

Making Russia First Again

Article by Agnieszka Bryc

January 27, 2020

The upcoming 2020 elections in the US, France (both municipal and for Senate), and for the German Bundestag in 2021 open a window of opportunity for Russia. The Kremlin is inclined to leave Europeans with no alternative but to reset a strategic dialog. To achieve this Moscow will have to use a variety of its assets, not to mention all of the Kremlin's friends and operatives in Europe.

From neighbour to challenger

Contrary to NATO (which Russia formally named a threat in its 2014 Military Doctrine), the EU, lacking capabilities to confront Moscow, used to be perceived by Russia as a model of modernisation, a trading partner, and a source of technology and investments. However, following the “colour revolutions” in post-Soviet republics in the early 2000s supported by the West, the Kremlin began to correct its assessment. In 2007, during his memorable speech at the Munich Security Conference, Russian President Vladimir Putin revisited Russo-Western relations and announced a readiness to defend his country's national interests even by force or at the cost of confrontation. In other words, the era of ‘Russia with-and-in the West’ was over.

In this new paradigm, the EU was believed capable of undermining Russia's domination in the post-Soviet sphere. Firstly, by promoting an open-door policy for new EU members and secondly, by launching in 2008 the Eastern Partnership which focused on attracting post-Soviet countries in the EU-Russia common neighbourhood. Lastly, from Moscow's perspective, it was Brussels that was responsible for events in Ukraine in 2014 and Russia's military intervention, as it had been pushing Kiev to sign an association agreement with the EU. Russia declared it had no choice but to stop the EU from “picking up Ukraine” from its neighbourhood. In this sense, Europe's eastward march was assessed as a strategic challenge to the Russian neo-imperialist vision. Without Ukraine, the *Russkiy Mir* (the Russian World) would end in vain.

The Kremlin's desire to restrain Europe was not without limitations, however. Sanctions imposed on Russia as of the 2014 Ukrainian crisis combined with a missed opportunity to modernise in the previous decade (instead of investing in economy and development, the Kremlin was strengthening the army) and the 2008 global financial crisis brought about an economic recession. The subsequent stagnation is likely to stop Russia from getting back on the fast track of development anytime soon. Also, Russia made a strategic miscalculation. European countries had reacted relatively calmly to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the first successful Russian military action outside of its borders since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine took Moscow by surprise. The Kremlin expected, broadly speaking, a lack of unity among EU member states but instead was met with a clear stance and economic sanctions.

The election of Donald Trump to the White House in 2016 was supposed open up a new opportunity in US-Russia relations but turned out to trigger a fierce crisis in bilateral relations. The new American president was keen to reset relations with his friend Putin but Russia's earlier actions proved a miscalculation. Their meddling in the presidential race was uncovered and resulted in new rounds of punishment, sanctions, and ostracism. Neither

Putin nor his chief of diplomacy Siergiey Lavrov were credible when repeating their mantra that Russia was ready to dialogue with Western partners on the basis of “mutual trust” and a respect for “national interests”.

Looking for balance

Aware of the harsh circumstances created by the loss of trust in the West’s relations with Russia since 2014, the badly timed series of diplomatic skirmishes (after Russia’s US election meddling and the Skripal poisoning case in the UK), and its own relative economic weakness, Russia has prioritised striking a balance with the West. Moscow assumed that the strategy of managing instability may bring results within Europe as it had done in Ukraine and the post-Soviet space. The Kremlin strategists had a number of cards to play. First and foremost, fueling the conflicts and discrepancies throughout the Western world via disinformation, media coverage and social media tools. Next, creating demand, especially among the Western European countries, to go back to a business-as-usual formula with Russia and in the meantime downplaying warning signals from Eastern Europeans by labeling them Russophobic and thus unreliable. Last but not least, strengthening the European far-right as Russia’s ally or a Trojan horse in the democratic and liberal world.

Instead of confronting the whole European camp, much more reasonable from a Russian perspective was to promote bilateral contacts with key countries such as Germany, France and the pre-Brexit U.K. Regarding the latter, in the Kremlin’s view Brexit has successfully focused London on leaving the EU and neutralised it as one of the leading powers in the continent. As far as Germany is concerned, the unquestionable European leader, Moscow tried for a long time to keep Berlin’s *Ostpolitik* friendly. Neither Nord Stream 1 nor Nord Stream 2 has ever been just a business project. For Russia, both gas pipelines via the Baltic Sea are of undoubted strategic and geopolitical importance in keeping their partner pro-Russia orientated.

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Germany’s consistent position on sanctions has deprived the Kremlin of the chance to deepen divisions between the western and southern EU member states calling for softer restrictions and those in the East that recognise Russia as a threat. Russia, accustomed to tactically packaging together various international issues, failed in this particular case because Germany (being experienced in equal-distance policy, such as in the Middle East towards Israel and Palestine) was able to continue, though not without domestic dissent, the Nord Stream 2 project while at the same time voting to maintain sanctions on Russia. Moreover, the shift in *Ostpolitik* is now based on a serious loss of mutual trust. It was hard to improve mutual trust, particularly after the 2016 “Lisa case” (in which the German public turned out to be the target of Russian disinformation) and considering the growing bias within some German parties like left-wing Die Linke or the far-right AfD which have developed links with Russian state institutions. Nevertheless, unlike southern European countries, Germany’s security institutions have since identified Russia as one of the country’s main challenges and bilateral relations have become increasingly politicised and securitised.

The “Russia-friendly club”, however, was quite soon joined by French President Emmanuel Macron who, facing massive “yellow vests” protests in autumn 2018 and trying to attract a right-wing electorate while also improving France’s position towards Germany, put forth once again in November 2019 his controversial 2017 concept of “Europe’s strategic autonomy”. While the diagnosis might be correct, the solution was widely criticised, especially in Eastern Europe. In Moscow, however, some of Macron’s remarks, like those on “the brain death of

NATO”, were praised by Maria Zakharowa, the spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as “golden words”. The Kremlin also lauded Macron’s call for overcoming security dependence on the US in the face of deepening global competition with the US and China. Nevertheless, Macron’s words seemed naïve even to the Kremlin due to the simple fact that the French President appears a political lightweight compared to Angela Merkel, the real shaper of Europe’s Eastern politics.

Lessons learned

Just as Angela Merkel has learned that Putin’s Russia will not respect Western values, Vladimir Putin has learned a few things as well. The 1999 Kosovo lesson taught him the impact of the “CNN effect”. From then on, Putin has invested much in Russian-speaking international broadcast, media coverage and social media tools. The second learning came from the 2007 cyberattack on Estonia, a small but impressive e-state with a very advanced e-governance. This was the first cyberattack of its size on a sovereign state and it taught Putin that cyberaggression is cheap, effective, and legally still in the shadows. Cyber activity thus became a new Russian domain, where its capabilities have been improving and tested on the US and European neighbours. Finally, the 2008 Georgian war proved to Putin that the old Leninist slogan *kto-kogo* (“who will beat whom?”)¹ is still valid, reinforcing his logic that world politics is a zero-sum game. The West’s relatively soft reaction surprised Russians, leading them to assume that if the West averted its eyes from a country Russia attacked once, it may do the same next time.

So, instead of confronting NATO and the EU openly, Russia implemented tried and tested measures like widespread propaganda in Western Europe, precise cyber targeting, and corruption of parties which might prove useful in promoting the Russian interests and worldview. Not surprisingly, Russia’s best assets are far-right parties and politicians who are, in general, ardently anti-European, anti-liberal and anti-migrant. They typically disapprove of European integration and prefer – in line with the Kremlin – conservative values, nationalism, autocracy and xenophobia.

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Among the most prominent of Putin’s friends is former Italian Deputy Prime Minister and leader of Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini, who openly admires Putin and calls sanctions against Moscow “madness”. Next, France’s far-right icon Marine Le Pen, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who imported Putin’s version of “illiberal democracy”, and the Austrian former-Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl, at whose wedding Putin was seen dancing and who represented one of the few EU governments which did not expel any Russian diplomats after the 2018 Skripal poisoning in the UK. More parties might be defined as belonging to this group, such as the governing Polish Law and Justice Party, which is officially Russosceptic but, by virtue of being conservative and populist, is closer to Moscow than its leader Jarosław Kaczyński would be ready to admit.

What to expect?

Moscow seems to be very successful, but only at first sight. Its strategic goals have still not been achieved. The West does not recognise the post-Soviet sphere as a Russian buffer zone. Moscow has not been restored to a prestigious rank among key global players in the shape of G8 membership. And the sanctions stopping Russia from developing and modernising its economy are still in place.

So, what is to be expected from Russia in the near future? Firstly, in 2020 and 2021 an electoral festival will take place in the US, Germany and France, which Russia will be trying to use as an opportunity to foment populism. What's more, if interfering in the US elections in 2016 turned out to be effective, financially not a burden, and legally still safe, it would be very naïve to expect Russia to abandon a strategy which – with some political costs – has granted Moscow undeniable weight on the international stage.

Secondly, Russia will do as much as possible to marginalise the Russosceptic countries of Eastern Europe. Some of them, like the Baltic countries, Poland, and Ukraine, have justified concerns about a creeping reset with Russia that would endanger their security and sovereignty.

Thirdly, Putin can be expected to continue repeating that “Moscow is ready to normalise mutual relations” or that “Russia is a very beneficial partner to the West” in resolving numerous urgent international problems, for instance that of Donbas and Lugansk in Ukraine, the Syrian war, migration to southern European coastline, or by helping the United States counterbalance the emerging Chinese superpower.

Now, the ball is in the West's court. Undoubtedly, it is fundamental to bear in mind two facts. First, it is no longer dealing with the Russia of 1990. Today it is a country revisiting the liberal order, labelling NATO an enemy, and challenging the West since the Kremlin realised that troublemaking works. Second, either the West will demand that Russia respects international law, democratic values, and free world standards, or it will finally lose its sway over Moscow. Without such clarity from the West, it will suffice for Putin to follow a simple assumption: sit back, be patient, and wait for the next country looking for *rapprochement* (France today, another tomorrow) in the name of solving bigger international problems.

Footnotes

1. Supposedly formulated by Lenin in 1921, this slogan has come to be understood to denote the inevitability of class struggle in which all compromises between antagonists are merely tactical manoeuvres in the struggle for domination.



Agnieszka Bryc is an assistant professor at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland. She is a former member of the board of the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). She specialises in Russian foreign policy and Israeli security.

Published January 27, 2020

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/making-russia-first-again/>

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL

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