



On Western strategy towards Russia: From ‘Putin first’ to ‘democracy first’

European View
2021, Vol. 20(1) 6–13
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DOI: 10.1177/17816858211003348
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

The article analyses two distinct approaches that Western leaders have taken to relations with Putin’s Russia. It argues that the dominant approach of fostering good relations with Vladimir Putin, prioritising these over support for longer-term democratic change in Russia, has not brought any results and is damaging the interests of Russian society, neighbouring countries and the West. The article analyses the prerequisites for deep change in Russia and argues that there is a need for the EU to comprehensively review and change its strategy towards Russia, putting democracy at its core. It discusses in detail the deterrence, containment and transformation elements of a new EU strategy. The article emphasises that the strategic approach of ‘democracy first’ in relations with Russia also relates to the future of democracy in general and should be a priority of EU–US cooperation.

Keywords

Russia, Democracy, Transformation, EU, Elections, Success belt

Introduction

Dreams move the world! Former US President Ronald Reagan (1984) used to say ‘America is too great for small dreams.’ One of his great dreams led to the collapse of the Soviet ‘Evil Empire’. On the European continent we are still living with the very clear big dream of ‘Europe: whole, free and at peace’. This is the dream of living in a peaceful, stable and prosperous neighbourhood. Unfortunately, today that dream remains unfinished. Parts of the former Soviet Union are still deprived of freedom, democracy and human rights. The biggest victim of this unfinished business is Russia, and President

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Vladimir Putin's autocratic regime in the Kremlin is the biggest obstacle to that dream becoming a reality.

The Kremlin is actively using its hybrid strategy to convince us, the West, that we simply need to adapt to 'Putin's Russia', since democracy is not, in its opinion, suitable for Russia. Having always been ruled by tsars, general secretaries or authoritarian presidents, Russia is supposedly a 'special case'. With his aggressive and unpredictable behaviour Putin aims to convince the West that Russia cannot become democratic, even in the distant future. Therefore, he argues, the West needs to cohabit with 'Putin's Russia'. His message to the West is quite simple: do not provoke us with a democratic agenda, because we are unpredictable and dangerous; if provoked, we can respond with poison or even push the nuclear button.

There were and still are many in the West who believe this propaganda and echo the narrative that democracy in Russia is impossible. They believe that the West should simply accept the status quo on the European continent, adapt to a non-democratic Russia and engage with it. We have witnessed many Western attempts to engage with Putin's non-democratic regime. Former US President George W. Bush said that he had looked into Putin's eyes and got a sense of his soul. There have been proposals for a partnership for modernisation and a partnership for peace and so on. Since then, the new initiative of the 'reset' has been put forward. More recently, French President Emmanuel Macron has clearly signalled that he also does not believe in the possibility of the democratic transformation of Russia and is ready to lead the West in yet another effort to adapt to Putin's Russia. All these initiatives of the West intended to adapt to Putin's regime can simply be named 'Putin first'. They have all failed. Not only have they not led to improvements in Putin's behaviour or helped to transform Russia into a democracy, but on the contrary they have provoked Putin to behave even more aggressively. It is high time to draw the proper conclusion and finally move from a 'Putin first' to a 'democracy first' agenda in our relationship with Russia.

There is another side to the story, however. There have always been brave people in Russia, despite the efforts of the Kremlin to silence them. There have always been some in the West, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, who have not lost hope that a democratic transformation of Russia is possible in the long run. Moreover, there have always been some who believe that this transformation of Russia is, in fact, inevitable and that the West can assist Russia in it. This argument is based on the fact that historically Russia has always undergone the same European-style development, just with a significant delay. Russia was the power-centre of the last European empire, which only started to collapse in the 1990s. Since then, Russia has gone through a post-imperial phase. It is precisely because of this painful imperial nostalgia that 'Yeltsin's democracy' was doomed and collapsed, similar to the collapse of democracy in Germany's post-imperial Weimar Republic (Kailitz and Umland 2019). However, history teaches us that post-imperial syndromes, despite their traumatic pain and authoritarian nostalgia, are temporary syndromes which fade with time. This makes us believe that democracy in Russia is possible for the new generation.

Before putting forward ideas for a new Western strategy towards Russia, we need to stress that the main difference between the two distinct Western approaches (Putin first and democracy first) boils down to one thing—whether there is belief that Russia can become a more democratic, more European country, or that it is doomed to authoritarianism for ever. There are two major bodies of evidence which should be convincing enough to enable us to abandon the shallow misunderstanding that democracy in Russia is not possible. The first is based on a better understanding of the historical processes the post-imperial Russia faces. These processes, as with other post-imperial developments, make a democratic transformation unavoidable: (a) the erosion of people's loyalty towards the autocratic and autarkic regime, (b) the erosion of the post-imperial power of the Kremlin, and (c) the inevitable periodicity of Huntington waves (Huntington 1991) of democratisation (Kubilius 2020a; 2020b).

The second body of evidence comes from recent developments within and around Russia, from the democratic revolution in Belarus, continuous public protests in Khabarovsk and the democratic victory of pro-European candidate Maia Sandu in the 2020 Moldovan presidential election, to massive public protests against the Kremlin's criminal attempts to poison and detain opposition leader Alexei Navalny. All these and many other events demonstrate that changes in Russia may come as unexpectedly as they have in Belarus. Furthermore, the democratic revolution in Belarus is one of the major factors that convincingly demonstrates that democratic transformation is as possible in Russia as it is in Belarus or Ukraine. In addition, the Russian autocracy is in retreat and that opens up totally new opportunities for transformation within Russia (Dickinson 2020). Powerful arguments for putting democracy first in the Western strategy on Russia were recently presented by Washington-based D. Fried and A. S. Vershbow, two of the best global experts on Russia (Vershbow and Fried 2020).

These historical tendencies and recent developments around and within Russia are why the EU must prepare for a major democratic transformation in its neighbourhood. With this in mind, on 17 September 2020 the European Parliament adopted a special resolution *On the Situation in Russia: The Poisoning of Alexei Navalny* (European Parliament 2020). This resolution called for EU leadership with the 'utmost urgency to launch a thorough and strategic reassessment of the EU's relations with Russia . . .'. The European Parliament specifically decided to call on the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, Josep Borrell, 'to review EU policy vis-à-vis Russia and the five guiding principles for the EU's relations with Russia and to develop a new comprehensive strategy, which will be conditional on further developments in the area of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights by the Russian leadership and authorities'. It also asked 'the Council to immediately start preparations and adopt an EU strategy for future relations with a democratic Russia, including a broad offer of incentives and conditions to strengthen domestic tendencies towards freedom and democracy' (European Parliament 2020, 6). The European Parliament used the same language in the revision of EU strategy towards Russia in its most recent resolution *On the Arrest of Alexei Navalny*, adopted on 21 January 2021 (European Parliament 2021). Thus the European Parliament has very clearly stated that future EU relations with Russia will

depend not on ideas of ‘reset’ or ‘friendship’ with Putin or the Kremlin, but on the democratic transformation of Russia.

It is time for the West to develop a policy towards Russia that is long-term, proactive and focused on helping Russia to return to the path of democratic, European-style development. We should not have any illusions that such a transformation could happen under Putin’s leadership. Putin will not change, but people can change Russia. In Lithuania, we have stayed true to the dream of democracy in Russia for many years. This dream also grounds our initiative of an informal Forum of Friends of European Russia in the European Parliament. In the Forum we have outstanding opportunities to share and discuss ideas on the strategy that the EU needs to implement in order to assist democratic transformation in Russia. Below I present some of those ideas, framing a vision of a new EU strategy towards Russia.

On ‘democracy first’ in the EU strategy towards Russia

The new EU strategy towards Russia should entail three elements—deterrence, containment and transformation. The first two elements are generally understood and already partially in place.

The deterrence strategy has a clear objective of deterring Russia’s military threat. Therefore it is not enough to simply talk about EU ‘strategic autonomy’. Securing NATO’s military presence in the Baltic region is a vital instrument of the deterrence strategy. It is only NATO which has the real capability to deter Russia. The 2017 US National Security Strategy identified Russia and China as major threats to US national security. In its own security strategies, the EU should likewise be capable of detecting the primary source of threat.

A containment strategy is necessary to effectively counter Russia’s hybrid threats in order to prevent the Kremlin from influencing the mindset of our citizens, that is, from ‘occupying’ the hearts and minds of our people, and hence affecting the outcomes of elections and the activities of political parties in EU member states. That is why the EU needs to have a consolidated, well-coordinated and holistic anti-hybrid containment strategy.

There is, however, a third element of the West’s long-term strategy towards Russia, which until now has been almost non-existent. This third element—a strategy of transformation—refers not to thinking about ways to defend ourselves from Russian threats, but to how to assist Russia’s transformation into a democratic, European-style country. While the future of Russia is for Russians to determine, the West can help. This will nevertheless require an appropriate long-term Western strategy towards Russia. A transformation of this kind is the only way for the EU to no longer be situated next to the threat we face today. The underlying idea behind the transformation strategy is simple. Three things can assist Russians seeking a transformation of their country, namely: (a) proper and targeted punishment (preventative sanctions) by the EU of those within and close to the Kremlin who are ready to ‘steal’ or corrupt elections (both inside Russia and

in the ‘near abroad’); (b) the EU’s strategic responsibility and geopolitical leadership in the creation of a ‘success belt’ of Eastern Partnership countries along the Russian border; and (c) an EU strategy for future relations with a democratic Russia, which would allow us to convey to the Russian people what they are missing out on whilst they continue with autocracy.

Preventative sanctions: against ‘stealing’ and corrupting elections

During the summer last year, we watched how Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus’s disgraced leader, rigged the system to ‘steal’ the elections in Belarus: not registering candidates, putting them in jail, fabricating numbers in voting protocols and so on. There was plenty of clear evidence that he lost the election, despite all the efforts of the regime to ensure otherwise (Demidova 2020). And when people went into the streets to protest the ‘theft’ of their victory, the regime unleashed all of its criminal brutality onto the ordinary protesting citizens. The reaction of the EU evolved gradually from statements of concern at the beginning to recent packages of sanctions, though these are still less severe than expected.

The Russian authorities have recently announced new regulations which show that the Kremlin is also ready to steal the forthcoming elections to the State Duma, the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia. The recent poisoning of Navalny; his arrest; and the brutality inflicted by OMON, a special police unit, against those who came out in protest are indications that the Kremlin’s suppression of protests will be harsher than that which occurred in Belarus. With this, the Putin regime is showing very clearly that it is ready to pit autocracy against democracy. The EU and other established Western democracies must be clear-eyed about this: this battle is a test of the West—is the West prepared to help defend democratic values despite the brutality of authoritarian regimes? Or are authoritarian regimes stronger than democracies?

US President Joe Biden has promised to convene a global Summit of Democracies; the EU should attend to input new ideas on democracy. We should elaborate and prepare those ideas in the special EU Conference on the Future of Democracy. One of the priorities should be the defence of democratic values against authoritarian brutality. To that end, a new legal instrument—the International Convention of Democracies on the Protection of Democracy (‘Global Magnitsky Act on the Defence of Democracy’)—should be created. This would establish a very clear system of international sanctions and penalties to be imposed on autocrats who steal national elections from their citizens. Similar penalties should be established for those who support autocrats in their attempts to steal elections from their citizens (such as Putin’s support for Lukashenko, which has enabled him to continue to perpetrate brutal crimes against the Belarusian people). Autocrats should be aware of these potential sanctions in advance.

In addition to this mechanism for the preventative defence of democracy against attempts to steal elections, there is also a need for a new and much more effective

mechanism to defend democracy against corruption attempts. As A. Åslund and J. Friedlander (2020) clearly state in their powerful report, *Defending the United States Against Russian Dark Money*: ‘Russian dark money is a quietly powerful influence on the American political system’. The report argues that after the 11 September 2001 terror attacks the US learned how to effectively combat the dark money used to finance international terrorism. Now the same methods should be used to eliminate the dark money connected to Russian oligarchs, especially those who are close to the Kremlin. The fight against Russian dark money or that belonging to Lukashenko should be the most important part of a new common transatlantic agenda for the defence of democracy.

The transformational soft power of the EU

The ‘success belt’ and the transformation of Russia

Transformation in a country such as Russia happens when the people who want serious change start to realise that they form a majority in the society (as was the case in Belarus). In 2019, according to polls by Levada, 59% of Russians were in favour of ‘serious change’ (Arkhipov and Andrianova 2019). Inspiration for transformation can come from the international neighbourhood by power of example. The EU needs to understand that the most important instrument in its transformational soft power towards Russia would be the creation of a ‘success belt’ along the Russian border (including Ukraine and Belarus, in particular), as this would set an excellent example for Russians. One should not underestimate the impact successful, democratic and market-oriented neighbours along its borders could have on Russia. If these countries can succeed, Russia can too. This is why the success belt is the Western ‘weapon’ that poses the greatest danger to the Kremlin’s regime and is feared the most by Putin. His strategic goal in Ukraine and Belarus, as in all the Eastern Partnership countries, is to prevent the development of prosperous, democratic, stable and secure states.

That is why the West should do its utmost to thwart Putin’s strategy, which is now focused on Ukraine and Belarus. The success of Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia and Belarus is what the West can make happen, and it is currently the only instrument available to the West to help Russia transform into a pro-European country. Therefore, a clear Western strategy on ways to build a success belt along Russia’s borders (starting with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) must be among our top priorities. In this regard, the West needs to understand that investing in the development of the success belt is not an anti-Russia policy. It is exactly the opposite: a democracy-first policy from the West that is important for the Russian people.

The EU’s strategic vision on relations with a democratic Russia

Another powerful instrument of EU soft power should be a clear message to the people of Russia about what future relations between the EU and Russia could look like if Russia finally returns to the path of democratic pro-European development. This idea was recently introduced by A. Umland (2017), and has since been elaborated by Tomi Huhtanen (2019). The West has to change the interlocutor and the content in its dialogue

with Russia. Dialogue with Putin is counterproductive, because Putin is not going to change and any overzealous Western attempts to seek dialogue with him will be further regarded as a manifestation of Western weakness. Signs of Western weakness provoke Putin into behaving even more aggressively.

Instead of directly talking to Putin, the EU must engage with the pro-European Russia of the future, addressing the majority of citizens who desire serious change in Russia. The EU should convincingly and understandably demonstrate to that silent majority the potential of EU relations with a post-imperial and non-aggressive Russia (which will happen one day!). The prospects for a pro-European Russia would be strengthened if the EU presented possible models for its integration into Western structures, as proposed by some renowned experts (Bershidsky 2018; Grygiel 2019). These could include a wide spectrum of promising future relations, such as a visa-waiver scheme, a customs union, a free trade and association agreement with the EU, and so on. This ‘EU Marshall Plan for a Democratic Russia’ could be expressly presented now in the EU strategy for relations with Russia.

Finally, this would help ordinary Russians and the Russian elite unconnected with Putin’s kleptocratic regime understand in more concrete terms what they are losing out on today because of the aggressive behaviour of the regime, and what they would gain with the evolution of a pro-European Russia (after Putin) in the long term.

Conclusion

In sum, this is what the Western strategy towards Russia could look like. To make it happen, the West should have more faith in Russia’s capability to transform and one day embark on the path of democratic European development. Likewise, the West should trust in its own potential to assist Russia on this challenging path of transformation through a long-term strategy of support and consistent implementation. The EU’s joint efforts with its transatlantic partners should be focused here. It is in this way that our dream of a ‘Europe: whole, free and at peace’ can become a reality. Democracy in Russia: the mission *is* possible—and is also our responsibility!

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