



As in Belarus: The beginning of the end of a reign in Russia

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Bernard Guetta

Abstract

It is now impossible to examine the world's largest country without acknowledging the new realities which have changed the situation there. The first is that the idea that Russia irresistible is no longer as compelling as it was even two or three years ago and that this has called into question, and even weakened, the Russian president's authority. The second reality is that it would certainly not be in the interests of the world's major democracies to allow Russia and China to combine forces against them. The third is that the botched attempt to poison Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2020 has raised his status to that of an alternative to the incumbent president. However, the most striking of these new developments is that Russia is at a loss as to how to respond to the democratic protests in Belarus because the options available would have major implications for both Putin and Russia itself.

Keywords

Russia, EU, China, Belarus, Putin, Democracy, Rapprochement, Modus vivendi

Introduction

Russia poses nothing but questions. Is it, or is it not, European, as Peter the Great, Catherine the Great and, more recently, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev wanted? Will it one day accept the loss of the nations that constituted its empire? And what kind of relations might it establish with these countries, Ukraine and Belarus in particular, as they increasingly seek to escape from its orbit?

And there are more questions: Will Russia ever be able to revert to the brief periods of democratisation that it experienced at the beginning and again at the end of the twentieth century? Will it find a modus vivendi with the EU by negotiating new security

Corresponding author:

B. Guetta, European Parliament, Rue Wiertz 60, Bruxelles, B-1047, Belgium.
Email: bernard.guetta@europarl.europa.eu



and cooperation agreements with the bloc? Or, conversely, will it align itself with Asia by moving closer to China? In other words, more than 20 years after Vladimir Putin took charge, where does Russia stand? And what of Putin, the man who restored strength to Moscow in a bid to make this former superpower a force to be reckoned with once more? Where does he stand?

Some of these are perennial questions that will no doubt continue to be asked for a long time to come, but it has now become impossible to examine the world's largest country without acknowledging the new realities which have changed the situation there.

The first is that Russia's awakening under Putin is no longer as compelling as it was even two or three years ago and that this has called into question, and even weakened, the Russian president's authority. The second reality is that it would certainly not be in the interests of the world's major democracies, either the EU or the US, to allow Russia and China to combine forces against them. The third is that the botched attempt to poison Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2020 has raised his status to that of an alternative to the incumbent president. However, the most striking of these new developments is that Russia is at a loss as to how to respond to the democratic protests in Belarus because the options available would have major implications for both Vladimir Putin and Russia itself.

Six months after the start of the crisis in Belarus, Putin remains hesitant about resorting to brute force, and what Russia does or does not end up doing about Minsk will speak volumes about the status and future of this poor power, whose choices will carry so much weight in determining the global balance of international relations.

The Russian president has so little faith in his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko's future that he is casting around for a successor, and is not really even bothering to hide the fact. At the same time, he refuses to let him go because the removal of Lukashenko, a man loathed by his people, would provide a fillip for democracy that might put dangerous dreams into the heads of the Russian people. On the one hand, Putin cannot bring himself to allow freedom to triumph in the most Russian of the lost empire's territories. On the other, he does not know how to bring Belarus to heel without repeating the same mistake he made in Ukraine, where the annexation of Crimea and Russia's intervention in the Donbas region have nurtured an anti-Russian sentiment that was once as unknown there as it still is in Minsk.

It is a dilemma of historic proportions. Outstretched hand or clenched fist: the choice ultimately facing Putin will determine Russia's future relations with its former possessions and, in turn, with the rest of Europe, China and the US. The Russian president's hesitation is therefore not surprising, but it is showing him to be less powerful than he thought he was after having lifted Russia out of the slump in which he found it.

Putin's rise

To better understand the current situation, we need to go back 20 years to a time when things were going well for Vladimir Putin.

When the wealthy elite and the security services shunted former President Boris Yeltsin off into retirement and appointed Putin to replace him in 1999, Russia was feeling demeaned and impoverished, robbed and humiliated. The way in which the Communist apparatus and three dozen predatory individuals had shared out the national wealth among themselves in the name of 'privatisation' had convinced the Russian people that the 'market economy' was simply banditry under a new name and that democracy was nothing more than giving power to the wealthiest. Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, both extreme wealth and extreme poverty were soaring. Masses of pensioners had been reduced to begging in underpasses and in the Moscow metro. The misplaced plaudits bestowed on the 'shock therapy' of privatisation by the international financial institutions, the US and the most brilliant liberal economists seemed to prove right seven decades of Soviet propaganda. Yeltsin had become so unpopular that Russia was in search of a strongman, a leader with an iron grip who would restore hope and greatness to the nation.

Chaos threatened to engulf Russia, but Vladimir Putin would manage to turn things around in no time. Trumpeting his KGB membership and vowing to make the thieves return their ill-gotten gains, this young man with his strapping torso erased the memory of his predecessor overnight and inspired renewed self-confidence in his compatriots by posing as a Russian superhero, the eagerly awaited avenger of their downtrodden homeland.

The assault on the Chechen separatists in the first decade of the twenty-first century was a heinous bloodbath, but it convinced the Russians that their young master would not cede another inch of the territories conquered by the tsars. In fact, the curbing of the oligarchs simply imposed a new godfather on them and eliminated those who refused to pledge allegiance to him. The move was actually a saving grace for the super-rich, who were able to launder their wealth by rallying around the new centre of power. However, this manifestation of the precedence of politics over money appealed to all sections of society, from the intelligentsia to former KGB agents, the urban middle classes to the military, and right down to those on the bottom rung of the social ladder and the peasantry.

The cynicism of his methods and the spurious pretexts for his policies enabled Putin to impose his authoritarianism on a country aspiring to a return to statehood, and when he annexed Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014, his popularity was greater than ever. Unprecedented in Europe since the Second World War, this annexation was massively applauded by Russians, who felt that their president was simply restoring a piece of their own territory, the 'Russian Côte d'Azur', which former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had transferred to Ukraine in 1954 to consolidate his position at the head of the party. In

the eyes of Russians, Putin was not only righting what they considered a historical injustice but also, in the process, washing away the indignities of 1989 and 1991.

Building on this momentum and exploiting the US reluctance to venture onto more foreign battlefields, in 2015 Putin flew to the aid of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, allowing Russia to regain a foothold in the Middle East, and later dispatched mercenaries to Libya, a stone's throw from the European coast.

Increasing troubles both at home and abroad

Everything was looking rosy for Putin. Everything was looking rosy for Russia. Just as the US had bounced back under President Ronald Reagan after he had healed the wounds of its humiliation in Vietnam, Russia was 'back'. But what, then, explains why the awakening of Belarus is causing it so many problems now?

Drawing on the fable by LaFontaine for a moment, it is a case of the frog that wished to be as big as the ox. Russia can take pride in its military victory in Syria, but its failure to get al-Assad to accept the political compromises needed to resolve the conflict means that it is now losing the peace as surely as it won the war. Bound up with a criminal regime that is corrupt to its core and now riven by clan fighting, Russia is getting bogged down in Syria. At the same time, it is failing to win the Middle East game because its only regional ally, the Iranian theocracy, is losing its footholds in Iraq and Lebanon and has completely run out of money.

It is a very similar story with Ukraine. There, Russia has reappropriated Crimea and it is hard to imagine what could make it reverse this annexation. So while Russia may have won a war, its inglorious victory has turned the country where it was baptised over a thousand years ago into one that is as anti-Russian as Poland. The minuses far exceed the pluses, and what card can Putin now play in Eastern Ukraine? Annex the region, with its devastated industries and mines? Take over a territory that would bring it nothing but new economic sanctions and a rebound of political tensions with the EU and the US? March on Kyiv and try to re-establish Ukraine as a protectorate?

None of these are viable options. Russia is getting bogged down in Ukraine, just as it is in Syria. Simultaneously, Russia failed to prevent street protests from overthrowing a trusted leader in Armenia in 2018 and has failed to stop Turkey muscling in as the protector of former Soviet republic Azerbaijan by helping it to win back Nagorno-Karabakh. Elsewhere, Kyrgyzstan is becoming increasingly unruly, Moldova has elected a president who staunchly supports closer ties with the EU, China is making strategic moves in Central Asia, and Belarus, of course, is showing dissident tendencies.

The strongman that the Russians had loved so much now finds himself unable to stem the self-affirmation of Russia's former imperial possessions. Russians no longer believe that he is capable of rewriting history and indeed no longer expect him to do so, given that three decades have now elapsed since 1989.

For Russians under the age of 40, the USSR is not even a memory. The lost empire is as alien to their view of Russia and the world as the colonial empires of France and Britain are to the citizens of those countries. Having reached adulthood long after the collapse of Communism 30 years ago, the urban middle classes of post-Communist Russia share the same values as their counterparts in Berlin, Paris, New York, Cairo, Lagos, Caracas or Warsaw. They aspire to the rule of law, to well-being and to societies that are open to the rest of the world—proof of that is provided by the fact that the populations of Russia's big cities have gone over to the opposition forces, in the same way as those of Budapest, Istanbul and Ankara have over the last few years.

The twentieth century, the century of Communism, ended in 1989. But the twenty-first century is only just beginning, and Putin does not belong in it. He will be seen as a mere hiccup in history, an in-between man whose popularity is waning, all the more so as his track record is far from stellar.

During these past 20 years—20 years that have followed the long Brezhnev stagnation and the immense economic problems caused by the perestroika—Putin has paid little attention to modernising Russia's infrastructure, its roads, hospitals, schools or railways. His handling of the pandemic has been as disastrous as that of former US President Donald Trump. Meanwhile, the country's standard of living is declining and its coffers are running dry because Russia's finances continue to depend on oil prices, which are in freefall—a situation which is likely to be a long-term trend.

As he embodies only imperial nostalgia, Vladimir Putin has become a man of a bygone age. He may remain in power for several more years, given that political assassinations, suppression of any form of protest and lack of a free press have prevented the emergence of a credible opposition and created a political vacuum that engenders fear. But, just as in Belarus, we are witnessing the beginning of the end of a reign in Russia. The muscular young avenger has aged. He has become tiresome. Big cities and younger generations—the useful Russia—have now slipped from his grasp. All that this autocrat achieved in 2020 was to reveal his bewilderment at the goings-on in Minsk; to hide away in fear of COVID-19; to make institutional changes to try to pave the way for a transition he hopes he can control; and to fail, on his own soil, to poison an increasingly troublesome opponent.

This is not to say that Alexei Navalny will be Russia's next president. And this would not necessarily be a desirable outcome anyway, since this astonishingly audacious man is more of a Zorro than a Franklin D. Roosevelt, more anti-mafia judge than the statesman with a clear programme that Russia so badly needs to rebuild itself. But by failing to eliminate him, Putin has dealt himself a major blow.

He has undermined the security services, which made fools of themselves while making a fool of him; he has shown *urbi et orbi* that he has lost his touch; and, in effect, he has inducted a contender for power who has proved, by returning to Russia, that Putin is no longer all-powerful. Putin's failure to eliminate Navalny has shown that it is possible to challenge him in one-to-one combat and survive; that his system has run out of steam; and that the forces that brought him to power, namely the security

services and the wealthy elite, now certainly have to consider the possibility of change—consider changing everything, as the Prince of Salina would say so that everything can stay the same.

The challenge of China

Looking beyond the accumulating difficulties and the obsolescence of its president, Russia has a colossal problem to resolve, the same one faced by everyone else, including the US, Africa, Asia and the EU: the problem of China. It is to Russia that the economic, military and political assertiveness of the world's most populous country poses the most problems, since these two giants—the one in terms of size, the other in terms of population—are separated only by a 4,000 km border that is not always clearly defined. Between the EU and China lies the huge buffer zone of Russia. Between the US and China lies the Pacific Ocean (increasingly a misnomer, but still). Between Russia and China there is nothing, nothing save Siberia, which China is quietly colonising by the strength of its trade, and the once-Soviet expanse of Central Asia, where Chinese President Xi Jinping is rolling out investments that are strategic rather than industrial.

Given its troubled relations with the West because of Ukraine, Syria and its ever-increasing military spending, Russia could of course cosy up to China in order to avoid the risky pursuit of self-sufficiency. This strengthening of links between the two former rivals of the Communist world would be a dream come true for Beijing, but would the West be the only loser in this Great Game?

In the long run, no. In the medium term, the main loser would be Russia, because it does not take much imagination to guess where an alliance between an economy on the verge of becoming obsolete and another that is the most dynamic in the world would ultimately lead. In a one-to-one relationship with China, Russia would soon become the vassal of a powerful overlord, far richer, more enterprising and better armed than itself. Clearly, by moving closer to China, Russia would not only be committing a historic act of self-effacement, but would also be running counter to the social and cultural aspirations of its two key socio-cultural groups.

For fear of being culturally absorbed by Western Europe, Russia has consistently been and still is reluctant to acknowledge itself as European. And yet, quite apart from the fact that it has never considered integrating with Asia, with which it has nothing in common and indeed has always rejected, neither its wealthy elite nor its urban middle classes are currently ready for the choice of China. The former simply aspire to be part of the Western elite, and certainly do not want to marry their heirs to the children of corporate China. The latter dream only of enjoying a Western lifestyle and are well aware that, compared with China, Russia is almost a land of freedom.

Conclusion

Right now, at what is the true start of the twenty-first century, there is an uncertain but very real possibility of a rapprochement between the EU and the Russian Federation. These two pillars of the continent of Europe need each other and, Rome and Byzantium notwithstanding, share the same culture, the same baptism and the same history.

The 27 member states need to secure a reliable energy supply, peace on their eastern frontier and investment opportunities to boost their growth. Russia needs to radically modernise its infrastructure and to stabilise relations with its former possessions. In other words, the EU and Russia need to conclude new security and cooperation agreements guaranteeing mutually beneficial exchanges, real recognition of Europe's borders following the break-up of the Soviet Union and strategic security based on confidence-building measures, such as a Russian withdrawal from Eastern Ukraine or the neutrality of states that are currently as likely to join NATO as they are to be attacked by Russia.

But where could this possible rapprochement be tested? In Minsk, of course. Belarus, a country which is shouting at the top of its lungs that its revolution is not pro or anti anyone, neither pro-European nor anti-Russian, is where the EU and the Russian Federation could begin to stabilise their relations by agreeing to respect both the democratic will of the Belarusian people and their military neutrality. There is nothing impossible about this. It would be a win-win situation for everyone, not least the Belarusians. No one would have anything to lose and, once this step was taken, it would then be possible to work on a new set of Helsinki Accords that would be equally beneficial to the EU, Russia and the countries in between.

Since an alliance with the US over the heads of Europeans is simply not an option for Moscow, and an alliance with China would seriously threaten it, Russia actually has no choice but to make a historic compromise with the countries of Central and Western Europe united within the EU. Such an initiative will not come from Vladimir Putin, who is a man of the past with no vision and who is fearful of everything. The EU has to take the lead. This means that it must spotlight and mark out the path of compromise and address itself publicly to Russia, to its people and to its cultural, industrial and political elites. It should call on them to make this choice and tell them that they have every reason to seek the unification of our continent in an economic partnership and political stabilisation that have been too long coming and that reflect a set of interests which are not only powerful but also shared by all parties.

It is now 2021, exactly 30 years since the Russian empire collapsed. The time has come for the European Parliament to issue an *'Address to our Russian neighbours'* that expresses our hope and desire for mutual understanding and cooperation.

Author biography



Bernard Guetta is a Member of the European Parliament from France in the Renew Europe Group. He is first vice-chair of the Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, and a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Delegation to the EU–Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee. He worked as a journalist and correspondent for French daily newspaper *Le Monde* in Warsaw, Washington and Moscow in the 1980s.