

Russia in Europe and the West

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Two swallows do not a summer make, as the old saying goes. And so you are cautioned. But still one can catch sight of two swallows in the air, suggesting that maybe the time is coming for a new and positive turn to Russia's relations with Europe and the transatlantic community.

The first swallow is Russia's ratification of Protocol 14 of the Convention on the European Court of Human Rights. This may sound like just a technical detail, but it is more than that. Protocol 14 is about reforming some rules and procedures of the Court to make it capable of handling more easily the huge increase in cases that are being submitted to it, and foremost from Russia. Of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, Russia has been the last to ratify, after four years of hesitation. The delay was widely interpreted as a blocking tactic, undermining the Court from functioning effectively, which would mean undermining the cause of human rights in Europe. In interpreting this successful ratification, some independent Russian lawyers are saying that this was a decision favoured at the highest level by President Medvedev in order to improve the rule of law within Russia, since the case law of the Court is mandatory upon national legal systems. Hallelujah!

The second swallow has come from Germany where Volker Ruehe (former defence minister) and General Klaus Naumann (former chief of staff of the German armed forces) published an article in *Der Spiegel* on 8 March, recommending that the question of NATO membership for Russia be put back on the agenda. The idea is not for a regular membership action plan, but rather that politically the perspective of future membership would be adopted as the frame through which to radically change the sense of thinking and debate about Russia's strategic security relationship with NATO and Europe. These authors are not naïve, and are quick to point out that the NATO alliance "is also an alliance of values and it will take some time before Russia fully satisfies these criteria".

Why should this bold proposition be taken up now? For an interesting accumulation of reasons.

First, it is clear that President Medvedev's draft European Security Treaty is not going to fly. It may be subject to endless talks in the OSCE's Corfu process, but the bottom line is that this is neither technically nor politically (for most NATO member states) a plausible proposition. It is too selective in taking up only some of the Helsinki Final Act principles (the hard security ones, ignoring the human dimension) and otherwise is a thinly disguised proposal to curtail NATO's

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expansion. Therefore all the more reason to turn this proposition on its head, open the prospect of Russian accession, which would at the same time dissolve the Ukraine issue.

Second, Russia now seems understandably to be more preoccupied with its Asian flanks, given the risks of destabilisation in Central Asia, and the exposure of the thinly populated Russian Far East to the rising power of China, all notwithstanding the formalities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Under the circumstances, better then tidy up its much more benign Western front (those little Abkhazia and Transnistria affairs) and regroup with the West in NATO.

Third, Russia is increasingly alarmed at the failure of its 'modernisation' concept for the economy. To be successful, this is going to need a profound opening and confidence-building with the West and the EU in particular. Russia cannot conceivably become an EU member state, but it could with a big stretch of the imagination join NATO. Joining NATO as an alliance of values would go well with broad economic integration with Europe.

Fourth is the new agreement between Russia and the United States to cut their nuclear arsenals in a new Start Treaty. President Obama goes even further, advocating a nuclear-free world, maybe even in his lifetime. Russia's reconciliation with the West and NATO, to become prospective allies rather than presumed enemies – as the script calls for in the war games of nuclear strategists – would already represent a huge step in the right direction.

And finally, for Russia to come really closer to Europe, there has to be some strong backbone to the proposition, rather than an endless succession of woolly strategy documents that mean little. A NATO membership perspective would be a game-changing move. And is this not what all parties – Russia, the EU and the US – basically want?