

Russia: “Calm Amidst the Tempest”. EU Sanctions, US-NATO Military on Russia’s Border

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Hail, fire and brimstone, new sanctions or the US tanks on its borders, Russia takes things in stride. President Putin could adopt the motto of William of Orange: saevis tranquillus in undis, calm amidst the tempest. The tempest is all around. American tanks moved into the Baltic states.

American warships sail up the Black sea. The EU sanctions against Russia were extended for another six months.

Russian assets were seized in France and Belgium. In Syria, Damascus is threatened by the US-armed rebels.

Greece wants to embrace Russia, but probably will not dare. Armenia, a small country hidden between Iran and Turkey, just joined the Eurasian Union of Russia-led states, and already there are public disturbances ominously reminding everyone of Kiev 2013. Ukraine is in shambles, sending waves of refugees to Russia. A weaker nation would become hysterical. Putin and Russia remain nonplussed.



I'll tell you a Mississippi joke. A black criminal and a white criminal are being led to the gallows. The black takes it easy, the white guy weeps. Stop whining, said the black. It's easy for you to say, retorted the white, you blacks are used to such treatment. Likewise, Russia is used to such treatment since Soviet days, and even since earlier times, for the rivalry between heirs of Rome and the heirs of Constantinople is very old indeed. Now, a short period of détente is over, and it's back to cold war. Surprise, surprise: the majority of Russians would prefer the West's hostility of Brezhnev days to their warm embraces in the days of Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Indeed things do improve, with the cold war and the sanctions.

- The Russian idle rich, bereft of Miami and Côte d'Azur pleasures, pay more attention to their less fortunate fellow citizens. They do not steal less, but spend

the loot locally.

- A most prominent lady, Valentina Matvienko, the Senate Speaker, had been banned from travelling to Europe and the US, so she went for holidays to a Russian resort. She quickly discovered its faults, aside of its considerable charm, and provided the budget needed for improvements. Let them all be banned, was the cry.
- Russian cheese makers could never compete with French or Italian ones in the liberal, open-markets-and-borders Russia of yesteryear. Came sanctions, and in the span of six months they almost doubled their output. Their cheaper cheeses are now freely available, while previously supermarkets preferred to stock expensive foreign cheeses.
- The Army needs hardware to defend the Motherland, and advanced Russian industry gets more orders from the Ministry of Defence. Factories and workers laid off or semi-retired get a new life, foreign customers queue up, the rouble is steadied. Young men get some purpose beyond watching telly and complaining. A feeling of national pride – after the terrible humiliations of being unheard and taken-for-granted in Yugoslavia, Ukraine and elsewhere – comes back.
- Infrastructure is brought up-to-date. Moscow gets a new hundred miles of bicycle paths, parks are well attended. The capital city is clean and shiny despite the stretch of heavy rains.
- Now you understand why Russians are in favour of sanctions. They are quite supportive of the government and of the president, whose American-agency-measured ratings reached an unheard-of 89%. It's not that the Russians want war, but they are tired of their country being pushed to the wall, as they see it. They do not want an Empire for themselves, but they want to be heard and their demands considered. And they want their government to make their erstwhile partners, present adversaries, pay for each anti-Russian action.

Among the very popular retaliatory steps of the Russian government, there is the full termination of transfer arrangements for the NATO troops occupying Afghanistan. President Putin in his first term, in 2001, was an enthusiastic supporter of the US; so after the American invasion of Afghanistan he offered Russian assistance with the transfer of equipment to and from that country. Now, almost 15 years later, this shortest and easiest route to Kabul has been cut; the Americans have to shift their heavy weaponry through Pakistan mountain passes where they are ambushed by the guerrillas with a long experience of fighting invaders from Alexander the Great to Brezhnev.

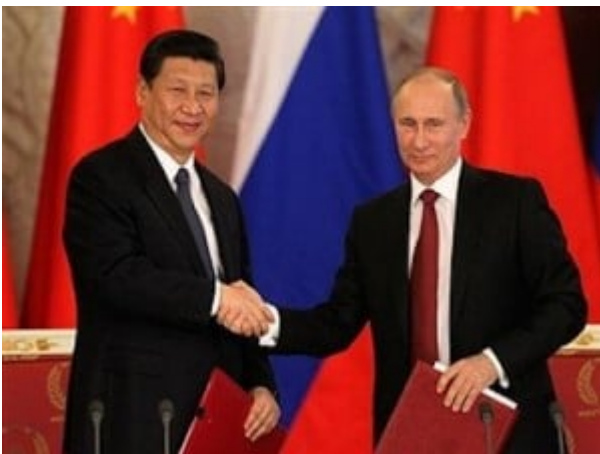
Russians liked the tit-for-tat decision to ban dozens of Western politicians from entering Russia, as a response to Western banning of Russian politicians from entering Europe. Perhaps Russia is not the world's most popular holiday destination, but surprisingly, the ban did hurt. The very idea of a Russian active response took the Europeans by surprise: they never thought the Russians have the means or guts. Squeaks of excluded Western public figures were music to Russian ears.

Regarding the Ukrainian crisis, there are many who dream of Russian tanks racing to Kiev and restoring civil peace to the troubled Ukraine, but this dream will remain unfulfilled while Putin believes there are other, peaceful ways to solve the problem. Still, the Soviet-style obsessive peace-mongering and fear of war gave way to a more vigorous attitude to war as a forced but unavoidable necessity of life. The soul-numbing mantra of "everything is better than a war" finally has been dropped.

On May 9th celebrations of the 70th V-day were most lavish ever in people's memory, and provided citizens with a chance to view the newest Russian military toys. This year, the Russians stressed their victory rather than their victimhood, suffering and losses. The victory has been perceived as a Russian victory over Europe, not only over Germany; for practically all European nations from France, Spain and Italy to Hungary and Bulgaria fought on Hitler's side against Russia. This is true, but this truth was rarely mentioned until this year. Faded Russian hopes of Europe supporting Russia's independent policies for its own benefit gave place to recognition that the European leaders are as obedient to Washington as their predecessors were to Berlin.

Slowly, oh so slowly the Russian giant remembered days of his youth, the battles on the Volga River and the sack of Berlin. These memories made him laugh over threats of Frau Merkel and Mr Obama. Just after the war parade on May 9th, millions of civilians marched the streets carrying photos of their fathers and grandfathers, the soldiers of the War. This was absolutely unexpected: neither I nor other observers and journalists, foreign or domestic, predicted an event of such magnitude. The city of Moscow planned for ten thousand participants; fifty times more, over half a million marched in Moscow alone, twelve million all over Russia.

This unprecedented act of solidarity for Russia had sent seismic tremors through the whole society. Many marchers carried the picture of the victorious war-time leader, Joseph Stalin. He is far from being generally loved, but anyone whose mentioned name can make fat cats and their apologists shake with rage cannot be wholly bad. People call for returning his name to Stalingrad, the place of the great battle, renamed by Khrushchev. Putin is not keen on that step, yet.



The towering presence of the Chinese President Xi at the May celebrations signified an historic realignment with China: a sea change in Russia's policies. Its connection with China grows stronger every day. This is a new attitude: previously, Russians and Chinese were suspicious of each other, even after overcoming the hostility of late Soviet days. Pro-Western Moscow liberals snubbed the Chinese and planned for an American-led war against China. Now this dream (or nightmare) is over. We are not yet back to 1950s, when Mao and Stalin established their ties, but close to it.

Some eight hundred years ago Russia had been in a similar situation, being hard pressed by the West. The Pope blessed a Crusade against them, demanding they accept Western hegemony and give up their Byzantine Christianity. Then, Prince Alexander preferred to accept the Mongol patronage of Genghis Khan's successors rather than submit to the Western diktat. His gamble worked out: Russia retained its own way, and the plucky Prince was sainted by the Church as St Alexander Nevsky. The Russians still feel that using

Easterners' support is less dangerous for the Russian soul than complying with the Western demands.

Could it be that Putin, a native of St Petersburg who cherishes his European contacts, speaks four foreign languages fluently (none of them Chinese), will repeat the deed of St Alexander and realign Russia eastwards? This would be a huge loss for Europe, as the Old Continent will become an American colony in all but name. St Petersburg, the city of St Alexander's last repose, is definitely an European city, west-facing as opposed to east-facing Moscow. It is most delightful in June, the month of White Nights, when it basks in light, cool and lucid light at day and soft and milky light at night, while lilac bushes in full bloom, dressed to kill, gaze into aquatic mirror for channels and rivers criss-cross the Northern Capital of Russia so a stream is never too far. The old Imperial glory still rests on the shores of the Neva River.

This was the heart of the Russian Empire until Lenin shifted the government seat back to the old capital, to Moscow. That's why, during the Soviet years, Petersburg (or Leningrad, as it was called then) did not suffer much from massive low-budget housing programmes that disfigured Moscow. The British historian Arnold Toynbee (all but forgotten due to his [anti-Zionist stand](#)) said the move to Moscow "embodied the reaction of the Russian soul against the Western Civilization". Putin's presidency, he would say, embodied a pro-European shift of the Russian soul. Could (what some Russians view as) Europe's betrayal cause Putin part ways with Europe, instead?

I saw him at the recent International Economic Forum in St Petersburg. At the Forum, Putin did very well: calm, he kept his poker face, answered every question sincerely, he never became irritated or visibly annoyed. He calmly dealt with the crisis of the [seized Russian property](#). His people would prefer if he were to thump his fist and seize French and Belgian assets. Instead, he promised to deal by legal means through European courts.

He came to St Petersburg after a very successful trip to Baku, the capital of oil-rich Azerbaijan where European Games provided a chance to meet and confer at length with Presidents of Turkey and Azerbaijan. None of Western leaders showed up, but these rulers of the Orient were quite satisfied with their own company.

Summing it up, President Putin speaks softly. If he carries a big stick, he does not flash it around. He does not act heartbroken because of some Western unpleasantness. It seems he is working hard for alternative arrangements but he wants to postpone painful decisions as long as possible. Eventually he may be forced into a strategic alliance with China, which will further undermine Europe's remaining independence.

However, things are not black-and-white. Russia is interconnected with the West in many unexpected ways. The most implacable enemy of Russia is the former Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt. His wife has been banned from visiting Russia. At the same time, Bildt was [appointed an advisor](#) to a Russian oil company, belonging to the second-richest oligarch of Russia, Michael Friedman. Friedman, one of the seven original oligarchs of Yeltsin's days, began as a ticket tout. He lavishly spends on Jewish education. His Alfa Bank tried to stop production of the new Russian tank, Armata by bankrupting the armour-building factory. Friedman is friendly with Putin. So much for the simple image of the ruthless Russian dictator, sworn enemy of Jewish oligarchs.

Indeed Russia remains liberal, and Russian liberals copy American liberals, mutatis

mutandis. They treat Putin like their US counterparts treated Bush II, though by their choice of vocabulary you'd think he is a Kim Jong Il. Newspapers are free to slight Putin, and they use their freedom to utmost. Theatre directors insert anti-Putin philippics into monologues of classic plays replete with attacks on the Church. Cinema stresses poverty and abuse in his realm just like Jim Jarmusch. But ordinary people like Putin as Bush II was popular in the Red states. They would like him even more were he to give the Americans a double tit for their tat, but meanwhile Putin prefers to do with token retaliation.

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