

**Russia and the EU: Can Partnership Work?
A Seminar On The Partnership and Co-operation Agreement, Democracy, Civil
Liberties and Human Rights in Russia**

Fringe Meeting - Labour Party Conference
Manchester, Sunday 24th September 2006

Speakers:

Dr Fraser Cameron - Acting Director, EU-Russia Centre
Mike Gapes MP - Chair of Foreign Affairs Select Committee
Richard Howitt MEP - Foreign Affairs Spokesperson, EPLP, European Parliament
Professor Alex Pravda - Fellow, St Anthony's College, Oxford
Gideon Rachman - Chief Foreign Affairs Columnist, Financial Times
Stephen Twigg - Chair and Director at Foreign Policy Centre

During this fringe event at Labour Party Conference, the Foreign Policy Centre, in partnership with the EU-Russia Centre, discussed not only the PCA, but also key issues including the implications for Russia of the accession of NATO and EU enlargements, issues around energy, the rule of law and human rights.

Approximately 50 delegates attended the event with several delegates staying behind to continue the debate and to speak to panellists.

Gideon Rachman asked the question "Why is there a need for an EU-Russia dialogue?"

He went on to answer by saying that from the Russian perspective, there is a belief that they will have more power and influence as 'part' of the EU block, and that this desire stems from concern about loss of status following the break-up of the former Soviet Union.

Russia wants to be seen as an equal partner with the EU, and if this is to be the case, then it is important that Russia and the EU are seen as a complete 'block'. It is vital to European/Russia relations that the EU acts in the interests of the whole 'block' rather than the narrow interests of member states.

From an EU perspective, there are three main concerns about Russia:

- (i) Energy – will the Russians turn the tap off?
- (ii) Will new oil money be used to buy up European businesses such as Centrica?
- (iii) Russian oil and gas production is not rising fast enough to allay concerns about increased demand.

Mike Gapes MP. There are deep-rooted concerns about Russia and its record on human rights abuses.

Mr Gapes quoted a report published by Human Rights Watch in 2005, which highlighted concerns that "Russia is slipping deeper into authoritarianism" and that there are serious concerns about "crimes against humanity" in Chechnya.

Added to these grave issues, are the increasing restrictions foreign NGOs have come under within Russia and the spying allegations British diplomats faced earlier this year.

A poll carried out by Pew Global Attitudes Project in May 2006 found that “many Russians are disillusioned” and that now think that a strong leader (66%) is more important than democracy (28%). Mr Gapes went on to state that the same poll found that 81% think that a “good Russian economy is more important than good democracy”.

Russia is also flexing her muscles internationally, and part of Russia’s foreign policy is the east Asian alternative to NATO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which they are leaning towards more and more.

Russia also plays a significant role in the Middle-East and has economic links with Iran. There is also the question of how Russia will react to an expanding NATO. These are difficult trends and issues which the EU needs to address.

Professor Alex Pravda opened his speech echoing Mike Gapes MP, stating that Russian attention is getting “Asia diverted.”

He went on to say that with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement due to expire next year, there urgently needs to be discussion on how to take the EU-Russia relationship forward. Russians are confused about what the EU actually is and how it works. On the other hand, Brussels must gear itself up to be able to deal with external actors and influencers such as Russia.

With regard to Russian energy, Moscow is convinced that energy is the key to everything and that “energy will solve all difficult foreign policy issues.”

However, Professor Pravda went on to say that Russians must be careful not to underestimate their future domestic energy demands. There may come a time when internal demand may be far in excess of what is currently anticipated, therefore they will not be able to rely on it as foreign “policy”.

There is a need for a political framework and “strategic vision” for our future relationship with Russia and a need to ask the question “Where are we going?” One possible approach could be devising a road map, which could be built upon through political and economic discussions with Russia.

Professor Pravda also touched on the issue of corruption in Russia, recognising that there is a huge gap between views and attitudes to corruption between the EU and Russia. Professor Pravda said that it is important “not to preach to them that democratisation is good”, going on to say that many Russians feel European, but not necessarily Western.

Dr Fraser Cameron opened with some background information about what the EU-Russia Centre is and what it does, outlining its aims and objectives.

He went on to state that “yes – partnership between the EU and Russia can work.” Russia is important to the EU – it has many shared interests, such as Iran and the Middle-East.

In economic terms, Dr Cameron summed up the relationship by saying that “there is no other partner for Russia like the EU. Russia needs us as much as we need them.”

Dr Cameron also spoke about the growing importance of Small and Medium Enterprises in Russia, saying that as the business lobby becomes more prominent and influential, they will become increasingly important in taking forward a positive relationship between the EU and Russia.

Richard Howitt MEP began his speech by stating that “Putin loves geo-politics” and that he “cleverly plays a dividing rule.”

He went on to talk about the eastern European states and the tense relationships between them and Russia. Mr Howitt emphasised that we should “not to underestimate the importance of these Eastern states’ feelings.” This has much to do with history, but also continuing uncertainty about geographical borders with Russia.

It is also important not to underestimate Russia’s importance in the Middle-East – particularly in terms of multi-lateral relations – including with Hamas, whilst also taking into consideration the US’s involvement in the area.

Following the speeches, questions were taken from the floor, and the speakers were invited to sum up with closing remarks, focusing on some of the issues raised in the questions.

Closing remarks covered issues such as the energy network and working to improve security, as well as how the EU needs to get its act together in terms of energy – both internally and externally.

Corruption was also mentioned, specifically pointing out that it is getting progressively worse under President Putin’s leadership.

Finally, Mike Gapes MP summed up that Russia is a country in transition and that we should not try and impose standards from the outside.