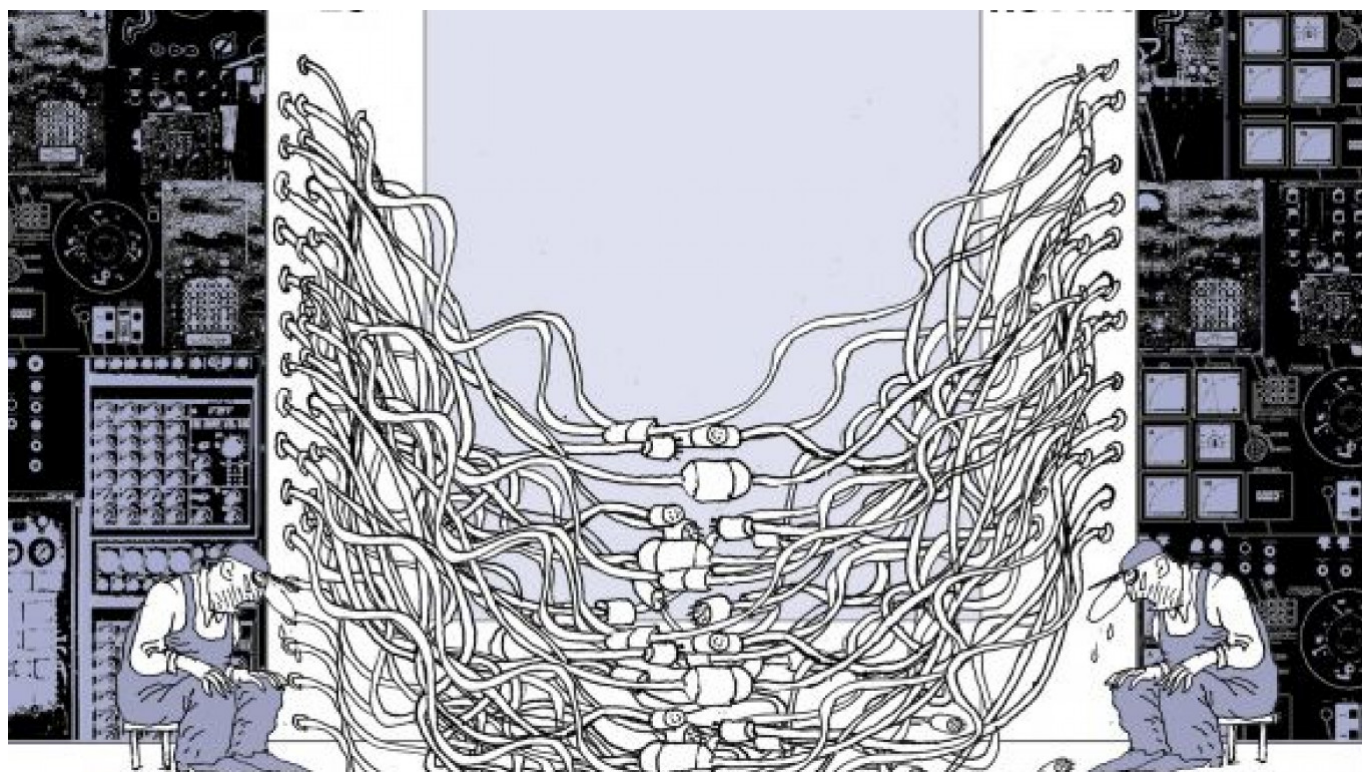


# The Vegetable Summit

By [Fraser Cameron](#)

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Leaders of the European Union and Russia are meeting Thursday and Friday in Nizhny Novgorod for yet another summit. President Dmitry Medvedev already meets his two EU counterparts, European Council President Herman van Rompuy and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, twice a year at EU-Russia summits, as well as at numerous other international meetings such as the Group of Eight and G20 gatherings. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also meets Catherine Ashton, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, about once a month at various meetings. Thus, it is no surprise that both sides are ready to consider reducing the bilateral summits to once a year, which would be the same frequency as the EU summits with the United States, China or India.

Summits rarely produce breakthroughs, and this one will likely not be an exception to the rule. The dwindling number of journalists who follow these summits will have little to report apart from EU efforts to overturn the Russian ban of vegetable imports from the EU following the E. coli health scare in Germany.

Officially, both sides will review the ongoing negotiations for a new partnership agreement, take note of a progress report on the EU-Russia Partnership for Modernization program and

exchange views on a range of foreign policy issues.

Negotiations for a new EU-Russia agreement have been going on for several years with only limited progress. The main problem area is trade. Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization is regarded as essential to conclude the agreement, but there are still some difficult issues to tackle. Russia is worried about the implications of WTO membership on certain sectors, including aluminum, automobiles and meat. The EU argues that after 17 years of talks, it is time to conclude the negotiations. Brussels wants to see Russia inside the WTO for several reasons, not least of which is to bind Moscow to comply with international rules, including the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism.

One of Russia's chief demands is to ease visa rules between EU countries and Russia. First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov was in Brussels last week to prepare for the EU-Russia summit and to try to meet EU concerns on visa issues. EU officials say some progress on visa rules has been made, but much more remains to be done. The EU wants to see improvements in the security standards of Russian passports and ID documents. It also wants Russia to take tougher steps to deal with illegal migration. The summit will not agree to any schedule for the lifting of visa restrictions, mainly because most EU member states believe that Russia should not have a privileged position over Ukraine, which has equally close ties to the EU. To deal with EU concerns, a migration dialogue will be initiated at the summit.

There has also been some progress on the Partnership for Modernization, which will be reflected in a joint report. The areas where progress has been made include: the environment; space, including EU involvement in the Soyuz program; Russia's involvement in Galileo, the EU's equivalent of GPS; and harmonized rules and standards for industry. But little progress has been made on trade and investment. Despite Medvedev's and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's appeals for more foreign investment in Russia, there are few signs of European companies wishing to take the plunge, above all because of the lack of rule of law in Russia.

Representatives of the newly formed EU-Russia Civil Society Forum will hold their own meeting parallel to the summit. EU officials have agreed to meet with forum representatives, and it is hoped that Russian officials will join them. This would be a signal that Medvedev is committed to strengthening civil society. On human rights, the EU will once again put the verdict against former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the death in pretrial detention of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky on the agenda and inquire about the independent review of both cases. The EU will also emphasize the importance of free and fair elections for the State Duma in December.

The foreign policy agenda will discuss ways to improve cooperation on Libya, Syria, the Caucasus, Western Balkans and Belarus. Russia has been critical of Britain and France seeking to expand the United Nations resolution on Libya to include the removal of Moammar Gadhafi. Russia has shown little enthusiasm for following the EU in imposing sanctions on Syria's leaders. In addition, the EU will probably use the summit to again remind Russia that it hasn't fulfilled its commitments on Georgia under the Sarkozy-Medvedev six-point agreement.

This will be a routine summit with no big fights and no major agreements signed. Arguably, the two sides could save a huge amount of time and money by holding a video conference or

even just exchanging position papers. In an age of government austerity, excessive debt and budget cuts, the public would surely applaud the move, and who would miss that second summit anyway?

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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