its perimeter. The European Union needs peace on its borders in order to resolve its numerous problems at home.

The system that emerged in Europe after 1991 was inherently unstable because it failed to satisfy the interests of all its participants

The unprecedented wave of terrorism has laid bare the depth and urgency of those challenges. The new political course by Brussels allows for a new approach to Russia, although a group of countries within the EU remains highly critical of Moscow and is oriented toward the United States.

In fact, the effective freezing of Russian-EU relations and the cessation of all talks and dialogue in response to the events of 2014–2015 actually provide an opportunity to make a fresh start. A propitious moment has arrived for Russia to take stock of its interests and to begin openly discussing them with its European partners. That relationship should be the result of serious deliberation at the expert and socio-political level.

It is especially important to take an open approach in which both sides firmly assert their interests while demonstrating both a readiness to compromise on equal footing and a reasonable degree of flexibility. An important drawback of the previous model was that the structural and ideological

framework in which the European Union operated was considered as immutable. Accordingly, Russia was expected to conform to it, despite the fact that all those rules and regulations were not of an external objective nature, but had been originally formulated by the European Union itself.

A rapidly and radically changing world demands that governments and inter-state bodies develop a qualitatively different pace of decision-making and the ability to respond to complex challenges with flexibility and creativity. In this regard, both Russia and the EU must “do their homework.” However, the problem is more acute for the European Union

because, over the last decade and a half it has almost entirely lost the ability to operate on the international arena in any formats other than those that it has created for itself.

Objective circumstances dictate that cooperation resume. The European Union needs a favorable environment in order to solve its problems and is now much less focused on expansion. The continuing incremental progress in the dynamics between Russia and China, advances toward Eurasian integration and Russia’s pivot to the East all provide reason for Russia and Europe to renew their dialogue. New economic and infrastructural developments in Eurasia offer Europe much-needed opportunities to help overcome the current crisis. Russia, as a strong Eurasian player, will find it easier to build new relations with the European Union based on equality. And the more seriously Russia pivots toward the East in political and economic terms, the more imperative it becomes that it retain cultural ties with Europe as an important source of Russian identity.

What do we want from Europe?

Russia has long viewed Europe as an important reference point for values, a civilizational model worthy of emulation. This attitude is rooted in long-standing intellectual traditions, and following the collapse of the Soviet Union Russians genuinely considered the “European path” as the preferred scenario for the country’s development. At some point, that sense of cultural and historical solidarity with Europe was transferred to the European Union as the current form of its institutional organization.

However, there has always been a gap between what was declared and what actually happened in practice. Russia, despite repeating all of the necessary “mantras” for years, has always been guided by pragmatic interests in relation to Europe, and that pragmatism eventually took shape as its official policy. Russian interests primarily included the following: a fair and predictable commercial relationship in the energy field, the free movement of citizens,

are the objectives that Russian negotiators have actually pursued since early the 1990s.

In the second half of the 2000s, the short-lived “Partnership for Modernization” replaced the earlier “civilizational” approach in which Russia had formally agreed to move closer to the EU values. Russia took an interest in this new concept, seeing in it a purely pragmatic opportunity to use the institutional and regulatory practices of the European Union and acquire technologies that could push the economy to a new level. However, the EU envisioned that partnership as containing a significant values and normative component and thus continued to believe it could use it to unilaterally compel Russia to adopt what it considered the “proper” form of government. For the technocratic Russian approach this was unacceptable.

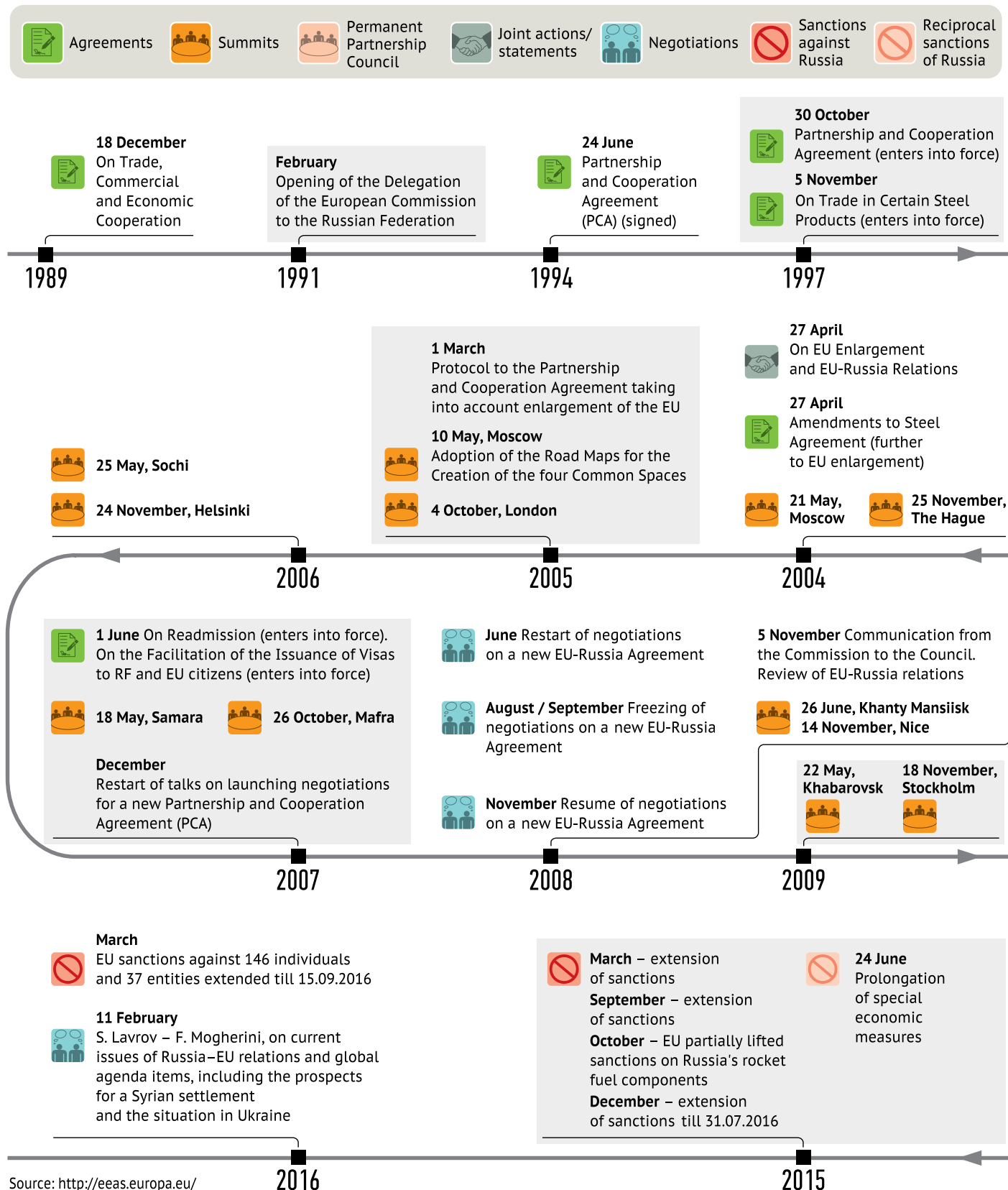
What’s more, Russia at that time began actively searching for its own system of values and the process of defining a new identity. Russia has quickly understood that in order to assimilate advanced practices it is enough simply to use high-quality translations of European technical regulations and to improve its own internal administrative mechanisms. Thus, the “Partnership for Modernization” became a last-ditch, ultimately unsuccessful attempt to restore the positive dynamics in the wake of the fading “Strategic Partnership.”

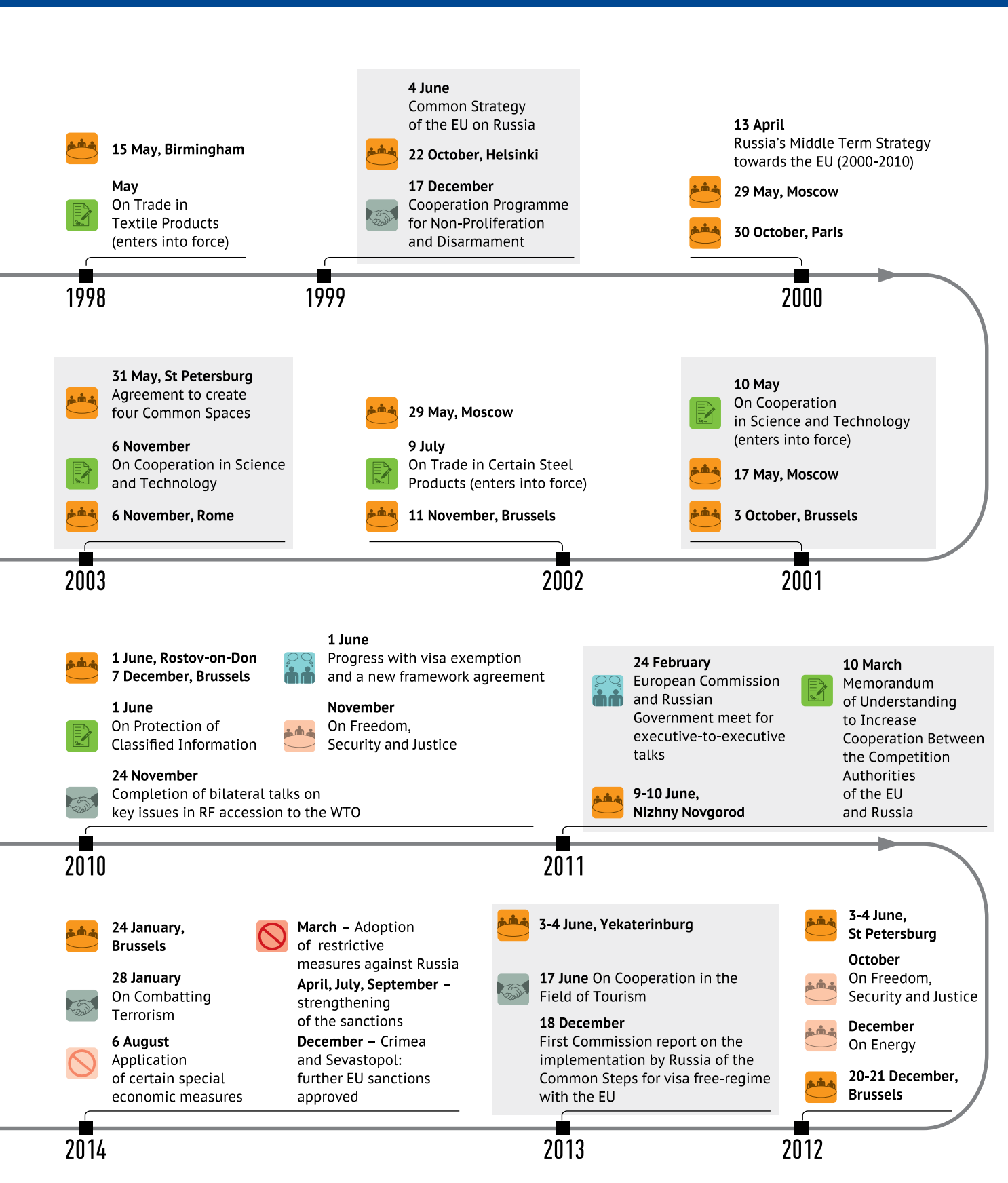
Assessing this experience, we can conclude that in order for this relationship to develop successfully, it must be based not on ephemeral “common interests and values” (that have never been clearly formulated), or on bringing Russia’s model of development into line with EU’s, but on the clearly enunciated interests of every party. Only

Russia needs Europe as a responsible and predictable partner in resolving economic, and to some extent political issues. It is also in the best interest of the European Union to become an independent and fully capable player

non-interference by the EU in the internal affairs of countries within Russia’s zone of vital interests and, finally, a sufficient degree of access to the rich European market for competitive Russian goods. Later, Russia also sought to ensure favorable conditions for the residents of Kaliningrad, which became a Russian enclave within the EU in 2002. These

RUSSIA–EU RELATIONS, 1989–2016





through frank dialogue can we work out the rules of behavior and move forward.

Russia has a deep interest in seeing a stronger European Union emerge from the current systemic crisis – one that began as the EU expanded eastward and stepped up its global ambitions. Russia needs Europe as a responsible and predictable partner in resolving economic, and to some extent political issues. It is also in the best interest of the European Union to become an independent and fully capable player. We do understand however constraints put on the EU policy by the long-lasting transatlantic relationships and solidarity. Thus Russia must be prepared to work with American partners in order to smooth the objective consequences of these limitations.

The norms and values contained in official EU documents are not an exhaustive list of all European norms and values. Rather, they reflect the vision of the European political establishment at this moment in time

The fact that Russian statehood and culture are basically European in nature does not mean that modern Russia must become “Europeanized” according to EU standards. The EU is the specific and current form of interaction among a dominant group of European states – one that does not, on the whole, represent the “end of history” for Europe. The norms and values contained in official EU documents are not an exhaustive list of all European norms and values. Rather, they reflect the vision of the European political establishment at this moment in time. Both that vision – and the membership of the establishment itself – could undergo serious

changes as a result of the internal convulsions and increasingly difficult political atmosphere that Europe is experiencing.

In a broader sense, we can say that the practice of one player adopting the norms of another is “going out of fashion” in the global community. As an economically and geopolitically polycentric world takes shape, the focus is less on reaching a single, standardized system and more on mutually beneficial harmonization and coexistence. That is how the Eurasian and Asian approaches differ from that of the European Union.

The future model of Russia-EU relations could be defined in the following way: close and adjacent to each other, rather than together. Europe is a large and important neighbor for Russia, and one with which it will always have close and multifaceted ties. Europe remains a source of primarily intellectual resources that are necessary to Russia’s development. Russia has an imperative need to ensure that its Western flank is secure. In addition, the European Union, even in its current weakened form, continues to play a political role in international processes of importance to Russia.

However, relations with the European Union cannot and should not be considered a monolithic and rigidly fixed structure. For objective reasons they are fairly fragmented, and formalizing that fragmented status serves Russia’s national interests.

Openness should be the primary principle of these relations. Russia is willing to develop relations with any state or non-state player in the EU, define different priorities at the national or European level and propose initiatives that are targeted at specific political and business partners.

For its part, Russia should be comfortable with the fact that some Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member states are interested in maintaining and expanding their ties with the European Union – unless those ties compromise their EAEU obligations. The EU is a source of investment and technology for all the

and the EU join political forces to address issues of common interest.

The development of relations between the EAEU and the European Union, or with individual EU member states, as well as political recognition by Brussels of Eurasian integration would be conceptually important steps. It would indicate a rejection of the inequitable and outworn idea of an EU-central Europe and Eurasia that de facto served as the basis for European and Western policies in the 1990s and 2000s. At the same time, establishing formal relations

with the European Union is not of critical importance for the EAEU. Accordingly, it cannot be viewed as a precondition for dialogue at an expert level or as an obstacle to adopting appropriate and truly advanced European regulatory practices.

The EAEU has a sizeable internal agenda. Member states must soon conclude 67 supplementary agreements and adopt numerous technical regulations. The EAEU should enter into direct talks with the European Union only after it becomes a fully formed regional economic entity with a relatively developed internal market. More pressing priorities include the need to elaborate an agreement with China (the decision was made at the highest interstate level), and to conclude negotiations on creating free trade zones with a number of foreign partners. There

is no point in striving to conclude a “major” EU-EAEU agreement at present. However, this does not preclude expanding expert ties and contacts with EU member states as EAEU institutions expand their competencies and its regulations gain operational proficiency.

The future model of Russia-EU relations could be defined in the following way: close and adjacent to each other, rather than together

countries of the EAEU. At the same time, not one of the existing or potential EAEU member states has any real prospects for joining the European Union. One option for the long term might be an “integration of integrations” concept, but that could take place only after the EAEU project is on firm footing.

The most important task before Russia with regard to the European Union and its member states is its involvement in the process of reforming the global regulatory environment. That currently takes place within the framework of global institutions

Establishing formal relations with the European Union is not of critical importance for the EAEU

such as the “G-20” or as an element of talks on climate change, and the European Union plays a major role in this. Russia should not withdraw itself from influencing these processes, especially because nobody denies that a multiplier effect results when Russia

How to move forward?

As the first step toward building a new model of relations with the European Union, Russia should put forward the basic principles of the new philosophy guiding those relations, and both sides should take stock of the forms and areas of practical cooperation they have built up over the past 25 years. The first step would enable Russia to develop a coherent policy line, thereby making it easier for the EU to adjust its approach as well. The second would make it possible to identify which elements of that shared experience are most useful going forward, and which are now superfluous.

Concerning the second process, it is important to single out the areas that are most effectively managed at the bilateral level with individual EU member states. This bilateral approach should be given equal importance with the Moscow-Brussels dialogue. European partners would do well to be guided by the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality that are central to EU rules. In fact, they cannot violate the very EU norms that European Union representatives often cite as evidence of the infeasibility of this or that Russian initiative.

This approach is appropriate in the security sphere, for example. Events of recent years have increased the role of the larger

As the settlement process for the Syrian crisis has shown, it is the U.S. and Russia that deal with that challenge most effectively. That cannot but evoke a sense of disappointment, considering that the European Union was always a player capable of contributing a spirit of cooperation to issues of international importance. Nonetheless, the EU and EU member-states might be able to fill those gaps in European security, that have resulted from the inability of the “common neighborhood” countries to resolve their own problems, by forming agreements with Russia and the EAEU. Collectively, EU and EAEU can assist the “common neighborhood’s” development without competing for influence over countries that would only become a major headache for the eventual “victor.”

Another fundamentally important area is working with the European Union and EU member states on mutual recognition of technical standards. It is essential to determine the number of industries where such efforts are most needed, and the appropriate formats for the recognition or harmonization of standards required in each.

The current international situation lends particular importance to the dialogue on the unrestricted movement of persons and cross-border cooperation. Concerning the former, it is necessary to form a consultative body in the near future that is capable of monitoring decisions related to immigration policy and of providing for the exchange of information and coordination between relevant agencies (Frontex and the Russian

Border Guard and Federal Migration Services) with the involvement of EAEU states – especially Belarus. The European Union will be taking steps to resolve its severe

Unconditional rescindment by the European Union of its visa ban against Crimean residents is a necessary condition for continued cooperation

member states at the expense of the EU as a whole. At the same time, a unified Europe has largely abstained from resolving the most challenging international security problems.

migratory crisis, and these measures must not jeopardize Russia's interests or the security of its citizens.

Russia and Poland provide one good example of cross-border cooperation, having implemented visa-free travel around the Kaliningrad region. Such a policy should expand to include the residents of all the border regions of Russia (and possibly the EAEU) as well as the European Union. Joint provision of security along the common borders of Russia and the EU is another question that deserves consideration now. Russia and EU member states might very naturally engage in bilateral talks on these issues.

Unconditional rescindment by the European Union of its visa ban against Crimean residents is a necessary condition for continued cooperation. The EU should cancel its ban on importing products manufactured in Crimea, the prohibition for EU companies to invest in Crimea or Sevastopol, the ban on the purchase of real estate on the peninsula and restrictions on transportation, including the prohibition against cruise liners calling at Crimean ports. In addition, the EU should lift the embargo on selling goods or technologies to Crimea that could be used in transportation, telecommunications or the energy sector, or for the extraction of oil, gas or mineral resources. Such a targeted and unusually harsh "punishment" of the people of Crimea runs contrary to basic notions of human rights.

An effective format for discussing such key areas as energy could involve Russia and those EU member states that are its main partners in implementing this or that related initiative – only bringing in the EU proper as needed. The priority for Russia in the energy field is implementing infrastructure and

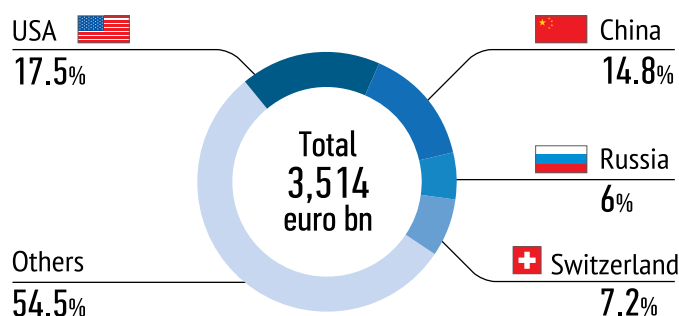
investment projects with specific EU member states. By constantly changing legislation and the rules of the game, the EU creates risks for the Russian economy (including its energy sector) and for the recipients of Russian gas on the European market. Russia is interested in a true liberalization of the EU gas market, as opposed to the increasingly stringent regulation of energy markets that the European Commission currently refers to as liberalization. Russia also continues to place a priority on diversifying buyers for its energy products – both within the EU and abroad, as well as on a general reduction of its dependence on the European market.

Another important issue of cooperation between Russia-EU member states must be energy transit through Ukrainian territory. If the authorities in Kiev are able to guarantee payment for gas and a fair distribution of transit fees, Russia might view this route as a promising one. A mutually beneficial solution to this problem could serve as a pilot project for the further resolution of conflicts connected with the so-called "common neighborhood." The experience with Ukraine shows just how destructive Russia-EU competition can become over countries that are inherently incapable of making an unequivocal and definite choice.

Russia and the European Union need a new institutional basis for their relationship. The experience accumulated through the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement played its role in the early stages, but has since exhausted its potential. This is primarily true of the Permanent Partnership Council that eventually became a largely formal and unsubstantial body as the previous model for Russia-EU relations was dying. These structures must be radically revised at the very least. It is also necessary to involve all

The European Union's and Russia's main trade partners*

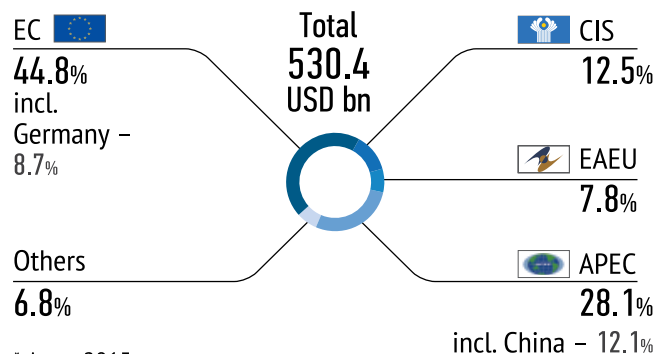
The EU's main trade partners



* As on 2015

Sources: Eurostat

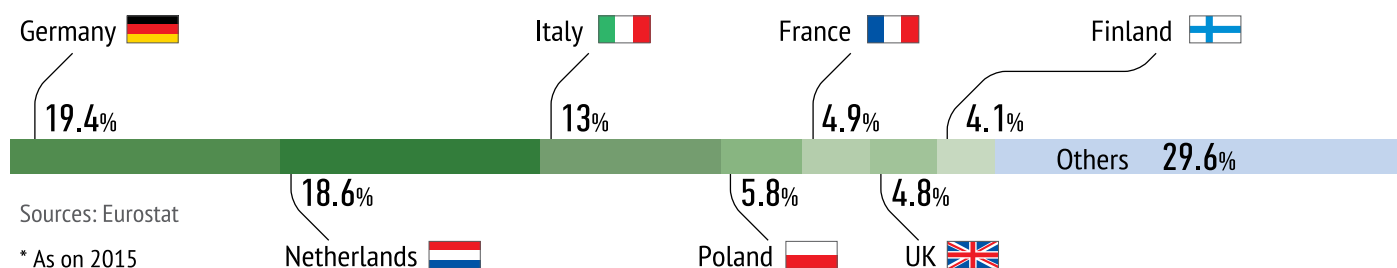
Russia's main trade partners



* As on 2015

Sources: Federal Customs Service of the Russian Federation

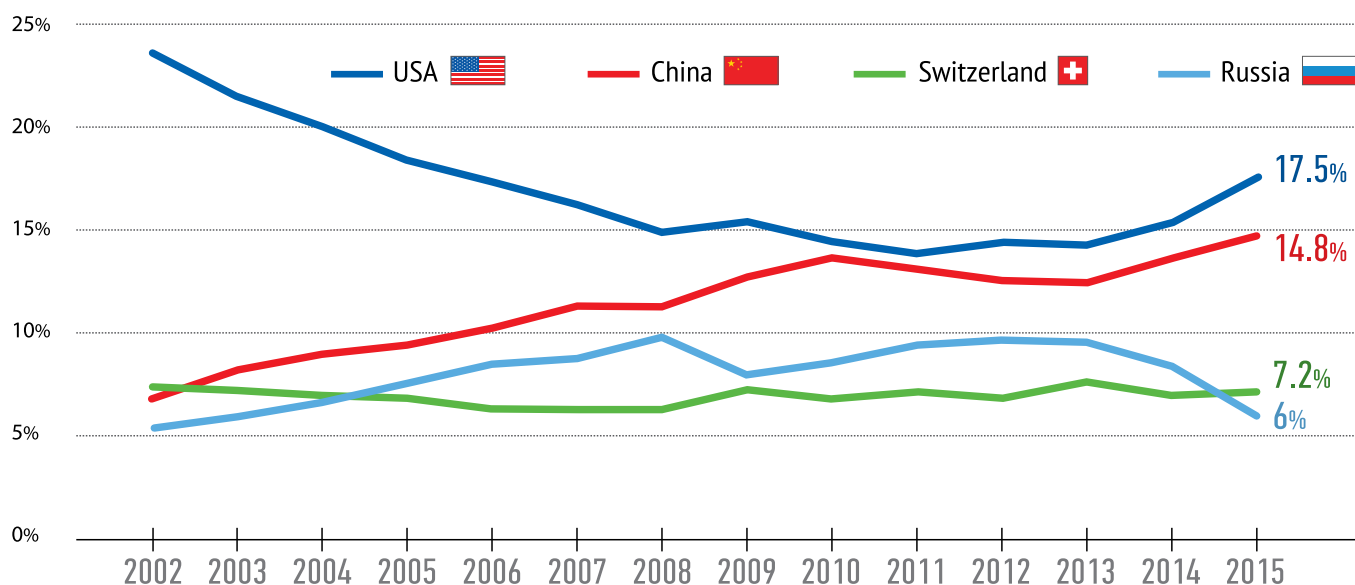
Russia's main partners in the EU*



Sources: Eurostat

* As on 2015

EU top trading partners, 2002-2015



Sources: Eurostat

interested parties – Brussels, EU member states and private partners – in a formal

As for the legal basis of relations, both sides should return to the idea Russia proposed 10 years ago to prepare a short political framework document with the possibility of conducting further work on sectoral agreements. This approach – that the Russian president has repeatedly advocated – would make it possible to more clearly identify and specify each side's respective interests in every aspect of their cooperation. In general, taking an approach based on specific interests would prevent the parties from finding themselves locked in a “zero-sum game.” If all

“Six principles” that should guide Russia's interactions with the EU: openness toward all partners; inclusiveness of relations; subsidiarity and necessity to resolve each question at the most appropriate level; proportionality of actions and levels of dialogue; diversification of foreign and external economic relations; unconditional rescindment by the EU of its visa ban against all Crimean residents

dialogue on each separate issue or sector of interaction.

The EAEU also needs to greatly step up internal communications and coordination in order to develop relations with the European Union. There is also good reason to consider creating broader formats that would include the EAEU, EU states and the “common neighborhood” countries of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

It would also be useful to revive the practice of Russia-EU summits. This form of communication enables leaders to discuss the most important problems face to face and to better control the actions of those who execute their decisions. In the EU the problem of the lack of horizontal communication and coordination between the individual operational divisions of the European Commission is becoming increasingly pronounced. Summits that are well prepared at the diplomatic level make it possible to address the greatest possible number of important subjects and to find effective solutions to controversial issues.

expectations are clearly laid out in advance, there would be no need to waste time “fumbling around” in an effort to ascertain each partner's real needs. The parties could then immediately begin by searching for mutually acceptable options.

The authors of these theses welcome the initiative taken by the European Commission in publishing its “five principles” of relations with Russia in March 2016. In general, formulating basic approaches is a necessary condition to holding a frank and constructive discussion on creating a new model of interaction between Russia and the European Union. For its part, the Valdai Club has formulated its own “six principles” that should guide Russia's interactions with the EU.

First is openness toward all partners and a readiness to develop relations with any state or non-state player in the European Union at the national or European level,

and to propose initiatives targeted at specific players in the political and business environment of the EU. Relations should be transparent to the public and business community in Russia, Europe and the world. The parties can promote this by involving the representatives of a broad range of nongovernmental organizations and interest groups in the dialogue, relying on input from major economic players and by rejecting all forms of backroom dealing and parliamentary control.

Second is inclusiveness of relations. Russia should be comfortable with the fact that some participants in the Eurasian integration project, as well as their economic actors, are interested in maintaining and expanding their ties with the European Union – unless, of course, those ties compromise their EAEU obligations. Wherever possible, cooperation between Russia and the EU or with EU member states should benefit the process of Eurasian integration and help to improve its regulatory framework and practices.

Third is subsidiarity and necessity of resolving each question at the most appropriate level: either Russia working with EU member states or with the European Union as a whole. If a question can be decided at the inter-country or inter-regional level, it should not be put on the agenda for higher-level relations between Moscow and Brussels.

Fourth is proportionality of actions and levels of dialogue, which should correspond to the fragmented nature of practical cooperation. It is time to abandon the penchant for making pronouncements and the desire to address all areas of activity. Instead, we should make proportional use of institutional mechanisms for cooperation,

foremost concerning meetings at the highest level. It is necessary to adapt institutions to the real needs of cooperation and eliminate superfluous formats of dialogue.

Fifth is diversification of foreign and external economic relations. Practice has shown that, rather than foster stable relations, over-dependence leads to dangerous imbalances. Russia must gradually reduce the share of the EU in its foreign trade while simultaneously involving the European Union and individual EU member states in broader formats of cooperation – primarily those in Eurasia. These would include involvement by Russia, EAEU member states, China, Iran, India, South Korea, Mongolia and other Eurasian states.

Sixth is unconditional rescindment by the EU of its visa ban against all Crimean residents who were granted Russian citizenship after March 2014, as well as all “special” sanctions targeted exclusively at Crimeans. Such targeted “punishment” of Crimean residents runs contrary to basic notions of human rights.

Of course, these theses are only an initial treatment of these issues. It is necessary to stimulate further discussion on these subjects both within Russia and with its European partners – whether members the European Union or not. Preferably, Brussels would also participate in an official or semi-official capacity. The Valdai Discussion Club believes that the time has come for such a discussion and calls on all interested parties in Russia and the European Union to participate. Only through cooperative efforts can we understand how to avoid repeating the mistakes that brought us to the current impasse and build a new model of relations that will answer the interests of all.

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Council on Foreign and Defense Policy



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