
Europe and Russia : losing momentum?

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(Orietta Moscatelli, head of the Italian Information Agency APCOM 'New Europe' project) - The Nabucco project, the gas pipeline that should link Erzurum in Turkey to Austria, was born in Europe out of fears of growing energetic dependence on Russia.

A fear spread by the 'gas war' with Ukraine in 2005-6 and refreshed by the new Caucasus conflict this year. As strange it may seem, though, these days in Brussels politicians and technicians are mumbling that, perhaps, Moscow should be invited to join: it has the primary good - gas - and the picture would not really change compared to one fourth of supplies Eu gets from its Eastern giant neighbour. Bizarre at first glance, but it is a sign of pragmatism tempting the Old Continent after last August events and, at the same time, a confirmation of European doubts and divisions about how to deal with Russia. Two faces of a medal that both Eu and Moscow should be careful when throwing into the air: on the side shown when it comes down will depend more than a new pipeline.

Moreover, it is a very delicate time, as in a phase of global and scary financial crisis, the danger to lose momentum is bigger. So: what about a new sign to move forward.

As a British colleague was pointing out recently, the August conflict has had at least one "sane" consequence: Europe has woken up feeling it should have a more independent voice when talking to Russia. How one (a European one) could not agree. A few concrete facts are showing that several European leaders are realizing it is dangerous to jump on the Us train when it comes to acting vis a vis to Russia, in the name of a Transatlantic cooperation that after 50 years can not count on simple make up any more. So much more, in a phase of 'power void' in Washington and one of serious doubts about America leadership in the future. France's Nicolas Sarkozy seems to have realized that. Germany's Angela Merkel definitely has. Silvio Berlusconi came out from the European emergency summit in September telling the press he challenged his colleagues to explain what "disproportionate use of force" means and what would they consider a "proportionate" reaction to Georgian attack. We do not know the answers, but as a declared friend of both Mr Putin and Mr Bush, the Italian prime minister seems to have made a clear choice. Certainly, it is easier with an outgoing American administration, still it should not only be about that.

In Brussels, though, at the last summit on October 15th, Eu decided to take more time before re-launching negotiations with Russia on a new Strategic Partnership. "It is better to wait a bit", said French Foreign Affairs minister Bernard Kouchner. Poland, the Baltics, Britain and Sweden are against resuming talks, and the=2 0Big in Europe - starting from Germany - are saving the 'unity dose' for more urgent dossiers, such as the financial crisis and the new dispute about measures to fight climate change. The differences about measures to reduce gas-emissions have taken the stage at the Luxembourg meeting, and the 27 will talk again about talking to Russia in November, when Italy and Germany will push again to break the 'New European' barrier. The two countries have lead the campaign to resume discussions after Moscow withdrew its forces from parts of Georgia, as asked by the Sarkozy-brokered cease fire. But Great Britain is insisting that Eu should wait on the result of the Geneva talks between Georgia and Russia in Geneva, where the first round last week was a total failure and where the next one,

November 18th, could easily mark a new stand-off. Talking about risks of losing momentum.

So, something new is needed to move on. If a constructive message should come through from Moscow before the next European summit, things could get much easier. President Dmitri Medvedev is offering consultations about a new security architecture for the old Continent, but that season seems still too distant to choose a proper wardrobe. A proposal of cooperation against pollution, instead, might seem diminutive, but would be concrete enough to give a sign. A sign easy to read in Europe, also beyond diplomatic circles. In December, Nato will have to decide whether to invite Ukraine and Georgia into a Membership Action Plan (Map), the first step towards proper membership. It won't go ahead, most probably. But it would make a change if European allies could oppose US not out fears of a new fight with Russia, but out of hope in a really new, possible partnership.

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