

Deepening impasse in EU-Russia relations

Witold Rodkiewicz, Pogłębiający się impas w relacjach Unii Europejskiej z Rosją

The 31st Russia-EU summit held on 4–5 June in Yekaterinburg has been added to the list of those which produce barely any outcome. The parties signed only one technical document – on combating the so-called “precursors” used in the manufacture of synthetic drugs. Contrary to earlier announcements, the agreement on visa liberalisation was not signed. It appears that the talks mainly concerned trade disputes. The summit was preceded by a polemic between high-ranking officials from both sides: Catherine Ashton and Jose Manuel Barroso insisted that human rights issues be discussed at the summit, which triggered a negative reaction from the Russian ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov.

Commentary

- The manner in which the summit unfolded and the fact that no tangible results were achieved shows that the impasse in Russia-EU relations is increasing, and there are no prospects that it might be overcome. The parties clearly failed to kick-start the stalemated negotiations on a New EU-Russia Agreement. The agreement is a necessary, albeit insufficient condition of a transition towards a more ambitious model of economic relations, that would include elements of economic integration between Russia and the EU. The Russian side put forward – for the first time and at the highest official level – a demand for the new agreement to take into account the existence of the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space, and for the European Commission to establish direct relations with the Eurasian Economic Commission. Russia is in this way seeking to persuade the European Union to recognise the integration structures it has been creating in the post-Soviet area.
- The fact that it was the second Russia-EU summit devoted largely to solving bilateral trade issues shows that – contrary to Europe's expectations – Russia's accession to the WTO has failed to bring about a qualitative breakthrough in EU-Russia trade. Russia's membership has, however, resulted in partial opening of Russian markets, but it has also led to more trade disputes between the EU and Russia.
- As regards visa liberalisation, the parties failed to solve the problem created by Russia's insistence on linking the easing of visa restrictions for selected categories of citizens with a visa-free regime for the holders of so-called “service passports”. On the contrary, new complications emerged over the issue of the personal data of air passengers (Russia wants these data to be handed over to the Russian authorities, while the EU is

refusing to do this without having first signed an agreement regulating the issue and has serious doubts about the credibility of the Russian institutions that would be receiving the data).

- The open polemic that preceded the summit and which concerned the place human rights issues should take in relations between the EU and Russia, shows that it will be increasingly difficult for Russia to continue its tactic of marginalising these matters and isolating them from issues of economic and political co-operation.