

***Czech PM Topolanek sees European Energy Charter as basis for relations with Russia***

VIENNA. APRIL 23. INTERFAX CENTRAL EUROPE – Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek sees the European Energy Charter, which Russia signed in 1991 but has refused to ratify, as the basis for future relations.

“The charter is the basis for future relations,” Topolanek told the Europe-Russia Forum in Vienna Monday. “Prospects [for improved relations] lie in the strengthening of mutual obligations in global stability, energy security and [... dealing with] common threats such as terrorism.”

The multilateral Energy Charter treaty mandates all signatories to liberalize their energy markets, something the Kremlin has been reluctant to do. Its refusal to ratify the treaty was one of the sticking points when Poland vetoed the negotiating mandate for a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and Russia, though the demand for ratification has since been dropped from the list of Polish demands.

With the EU unable to launch the PCA talks, some have come to question the rationale for a comprehensive treaty, suggesting a number of piecemeal deals on specific issues would serve better the cause of mutual relations.

“There is no need to draw up any massive document,” Andranik Migranyan of Russia’s Public Chamber said. “We should focus on specific issues.”

According to Katinka Barysch, chief economist at the Centre for European Reform, a London-based think-tank, one idea doing the rounds in Brussels is for the PCA itself to become part of the solution. The new agreement could embrace elements of the energy charter, eliminating concerns of some EU countries about Russia’s motives for the failure to ratify. In return, she said, the EU would consent to a free-trade agreement with Moscow.

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