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**30 Years after Russian  
Independence – Where is the  
Kremlin heading?**



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# WHY RUSSIA FAILED

*-Göran Lennmarker*

It is the first week of December 1991. Moscow is still in the Soviet Union. I am meeting with an enthusiastic young man from, a think tank close to President Yeltsin. He presents the ideas for a future Russia in five points:

- The Communist Party must be dissolved and prohibited. That had already happened. The reason was that it was the owner of the Soviet Union, which is not a country governed by a party as you in the West believe. On the contrary, the country is a subsidiary to the party.
- The Soviet Union should also be dissolved. That happened only a few weeks later, on Christmas Day 1991. The Soviet Union could not be reformed -but Russia could.
- Russia should be a normal European democracy and a part of the West.
- Russia should also have a capitalist economy.
- The defence forces should be reduced to 1.1 million men, a fifth of the Red Army.

I was flabbergasted. I have never been so astounded in the whole of my political life. The Soviet Union would disappear.

## **A corrupt system doomed to fail**

These five points reflected very well the ideas of the Western-minded reformers who played an important role during the 1990's in Russia. The most important of these were Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais, both of whom I met numerous times since they together with others founded a moderate Russian party. In these early days the conservatives were the unreformed communists.

Was it possible that Russia could become a modern prosperous democracy and part of the West? We argued a lot of times about that. If the energy and the creativity of the Russian people were set free, it would be possible. And it had happened before in recent history.

In 1945, Japan and Germany were destroyed. Germany was also morally bankrupt because of the Holocaust. Both countries had through their own efforts and under American leadership, protection, and generous support become prosperous democracies in less than a generation. The West German miracle was a fact already around 1960, fifteen years after the end of the war. Miracles can happen in real life. Russia was in 1992 certainly in no worse situation than Germany and Japan in 1945.

Both countries had also renounced to be great powers, although they were the third and fourth economies of the world. As Konrad Adenauer remarked: "Germany has twice been a big power, resulting in two catastrophes in a lifetime". That should also be an inspiration for Russia.

Russia is by far the largest country in the world. Its surface area is almost as big as that of Canada and USA combined. Thus, it cannot be a centralised country, but a federation. So, it was deliberately named the Russian Federation.

Now, thirty years later, Russia is not a Western democracy. It is not even a high-income country. Instead, it is the most corrupt country in Europe, according to Transparency International. Why has Russia failed?

Strong forces inside Russia were against democracy, market economy and a Western orientation of the country. Of these, the three most important were corruption, imperialism, and communists. We westerners underestimated the first, understood the second and overestimated the third.

Let us start with the third. Believing communists tried to stop the development twice; the failed coup against Gorbachev that Yeltsin stopped and the attempt in the Duma, that was stopped by the shootings at the Russian parliament building, the White House. These attempts were badly organised and not supported by any significant part of the establishment inside the party. There was also no mood among the population to preserve a rotten system.

The party membership was restricted to some 5.5 percent of the population in accordance with the principles of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It was an elite party and membership strictly controlled. Most new members were the sons of Communist fathers.

Since all positions in society of any significance were held by communists, membership in the party bred a sense of superiority and even arrogance. Perhaps like being a nobleman in feudal times. There were also special privileges, like certain advanced hospitals reserved for party members, which has been described in Nobel literature laureate Solzhenitsyn's "The Cancer Clinic".

Inside the party there was a hierarchy; some were dukes and others simple baronets. A chief executive of a company with more than a hundred thousand employed had a greater say than a teacher. Most of the party establishment gradually understood that communism was a failed system since nothing functioned well.

The 1991 revolution was an inside job by an elite that was tired of a dysfunctional system. There was no Solidarnosc. But there was also no strong resistance in the once so mighty Communist party.

The fact that the Soviet Union died in a tired yawn also explains why there was so little violence in dismantling the system and the empire.

## **The need for reform and good neighbours**

Once I watched a Lenin statue in the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek. It was the first of May, and I was there to see how many people would turn up in nostalgia for a lost world. Only 67 persons in a city of half a million. There were no celebrations at all in 2017 at the centenary of the Communist Revolution. The Soviet Union was a corrupt oligarchy, the rule of the few, and that mattered more than ideology.

There are several forms of capitalism. We westerners usually think of market economy, which is prevailing in all advanced economies as defined by IMF. Its lifeblood is competition, which in turn needs rule of law and a low level of corruption to function. Otherwise, competition will not be fair and thus not economically efficient.

Privatisation in Russia was to a great extent done by former bosses, who took over the resources they had formerly administrated. They started a private company in the same line of business as the state company. They had no experience of competition and saw it as a threat. They had better find an alternative.

Managed capitalism or mercantilism, as it is called in Latin America where it is common, gives protection by political interference through tariffs, state subsidies, tax exemptions or regulations. To this end, bribes are often used. That is what former Communist bosses were used to in an already very corrupt society.

The Latin American model was simply more attractive than the Western one. This was of course an anathema to the West-inspired reformers, who wanted an efficient national economy rather than rich oligarchs. But the Duma was filled with members attached to special interests, so the reformers lost.

A particular way to get rich very fast was to dismantle the old socialist economy slowly and thus have two parallel systems at the same time. Then one could buy very cheaply in the old and sell expensively in the new system. The reformers wanted a quick end to the socialist economy. That was called shock therapy, which the oligarchs were against. Countries who adopted shock therapy, such as Poland, The Baltics and East Germany were much less corrupt than Russia and others, which kept the old socialist system longer.

The worst consequence of the oil price hike was that it got a new idea into the head of the president. Or rather an old dream that now seemed possible: Russia as a great power.

Yeltsin's team wanted Russia to be part of the West. When I attended a NATO Parliamentary Assembly session in the spring of 1993, as the first Swedish MP, all European nations were already there, and the biggest delegation of all represented the Russian Federation. The American delegates were particularly considerate to the Russians. An American senator even declared at the very session that the US was prepared to protect "also you", meaning Russia. SACEUR, the Supreme Commander of the NATO forces in Europe, offered his personal aeroplane to the Russian delegation, so that they could visit any NATO installation wherever in Europe.

NATO declared that Russia was a strategic partner, and the country was also admitted to the G7, the group of the seven leading market economies of the world. Like Japan and Germany, also former enemies, Russia was indeed welcome to the West.

But great-power thinking and imperial ambitions put an end to that. The money from the oil bonanza was used for re-armament of a dilapidated army, which had been largely neglected during the Yeltsin years.

Russia started to harass its weaker neighbours. At the oil price peak in 2008 Georgia was attacked, and six years later Ukraine. To create enemies around you is a very stupid idea.

A wiser policy would have been to use the money to support its weaker neighbours and build on the existing, rather strong linguistic and cultural links and the common hate against communism. But the Russian president is a tactical player rather than a strategic leader. Probably greed is the decisive factor.

Now Russia is busy spreading corruption to its neighbours and even wider. It tries to save a war criminal in Syria and meddle into the Libyan morass. Petty dirty politics.

Because of its weakness Russia has to please China, who despises it. The Chinese Belt and Road program sees Russia and Central Asia as a vast territory that must be overcome on the road to a prosperous Europe. The Russian strong points are formidable nuclear forces, veto power in the Security Council, oil, and natural gas. But fossil fuel will decline in importance.

Russia has been forced into a corner because of stupid policy decisions made by a greedy Kremlin in an extremely corrupt society.

### **Hope for democracy**

Russia is by far the largest country in the world. Its surface area is almost as big as that of Canada and the USA together. Thus, it cannot be a centralized country, but a federation. That was also the intention of the reformers and why it was deliberately named the Russian Federation.

The Russian Federation is not a federation but a centralized nation, where all power sits in the Kremlin in Moscow. Decentralization of this vast country would open energy that is now suppressed.

Russia might not have made the miraculous development that Japan and West Germany had after losing the second world war, but it could have been a peaceful high-income democracy, perhaps on the level of Estonia or even better if the oil boom income had been used wisely.

However, the country is not doomed to stagnate. It has a well-educated population, entrepreneurial people, and abundant natural resources. What is needed is a Russian Maidan, an uprising against a corrupt system that suppresses the country.

Georgia succeeded in combatting corruption. Ukraine has started the process. Someday Russia, too, will make the leap forward.

### **Göran Lennmarker**

Former chairman of the foreign affairs  
committee of the Swedish Parliament



# EUROPE AND RUSSIA – LOST IN TRANSLATION?

*- Mart Laar*

The development of the European Union has gone through different crises and challenges. These have kept the European Union fit, healthy and forward moving. Some of these challenges are quite permanent. As how to handle its big neighbour Russia. This is not easy at all: for Westerners it is enormously difficult to understand Russia. As Sir Winston Churchill said about Russia: “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside enigma”. And this is still true – we cannot forecast the actions of Russia. And even more – neither could he. Churchill argues that the key can be found in Russian national interests. Maybe. But often Russia does not seem to know where its national interests are.

This puzzle becomes even more complicated if we keep in mind that the same words can have different meanings for us and Russians. Just take the word “democracy”. For us this has a strongly positive meaning, but for Putin not. For him it sounds like a dangerous Western conspiracy, created with the goal to achieve control over other countries, including Russia. Both sides need some special dictionary, from where they can see which meaning some words can have for the other side. It is as in George Orwell’s “1984” or inside the Soviet Union, where Peace meant War and vice versa.

Misunderstandings easily happen in such situations. After the end of World War II, when East and Central Europe were divided between the winners, Soviet representatives did not understand the proposals of Western countries to let people of these countries decide democratically how they wanted to live. But when the Western countries had declared to Moscow, for example, that Russia should not conquer Czechoslovakia just because Russia needs its mines and factories, maybe Russia had at last understood what the West wants.

Or when the Western countries hoped to convince Moscow about their peaceful intentions and declared that the expansion of their influence can happen only with peaceful measures and through free acceptance of local people. This sounded especially suspicious to Moscow. For Moscow it seemed as if the Westerners tried to fool them and just allowing others to do the same thing that they themselves are permanently doing – the Russian Empire was not created like that. Expansion by peaceful means seemed unthinkable for Moscow since nobody has wanted to unite with them voluntarily.

That is why it is so important to be very careful what you say to Russians or how you respond to what they say. In this world, demanding both sides to stay calm and maintain peace can be interpreted as a license to start the War from the Russian point of view.

So, what can we do, dealing with this highly unpredictable partner? Why not follow the old motto “Fortiter in re, suaviter in modo” (Gently in manner, firmly in action)? For me it means to always follow some basic principles, for example:

Be strong! As Sir Winston Churchill was convinced, “there is nothing they admire so much as strength and there is nothing for which they have less respect than weakness”.

Unfortunately, the West is just now not demonstrating its strength. The escape from Afghanistan was a fundamental disaster not only for America and President Biden, but also for Europe. Currently, we seem weak and divided. And this is a dangerous



situation, that needs to be fixed immediately. I am not calling to a new arms race, but to a breakthrough in areas which lie under European Union authority and are important to our opponents – Russia, China and North Korea – for the cybersecurity. So let us make the West Great again – use our infrastructure, research, and resources! Let us build alliances and launch necessary programs. And use our advantages, what the other side does not have – the power of freedom. Do not set your hopes on governmental agencies and bureaucracy, but on free initiative and risk-taking of free people. That is how the West has been successful in the past and how we also will be in the future!

Whatever you do, do it together! Moscow knows very well how to “divide and rule” and has used this through centuries. Current examples from Europe are demonstrating this too well. There is no hope to influence Moscow’s policy, if we do not speak and act with one voice.

Do not stay silent! Russian official statements or articles of their political leaders are often also tests. As Putin’s story in “The National Interest” on lessons of World War II. There he denies secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, finds that Poland was itself guilty to be attacked in 1939 and argues that the Baltic countries in 1940 joined the Soviet Union wholly voluntarily. This can look just stupid, but to stay there silent can encourage Putin to more dangerous adventures. At the same time, it must be remembered that such statements often are for internal use as well. In any case there is no need to overreact. Maybe Russia just wants us to be worried, nervous, and unhappy? So, let us stay clear, calm, cold, and happy, making Moscow worried and unhappy.

Be steadfast and persistent, keep the line. Russia has used to play on time, knowing that with time sanctions do not mean very much and that at the end everybody returns to “business as usual”. Do not let this happen! Russia seems to act as a schoolboy, committing one crime after another, hoping that the former ones are – perhaps not forgiven, but at least partly forgotten. And yes: who, after their annexation of Crimea, breaking international treaties and starting a war in Donbass, remembers that a large part of Georgian territory is occupied by Russian peacekeepers, who are not keeping peace, but pieces of the empire together there? Or even more: who remembers Russian troops present in Moldavian Transnistria, which according to the Russian explanation could not withdraw from there, because that would create instability?

Looking on Europe today, it is of course easy to talk but hard to act on them. Examples as Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 are not very encouraging. But there is not much more we can do. And there is not much reason to become pessimistic. Just see what we have achieved! Europe, united and enlarged not only to the borders of former Soviet Union, but partly also to its territory. Maybe Europe just needs some time to learn to live in this new form, maybe all our problems and nervousity are coming from these unbelievably fast changes? Perhaps we sometimes just need to calm down and be thankful.

**Mart Laar**

Former prime minister of Estonia

# OUTLOOK FOR THE RUSSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

*- Natalia Arno*

Between 2021 and 2022, Putin's regime has completed the transition of the country from partial democracy, faking the appearance of rule of law, to the state of brutal authoritarianism, reminiscent of the darkest days of the Soviet Union.

Russian constitutional reform 2020 – the quietest coup in history

The Western world, grappling with the woes of the Coronavirus pandemic – dealing with losses of human life and economic wellbeing – turned its attention inward. Bewildering uncertainty surrounded the new virus. We did not understand how to prevent or treat it; we worried about losing loved ones as healthcare systems became overburdened, we scrambled educating kids as schools closed while also earning a living, as economic activity came to a screeching halt. Foreign news, not related to the pandemic, temporarily lost their relevance.

This was the period when Putin executed his decisive attack on democracy in Russia. In July 2020, at the height of the Covid-19, he staged an all-Russia vote on constitutional amendments. To increase the turnout, the Kremlin suspended all health and safety regulations, criminally endangering the health of Russian citizens. Voting was mandatory for millions of people whose salary comes from the state budget – teachers, doctors, military people. Mobile and rural voting spots were set up with gross violations of all voting regulations – literally, like turning a trunk of a privately-owned car or a tree-stump in a forest into a voting post.

The process was characterized by massive voter coercion, suppression of independent and opposition voices, fraud, such as double voting, censorship of the traditional and new media and violence against journalists.

Russian citizens were asked to give a yes or no vote on a massive and confusing package, consisting of over 40 amendments. The way in which the drafting and approval of the amendments were organized gravely violated the Russian constitution – making them, in fact, unconstitutional. Many amendments contradict pre-existing and concurrent articles of the constitution. They touch upon seemingly random areas of life – for example, postulating a conservative definition of a family, banning officials from holding foreign citizenships, or establishing Russian law primacy over international law. However, the real intent of this process is very clear – Putin has rewritten the constitution to “nullify” his presidential tenure, allowing him to remain in power indefinitely.

In other words, in the summer of 2020, Putin's regime executed a constitutional coup, ending two decades of pretending to respect the rule of law and cementing his authoritarian grip on power. This caused very little international scrutiny or attention, like a petty thief who strikes at dark when no one is watching. It may have been the quietest coup in history.

## **The bloody mopping-up**

However, in August that followed, Putin's assault on the opposition became top news worldwide – when Alexey Navalny, poisoned by a weapon-grade chemical agent, fell into a coma. Due to the combination of badly botched operations of the poison squad, quick decisions by a paramedic and an airline pilot, and international pressure, Navalny survived the attempt and was flown to recovery in Germany.

Within weeks, a Bellingcat investigation directly implicated the Russian government in this assassination attempt and unearthed a standing assassination program targeting opposition leaders inside Russia and around the world. Domestically, this was not only the story of criminal activities by the government, but also yet another manifestation of how pervasive corruption have eroded all state functions, even its intelligence service, lavishly funded and extolled by Putin.

As soon as his health conditions allowed him, Navalny bravely returned to Russia, where he was immediately arrested and put behind bars on fake criminal charges. The injustice of this arrest has moved tens of thousands of Russians into the streets in dozens of cities, including people in the Arctic city of Yakutsk, who came out to protest in -52C weather.

A few days after his arrest, Navalny's team released a scandalous video, "Putin's Palace". The video –exposing the vulgar vapid ways in which Putin and his surrounding are squandering billions of dollars annually in funds they steal from the Russian state – topped international charts for weeks. This was a pivotal moment in the Russian history, as the expose drove a wooden stake through the undying corpse of Putin's personality cult.

Publicly humiliated, Putin and his regime spent the spring and summer of 2021 mopping up Russia of all independent voices and pro-democratic forces and figures.

Protests were brutally dispersed, close to 13,000 people arrested, thousands experienced house raids, saw criminal investigations unleashed, and hundreds sent into political exile. Today, the count of political prisoners in Russia is comparable to that of the last decades of the Soviet Union, complete with reinstatement of punitive psychiatry, applied, among others, against the shaman-activist Aleksandr Gabyshev, who set off on his quest to drive Putin out of power.

The reaction of Europe and the United States to these atrocities, or better said, lack of such reaction, have greatly facilitated this grand terror. Germany fought hard to sustain economic engagement and finish the construction of Nord Stream 2 pipeline; France proposed to tone down Russophobia, the new presidential administration in the US has led with interludes about nuclear security and combatting climate change. Over the months, the heated rhetoric of the West has completely died down, along with the implementation of the mandatory Second Sanctions Package. This inaction has sent a clear message to Putin that the West was prepared to conduct business as usual.

## **Qualis rex talis grex (such king, such people)**

The oft-recited argument of those who oppose taking a moral and legal stance against Putin is that “Russian people love a strong leader, and the West should stay out of this”. This argument, however, falls apart at even the most superficial evaluation of the situation inside Russia. If Putin, in fact, were a popular benevolent autocrat – why would he close all independent media and polling agencies? Why would he assassinate the opposition and outlaw even one-person protests? Why would he force Western social media companies such as Facebook, Apple, Google, and others to block independent content and incorporate censorship and surveillance mechanisms? And as of September 2021, we can ask: why would he falsify the vote count in the Duma elections, where all viable opposition is either in jail or exile?

The answer is obvious, and its resonance is growing: the “power vertical” – hedging on the ability of his elites to pillage the state coffers and on the compact with society where economic prosperity was traded for political freedoms – that sustained Putin’s rule for two decades, is eroding, and the process will accelerate in the coming months.

Putin did not come to power as an autocrat. Instead, in 2000, Russian people elected an unknown, humble, and ascetic operative with a carefully cultivated image – a personality who promised people a badly-wanted stability – without knowing he had designs on ruling the country indefinitely.

Putin’s initial rise to power and popularity around 2000 was based on his social contract with the Russian people: Russians would not scrutinize his methods and will be rewarded with growing prosperity – access to mortgages to buy apartments, ability to build and run a business, travel internationally, and buy imported goods.

To most outside observers, Putin did not look like an autocrat in the beginning either. His early moves to consolidate power, control information, and muffle independent voices were explained away with need for order and efficiency. During his subsequent years in power, Putin continued to concentrate the levers over state agencies until he gained control over most of the major mainstream media. He began pushing to change election laws, built a political party system that crushed all rivals, subjugated the judiciary, and built the “power vertical”, which made politics of just one man’s personality – Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

At the start, this seemed like a great trade off and Putin delivered on his promises. Average Russians’ personal income grew over the eight consecutive years. The government, too, was flush with money – thanks to higher oil prices and a growing market share of Russian crude and gas. It was a fortunate economic situation for both Putin and the Russians that extended the honeymoon for the Russian leader.

Similarly, as it happens with all unchecked rulers, the desire to usurp power became too tempting for Putin to resist. Limitations on his tenure in power, imposed by the Russian Constitution, became a nuisance to be dealt with. As 2008 neared, Putin devised the “tandem leadership” arrangement where his obedient and agreeable acolyte Dmitry Medvedev was used as a presidential placeholder, while Putin assumed the position as prime minister.

It was amply apparent to most Russians that Medvedev was not the real leader of the country. Any evidence to the contrary was decimated completely when constitutional reforms pushed by Medvedev expanded the presidential term limitation to two non-consecutive six-year terms.

This reform was a major violation of the social contract Putin had made with the Russian people. They now understood they would be saddled with Putin as their de facto leader until 2024, and it was further understood that they had no choice or voice in the matter. It was a parlour game to calculate how old they would be when Putin was replaced by a new leader.

The conflict between Putin's intensifying autocratic bend and the growing pro-democracy opposition sentiments among Russians went kinetic, following the disputed Duma elections in 2011. Unprecedented mass protests went on for most of December of 2011, calling for annulment of the elections and Putin's resignation. Alexey Navalny, an anti-corruption blogger, emerged as a driving force in bringing Russians out into sub-zero temperatures to protest the Putin-backed United Russia's tainted victory, dubbing it the "party of crooks and thieves" – a moniker that has stuck. With the support of dozens of other pro-democracy leaders, rallies against Putin and United Russia grew close to 100,000 people around the country, becoming the largest protest rallies since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The "Bolotnaya" rallies were a turning point in the public perception of the Putin regime, but the pro-democracy movement struggled to unite under one leader. Over the years, it became apparent that the disciplined and talented Navalny could take on Putin's leadership. With his timely and moving public appeals and ground-breaking investigations, Navalny rose as the representative of the good forces; pitted against the evil forces of Putin and his cronies. It was the first time many Russians saw such a strong personality stand up to Putin without fear.

Domestic unrest and successful colour revolutions in the region have unnerved Putin and his inner circle. His greater autocratic instincts were unleashed to create a series of repressive and draconian laws that included a "foreign agent" and "undesirable" law, and restrictions against political rallies and independent media. He began to criminalize any political activity. A simple Tweet could result in a 4–5-year prison sentence. One could not teach a foreign language or yoga even as a volunteer without a license from the state.

As Putin sought to shut off dissent and pander to his natural constituencies of people living off the state budget, Navalny took to reaching a broader audience through new social media avenues. No longer were most Russians, particularly younger Russians, getting their information off Russia's state-run Channel One.

Instead, they were turning to a variety of sources that provided entertaining, and often sardonic, content. As he fearlessly challenged Putin and those around him, Navalny's popularity and number of followers grew. They grew even faster when he was frequently jailed on preposterous charges or faced physical threats including having acid thrown at his face. Rather than slow him down, the attacks energized him and those around him. He produced several widely popular videos on YouTube that directly confronted Putin and his regime. His 2017 "Don't Call Him 'Dimon'" video, that exposed and ridiculed the corruption

around Medvedev, was viewed more than 43 million times, while his “Putin’s Palace” video has drawn more than 125 million viewers to date.

Navalny’s fearless confrontation with Putin nearly cost him his life when he was poisoned with a nerve agent in August 2020. While many people were astonished by Navalny’s return to Russia, given his fragile health and inevitable jailing, his return was viewed by many Russians as a sign of strength and a direct confrontation to Putin’s monopoly on power. Despite his prison sentence on a dubious charge of missing a parole meeting while recuperating from a state-sponsored attempt on his life, Navalny remained sanguine, sending a note from jail that read, “Iron doors slammed behind my back with a deafening sound, but I feel like a free man. Because I feel confident that I’m right.”

What Navalny accomplished in his willingness to stand up to Putin was to alter the view that Putin is the only strong leader that Russians can choose. In a society that values strength in their leaders, even more than competence, this has resulted in a powerful shift among voters.

Two decades of inept governance, expropriation of national resources into private accounts, and lack of reforms have hurt the Russian economy and constituted another major reneging on Putin’s social contract: the exchange of rights and liberties for economic security. The ongoing Corona virus pandemic has rendered another big blow to Putin’s voter base – impoverishing and outright killing elderly retirees, who have served as his staunchest supporters. The latest attempts to buy up the votes through disbursement of social payments have not only failed to improve the approval ratings, but they have also fomented resentment and indignation. Employed men of working age, especially those working in the private sector, but also military personnel are the demographic groups whose opposition to the status quo is prominent and growing. In key metropolitan Russian areas – Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Khabarovsk – the opposition is vocal and visible.

As of September 2021, the popularity of Putin and his United Russia party are at all-time lows, even according to the pro-Kremlin polling agencies. The negative rankings of Putin and his United Russia have been growing, with the latter’s approval rate below 20 percent.

Whether voters will vote for Navalny, or other leaders like Vladimir Kara-Murza, Vladimir Milov, Lubov Sobol, Dmitry Gudkov, Ilya Yashin, Yulia Galiamina, and Boris Nemtsov before them, is far from the point. The point is that after two decades of Putin, Russians are ready for a different ruler and a different path.

### **Democracy in Russia – not charity but security**

The Russian civil society has entered its darkest moments. The September 2021 Duma election has been shamelessly stolen. Key opposition leaders are in jail, in exile, facing criminal investigations and physical threats.

However, far from falling into despair, we see these developments as harbingers of imminent change. The radical intensification of domestic repressions underscores that despite an unlimited access to administrative resources and erecting steep barriers to all



independent leaders and movements over the past two decades, the ageing Putin and his United Russia continue to lose the political grip on the country. Today, the Kremlin perceives political threats everywhere – from studying a foreign language and travelling internationally to examination of the Russian and Soviet history and conducting or participating in any educational activity not sanctioned and registered by the state.

The numerous schemes devised to guarantee the legislative dominance of the United Russia party and Putin's rule are now faltering. "In-system opposition" figures such as KPRF and LDPR are exiting the compact, as they judge the risks of both the possible government prosecution (or outright assassination) of viable candidates and facing the backlash of electorate being too high. Along with Smart Voting, this exodus precipitates sustained drops in popularity rankings of United Russia and Putin recorded even by pro-Kremlin pollsters.

Unvarnished government brutality and violence against the civil society, as well as embarrassing avarice and ineptitude of the regime remove the half-tones from the domestic ideological and moral discourse, making it black and white for most Russians. The existence of sources of information and socio-political networks alternative to the government (such as social media platforms and channels) upend the repressive measures – instead of instilling terror and passivity, it creates backlash and more active dissent.

For Europe, adopting a proactive and positive role in this transition is an urgent matter of national security. Putin's ability and willingness to attack democratic institutions, sway elections, splinter society, co-opt elites, weaponize immigration, energy exports, and propaganda have been documented extensively. In Sweden, these threats manifest in the Kremlin support for ultra-right and ultra-left parties and candidates and the resulting polarization of the society and political discourse; attempts to interfere in elections and other social processes through propaganda and disinformation (including issues of coronavirus, vaccination, environment, gay rights, freedom of religion, race relations, immigration, refugees). Soon Sweden should expect Kremlin-instigated social perturbations related to increased refugee flow from the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as the fallout from Gazprom pipeline politics that would impact the availability and cost of energy sources to consumers. It should prepare for increasing frequency of environmental disasters brought about by disintegration of the corrupt Russian state (like oil spills, military accidents). Sweden's Ministry of Defence is also well-familiar with various military (including nuclear) and humanitarian crisis scenarios involving Belarus, Ukraine and the Baltic region. Such eventualities should be viewed not as accidents, but as prominent feature, manifestation of Putin's sustained grip on power.

Today, the Kremlin no longer bothers pretending to obey the rule of law and international conventions. It openly mocks the international calls for democracy and freedom and proudly positions itself as a viable alternative to the immoral West. Passionate statements and resolutions from Western leaders urging Russian government to change its behaviour have zero effect. They are simply ignored.

The approach of the past few decades, where Europe saw supporting democratic development in Russia as a charity cause – not a critical area requiring hard decisions, investments, and political will – has utterly failed. And today, the realization is growing that defending democracy at home – in Sweden – requires standing up for democracy in Russia. What does that mean?



Contrary to popular assumptions, the Russian civil society does not need help deposing Putin. As Russians, we will take care of authoritarianism ourselves, just as we had accomplished at the end of Soviet rule.

However, what we ask is for the West to stop aiding and abetting Putin.

For starters, the West should declare Putin's regime illegitimate, as he circumvented the Russian constitution through an illegal amendment process last summer.

From such a declaration it should follow that the West suspends all deals, be they related to energy supply, nuclear security, climate, or counterterrorism efforts. There should be no working together and no business as usual.

The West also needs to stop enabling Russia's top kleptocrats and shut down the importation of corruption – one of Russia's biggest exports and the one central to the sustenance of Putin's regime. This includes their access to financial institutions, residence and citizenship applications, ability to buy property and hold assets. By closing safe havens for Russian oligarchs and Putin cronies and rolling up the welcome mats that allow these figures to live under a freedom they suppress in Russia, will send a strong message to Putin's inner circle and the elites that keep him in power.

Such sanctions can serve not only to punish malign behaviour or erode support for Putin inside Russia, but also can and should be employed as a mechanism for Europe to deny nefarious actors' access to international financial institutions and infrastructure, thereby deterring foreign interference and more broadly defending Western nations and societies.

Monumental political shifts in the Russian society are in full swing, undeniable, and unstoppable. While we do not attempt to predict the exact way they might unfold or the precise timing, it is clear that the need today is greater than ever to increase participation of independent candidates in local elections throughout Russia, cultivate a diverse cadre of competent, experienced and principled leaders committed to democratic development and values, and counter the Kremlin's repressions against the Russian civil society by sustaining an independent information and professional nation-wide network mobilizing society for change.

Sweden can help by supporting programs inside Russia that provide training, advisory support and access to a professional network and a material resource base to independent candidates for local government posts as well as to activists conducting advocacy campaigns, which holds a powerful long-lasting potential for a more prosperous and politically stable Russia. In the long term, emergence of new competent governance practitioners and the mature experience of self-governance will play an important stabilizing role for Russia at the national level for a smooth political transition – thus contributing to European peace and stability.

Finally, Sweden can step up its efforts at welcoming Russian political exiles and helping them stay in the fight for democracy and human rights in Russia. Just like all other

recommendations, such a move should not be viewed as pure charity – mobilized and well-informed Russian exiles can significantly boost Sweden’s understandings on the domestic threats tied to the Kremlin’s agenda and articulate ways to neutralize them.

**Natalia Arno**

Director of the 4FreeRussia  
Foundation

# EUROPE SHOULD SUPPORT A DEMOCRATIC RUSSIA

*- Arba Kokalari*

I was in Tirana when the communist regime in Albania fell. Even if I was just a child back then I can recall memories of when the huge statue of Albania's dictator Enver Hoxha was torn down in the city centre by thousands of demonstrators urging for freedom. That was the end of one of the harshest regimes in Europe.

The 1990's economic crisis and political instability forced many Albanians to seek a new home, including me and my family who moved to Sweden. Gradually, Albania started its rocky journey towards a more open society – two steps forward and one step back. Albania was not the only country who took on a new path. With the fall of the Soviet Union, countries formerly occupied by the USSR gained their independence and Russia emerged as the successor state.

Instead of opening the Russian economy, there was economic chaos and power grabs. Less than ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Putin came to power. Another twenty years later, Putin succeeded to amend the constitution into giving him the right to stay in power until 2036. Putin is so entrenched in corruption that it has become difficult for him to leave his position.

During Putin's rule, Russia has become a more repressive country. Political opponents and journalists have been murdered and arrested, human rights organisations have been marked as "foreign agents", living standards and economic wellbeing have dropped and the government has taken control of most of the private sector. The government controls most of the media and its narratives.

The Russian regime is waging war against Europe through disinformation, cyber-attacks, election interference, energy warfare, and military escalation. It has carried out political executions on EU territory and directly attacked critical infrastructure and interfered in elections, to try to weaken our democracies. The regime is using our free societies, while denying its people the very same freedoms.

Those who have experienced political arrests, restrictions in media and manipulation of election results know the importance of democracy and freedom. These are not just nice words. When fighting from the inside, there is some comfort in having support from the outside. The European Union has an important role to play here, as our core beliefs are the opposite of extremist ideas and authoritarian rule. We must lead by example and keep the democratic hope burning. Russia has become more isolated from Europe, but at the same time, Russia is and will remain an integral part of Europe.

To support the Russian people, we must defend democracy and rule of law, both as principles and in practical terms. Russia can have a democratic future. Saying that Russia is incompatible with democracy or that this is an impossible goal would be falling right into the traps of the Kremlin playbook.

First, the EU must uphold the values it promotes. By doing so, we speak with credibility. The EU should ensure a coordinated unified approach, preferably together with other liberal democracies like the United Kingdom and the United States, to strengthen our voice globally. We should support democracy in countries in Russia's neighbourhood, against whom Russia uses military and hybrid tactics, by strengthening the Eastern Partnership. And we should support democratic voices inside Russia, both politically and through financial support.

Earlier this year, the regime got rid of Alexei Navalny, one of the most outspoken critics of Putin, by putting him on a bogus trial and sending him to prison camp, after failing to kill him through poisoning. The democratic world protested at first, but then turned into silence. We must keep our demand of Navalny's immediate release on the agenda and speak up for the hundreds of other political prisoners currently held in Russia.

We need to insist on removing barriers that hinder parties from participating fairly in elections and the legislation on "undesirable" NGOs that hinder civil society. Europe can provide a platform for free and independent media, but we should also be aware of Russia's information warfare. This means that we need to take our responsibility as politicians, journalists, and citizens to stop the spreading of Russian misleading narratives in our own societies.

The sanctions imposed on Russia must remain, and we should consider more sanctions against Russian individuals who commit human rights abuses. In early 2021, the EU used its new human rights sanctions regime (the Magnitsky sanctions) for the first time, against several Russian officials in response to the jailing of Alexei Navalny. The EU Magnitsky sanctions framework should also include corruption as a cause for sanctions, to enable the EU to sanction individual oligarchs.

A consequence of Putin's rule has been the deterioration of corruption in the country. While the communist legacy slowed down anti-corruption work in many post-communist countries, it is affecting all parts of society in kleptocracies like Russia. Russian oligarchs are protecting Putin's personal wealth and power. They have for long used Western banks for their dirty money, earned through corruption or criminal activities. When Russian oligarchs are placing their money in Europe, we need to push back where it hurts the most.

Europe must also be prepared to take a principled approach to its energy policy, by reducing its dependency on Russian gas and oil. The construction of Nord Stream 2 goes against our own energy policy and security interests and is more beneficial to the Russian regime than to us. When Russia is using energy as a weapon, we should not give them new ammunition.

Finally, yet importantly, Europe needs to boost our defence – both traditional military defence and strengthening our resilience against hybrid threats – to deter Russia, and we need to improve our foreign policy making. That will make us a more credible actor. When we defend our principles towards Russia, we do so also against other authoritarian regimes.

I firmly believe that the best way to contain Russia and to engage with Russia is through the European Union, as we are stronger when we speak with one voice. Sweden has an important role to ensure that the EU has the right message and to steer away from thinking of "business as usual". Europeans need to talk less about resets and more about clear and coherent messaging towards Putin. We will not accept Russian aggression against other nations or against its own people.

Democracy, rule of law and a market economy are fundamental pillars for all the rights and freedoms that we today take for granted. They are not only good principles, but they create societies where people can live their lives according to their own wishes. The recognition of individual rights and people's individual choices is one that separates democracies from collectivistic societies, regardless of whether they are nationalist or communist. The ideas of collectivism have been tried before, but they never succeed.

While there may not be a unified idea of what future Russia should have – as there rarely is when people are allowed to think freely and independently – people have shown that they are tired of the Putin regime and of corruption. Earlier this year, they marched the streets of Russia, from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok, in temperatures as low as -50C, despite the threat of repercussions and the police's brutal force.

Russia's democratic future seems bleak when looking at the outcome of the 2021 Duma elections. While some brave people are reporting and fighting against the corrupt system, the regime silenced oppositional voices, manipulated results, and made it difficult to monitor the elections. This was again a stolen election, where Putin's United Russia won a majority in the parliament. But it is important to note that United Russia fared worse than expected due to lower approval ratings, despite it not being a free and fair election. They were forced to significantly manipulate the results to achieve those figures.

Democratic progress has rarely been a straight line. The work of today may bear fruit in the future, which is why we should not give up the thought of a better Russia. The Russian people who are dreaming of change need to feel hope and that its European neighbours are not indifferent to the situation in Russia. There is nothing so dangerous as hopelessness.

I was born into a totalitarian system, but I am lucky to live today in one of the most developed democracies in the world, promoting freedom, democracy, and market economy as a democratically elected official. Values that my parents and millions of people living in communist regimes in Eastern Europe only could dream of a few decades ago. Even though I was only a child when the communist regimes in Albania and Soviet Union fell, the effects of the communist system have affected me for the rest of my life. Those of us who once experienced totalitarian rule will never take freedom and democracy for granted. Neither should we, as Europeans.

**Arba Kokalari**

Member of the European Parliament

# EUROPEAN FUTURE FOR RUSSIA: AN OPTIMIST'S VIEW

*- Leonid Volkov*

Despite current depressing news from Russia — and they were depressing every while since Putin decided to get back to Kremlin in the fall of 2011, which immersed the country into a downfall of authoritarian revanche, economic decline, and international isolation — we believe that some fundamental factors that will have major long-term impact on Russia's political life in the midterm perspective are all quite favourable for those advocating the European path for Russia.

Three main factors will contribute to the democratic transition in Russia. First – Putin himself. He could do nothing to become beloved again, as he cannot get on terms with younger voters. A mastodont two generations older than digital natives, publicly admitting that he is not using the internet at all – Putin can only make people more and more tired of him. No one under the age of 35 can remember anyone but Putin in the lead. Every year two million young Russians reach maturity, all of them already tired of Putin and hardly vulnerable to Putin's mighty TV propaganda machine.

Second, it is economics. We cannot see how Putin could hope to fix it. An eight-year decline in household income has brought average Russian families back to the level of 2005/06 — only that in 2005/06 after eight years of steady and fast growth, everyone was quite optimistic. And the number of billionaires has increased dramatically since 2005, making the public perception of injustice and inequality much stronger. Moreover, the decline continues even despite the enormously favourable situation with the natural resources price conjuncture — just because the appetite for money in Putin's elite has grown larger than the combined proceeds from oil and gas.

But third and foremost, it is corruption. When we launched the Anti-Corruption Foundation back in 2011, only around 15 percent of the Russian voters considered corruption a major political issue. Now, ten years later, this figure stands above 60 percent, a genuinely tectonic change for the whole Russian society. It required patience, it required time, and persistence, but finally, here we are. Why is it so important? Because Putin could do nothing to fix it — corruption is the cornerstone of the management system he has built, and it cannot be removed without completely dismantling the system itself. And people are not ready to tolerate corruption anymore.

The Russian people started to understand that corruption is the basis for all the human rights violations they are experiencing. For these ten years, we have proven beyond a reasonable doubt: corruption is a human rights issue, probably the most vital of them all. When the country's leadership is totally corrupt, there is no choice for them but to rig the elections — as they just cannot afford to get outvoted. They have no choice but to destroy the judicial system — as they just cannot afford to be challenged in court. There is no choice for them but to beat down the protests — since otherwise they would lose their ability to steal more money. And there is no choice for them but to erase freedom of press and freedom of speech — as they just cannot afford their corruption to be spoken about. All of this has happened in Russia and is happening in so many other countries worldwide.

The fight against corruption is global, and we cannot win this fight alone. If those people, Putin's friends, will be able to use stolen money to buy villas on Cote d'Azur, build their yachts by Luerksen in Bremen, and send their children to the best private schools in the UK — they will not stop. Their money, covered with blood and Novichok, is here, all around us in Europe. It is spent not only on luxury properties but also on Western politicians. It is buying influence and, also, media.

We do not ask Europe to help us. But we do ask Europe to help itself. Dirty money from Russia and countries alike spoil and rot the very foundations of the political system of the free society. It is just getting too dangerous. Europe must help itself — but by doing so, it will also help us a lot in making corruption in Russia less enjoyable — and become more of a role model for those within Russia who fight for change and a better future for our country.

**Leonid Volkov**

Chief of staff to Alexey Navalny



# WHAT IS THE JARL HJALMARSON FOUNDATION?

Founded in 1994, in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation is the Swedish Moderate Party's foundation for the international promotion of freedom, democracy and market economy. The Foundation's operations are primarily funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), within its framework of party-affiliated democracy assistance.

## WHAT IS PARTY-AFFILIATED DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE?

Sweden's democracy assistance through Party-Affiliated Organisations (PAOs) strives to promote democratic development and respect for human rights in countries that are eligible for overseas development assistance, as defined by the OECD. The purpose is to strengthen political participation and democratic political systems.



***Our ambition is to  
promote European  
cooperation, based  
on a vision of  
freedom, democracy  
and market  
economy.***





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