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Foto: Stig Morten Karlsen, Oslo Militære Samfund

“Relations Russia-Norway: today’s challenges and future opportunities”

The Russian-Norwegian bilateral relations are quite positive; we are good neighbours and partners.

Our mutual acquaintance, relations, exchanges have over a thousand years’ history. And there are very few neighbouring countries in the world that have never been at war with each other. Centuries-old trade relations in the North, family bonds between Russian and Norwegian ruling dynasties, opposing common enemies, the lightning-fast recognition by Russia of the Norwegian independence, Nansen’s humanitarian mission in support of famine victims in Russia, the liberation by the Red Army of Northern Norway from the nazi occupation...

This is an important platform of our relations – a positive mutual perception by our peoples at the emotional and subconscious level. There are no particularly hard feelings towards each other in our historical memory.

Of course, there are problems between us, some of them rather complicated, but we always seek to solve them in a spirit of mutual sympathy, respect and pragmatism.

On international issues we usually agree regarding maintenance of international peace and security, international law's supremacy, the UN's central role, accent on political and diplomatic means of solving differences, involving "problematic" states and parties into negotiations instead of their isolation. On the contrary, we often disagree on questions like NATO's enlargement, ratification of the adapted CFE-treaty, assessing activities of the OSCE, its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "colour revolutions" in post-Soviet countries.

A negative factor in our relations is a modest volume of bilateral economic cooperation. Russia and Norway stand for only 1-2% in each other's overall foreign trade. The reason is obvious: both our countries sell their main export goods – oil and gas – to the third parties.

Energy branch is of special importance for both our countries. Russia is the world's leading exporter of gas and 2nd exporter of oil, while Norway holds the 3rd place in oil and gas exports after Russia and Saudi Arabia. Russia accounts for 1/3 of oil and 40% of gas imported by the EU countries from outside the Union, Norway supplies 17 and 25% respectively. We compete on the European market, but we also face common challenges – ensuring safe conditions for development of oil and gas production.

Partnership in developing Shtokman gas field is a crucial step not only in our energy cooperation; it may lead to quality changes for the better in our economic relations in general.

Over 30 years we have been successfully cooperating in jointly managing Barents Sea's fish stocks through our Mixed Fisheries Commission. It is a good example of how most complicated issues can be solved in a constructive and efficient way.

We highly appreciate assistance by the Norwegian side in solving problems of nuclear and radiological safety in North-Western Russia.

For centuries Russians and Norwegians have been working side by side on Spitzbergen archipelago. Russia faced difficult times in the 90-s, that also affected the Russian activities on Spitzbergen. Now we intend to invest more money and efforts into improving the situation in Barentsburg, solving problems that have been mounting there over the last 15 years.

Complicated issues of our bilateral relations are delimitation of exclusive economic zones and continental shelf in Barents Sea (the negotiations on this subject have been going on for over 30 years) and the regime of sea areas and continental shelf around Spitzbergen.

However, this largely positive atmosphere in our official contacts, business and humanitarian cooperation contrasts with the image of Russia in Norwegian media, which naturally strongly affects the public opinion in this country.

In this respect Norwegian media are no exception from the general trend that prevails in other West European or North American countries.

In fact, there is a psychologic, propaganda war going on against Russia in Western media.

See what we read or hear every day about Russia. With very rare exceptions it is a rather one-sided and superficial set of stereotypes: "in Russia democracy is subdued, authoritarian rule strengthens, there is no freedom of speech, human rights are violated, authorities get rid of political opponents and unwanted journalists, criminality and corruption grow; Russia is returning to the cold war, rejects Western values, does not let the West solve properly international problems, tries to split the EU, divide Europe and USA, increases its military power, threatens neighbouring states, uses energy supplies to put pressure on them" etc.

In March this year Norway's Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, speaking at the opening of the Business Centre for Northern Regions in Bodø, said the following:

"Nå følger vi Russlands utvikling, med stor interesse og forhåpning, med spenning og med en viss usikkerhet. Noen ses veldig raskt etter alarmerende trekk i dette bildet. Det mener jeg vi skal være varsomme med. Tenk på kontrasten til tiden før 1990. Så skal vi møte Russland med realisme og nøkternhet... Men vi skal ikke møte de nye trekkene med "kald krigs reflekser". De må ikke ta styringen over refleksjonen".

This wise message unfortunately up to now has not been received. What I described before quoting Minister Støre is precisely a product of cold war reflexes, not reflection.

If we assume that the media both reflect and to a large extent shape the perceptions that really exist in the society, I would earnestly like to understand why Russia is subject to such irritation? Believe me, there is nothing comparable in the Russian public opinion and media with regard to Norway.

It looks like the very existence of Russia on the rise is perceived by certain people as a confrontational challenge.

Normally the media avoid direct lies; usually it is angles and interpretations, rather than facts, that matter. The information from Russia and about Russia is served in the context of negative clichés I mentioned earlier.

Russia is among items on which there is not much place for pluralism in public discussion.

I don't question the role of free and critical media in modern society. It's about their responsibility for circulating full, objective and balanced information and for not allowing misuse of their considerable influence on public opinion.

How do we see today's world? We believe that after the cold war there is no objective ground for global confrontation. However, the world remains unstable, new conflicts emerge, former block discipline does not function, new checks and balances are not yet in place. Rivalry for access to natural resources, particularly energy, increases. Slogans about "promoting democracy" and humanitarian concerns are often used for breaking national sovereignties and imposing loyal political regimes.

Attempts at promoting unilateral leadership, unilateral decision-making, unilateral use of force have failed. They produced ideological reloading and remilitarizing of international relations, security deficit, new impulses towards arms race and acquiring weapons of mass destruction. And finally, unilateral approaches do not solve problems,

but provoke new ones. Wars and conflicts grow in number, more people die in them than before.

We believe that the only right way to follow is shaping the multipolar international system, based on the international law, collective leadership of world powers and power centres.

Forcing of democracy – and more precisely of its certain model – upon other countries results in major setback for their democratic development undermines its credibility. In most cases there are reasons to believe that other motives and interests are pursued through “forced democratization” policy.

We firmly abide by the principles of sovereign equality and non-intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Each country should be allowed to follow the logic of its own evolution and arrive at democracy in due time. Within the scope of democracy and market principles there are different systems and models, they should not be evaluated by comparison to some ideal pattern; the criteria for such evaluation should be their efficiency in promoting social and economic development of respective states.

Meanwhile, those who preach ideology-guided approaches to the world affairs challenge the international stability. Security and prosperity are indivisible; there is a direct link between peace and development. Extending conflict zones of the world politics – even if it is justified with fighting for democracy – undermines international stability and sustainable economic growth. Poverty and desperation are conducive to extremism.

Russian foreign policy’s main principles today are pragmatism instead of ideology, multi-vectoralism, firm promoting of own national interests without confrontation with anybody.

We don’t try to please everybody, either hide disagreements with our partners or overdramatize them – we just pursue our pragmatic interests and regard Russia’s role as an important balancing factor in international relations.

We don’t have any imperial ambitions or great power complex – but we do not suffer inferiority complex either. We are ready to take upon ourselves our share of international responsibilities and play by the rules agreed with us.

There are no states or groups of states that we regard as our adversaries. We will not take part in any “sacred alliances”, based on ideological or civilizational confrontation, and support things in which we don’t believe.

We have no intention of trying to split the EU or NATO, but we do not like false alarms about Russia to be used for consolidating transatlantic unity at our expense.

Spiritually and culturally Russia is an inalienable part of the European civilization. We do not intend to apply for membership in or association with the EU, but we are willing to promote our strategic partnership and to advance in this direction as far as possible. Disagreements and competition between us are unavoidable – but they should be taken naturally and calmly and not as a motive for announcing a new cold war and conflict of values between us.

Our opponents say that Russia's policy is conducive to a new cold war. Maybe they forgot how the genuine cold war really was – a global confrontation between two systems based on irreconcilable ideological differences. There is nothing of this kind at present.

Let me remind you some simple things that the heralds of a new cold war normally leave outside their analysis.

The Russian armed forces have been reduced from 2,75 mln. in 1992 to 1,1 mln. and are going to be cut further down to 1 mln. Our military budget is less than 3% of the country's GDP, over 10 times less than the size of the USA's military expenses, more or less equal to military budgets of Great Britain or France. NATO's military potential in Europe is 3 times larger than that of Russia.

Our country is not a member of NATO and has to provide for its own security. The increase in our military spending is not a threat to anybody, but a necessary effort to give the armed forces what they need and what they for well known reasons didn't get in the nineties.

By 2000 80% of the Russian armed forces' equipment were obsolete; with all the financing approved now by 2015 the share of modern equipment is going to reach only 45%. And the major part of the spending is directed at improving living standards of the military and covering the expenses of cutting down obligatory military service in favour of professional armed forces.

Don't those who keep writing and speaking about the Russian threat know it? We have much more reasons for concern seeing that NATO's military infrastructure moves closer to our borders, that elements of the American global anti-missile defense are established along our territory's perimeter, that NATO countries for over 8 years have been blocking the ratification of the adapted CFE-treaty, that certain countries try to influence our domestic politics.

Unlike some other countries, Russia does not use force abroad against the international law, and the Russian public is very much allergic to the very idea of sending our troops beyond our borders.

We have abandoned the foreign policy based on ideology in favour of pragmatism and common sense. We believe that one should not mix ideology with practical politics and we don't want to take part in new crusades, even if they are proclaimed to be for the sake of promoting democracy. If there is someone now who forces own ideology on other countries and seeks to bomb them into a "shining future", it is definitely not Russia.

We don't believe that democracy may be exported into other countries by force or by sponsoring so called "colour revolutions"; that nuclear problems with Iran or North Korea may be solved through putting pressure upon or isolating "rogue states"; that Kosovo's hasty independence would be a good solution both for this concrete problem and for international relations at large, etc.

If gas costs on West European markets up to 250 US \$ per 1000 m³, why should Russia sell it to neighbouring countries at 40 or 50 US \$? And when those countries insist upon getting unfairly low prices, blocking supplies to Western Europe, why is Russia blamed for it? Why is Russia accused of blackmailing its neighbours for political reasons? Who blackmails whom?

Why exaggerate fears over “energy dependence” of Europe upon Russia? The EU receives 52% of Russian exports and provides for 70% of foreign investments in the Russian economy. Yes, we supply 1/3 of EU’s oil and 40% of gas imports, but this is also respectively 78% of our oil and 90% of gas exports. This dependence is reciprocal, and if even during the cold war the energy supplies to Western Europe never stopped, it would be absurd now to undermine the basis of our cooperation with leading economic partners.

Russia has its natural advantages; including natural resources, geographical situation etc., and we intend to make full use of them. We regard our standing in the world energy branch as a guarantee of our independence in international politics.

But it is no reason to accuse us of imperial ambitions and great power complex; we base our relations with neighbours and partners on pragmatism, balance of mutual interests and security considerations.

We have no reason for being ashamed of our history. There was a lot of everything in it – good and bad, - but in any case we have at least as much ground to be proud of our country and its past as any other leading nation of the world.

We see as unacceptable the demands that foreign officials should link discussing the issues of our bilateral relations with “the state of democracy in Russia”.

Exactly what is not right with it? Elections at all levels are held regularly, on the basis of competitiveness and political pluralism, in the presence of international observers; there are no serious reasons to question their fairness; one can say and write whatever he or she wants – no one is persecuted for freedom of speech or opinion; disputes are solved in courts etc.

We do not intend to abandon democracy, because we know only too well from the Soviet Union’s experience that only the society based on competition and cooperation between free people, open to the outer world can be successful.

But it doesn’t mean that we should reproduce other countries’ state institutions.

The system of state governance in Russia should be first of all efficient, adequate to the needs of solving our problems, to present phase of social development, geography, traditions. Which model suits us better, we shall decide ourselves.

The quality of democracy depends directly on the level of social and economic development of the society. Democracy is an expensive thing and functions successfully only in a fairly well-off society, with numerous middle class and strong state authority. The Russian democracy is far from perfect, and to consolidate and develop it, it is vitally important to ensure accelerated economic growth, better living conditions for the people and for this – political stability, competent and pragmatic policy, guided by national interests, citizens’ confidence in their leaders.

It is evident that short time after a period of severe political, social and economic turbulence, facing acute domestic and international challenges, the Russian authorities have to act resolutely and firmly to guarantee security and well-being of the country and its citizens.

In fact, it is not the lack of democracy in Russia that irritates our opponents – there is hardly any doubt that the governing bodies in Russia are constituted in accordance with

the electorate's genuine will and that the policy of Russian leadership enjoys the support of the people's vast majority. The cause of discontent is this policy itself. Those who criticize us, like better the helpless state in which Russia was in the 90-s and those in Russia who, lacking support in their own country, appeal to foreign backing. It's the cold war reflexes that dictate a "black and white" logic: "anybody who opposes Russia is a true democrat and the free world's friend". According to this logic the criterium of democratism is the readiness to follow the foreign lead. This logic of "political correctness" dictated that elections, for example, in Afghanistan, Iraq or Georgia should be declared "just and fair" and those in Russia, Bielorrussia or Ukraine should not.

Pressure, to which Russia is subject on these issues, we regard as aimed at getting from our country concessions in foreign policy and on practical matters of our relations with foreign partners. The natural reaction of an absolute majority of Russians, no matter if they support Putin and the Government or not: we shall sort out our problems ourselves.

Let's see closer at the freedom of media in Russia. There is no state censorship; one can easily find out that there is a wide pluralism and diversity of opinions in thousands of Russian newspapers, radio- and TV-channels. Russia is an open country, where one can receive foreign radio- and TV-programs, use Internet, read foreign written press.

Russian leading TV-channels are under state influence – but isn't it so also in many other countries, including Norway.

In fact, it is a necessary element of media pluralism and defence against the propaganda aggression we are subject to. It is well known that the world information space is dominated by Western media-corporations that have at their disposal the largest financial resources. They are tuned and addressed mostly to the Western public and cover the news accordingly. The Russian public has access to alternative information – otherwise we would be at the mercy of the same one-sided picture of the world that is fed to information consumers in many other countries.

There is no ground to make the Russian state responsible for killings of journalists. It is understandable that the media are particularly sensitive to their colleagues' deaths, but even if the deceased criticized authorities it is not a motive to accuse state institutions of having ordered his or her killing, or of covering up the killers, or of delaying investigation etc.

We believe that with our Western partners we have much more in common, than motives for disagreements, but it is necessary to cooperate as equals, without imposing own will to each other, without politicizing questions that are of purely material nature (like Polish meat, gas prices, etc.), not to look for pretexts for announcing a new cold war and not to picture Russia as an enemy each time we have differences on specific issues.

Finally, to sum up the message I meant to deliver today:

1. Don't take for granted everything you read or hear about Russia; follow Minister Støre's advice and guide yourselves not by cold war reflexes, but by reflection and objective information.
2. Simplistic approaches – "whoever is not with us, is against us", "there are two standpoints – ours and wrong" etc. – do not work.

3. Ideology should not be mixed with practical politics.
4. In dealing with Russia one should choose between cooperating with it and containing it – the latter choice should be preceded by answering to the question: containing from what and for what purpose?
5. And finally: I'm optimistic about the future of our relations. Regardless cold war reflexes, we have much to do together and for mutual benefit. Cooperation on the ground, more people getting to know each other is the best way of dismissing old fears and outdated agendas.

Thank you for your attention.