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There is no Europe without Russia

“Leaders remain committed to the vision of a joint humanitarian and economic space from the Atlantic to the Pacific based upon full respect for international law and the OSCE principles.” If you did not recognize it, this is quote not from better times in East-West relations but from the **Declaration of Minsk of February 12, 2015!** This vision, to which I myself have been committed since the fall of the Iron Curtain and in particular during my work in the Council of Europe, is still alive. Europe is a strange continent. Strictly speaking indeed, it is not a continent at all, but a mere peninsula tacked onto Asia. Looking at the map, Russia west of the Ural Mountains is either the base or the beginning of this peninsula. But – for its unmistakable cultural identity this peninsula has become an own continent, and Russia is without any doubt an indispensable part of it. Russia belongs to the family of the Slavic peoples which is one of the main linguistic groups in Europe and settling in the main areas of Central, South Eastern and Eastern Europe. Russian Orthodoxy forms an important part of European Christianity. Russian poets, composers, musicians, actors, painters, dancers have contributed to European arts and culture. And for example, St. Petersburg’s Hermitage is one of the largest treasures of European arts.

But at the same time the main part of Russia belongs to Asia (although the vast majority of the population lives west of the Ural mountains), the **whole territory of Russia is larger** than the “rest” of Europe, and last but not least Russia is not only the **legal successor** of the Soviet Union but in many respects also the **heir of its traditions** including the one that in the times of the bi-polar world of the Cold War it was one of the two super powers. All this creates a special situation with regard to the process of European unification or cooperation.

Notwithstanding these aspects I would like to remind you that it was a Russian, of course at that time representing the Soviet Union who spoke in Strasbourg on July 6, 1989 to the Council of Europe the word of **the “common home of Europe”**, Mikhail Gorbachev. Russia made its strategic choice for Europe when applying for membership to the Council of Europe in 1992 and joining the oldest and most comprehensive European organisation in 1996. Only ten years later, from **May to October 2006, Russia was leading the organisation by chairing its Committee of Ministers.**

Membership to the Council of Europe is not just a formality; it means commitment to the basic principles of the organisation, which transform Europe’s cultural identity to a political identity: **pluralist democracy, the rule of law and human rights.** The honouring of this strong commitment is monitored by the Council in several ways, by the Parliamentary Assembly, the Committee of Ministers, by special bodies like the European Anti-Torture Committee and above all by the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. **The history of Russia and the Council of Europe is not without tensions and difficulties.**

I know what I am speaking about. I was just elected President of the political group of the European People's Party when the Parliamentary Assembly had to vote on the admission of Russia and the issue was very controversial in the group – the result of an indicative vote was just 50 – 50 and the second Chechen crisis or war started just after I took my office as Secretary General of the Council. During the first Chechen war the admission procedure for Russia was suspended and twice the voting rights of the Russian delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly were suspended, once because of the second Chechen crisis and now again because of the Crimean crisis. But there was also fruitful cooperation between Council of Europe and Russia, e.g. the setting-up of a human rights mission on the spot in Chechnya and my invitation to the hearing of the State Duma on Chechnya.

Russia has not yet finished its transition process which is not an easy task after 70 years of Communist dictatorship. There are still many features inherited from the past. There is an age-old mistrust of the State. The citizens feel suspicions for the State. And the state and its authorities in particular law enforcement agencies feel suspicious for the citizens and the civil society. This is the challenge of strengthening Russia as a modern State. This is also a question of the functioning of the Federation. The organisation of relations between the federal and regional levels of government is not an easy task in a state composed of 89 subjects. **It has been an old saying that Russia is big and the Tsar is far away.** Russia has to find its own way how to tackle all these challenges within the framework of democracy, rule of law and human rights. This is something which is not always understood in the so-called West including the European partners of Russia. But a strong civil society including vivid religious communities and an emerging middle class will help Russia to finally determine that way.

And there has been – long before the Ukrainian crisis - the question of the relationship of Russia and the European Union and in particular also with NATO. Turning (slowly) towards a political union, comprising 28 member states, already the majority of states in Europe with the majority of the population of the continent, the EU is tempted to consider itself as “Europe” and to act on behalf of Europe. **But Europe is still larger**, and notwithstanding the fact, that other countries too may join the Union, in particular the countries of South-East-Europe and also former Soviet republics like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are looking for EU-membership, **Europe is still larger than the Union.** Also countries unwilling or unable to join the Union are part of Europe and have the right to be considered as equal partners in the European political concert. In particular regarding Russia the Union has to find the right policy. **I would say it is high time after nearly a quarter of a century since the collaps of the Soviet Union.** In the 90ies, when Russia was in economic troubles, the Union had a tendency to patronize Russia, and some decision makers, old suspicions alive, where not unhappy with the situation. After the economic revival of Russia, in particular on the energy sector, old suspicions still alive, they have difficulties to tackle with the new reality. But despite diverging opinions on certain cases like Kosovo (between the majority of EU on one hand and Russia and the minority of EU members on the other!) there is no alternative to close cooperation between the European Union and Russia. I dare to say this being fully aware of the obstacles for closer cooperation because of the Ukrainian crisis.

In particular the **Ukrainian crisis is proving the common responsibility of both for stability and peace** in Europe. Responsible cooperation will strengthen the voice of Europe in a multi-polar world.

There is a lot of common interest. This is, e.g., the energy market. This is not only a matter of Russia as supplier and Western Europe as consumer. There should be the common interest of promoting renewable energy, climate protection and sustainable agriculture and forestry. In the globalization process, EU-Europe and Russia have quite similar interests towards the USA and the new economic powers as Brazil, China and India. And above all, after two terrible World Wars which devastated large parts of Europe including Western and Southern Russia there must be the common interest to preserve this continent for the future as an area of peace and democratic stability.

NATO, the trans-Atlantic military alliance, in Europe **growing faster than the EU**, is a more complicated case. NATO was the counterpart of the not any more existing Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. But NATO is not only still existing but expanding to the East including aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia to join the alliance. US' "European Phased Adaptive Approach" or Missile Defense Umbrella with new missile bases and radar stations closer to the Russian borders creates suspicions on the Russian side and do not facilitate relaxed relations of Russia with NATO and had in my view a negative impact on "European-Russian" relations in general. It is too early to assess to what extent EPAA had an impact on the Russian position towards Ukraine after Maidan. Most of the member states of the European Union are members of NATO and regarding European security policy it is not easy to distinguish between the two communities.

European NATO members would therefore be well advised to give priority to genuine European interests including good relations with Russia without tensions.

In my opinion and that may sound today as a total unrealistic utopia, but it is my humble opinion, in the long run and of course after having found common ground and solutions of today's crisis not even a membership of Russia to NATO should be excluded, turning the European part of NATO into a security system which guarantees peace and stability on the continent.

Currently we see of course a **totally different but also ambivalent picture**. The main players are sitting together in **Minsk** being fully aware of their responsibility and agree on a declaration from which I quoted at the beginning. But in Eastern Ukraine or as it is called by some people Novarossiya **fighting and killing goes on**. Each party is blaming the other not to stick to the Minsk agreement.

A few days ago the tragedy of the Maidan where more than 100 people, protesters as well as policemen, were killed was commemorated. In my humble view no side at this time was without mistakes. The main mistake from the EU as well as from the Russian side was a misinterpretation of the Maidan. At the beginning Maidan was a civil society protest against corruption and mis-governance. The EU association agreement was not in the main focus of the mainly young people who made up the so-called Maidan. If the EU association agreement played a role it was the fact that in the eyes of the people the refusal of Yanukovich to sign the agreement which was adopted by the Verkovna Rada was just another evidence of his anti-democratic attitude. **But Brussels made out of the Maidan the Euro-Maidan and Moscow a neo-fascist putsch.**

What was totally ignored by the European Union in that moment was that **Ukraine has two big neighbors, EU in the West and Russia in the East**, that Ukrainian economy needs good relations and good conditions with both neighbors and finally that Russia has understandable interests in Ukraine, regarding economic relations, the desire to protect the ethnic Russian minority in Ukraine and last but not least strategic interests as the Russian Black Sea Fleet had no alternative to the naval base of Sebastopol. And I do not ignore the religious or spiritual aspect as many Ukrainians obey to the Moscow patriarchate of the Orthodox church.

What happened in Minsk a few days ago therefore should have happened one year ago before. In my view a sincere tripartite dialogue – European Union, Ukraine and Russian Federation – could have avoided the deterioration which followed the Maidan events. Moves like the attempt of abolishing Russian as the second official language – although even many Ukrainians who do not consider themselves as ethnic Russians have Russian as their mother tongue – and even more serious to declare the agreement on Sebastopol as illegal in connection with open declared NATO aspirations raised the suspicion in Moscow that all this was **part of an anti-Russian plot.** Russia made mistakes too. To act as a kind of protector of the corrupt president of Ukraine Yanukovich was one, to declare the entire new leadership of Ukraine as neo-fascists and not to distinguish between the democratic majority and an extreme right minority was another one. The situation was serious enough to be dealt with at the highest level. It is certainly **due to this lack of dialogue that escalation as well as an unwanted automatism took place.** It is not the place to assess the events and developments which lead to the annexation of Crimea. That will be done in the future by historians.

But I dare to say as they did not talk to each other both sides have **a joint responsibility for the events.**

The Russian side justified the admission of Crimea among others with several violations of international law by the “Western” side and in particular with the case of Kosovo. But certainly a violation of international law cannot be healed by previous violations of international law in different cases. And the so-called referendum in Crimea was declared illegal by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe to which Russia is a member, to the Commission and to the Council as well. Now both sides have a big dilemma. The European Union cannot accept the violation of international law and the unilateral change of borders under military threat. **For Russia it is a fait accompli**, State Duma and President adopted the admission of Crimea to the Russian Federation and nobody expects a Russian withdrawal from the Black Sea peninsula.

It seems that both sides are **trapped in the automatism of sanctions and countersanctions**, in a kind of an **economic war** that nobody wants and which will not see a winner on the two sides. Sanctions are the result of an apparent lack of alternatives – as military intervention is of course excluded – but they do not solve the crisis, do not stop civil war in Eastern Ukraine, do not bring Crimea back to Ukraine? **And it is of course not in European interest to allow in Eastern Ukraine a kind of proxy war between “East and West”.**

To avoid any kind of proxy war and to escape from the trap of escalation and automatism urgent – joint – steps for **building confidence** are necessary:

First step, both sides have to use their utmost influence on the parties in Eastern Ukraine to **fully stick to the Minsk agreement**, sending the message that there is no military solution, imposing an arms embargo on both sides.

Second step would be that EU and Russia agree on a list what has **to be solved through negotiations between the two parties**, what must be solved inside Ukraine, that means **between Kiev and Donezk/Lugansk**, and thirdly, what must be solved **between Ukraine and Russia including the Crimea case**.

In a third step, Ukraine - knowing that the EU expects a peaceful solution with protection and promotion of minority rights and the local representatives of Donezk and Lugansk, knowing that Russia is neither supporting secession nor civil war, have to come together to find a sustainable compromise.

I think that must be doable. It is a well-known saying that any crisis constitutes also a chance. EU and Russia can return not only to normality but to the implementation what I quoted at the beginning from the Minsk Declaration, **the vision of a joint humanitarian and economic space from the Atlantic to the Pacific based upon full respect for international law and the OSCE principles. And I would like to add what was forgotten in Minsk, the values of the Council of Europe.**

Let me conclude. **Europe and Russia – when did this story begin?** In ancient times, when most of today's peoples came through Russia to Europe? At the end of the Roman Empire when the migration of peoples started in Southern Russia? More than 1100 years ago when Christianity came to Russia?

200 years ago at the Vienna Congress when the new order of Europe after Napoleon including Russia was set up?

Russia was always a part of Europe and Europe's historical and cultural identity would not be complete without Russia's contribution to it.

In the 21st century, after the tragic experiences of the 20th century, we have the chance for the first time **to create a peaceful Europe without dividing lines.**

Regarding Russia, this is of course not a one way street. Both sides have to deliver.

But while Russia has to complete its transition to a member of the European family of democracies, the other part of Europe has to accept the new Russia as a partner with equal rights and equal opportunities.

One may ask whether this would also mean that Russia will become one day a member of the European Union. Who knows? Looking not only to the figures but also to political realities it is for the time being not likely. On the other hand, if Russia will fulfill the criteria and would apply, would "Europe" have the right to reject Russia? In any way there is still a long way off.

However, it applies for the past, for today as well as for the future: There is no Europe without Russia, there is no Russia without Europe.