

EN version of Russian article in “Kommersant” 14 December 2011

1. Dear Baroness Catherine Ashton! What is your opinion on the results of your visit to Russia and the meeting with Mr.Sergey Lavrov? What has been achieved? Which points remain unsolved?

We had a friendly and constructive exchange on a number of bilateral issues, such as our Partnership for Modernisation, energy cooperation, movement of people, including visas, and prospects for further negotiations on a New Agreement between the EU and Russia. We agree that Russia's WTO membership will be in the long-term economic interest of Russia and the European Union, and that we should now put our efforts into our bilateral negotiations, especially on trade and investment.

There is still an untapped potential in our Strategic Partnership, both in political and economic terms: we should further promote trade and investment; we need to pursue work on increased mobility of our citizens; we need to make further progress in the area of energy cooperation. I am also convinced that there is scope for closer interaction in foreign policy and crisis management.

2. Mr. Sergey Lavrov said that the “Common steps” were finally agreed on and ready for a signature at the EU-Russia summit in December. How has the issue with the automatism been solved? Russia insisted on having a visa free regime in place as soon as all common steps had been implemented. As far as we understand Russia wanted to have such guarantees. Will it get them?

The text of the "Common Steps towards visa free travel" is solid and ambitious. We are now working towards our common aim of adopting the Common Steps and launching their implementation at the Summit on 14-15 December. It is clear that the ultimate goal of Common Steps is visa freedom but this is a decision that the EU will be in a position to take only once the implementation of the Common Steps is complete , and it will then require us to negotiate a Visa Waiver Agreement.

3. What progress has been made on the crisis management agreement between the EU and Russia? Why is this agreement important? What does it give to the EU, and what are the benefits for Russia? And why doesn't the EU want this agreement to be a reciprocal one so that the EU could take part in Russia-lead operations?

The EU and Russia have already co-operated in several crisis management operations. For instance, Russia contributed 4 helicopters and around 120 personnel to the EU operation EUFOR Tchad/RCA. We also co-operate in the fight against piracy off the

coast of Somalia. The purpose of a framework agreement would be to make such co-operation easier, and negotiations are currently underway. We have similar agreements with our closest partners, like the United States. We still have some legal issues to address, but I am optimistic that we can make progress.

4. What do you think of Vladimir Putin's idea about the Eurasian Union? It seems like the EU might get a big "brother" on the post-soviet territory soon.

As an example of regional integration ourselves, we of course take an interest in these proposals, and I discussed this matter with DPM Shuvalov in Moscow. I expect the issue to come up also at the summit.

In principle, we see no contradiction. Closer co-operation between the countries in the region and Russia does not exclude closer ties also between them and the EU. In fact, the idea of closer economic integration in a space "from Lisbon to Vladivostok" and based on WTO rules has actually been discussed for some time and is also underlying some of the ongoing work in EU-Russia relations.

The integration processes in the Customs Union, the Single Economic Space and the "Eurasian Union" are for the countries concerned to decide. The EU, as the largest trading partner of all countries concerned, of course wishes to be informed in a timely and proper manner about decisions which affect us. This is in our mutual interest. Likewise the EU will continue to provide information about developments related to the Eastern Partnership and the EU's Central Asia Strategy. We are continuing at the same time the deepening of our bilateral relations with both Russia and Kazakhstan, including by negotiating Agreements, providing a new, comprehensive and substantial framework for our relations.

The EU notes the emphasis laid by Prime Minister Putin on the free, sovereign nature of the decision that a country may wish to take on an integration project on the basis of its own national interest. We therefore assume that there will be no pressure against a country with which the EU is negotiating a deep and comprehensive free trade area. The EU also takes note of Mr Putin's reassurance that all integration processes in the "Eurasian space" must be based on the common values of freedom, democracy and free markets. We took note with satisfaction that the newly appointed Commissioner of the "Eurasian Economic Union" Minister Khristenko recently stated that the technical norms and standards of that union should not only be WTO compatible but also aligned with EU standards. This will help to avoid the creation of new barriers for trade and mistrust on our continent.

5. Following your visit to Georgia and the recent resolution of the European Parliament, some experts argue that the EU is speeding up Georgia's integration into the EU. Others say that the EU is just being so "nice" towards Georgia because Tbilisi recently agreed to a compromise on Russia's access to the WTO – something that the EU worked very much on. Who is right?

First of all, let me say that it was very important for Russia, for Georgia and for the EU that a compromise was agreed in the WTO context. Everyone stands to gain from this important step in bringing Russia into the WTO framework. The EU rightly expressed its appreciation both to Georgia and to Russia in this regard, and we expect that this agreement could open the way for improved bilateral relations and improved co-operation in the context of the Geneva talks.

However, to make a link between this deal and an ongoing process of approximation is not correct. EU-Georgia relations have been evolving and developing since the first Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was established in 1998. Georgia is now part of the Eastern Partnership initiative, within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This relationship is very good and dynamic, on the basis of the ambitious domestic reform agenda of the Georgian government.