

What to do about Russia? The German view

Written by Paul Maddrell

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PAUL MADDRELL, MAY 26 2008

The European states and the United States are increasingly having to consider what policy they should adopt towards Russia. During the Presidency of Boris Yeltsin, the Russian Federation to a large extent dropped out of international relations, so gripped was she by internal crisis. But under Vladimir Putin Russia has chosen to deal with its internal problems very aggressively and to pursue a confrontational course in foreign relations. The war in Chechnya has been ended by pitiless repression. The Russian security services have taken brutal action against Chechen terrorism.[i] The autonomy of Russia's regions has been greatly reduced. The media are under strict control.[ii] Critical journalists and political opponents have been murdered in circumstances which suggest collusion on the part of the regime.[iii] Political parties which favour a liberal, or even more moderate, policy have been driven out of the political arena. The takeover of the Yukos oil company and persecution of its chairman, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, were intended to secure state control of a key resource and to obstruct any encouragement of political reform by the country's richest people.[iv] Russia has demanded the extradition of prominent reform-minded figures like Boris Berezovsky. Its efforts to suppress criticism at home have resulted in the murder of at least one dissident abroad, the renegade state security officer Alexander Litvinenko. The circumstances of his murder strongly suggest state collusion, of which Putin must at least have been aware. Both Khodorkovsky and Berezovsky, it should be noted, are Jews. The Russian regime has no sympathy for Jews who get rich while most Russians are poor, and is willing to enrich itself at their expense. This reflects an anti-Semitism which was very strong in the Soviet security service, the KGB, of which Putin is himself a former officer. The Russian Orthodox Church has in recent years become the religious wing of Putin's 'United Russia' party.

The Putin regime is authoritarian and nationalist in character. The aim of authoritarianism at home is to maintain the integrity of the Russian empire – for the Russian Federation is both an empire and a state – and thus the power of Russia in international relations. Putin's ultimate objective is to reconstitute the Soviet Union, the collapse of which he has called 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the last century'.[v] The suppression of freedom internally is a means to this end. The regime probably does not intend to deprive Russians of the vote, but it does not want that vote to be free. Russians must vote for a political party which seeks to make Russia great.[vi] Any party which is

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willing to sacrifice this objective to others is an enemy. The West, and above all the United States, are seen as enemies because they wield their power at Russia's expense. Russia wants a more equal relationship with the United States and its search for this means that it wants a closer relationship with China, to balance the power of the US. That is why it has been so understanding of China's brutal repression of the Tibetans in recent months. Russia has repeatedly harassed states around it (former constituent elements of the Soviet Union), such as Ukraine, Georgia and the Baltic states.

Aggression abroad, suppression of freedom at home, intimidation of all opposition, murder, corruption and anti-Semitism have given rise to increasing alarm abroad. The policy debate to which they have given rise mirrors similar debates during the Cold War. Whether this debate will last long is a very open question. It may well be that Putin's aggressive policy is too much for a weak state to bear and will prove so obviously counter-productive that it will be abandoned. His authoritarian-nationalist regime, like the Soviet Communist regime before it, will simply collapse. He will go down in history as Russia's Franco. Nevertheless, it now dominates political life in Russia and has enough popular support to remain in power for the foreseeable future. However, little of the future is foreseeable.

Putin's regime has given rise to much alarm in Germany. Germany has close relations with Russia and needs them to be good. Close relations arise out of Germany's 'Mittellage': its place in the centre of Europe. Russia is its most powerful neighbour to its East. The need for good relations was driven home very painfully by Germany's terrible defeat at Russia's hands in the Second World War, a defeat which ended its bid for European dominance, cost it much of its territory and caused Germany to be divided into two states for almost half a century. The German policy-making establishment is powerfully influenced by the memory of how the country's division was overcome. The strength of the alliances into which the Federal Republic had entered over the Cold War period was shown during the revolutionary year 1989-90; its partners supported its bid for reunification and helped to determine the terms on which it took place. The good relations with the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, developed by the then West German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, helped in 1990 to persuade Gorbachev that a reunited Germany would not threaten Russia. The Soviet Union's German satellite, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), fell into dependence on the Federal Republic owing to extensive economic, political and ordinary human contacts; this is seen by German politicians as having discredited the Communist system in the GDR and encouraged criticism of it by its own people.[vii]

For the German policy-making elite, Russia's policy raises three sets of issues: political, military and economic. The policy problem is that these different issues present it with conflicting challenges. Putin's political course is objectionable to them, and to the German people, because it runs counter to the entire trend of German foreign policy

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since the end of the Second World War: that of commitment to democracy, respect for international obligations and human rights, and adherence to multilateralism, especially in the resolution of bitter disputes. The natural instinct of the German political class is to distance itself from Putin's coercive anti-democratic course. It knows that the German people expects this of it.

However, Germany's policy-makers are also mindful of the chaos into which Russia fell at the beginning of the 1990s, when the economy was in a desperate state, corruption and criminality were rife, the Soviet Communist Party had been banned, the Soviet Union had collapsed and Chechnya had declared its independence. Putin's greatest fear is that, just as the USSR collapsed, so parts of Russia will break away from it. Much of his aggression is directed towards preventing this. Germany sees that it must accommodate Russia in this respect: if it fights Russian nationalism, it will only ignite Russian popular hostility to it, strengthen Putin and his imperialist 'United Russia' party and stimulate Russia to increase its military strength. A Russia which is militarily more assertive will frighten all its neighbours, including Germany. Germany does not want to get into an arms race with Russia, particularly since it is not permitted to become a nuclear power itself and even the size of its armed forces is limited by the '2 plus 4 treaty' which secured German reunification.^[viii] Therefore, any policy of resistance to Russian aggression would have to be agreed with the United States, which would have to supply the military muscle to support it. A policy of strong resistance would also have to be agreed with France and probably Britain as well, which might otherwise fear that Germany was intending to establish its own influence over parts of the former Soviet domain – over Ukraine, for example, and perhaps resource-rich Kazakhstan.

Moreover, Germany does not want the huge area of the world to its East, stretching from Russia's European border to the Pacific Ocean and down to the Middle East and Central Asia, to fall into ungovernable chaos. The idea of radical Islamist regimes taking power in the Middle East and Central Asia is particularly troubling, and especially so if one of them might develop nuclear weapons. The political course this region will take is one of the great issues of contemporary international politics.^[ix] Germany does not want to adopt too confrontational a policy towards Russia, particularly since it can no longer itself fill any vacuum created by Russian impotence, as it did in 1918, after the collapse of the Tsarist empire, or in the years 1941-44, when it occupied much of the western Soviet Union. It understands that Russia may need authoritarianism now, to bring about necessary economic reform without an unacceptable level of social conflict.^[x] The terrible mistake made by Mikhail Gorbachev, when he was Soviet leader, was to initiate political liberalization before reform of the economy. China's greater political stability in the 1990s and the new century is due to the fact that Deng Xiao Ping initiated sweeping economic reforms without abandoning the authoritarianism which allowed him to control their consequences. Germany is more sensitive than most states to the fact that authoritarian systems can have advantages. Their own Weimar Republic fell, in 1933, to the most radical

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and vicious of right-wing movements. They know that Hindenburg and von Papen, bad as they were, were better than Hitler. Likewise, Putin is better than Zhirinovskiy.

Germany's history and its self-interest require it to be a dedicated multilateralist; its policy towards Russia shows this truth as well as anything else. It has to adopt a policy towards Russia which is consistent with that of the United States. The United States is clearly willing now to take a strong line on Russia. Indeed, it is willing to consider policy options that smack of its Cold War policy of containment. Its recent support for Ukrainian and Georgian accession to NATO shows a willingness to put military pressure on Russia. Both Ukraine and Georgia deeply resent Russian aggression towards them and, by supporting the idea that they should become members, the Bush Administration was making it clear to Putin that his aggression would have a price: that of surrounding his country with an increasingly-powerful alliance increasingly united by hostility to Russia. The Great Power in the region between South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia would become, not Russia, but NATO. To an aggressive Russian nationalist like Putin, nothing could be more humiliating or more threatening. Russia's recent reinforcement of its 'peace troops' occupying the rebellious Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was intended as a two-fingers to NATO.[xi]

Germany does not want the policy of military confrontation which appeals to the United States. Together with France, it resisted the idea of Ukrainian and Georgian membership at the NATO summit in April and the United States had to back down. Germany has a different view of how influence should be brought to bear on Russia. As with the GDR in the last two decades of the Cold War, Germany favours engaging it. It believes that the Putin regime will not be able to stop the trend towards democratization which began in Russia in the late 1980s; the regime is too weak to maintain a situation in which the people have the vote but the government has all the power. It sees here a parallel with the fragility of the GDR regime and believes that engaging Russia, despite its breaches of international law, will nurture the confidence of Russians in Western liberal democracy. It seeks trade contacts as ways of binding Russia in to Western economic institutions. It argues that these relationships create dependence on both sides; the West, as the stronger partner, will be able to exploit this dependence to exercise influence on Russia. Germany is encouraged in this policy by its dependence on Russia for energy supplies and export markets. Germany and Russia are natural trading partners: Germany supplies Russia with high-quality manufactured goods and in return obtains from Russia industrial raw materials, particularly energy. Since the oil shocks of the 1970s, Germany has tried to decrease its dependence on Middle Eastern oil and is heavily reliant on Russian gas.

The moral of this story is that it makes little sense to talk of national foreign policy any more. Even once-great states like Germany can only make their policy count if it is consistent with that of their partners. The decisive victories are

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those of alliances, not those of individual states. The more powerful the state to be resisted – and Russia is still a Great Power, though no superpower – the more important a united, multilateral approach is. In reality, Germany, the US and the others have agreed on a policy which is chiefly one of engagement – or appeasement, as its critics would call it – but which also contains elements of pressure (or containment). The often irrational aggression of the Putin regime enhances the effect of Western cooperation against it, for all Russia's neighbours have an incentive to side with the West. Putin's great weakness is that Russia stands alone in international relations; that is why it is making such overtures to China. Germany is confident that multilateral engagement will win the day. The history of the Cold War suggests that it is right. What no one knows is how long the process will take and how many people will suffer in the interim.

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[i] See Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya* (London: Harvill, 2001).

[ii] See Stephen White, *Media, Culture and Society in Putin's Russia* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[iii] See Martin Sixsmith, *The Litvinenko File* (London: Macmillan, 2007); Alex Goldfarb, with Marina Litvinenko, *Death of a Dissident: The Poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the Return of the KGB* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2007). See also Yuri Felshtinsky & Alexander Litvinenko, *Blowing up Russia: Terror from Within* (London: Gibson Square, 2007).

[iv] Khodorkovsky's supporters maintain a website dedicated to him: <http://www.khodorkovsky.info>

[v] See: <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2005/04/25/putin-soviet050425.html>

[vi] For discussions of these issues, see Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice* (London: Routledge, 2004); Margareta Mommsen & Angelika Nußberger, *Das System Putin: gelenkte Demokratie und politische Justiz in Rußland* (München: Beck, 2007).

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[vii] See Wolfram Hanrieder, *Deutschland, Europa, Amerika* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1995), ch. 8; Helga Haftendorn, *Deutsche Außenpolitik zwischen Selbstbeschränkung und Selbstbehauptung, 1945-2000* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), ch. 9.

[viii] Haftendorn, *Deutsche Außenpolitik zwischen Selbstbeschränkung und Selbstbehauptung*, pp. 379-383.

[ix] See Michael Stürmer, *Die Grenzen der Macht* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1992), ch. 5.

[x] For an argument to this effect, see that of the former Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in, *Die Mächte der Zukunft* (München: Siedler Verlag, 2004).

[xi] See <http://www.tagespiegel.de/zeitung/Titelseite;art692,2525159>