

Strained Russia-EU Relations

Interview of the Ambassador of Russia to the EU Vladimir Chizhov

By [Vladimir Chizhov](#) and [Euractiv](#)
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In a telephone interview on Thursday (11 February) the Ambassador of Russia to the EU Vladimir Chizhov evokes the recent visit of EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell to Moscow, which he helped arrange.

Vladimir Chizhov is a career diplomat. Before being appointed ambassador to the EU in 2005, he was Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. He spoke to EURACTIV’s senior editor Georgi Gotev.

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Euractiv: Why did you, why did Russia, as host country, humiliate your European guest, Mr. Borrell, who came to you with an open mind and an open heart?

Vladimir Chizhov: I am surprised to hear such a question. Even if the High Representative feels humiliated, I believe this humiliation comes not from Russia – it certainly didn’t happen in Moscow, but rather here in Brussels upon his return.

I saw the debate in the European Parliament, and I read a number of comments, some of which actually preceded his trip to Moscow, while most of them followed the trip. Evidently, there were people who didn’t like the very idea of the trip. And I appreciate that despite these “friendly advices” Josep Borrell has shown will and determination to go to Moscow.

So this artificially tense situation was created in Brussels, not in Moscow.

E: Mr Borrell probably now regrets having gone to Moscow.

VC: Well, you will have to ask him. But I hope he does not because the visit was useful. The discussion was quite frank and highly professional.

E: Maybe that discussion took place behind closed doors. But what we saw at the press conference as Russian public communication was quite shocking. During the exchange, Russian foreign minister Lavrov described the EU as an “unreliable partner”? Can you explain what this means? In what way is the EU an unreliable partner to Russia?

VC: Well, I think it refers to the previous record of Russia-EU relations. You are aware

probably, having dealt with this topic for a long time, that we had created – with joint efforts – a multifaceted and complex architecture of cooperation. But most of those formats, including regular summits, the Permanent Partnership Council at ministerial level, a lot of sectoral dialogues and the parliamentary cooperation committee, they were all frozen by the EU, on dubious pretense back in 2014.

E: This is not “dubious pretense”, Mr. Ambassador. For the first time in post-World War II history in Europe a country annexes foreign territory. This is not “dubious pretense”.

VC: Of course, Russia didn’t annex anything. Look at how things developed, if you refer to Crimea. What preceded the referendum, what led to it, how it was held, what was the turnout and what was the outcome.

E: Europe doesn’t recognise this referendum.

VC: Most EU member states have recognised the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo, splitting a sovereign European country, which was then called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. With no referendum whatsoever.

E: Two wrongs do not make a right.

VC: That’s why I pinpoint the factual difference between the two cases.

E: Tell me, would you do the same trick to Mr. Macron, if he comes to Moscow, as you did to Mr Borrell, would you humiliate him? I’m asking because I don’t think so. Are you mocking the EU as a non-entity?

VC: Again, I cannot understand what you mean by using the term of “humiliation” in the context of Mr. Borrell’s visit to Moscow. There was nothing that could be perceived as humiliation. I was there during the official part of the negotiations, from the very first moment until the very last. And I didn’t sense anything that could be perceived as such.

E: But you lost a friend. Judging from what [Mr. Borrell said before going to Moscow](#) and [after his visit](#), Russia should now brace for sanctions. And he was not in that state of mind before going to Moscow. Do you think this was a successful visit?

VC: I think it was a useful visit. Whether it was successful, it is perhaps too early to judge. But evidently it was successful in terms of frank and open discussion of issues that bring us closer, as well as on issues that for the moment divide us.

You know, as Borrell himself admitted, when the two sides have problems it is particularly necessary to maintain dialogue to discuss those differences. And that’s exactly what happened.

E: I have had the opportunity to interview you in your capacity as Ambassador to the EU over the years since 2008, and thank you for always being responsive. But EU-Russia relations have deteriorated steadily, while the duty of an ambassador is to improve relations. Do you have any frustration?

VC: Of course I do. Our relations have had their ups and downs. I have been here perhaps longer than you. And I’ve been dealing with Russia-EU relations directly since 1999. So, I’ve

really seen ups and downs.

For instance, I've seen a certain down due to events in my country, namely in the Republic of Chechnya back in 2002-2003, when genuine terrorists were courteously called "rebels" by some democratic partners. After that we managed to put our relations on a more positive track, with the four roadmaps, the four common spaces. We had two summits every year, in the better years and in the more complicated years.

The latest summit took place in January 2014, but for the next one, which was scheduled for June 2014 in Sochi, the EU failed to show up. It was not our fault; we didn't close any negotiating venue. We never shut up any door on the EU.

I have to admit that we did have certain difficulties, certain problems, well before the Ukraine crisis erupted in 2014. Let me just remind you of the negotiations we had on visa liberalisation. We had the feeling that every time we were at the threshold of an agreement, for some reason the EU rolled back. And there were similar other cases.

But with perseverance and determination, that both sides showed, we were able to overcome these differences. I hope that we will still be able to do that sooner rather than later.

E: Yes, but it will be more difficult. Mr. Ambassador, we are both people with experience. We remember the Helsinki Process, 1975, and at that time, it was possible to discuss human rights, as part of the so-called "third basket", the first one being disarmament and security, and the second economic relations. Why isn't it possible to discuss human rights with Russia any longer?

VC: I didn't say that. It is possible of course. We are fully prepared to discuss human rights in Russia, in the EU and at the global scale.

E: But you don't accept the EU raising the question of sending Navalny to jail?

VC: We can discuss this issue, however pointless it may be. By the way, that issue was mentioned by both sides during the negotiations between Lavrov and Borrell in Moscow.

E: And what was the result?

VC: We explained our view. We reminded, and we always remind the EU, that independence of the judiciary is part of the values the EU cherishes so much. So we expect that independence of the judiciary in Russia is respected by the EU.

When we hear appeals that Navalny or other people that may be spending time in jail in Russia should be immediately and unconditionally released, this is surprising. It contradicts our common commitment to the principle of independence of the judiciary, and above all it represents flagrant intervention in the internal affairs of my country.

E: Discussing human rights is not intervening in internal affairs.

VC: You know, I would like to see the same energy on behalf of the EU demanding unconditional release of, for example, Julian Assange who is in a UK prison without verdict or even charges.

E: During Soviet times Moscow replied to US criticism by saying «[А у вас негров линчуют](#)», which means “in your country you lynch the Negroes”. It sounds the same to me.

VC: You shouldn't use this terminology. Afro-Americans is more correct.

E: I'm quoting.

VC: Then you should take into consideration certain specificity of the Russian language. So do you want to go back to those times? Those were different times, those were the times of the Cold war which we all celebrated the end of.

E: After the Cold War there was détente. Now I don't see détente.

VC: Détente was also linked to those previous times. I think détente should not be used to describe what we have today. We live in a different world, a multi-polar world where countries and governments should look towards combating common challenges and threats, like for example the current coronavirus.

E: Mr. Borrell complimented Russia over the Sputnik vaccine...

VC: That was appreciated, also publicly.

E: But he was still humiliated.

VC: Who says that?

E: Everybody.

VC: Well, again, I believe, even if he was humiliated, it was done not in Moscow, but here in Brussels upon his return.

E: Judging from his latest statements, Mr. Borrell is now an advocate for inflicting new sanctions on Russia.

VC: I didn't read his statements in that way, he was much more cautious than that. And of course, it's not up to him to decide on any restrictive measures. By the way, when we speak about what the EU can do, we can only speak of unilateral restrictive measures, not sanctions. The EU is not entitled to introduce sanctions, it's only up to the UN Security Council.

E: Call it restrictive measures, but they will target Russian officials in high positions.

VC: For ostensibly humiliating Borrell? Look, that is nonsense.

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