

EU relations with Russia must focus on values, not trade



Nobody knows better than the European Union's ex-communist members what it takes to become a market-driven democracy. **Sandra Kalniete**, Latvia's former Foreign Affairs Minister, argues that the EU must insist that values not trade are the cornerstone of its relationship with Russia

Russia has always been important to Europe, but the EU's latest enlargement has given the relationship some important new dimensions. Eight of the 10 new EU member states have a special history with Russia created by long-lasting and often forced co-existence.

Their experience brings a new realism when the EU discusses its policies vis-à-vis Russia, even if it also gives rise to disagreements. Some EU countries believe the newcomers have specialist knowledge that if skilfully used could promote more effective co-operation with Moscow. Others are suspicious and even irritated, because they think the new member states are preventing the Union from pursuing good relations with Russia, even if at virtually any price.

Eastern European countries are sometimes accused of basing their thinking on historical biases and emotion, something that supposedly hinders their ability to establish pragmatic relations with the Union's largest neighbour. The years that eastern Europe spent behind the Iron

Curtain are still recent history, but it would be wrong to see this as a shortcoming. It is a great advantage, for western Europe is being offered true expertise based not just on theory but on practical experience.

The countries of eastern Europe are not only very familiar with Russia, they also know what needs to be

done if a society that has suffered heavily under totalitarianism is to emerge as an open and democratic society, able to establish a modern state with political freedom, the rule of law and full respect for

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human rights. This is the second aspect of eastern Europe's unique experience, and it will prove as important as the first as the EU develops its policies vis-à-vis Russia.

The European Union and the Russian Federation are the two largest entities on the European continent, and are thus destined to engage in close partnership. Both sides understand this, but they differ over the content of their partnership. That is why so far their efforts have not yielded significant results. This lack of hard results is in spite of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA) concluded in 1997, and the Permanent Partnership Council (PCC) created in 2003, at which it was agreed there would be four common spaces of co-operation. In May of this year, after two more years of negotiation, they agreed on detailed "road maps" for these four areas. The impression given is that both partners are trying to hide the lack of real results by keeping up a flow of new declarations and documents on co-operation.

So if the co-operation is proceeding only slowly, why is that? Mostly because the Russians perceive the partnership as primarily an economic process allowing Russia freer access to the EU market place. Other benefits they see are the guarantee of EU support for Russia's bid for WTO membership, and a deal to ensure that Russian citizens get visa-free travel to Europe.

The European Union seems fully prepared to go along with these aims and establish an open and integrated market

COMMENTARY

By Hiski Haukkala

Russians have a point about their burden of history

Sandra Kalniete raises three important questions about the European Union's relationship with Russia: The different goals and perceptions they have; the uncertain internal development of Russia; and the difficulties of the EU in developing a coherent Russia policy.

It has become a truism that the EU and Russia have different readings concerning what should legitimately be on their joint agenda. Russia's tough interest-driven approach is often seen as being in conflict with the EU's softer value-laden approach. It is even argued that these differences are the root cause of the relationship's lack of concrete progress.

Although basically correct, this is true only up to a point. The EU and Russia do indeed differ in their approaches when it comes to the role of norms and values. But it is an exaggeration to argue that values are all the EU is interested in. A positive way of evaluating the recent roadmaps for the four Common Spaces is that they try to devise a "to do list" based on common interests. The proof of the pudding is in implementing it, but the Common Spaces should not be rejected as yet another empty declaration.

On the second question, it is easy to agree with Kalniete's concern over recent developments in Russia. But it is not yet realistic to expect "perfect" democracy from Russia. Democracy is a process and not a static end-state that can be achieved once and for all. Russians

with Russia. It has been positive, too, on WTO membership and the visa-free regime. But the EU also perceives the partnership as a means of engaging in open dialogue about values, including human rights, media freedom and events in Chechnya. Russia rejects any attempt by the EU to speak about values, accusing Brussels of “ideological fundamentalism” and arguing that the EU is trying to interfere in its internal affairs.

These are fundamental disagreements. They reflect the inability of Russia’s post-Soviet elite to accept the simple truth that in modern and highly developed countries an inviolable component of statehood is respect for human rights, democratic freedoms and the rule of law.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the countries of eastern Europe, the Baltic States and Russia all found themselves on the same starting line. Nearly 15 years later, it seems only logical to ask why eight eastern European countries have managed to achieve what Russia had hoped for but has still failed to do. One of the most important factors is that the people of eastern Europe have been prepared to engage in dialogue not just about necessary reforms, but also about the essence of democratic values. During this time, our European partners showed understanding over the practical difficulties of reform, but were stern and demanding whenever fundamental principles were at issue. Without these consistent and strict demands, the return of eastern Europe to the European continent would have been much slower.

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Via Angelo Brunetti 9, 00186 Rome, Italy
Tel: +39 06 3224 360; Fax: + 39 06 3224 363
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Until such time as Russia’s understanding of the content of the partnership draws closer to the European Union’s understanding, it seems inevitable that there will continue to be tensions between two factions inside the EU – those who support “at any cost” policies, and those who are convinced that policies are positive only if they strike a proper balance between values and interests. The temptation to sacrifice values on the altar of quick results is enormous, because after years of debate over the EU’s Russian policy, there is deep dissatisfaction over the lack of readily visible progress. The situation has of late been exacerbated by growing fears of increased isolationism in Russia. These are arguments which certainly serve the interests of the “pragmatists”, and yet the positive reform experiences of eastern Europe represent convincing proof of why the EU must insist on talking about values.

The EU was far-sighted and right to view with condescension but understanding the shortcomings of democracy in President Boris Yeltsin's Russia. Back then, the EU did what it could to expand co-operation and help Russia overcome its totalitarian past so that a democratic state in which the rule of law prevails could be established. Today, however, democracy is in retreat in Russia. There is no other way to describe what has been happening there. Limits have been clamped on the press and on other democratic freedoms. Representation of the people has been narrowed, power has been centralised, hidden re-nationalisations have occurred, civil society has been weakened, anti-Semitism is on the rise and the Russian Orthodox church has refused to engage in closer cooperation with other denominations. There has been a refusal to take a frank and critical look at the role of Stalinism and Bolshevism in Europe in the past century, to consider thoroughly the war in Chechnya and the human rights abuses that have occurred.

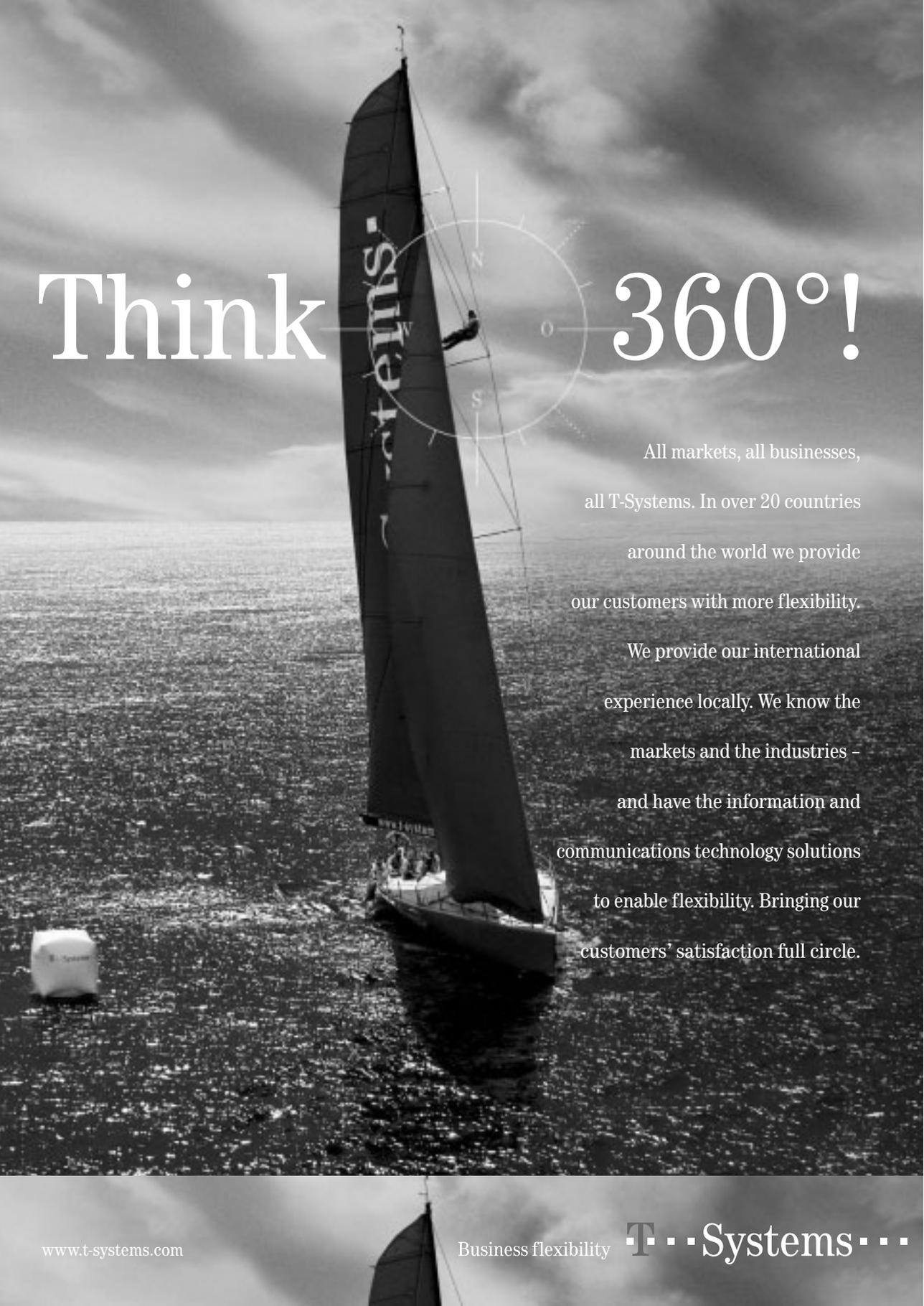
In the years since the Iron Curtain came down, popular revolutions have restored democracy and freedom in eastern Europe and the Baltic States. But unlike in the Baltic States, the communist elite in Russia and the other 11 CIS States that were Soviet republics have managed to preserve their power by instituting the so-called "revolution of the Nomenklatura." Recent events in Georgia, Ukraine and Kirghizia, as well as the bloody slaughter in Uzbekistan, show how weary the people of these countries have become of their leaders and with incompetent and arbitrary governance.

have a point when they argue that the burden of history weighs heavily on their country. That said, the overall trend in Russia is negative; and the least the EU and its member states should do is to consistently voice concern over the current state of affairs, and insist that Russia gets back on the path to democracy and human rights.

On point three, it can be debated whether the EU is currently in a position to act as an anchor for Russia. The EU has been consistently inconsistent in its policy on Russia. The EU's Commission, Council and Parliament have had one agenda, and the member states have had others. Some of the larger member states have inflicted serious damage on the Union's credibility vis-à-vis Russia. Yet to claim, as Sandra Kalniete does, that they are pursuing good relations with Russia "at virtually any price" is perhaps a bit too much. To give Germany and several other member states the benefit of the doubt, one could say that they too have a strategy about norms and values. They are seeking to tie Russia into Europe through economic relations.

But one should not overestimate the power of the EU economy as a magnet to bring Russia closer to Europe. We have already seen how Russia, instead of embracing the growing interdependence with Europe in the field of energy, is shying away from it by seeking to diversify its energy exports, especially to the Far East. This could mean harder times for the Union, so it is easy to foresee that striking the right balance between pursuing economic interests and promoting European values is not going to be easy for the EU or its member states. □

Hiski Haukkala is a researcher at the University of Turku and at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. hiski.haukkala@upi-fiia.fi



Think

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The dynamic development of the situation in the post-Soviet space suggests that the suspended revolution that did not take place in the 1990s is continuing today. All the signs confirm that there is a growing wave of popular protest, and as has been the case in other countries of the CIS, the people of Russia may be preparing to present a reckoning to their leaders that could lead to political, economic and social instability. The governing elite in Russia has good reason to be concerned about the Parliamentary elections to the Duma scheduled for 2007.

There are striking parallels between political developments in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and present-day Russia. Gorbachev, pressured by the hardliners in the Communist Party, decided that democratisation and reforms should be suspended for a while and this led to the putsch of August 1991. Of late, Vladimir Putin has been increasing his presidential powers by imposing restrictions on democratic freedoms that he blames for his own political failures. Just as hardliners once accused Mikhail Gorbachev of having lost eastern Europe and the Baltic States, now Putin is being blamed for supposedly having lost Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Kirghizia. In the 1990s, the United States and western Europe insisted that only Gorbachev could guarantee successful reforms in the USSR and deliver on disarmament. Gorbachev's

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successor, Boris Yeltsin, was seen as a similar guarantor of democratisation in Russia. With that role now being performed by President Putin, is it not time for Europeans to understand how dangerous it is to link the development and normalization of a country as massive as Russia to just one man, as opposed to a truly democratic system?

It is in the long-term interests of the European Union to draw closer Russia and to establish a long-lasting and sustainable partnership in which both have an equal say and benefits. This is why the EU must help the governing elite in Russia to understand how they are endangering the future of their own country, and of

Europe, to say nothing of their own hold on power, if they continue to step back from the norms of democracy, the rule of law, and the principles of good governance. There is no other way to a stable, modern and prosperous Russia than along the path of democracy. The EU must not yield to the temptations of realpolitik if that means sacrificing democratic values. The 20th Century history of the European continent illustrates the calamitous consequences when politicians forget about fundamental values in the name of pragmatism. □

sandra.kalniete@apollo.lv