

Interview of Dutch Ambassador Tiddo P. Hofstee

Moscow, 6th of July, 2004



Mr. Ambassador, the Netherlands just took over the Presidency of the European Union for the next six months. It is therefore especially interesting to hear your opinion on the prospects of the EU-RF relations. First of all, we would like to know your opinion on the long-term goal of the EU-Russian relations. How do you see it?

When you talk in terms of ultimate goal, you also talk in general terms. The ultimate goal is that there must be a very good political, economic and cultural relationship between the EU and Russia. And that is what we are working for on both sides. What kind of shape that will take in a longer term, I think nobody can say, it is not evident today...

The current EU-RF approach anticipates a creation of the so-called four common European spaces. (The Common European Economic Space; the Common Space of Freedom, Security and Justice; the

Common Space of Cooperation in the Field of External Security; and the Common Space of Research and Education, including Culture.) What kind of progress do you expect in the work of creating these spaces during your Presidency?

This is a process that we will try to follow during the Dutch presidency. The EU has developed a draft paper, a joint action plan on all four spaces, that has been submitted to the Russian side and we are expecting comments and rational ideas very soon. Then we can go forward in our work, so that at the EU-Russia summit, which will take place on the 11th of November, we can register progress. Especially, it is important that we can develop the road maps on which we have in principle agreed.

Coming back to the first question on the long term goals of the EU-RF relations and developing the four common European spaces and especially the Common European Economic Space... Don't you think it is a little bit difficult to go forward if you don't know what is the goal? The Common European Economic Space – what is it? What should it be? Should it be a single market or should it be a customs union or what?

Well, I think it really should be an open market, an integrated market.

May be something like the European Economic Area?

I think it will come to be close to that. But what do we want and need is an open market, which means that we need convergence of legislation and regulations, trade facilitation, customs procedures etc.

Ok, so the goal is open market... What about a free trade area?

This is going to be discussed, when we discuss this common economic space, and let's see how far we get.

How do you see then what is the motivation for Russia to comply with the EU regulations and to harmonise the legislation?

There is a huge market in the EU that is of interest for Russia. Well, that is a sort of complementary relation. We can offer Russia know-how and technology, and investments.

If we speak about the countries, which just joined the EU, they changed their regulations because there was a promise of their membership in the EU. Is there any kind of explicit mechanism of what the Europe will promise Russia if it harmonises its legislation?

I don't think it will be difficult to make Russia harmonise the legislation.... I think that this is in our mutual interest.

What about the World Trade Organisation? At the May Summit the EU promised to support Russia. What does this promise mean in practice? Will it accelerate Russia's membership in WTO?

It will certainly accelerate Russia's accession to WTO, because there is now an agreement between the EU and Russia. However, Russia still needs to reach agreement with the other countries and actors - the United States, and Japan and China etc., and then WTO. The matter is not finished.

But as for the EU, it's finished?

Yes, bilaterally speaking, it is finished. We will facilitate Russia's membership of WTO.

In your opinion, when do you think it will happen?

This is very hard to say. But I hope and I expect it will be soon, within the next few years.

What consequences for the EU-RF relations do you see as a result of the recent enlargement of the European Union? Do you see any changes in the EU-Russian relations?

The European Union has become a larger and more important partner for Russia. If I'm not mistaken, it's now over 50% of Russian export that goes to the countries of the EU.

In Russia, some commentators have noted that part of those new Member States are perhaps less interested in creating relations with Russia than the old Member States. Do you agree with that?

No, I don't agree with that. And I don't see why it should be so. In general terms, the EU is not less interested in the relations with Russia. Yes, internal trade within the EU has increased, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the interest in trade with Russia will decrease.

Also, the Russian commentators often touch the Russian minority question in the Baltic States. And they now see it as some kind of a European question. Is it a responsibility of the European Union to negotiate with Russia on this question?

The EU has established the so-called Copenhagen criteria, which all accession countries had to follow. They include criteria of the human rights and protection of the rights of minorities. We have no reason to suspect the Copenhagen criteria are not followed. But if there is a substantial complaint, that can be discussed.

If this question is issued on the table, who will be the negotiation partner? Will it be the EU or the European Commission, or should be the individual Member States?

Both, the EU and the Member States.

What are the prospects for the Kaliningrad region? Could it be developed into a pilot region, as proposed by Russia, showing how the EU-Russian cooperation could be developed in general? Or do you think that Kaliningrad is a kind of exceptional case that should not be confused with other questions of the EU-Russian relations?

I'm not sure we could see it as a pilot project. But I agree that Kaliningrad needs special attention because of its geographical location and now being a region surrounded by the EU. Already in the past years, since 1991- 1992, the Commission has paid attention to the region's development, and this process is supposed to be continued. We will continue to discuss Kaliningrad with Russia and see what we can do to help the regional development.

One of the key areas of cooperation between the EU and RF is the energy dialogue. What is the goal of this dialogue? Is it so that Russia should remain gas and oil producer for the EU and the EU will help Russia by investments and so on?

We will continue to import Russian oil and gas also in the future and that proportion may well increase. So we have an interest in talking with Russians on many things like rationalization of production, energy saving, transport, investment possibilities. All these things we are discussing with the Russians, which is not to say that we haven't already made a very big progress. Well, a lot of analyses have already been done.

But the goal here also is in a way an open market?

Yes. The EU is a good market for Russia and Russia is a good supplier for the EU.

Do you expect any progress now during your Presidency? Some kind of substantial results?

We hope to make progress in these four economic spaces included the energy dialogue. If we could go forward with these four spaces, I would consider it a substantial result. Then, of course, the road maps...

Finally, Mr. Ambassador, after the first few days holding the Presidency, what are your impressions in dealing with the Russian officials from this new position? How do you feel the atmosphere, the negotiation culture? Do you see any cultural obstacles?

I find Russian colleagues very good professionals and negotiators. So I would make no complaints. Is it difficult to do business with Russians? No. You have to know your own

position... You have to do your job well and be a good professional, if you want to be successful.

What about the whole policy, what will be changed now during the Netherlands presidency?

I don't think a lot will be changed. We will continue to work with Russia with mutual respect. We are interested to work together and that is the basis for making progress. Of course, there might be difficulties. But these are things not to be achieved over night.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you for your time and answers!

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See also:

The website of the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Moscow:
<http://www.netherlands-embassy.ru/>

The official website of the Dutch EU presidency
<http://www.eu2004.nl/>