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THE TWO ST. PETERSBURG SUMMITS¹

It is always difficult to comment on the yearly G8 Summit meetings. The G8, judged by the results of its actions, and indeed by the very structure of the group itself, is a fairly amorphous organization. It is a club, not an institution. The results that it achieves are less than obvious. And the most interesting processes that take place during the G8 Summits are hidden from outsiders.

On the other hand, it is fairly easy to answer the question of what Russia expected from the St. Petersburg G8 Summit of July 2006. Russia wanted to host a G8 Summit that proceeded smoothly, and thereby fulfill its role as chairman of this informal club.

Qualms about the St. Petersburg Summit in the media (particularly in the foreign press) and political circles far exceeded those in the Kremlin. The Kremlin viewed the G8 Summit as yet one more prominent meeting in a series of summits of equal symbolic significance, such as the celebration of St. Petersburg's 300th anniversary or the 60th anniversary of the victory in World War II. In addition to the journalists, Summit organizers were naturally nervous, particularly those directly involved in St. Petersburg. As for President Putin and his foreign policy team, they were uncommonly relaxed.

Some difficulties were expected, but not so much from the G8 Summit as from the U.S.-Russian meeting and from the free day that U.S. President George Bush would spend in Russia.

Much has been said in recent months about the fact that the "Vilnius speech" by U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney denoted the lowest point in U.S.-Russian relations in many years. This is true. At least, in the half year that preceded this speech, Putin and Bush only spoke with one another once or twice on the telephone. This was the lowest point in the whole history of the two leaders' communications. Now it seems as though in Vilnius the relations between Russia and the United States hit bottom, and have begun to rise somewhat since. How long-lived this trend will turn out to be we will see as events unfold in the near future. Ahead are several serious tests, particularly those related to the Russian-Georgian conflict, to the recognition of Kosovo independence (which Moscow sees as precedent-setting), and to NATO's conduct with regards to the possibility of former Soviet states joining the organization.

As for the question of democracy in Russia, discussion of this question both in the bilateral U.S.-Russian format and in the G8 format was solved fairly painlessly for the Kremlin. The participation of the U.S. deputy secretary of state in a meeting with one Nazi, one ultra-Communist, and one liberal organization with a popularity rating of under one percent cannot be viewed as anything other than a farce. The attempt by several colleagues from the Public Chamber to express their angry protest about this to George Bush and Tony Blair was rather surprising. And a *jab* like "Russia would not want to build the same kind of democracy as they have in Iraq" should be wished for anyone appearing in a debate. This sort of *jab* is hard to deliver badly.



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As for the St. Petersburg G8 Summit itself, to take a narrowly Russian viewpoint, one could evaluate them as extremely positive. Of course, Russia itself prepared the majority of the documents adopted at the Summit. But I would like to note that they were not simply adopted, but largely adopted without serious debates or objections on the part of Russia's other partners in this "club."

Both the content of the documents that were adopted and the Summit format were conducive not just to an improvement of Russia's image, but also the image of the G8 itself, which in recent years has had a clear reputation as a "club for fat cats" that meets in order to discuss their own problems. When I speak of the Summit format, I principally have in mind the fact that other significant actors were included: China, India, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and international organizations. It is also important that in the final documents on education and on combating epidemics a great deal of attention was paid to the interests of countries that do not belong to the club.

And now that Vladimir Putin and Tony Blair have publicly supported the expansion of the G8, this expansion itself will be just a matter of time.

I would particularly like to draw attention to the document that was adopted on energy security, which includes the Russian interpretation of what energy security means. It is not just the rights of consumers, which is understood as market liberalization and increasing production, but also the rights of producers, who are interested in long-term commitments for the use of energy resources, fair prices, and unimpeded delivery on world markets.

Looking back at mid-July 2006, at the days of the St. Petersburg Summit, one must admit that it was overshadowed by events: the war in Lebanon. The Summit was pushed off the front pages, and at the meetings themselves the leaders had to devote an unplanned and disproportionately large amount of time to the Mideast problems. Several Russian analysts and politicians believed that this might even be a good thing. Clearly, under these circumstances Garry Kasparov and Mikhail Kasyanov had less air time on BBC and Sky News and other television stations that they would have if events had unfolded otherwise. On the other hand, the tragic events in the Middle East did not allow Russia fully to announce its position during the Summit.

The events in the Middle East noticeably sped up the process of taking decisions at the Summit. Decisions on new problems had to be made quickly, which necessitated rapidly finding solutions to disagreements. Therefore, all documents that had been prepared in advance went through virtually without discussion. As for working out a common position on Lebanon, we saw that over the course of two days the positions grew closer before our very eyes. If the leaders had been in their national capitals at that moment, there simply could not have been a common position. Just as there would not have been a UN Security Council resolution on North Korea. It is the presence of these leaders in one place at this critical moment that allowed for the rapid agreement on these documents.

Finally, the Summit was organized well and came off without a hitch. This is an *organizational* question, but it was solved brilliantly, and left the pleasant *aftertaste* that remains from the St. Petersburg events. As far as substance is concerned, this G8 Summit, like those that preceded it and, most likely, those that follow, should not lead to raised hopes among the expert community. After all, it is primarily an informal discussion club for world leaders, decisions do not have to be taken there, but many barriers can be removed there, including psychological ones, so that such decisions may be taken in future. If there are no hopes raised by G8 Summits, then there will be no disappointments either. 

Note

¹ This commentary is based on Vyacheslav Nikonov's address to a session of the *Dialogue Club* organized by the PIR Center on July 19, 2006.