

---

## Russia « An Enemy » ? Wrong Answer

By Aldo Rizzo  
La Stampa Italy - 7/10/2008

---

What bizarre answers the citizens of the EU's five largest countries (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain) gave in a survey that the Harris Poll organization conducted on behalf of the Financial Times regarding the situation after the war between Russia and Georgia. Most respondents pointed to Russia as being the greatest threat to world stability, after China (which was in first place in previous surveys) but ahead of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. However, asked if it might be appropriate to boost spending on security, the same respondents said "no," in order to avoid taking resources away from domestic welfare programmes. In fact in Italy, in Spain, and above all in Germany, they even said that they would be opposed to NATO intervening if the three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) were to come under attack from Moscow's troops.

There is about as much point in preaching to public opinion polls as there would be in preaching to an earthquake. But this is not an earthquake, it is a reliable opinion survey, and its results are worrying. They point to a dramatic inconsistency in Europe's "perception" of the international situation; namely, that Putin's and Medvedev's Russia is a looming threat but that we need to busy ourselves with our domestic concerns. And this, after the EU finally managed to move in unison in the Caucasus crisis while the US superpower was otherwise distracted by the long changeover in its presidency. Naturally these are the views of Europe's citizens, not of its governments, but in true democracies such as those in Europe, it is interaction and exchange between the electorate and those elected that "generates policy."

So it needs to be said that both answers in the Harris poll are mistaken. It is a mistake to say that Russia, despite its newly rediscovered aggressiveness which, it has to be said, is the result of a culpable lack of attention on the West's part, is more dangerous today than the situation in Iraq or than Iran's ambitions. Putin is already having to cope with the repercussions of his Georgia operation, which range from the undermining of foreign investor confidence and emerging domestic economic difficulties (and this, despite the country's strength in the energy industry), to looming diplomatic isolation. The silence exhibited by China and by Russia's Asian partners, Turkey's manoeuvres in the Islamic Caucasus and elsewhere (Armenia), and Serbia's independent stance count for far more than Bush's or Rice's recurrent upbraiding; while even Russia's counter-maneuvres in Iran's favour can only lead to a nuclear-endowed Tehran becoming a major centre of seething Muslim revanchism on postcommunist or neoczarist Russia's southeastern border. And quite frankly, its war games in the Caribbean with the local demagogues are nothing but pointless pinpricks.

A return to dialogue with the West is the Kremlin's sole option. This, however, as long as the West does not intend to force matters over Ukraine and over Georgia by wanting them to join NATO as rapidly as possible.

But that does not mean (and this is why the second answer is mistaken, too) that the EU should give up the idea of boosting its own security, including on the military level. Only a strong Europe can compensate for our energy dependency on Moscow and, at the same time, play a mediator's and an oversight role, keeping Russia's neoimperialist tics in check and fostering much-needed dialogue. That is what Sarkozy, the leader of a pro-active and powerful France as well as the EU duty president, has succeeded in doing to date.

---