

The relationship with Russia: troublesome but multi-faceted

The tragedy about the poisoning of the former Russian spy Skripal (and his daughter) in Salisbury has brought to light a number of phenomena related to the European Union's CFSP: solidarity as well as rapidity. The decisions taken have triggered solidarity from other (third) countries and NATO within a couple of days. Have we then finally developed a real and effective CFSP? Or is it just an incident? Moreover, it looks as if Brexit has been forgotten at a crucial moment. On the other hand, the Salisbury event also shows that a 'sovereign' country cannot handle such issues alone. Food for thought in London?

Unfortunately, the Salisbury event is not the only bone of contention the Western world has with the Russian Federation. There is more, the list is long: the Ukraine crisis, the problematic regarding 'frozen conflicts' generally speaking, the Middle East (Syria), cybercrime, forms of hybrid warfare and the arms race, which recently got a new impetus when President Putin presented a series of new nuclear weapons. In my country, the Netherlands, the mystery around the shooting down of the civilian Air Malaysia flight MH17 in July 2014 with a Russian Buk rocket has become a national trauma. 298 citizens lost their lives. That trauma represents another, still unresolved, problem where one way or another a Russian involvement and responsibility is 'highly likely'.

Therefore, from a perspective of the global challenges we are confronted with, Russia plays a –to say the least- controversial role in several of our today's most intriguing international problems.

But still. Confrontations (and economic sanctions) generally speaking do not solve problems. Yelling to each other, without listening to and discussing with the other party, is not a fruitful and effective approach.

On the contrary, no matter how problematic a situation may be, communication by way of principle is important. Not necessarily at the highest political level, but at an appropriate level and in a suitable setting.

These days the opportunities for communication between the West and Russia are only scarce. A new initiative is needed. Perhaps a new challenge for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna? That organisation has been established, in the seventies of the last century, as

an international platform for discussions between the East and West in the gloomy period of the Cold War. Now, certainly, let's not (as yet) compare the present crisis with the Cold War of some decades ago. Nevertheless, the OSCE framework is still available. It is a useful platform worth to be tested once more.

And, let's be clear. When in contact with the Russians, our attitude has to be firm and our positions straightforward. We must not give up our standards and fundamental values.

I add to this a personal comment.

Over the years I have been involved in several academic projects with Russian universities and colleagues. In the period 2006-2014 (the year of the Ukraine crisis) I was member of the Governing Board of a European Studies Institute, founded by the EU and the Russian Federation and financed on a 50-50 % basis. That institute offered –and still offers, albeit in a different organisational setting- post-master programmes to Russian civil servants from ministries and executive bodies. There was –and still is- a lot of interest on the Russian side to follow our courses and lectures. An interesting experience! As another example, up to this very day I discuss with Russian colleagues topics in the framework of the global substance matter 'EU-Russia relations' like: trade relations in the framework of WTO; the similarities and differences between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU); sustainability; and the impact of the mutual sanctions related to the Ukraine crisis. My experience during these discussions has always been that Russian academics are nice and expert colleagues, open for debate.

In a way, the symbolism lies in what President Tusk said on 26 March on the follow-up to the European Council meeting regarding the Salisbury tragedy, right at the end of his statement: *'We remain critical of the actions of the Russian government, but at the same time, today we Europeans – together with the Russian people – mourn the victims of the tragic fire in the city of Kemerovo in Western Siberia. Our thoughts and hearts are with you.'*

So, the relationship with Russia is complex but multi-faceted. People to people communication and contacts are all the more important.

My conclusion:we have to do our best,from both sides. At least at the academic levelEU and Russian colleagues still can –and should- communicateand cooperate.

Could that be a challenge for TEPSA as well?

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