I am thankful that Russia is being discussed with at least one of the speakers from Russia. It’s a very good sign for the future.

Here are some general observations to start with. If one would compare, the road to liberal democracy which Germany or Japan and for many other countries followed with Russian reforms of 1990s, one should bear in mind that Russia launched the reforms on her own. She started that process not to win someone’s benevolence, but because the Russian people decided that this was vital for their future and for their children and grandchildren.

Secondly, certainly when Russia began the reforms, we relied a great deal on the Western political and economic model and on the West in general. To be honest, I can say that if at the beginning of 1990s the West would have had any kind of strategy to deal with Russia, then it could have been a very successful story because Russia was well-prepared to accept such a strategy. But developments took a different way, and now we have what we have and what you have heard.

After listening to the speakers at this panel, I changed my mind and decided to start by saying that I am an optimist about Russia’s future. Despite many sinister forecasts which we heard here, I would dare to make a forecast that I really believe in: in 10-15 years, Russia will be a democratic country; in 20-25 years, Russia will be a fully-fledged member of the European club and of all European institutions. I think we will have a Trilateral Commission meeting in Moscow, and you will be able then to verify my forecast. To explain how difficult this path will be, I will start by describing the present situation.

Today, Russia is a member of the G8, of the Council of Europe, and an associated member of NATO. Russian president is a friend of all Western leaders one can think of, starting with Mr. Berlusconi and going all the way to Mr. Bush. All are “best friends” of our president. This is our international environment.

Russia’s Six Degrees of Authoritarian Rule

Regarding our domestic situation I have to say that Russia is not a democratic country. It is an authoritarian country. This means that Russia does not have an independent judiciary any more. Russia’s parliament is no longer independent. Russia has no independent mass media. Russia has no public control over secret services and law enforcement structures. Russia does not have fair elections. Russia experiences a 100 per cent merger of business and politics. These six features describe what kind of system we have. Three-fourths of Russia’s economy is based on oil and oil prices. The main problem of the Russian economy is that we still do not have guarantees for private property. This is the most painful aspect. Civil society is in decline.

In order to understand why all this happened, one should look back at the reforms that have been carried out in Russia in 1990s. The start or those reforms in 1992 brought about inflation, of 2600 per cent. Then came 1993—tanks shooting at the parliament. Then in 1994 the bloody war—a crime in fact—started in the northern Caucuses in Chechnya. At that time Yeltsin’s popularity hardly reached 3 per cent according
to the polls. Yet, just in two months, he was re-elected showing 56 per cent ballot result. And then—the serious crisis of 1996 and 1998 followed. No wonder, all this taken together, Russian people felt deeply disappointed. People asked: “is this what a real democracy is about? Is this what a real liberal economy is about? Is the model we are following with that criminal privatization where you don’t know who owns what the real market system? Why did the Western elite deal with the people most hated in this country? Why is corruption so widespread and incomparable even to the level that existed before the reforms? And Chancellor Kohl and President Clinton and many other Western leaders visiting Russia were saying that President Yeltsin is the best democrat in the world… And no surprise that the people were prepared to accept and support, as it happened after the Weimar Republic, authoritarian rule.

Russia’s Isolation

We can go into many details regarding the economy, the defense policy or the security policy and the civil society, but I would like to concentrate on the relations between Russia and the West. The reality is that the majority of the Western countries leaders are disappointed that Russia was not able to implement the real democratic reforms, because the intentions of Western leaders, in my opinion, were open and sincere. This disappointment, on the other hand, reflects their understanding that Russia is very important from the viewpoint of “not making problems,” so that the West can feel comfortable. And also Russia is important in the fight against terrorism. And they decided to follow the simplest and most well-known historically strategy. It is preferable to have a strong hand in the Kremlin in order to hold this dangerous country in a grip of steel, to make friends with him, and to support him whenever necessary. That’s the essence of that strategy. That’s why in the newspapers commenting on discussions of this meeting or other meetings regarding the broad strategies for Europe or on the “new West,” Russia is not present all. As a consequence Russian democratic and civil forces are seriously challenged because they are rather isolated at the moment.

As viewed from the Russian side, relations with the West in general are based on one important principle. Russia should, by all means, establish very good relations with Europe and the United States: the authoritarian Russia—simply to survive. The Russian elite—just to protect itself. And if Russia were democratic, then such relations would be a major factor in its development.

The Two-Headed Russian Eagle

Theoretically, Russia is interested in very good relations with the United States because that’s the only country that can help Russia in keeping order along her longest borders with the most unstable regions in the world. This strategic partnership is absolutely crucial for Russia. It is also very important for Russia to have productive and close relations with Europe because Europe is a major economic partner and represents a democracy that can really influence political changes inside Russia which potentially might bring her closer to Europe. In Asia Russia also has vital interests because strengthening Russia’s sovereignty in the Far East and developing this region is possible only by means of the positive and friendly relations with Asian countries.

However it is very difficult to realize all these strategies at the moment because of the views I described above and also because of the current domestic situation in Russia. In a textbook you can read that foreign policy is a reflection of domestic policy. But in Russia we have a two-headed eagle for the coat-of-arms. And his heads look in different directions. So, we can have one policy for domestic use and another policy for external use. A skier, and Mr. Putin is a skilled one, cannot direct his skis in two different directions for a very long time, as Mr. Putin does at the moment. And I don’t know for how much longer he can manage that.
The Need For Good Examples

The example that the West sets is absolutely crucial for Russia’s further development. Russia broke with the Soviet system at the beginning of the 1990s not because of an economic crisis, but largely because the Soviet people discovered absolutely different quality of life in Western Europe and the United States. That was extremely important for the changes that followed in Russia. Today, however, I can tell you sincerely, that it is counterproductive to be an openly pro-Western party in Russia if a party aims at winning popularity. The turning point was the NATO attack in Kosovo in 1999. Current events in Iraq, the problems between EU and NATO, problems inside NATO have given Russia such an example that it is becoming more and more difficult to promote liberal democracy and the values of the Western world in our country.

It would be fair to say that Russia will become a democratic country in 10 years and a member of the European Union in 20 years, provided there is one important condition: that the affairs in the world would develop at much more positive direction than they are developing today. In that case it would be still possible to set an example for Russia how to move forward.

What can the West do?

It is of major importance for Russia that Western politicians find the way to put their own houses in order so that Russian democratic and liberal forces can still rely on the Western example as an attractive model for the Russian people.

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