

René Nyberg

www.anselm.fi

EU – Russia

EUREN Side Meeting – FIIA

Helsinki 12 December 2019

Why did Russia abandon its European Course?

The EU Summit in Corfu in June 1994 was historic. The Prime Ministers of Austria, Finland, Norway and Sweden signed their accession treaties and President Boris Yeltsin of Russia signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Communities.

The spirit of the early years of the Russian Federation emerging from the economic and moral collapse of the Soviet Union was characterized by a quest to join the civilized world. Stanislav Govoruhin's film *Tak zhit nelzja* (You can't live like this) from 1990 was a *cri de cœur* about the harshness of Soviet life and a brutal depiction of the state of society.

Last spring another famous Russian director Pavel Lungin released *Bratstvo* (Brotherhood), a film about the end of the war in Afghanistan. The war had demoralized the Soviet Army and introduced drugs into the country. The end scene of the film takes place on the Soviet side of the border in Uzbekistan. A band is playing and soldiers are being decorated. The Russian general who lost his son in a botched prisoner swap and broke his word to an Afghan war lord slurps his soup. The speaker summarizes it all: **“We all died in Afghanistan, even those who survived, and with us died the Soviet Union.”**

Joining the civilized world was no empty phrase. Europe and the West were the aspiration and hope for a brutalized and deprived Russian society. Everything became *jevro*, *jevroremont*, *jevrostandart*, you name it. But it was a difficult act to follow. Russia did join the Council of Europe in 1996, but talk about joining the EU soon ceased.

The early years of Vladimir Putin's reign brought forward crucial reforms: a radical energy reform, a tax code with a flat rate, legislation allowing land ownership (*zemelnyi kodeks*) and a forest act (*lesnoi kodeks*) though without provisions of ownership, only a lease for forty nine years. But to dismantle GOST, the Soviet standards, and replace them with EU standards was an uphill battle. German Gref then Minister for Economic reform and one of the leading reformers joked with the EU ambassadors that he understood that imported consumer goods had to be certified, but it did not make sense to require that Swiss watches were re-certified in Russia. He was met with open hostility in the Duma. Does the minister understand how many work places will be lost if certification is simplified or abandoned? The same applied to attempts to reform Customs. A Member of Duma who had studied the customs practice of Finland summarized the dilemma aptly. The task of the Finnish customs is to support foreign trade; the Russian Customs' job is to assure control.

Today the slur is *geiropa*, gay Europe. What happened? Vladimir Putin spoke twice in Germany. He addressed the Bundestag in fluent German in 2001 assuring his captivated audience that Russia was on its way to join Europe. In 2007 in Munich the tone was different. I sat next to the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt who succinctly summarized the reaction to Putin's speech. "The Germans are scared stiff and the Americans furious." The U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates quipped that he too was an old spy, but had gone through rehabilitation. Later in the evening the puzzled Police Chief of Bavaria asked me over dinner, why was Putin so angry today?

With the second Chechen War 1999 Putin restored the honor of the Russian Armed Forces, although chechenization of Chechnya did not eliminate the separatist challenge, it only postponed it. By securing control of national television, Putin silenced vocal critics and by manipulating the Duma elections, he reduced the opposition to a simulation by the so called systemic opposition: the neutered communists and Zhirinovskiy populists. By arresting Mikhail Khodorkovskiy and confiscating his business Putin disciplined the oligarchs.

Taken together these steps eroded even a semblance of the rule of law. The price of authoritarian rule though became evident only later. As long as the oil price was high, economic growth continued and people's disposable incomes increased. Today the lack of property rights and guaranteed ownership are a critical factor in the decline of the Russian economy and the fall in investment both domestic and foreign. Rule of Man instead of Rule of Law inevitably leads to arbitrariness (*proizvol*), which is the real curse of Russian life today.

The European path was blocked. The Soviet system was never really dismantled, it was just reformed. The nomenklatura, for example, did not go through a lustration process. A Russian version of the deep state, the *siloviki* continued as the guarantor of the system. The Kremlin realized that the existing system could not co-exist with rule of law and European values, so they had to be disparaged and shown to be incompatible with Russian traditions. Spin-doctors came up with the needed slogans like "sovereign democracy" and "traditional values".

On the foreign policy front, the crucial event was the renunciation of the ABM treaty by the United States in 2002. This was seen in Moscow as creating an unacceptable risk to Russia's second strike capability, even though the U.S. primary motive was to hedge against Iran and North Korea. The second threat as seen from the Kremlin was the menace posed by the drift of Ukraine to the West.

Even if NATO membership of Ukraine or Georgia was and remains unlikely, the example of the Baltic States was instructive. It was EU membership that changed these countries beyond recognition not NATO, although NATO membership did enhance their security. In the process, it contributed to the security of the Baltic Sea region as a whole.

The Russian propaganda machine found a phrase that summed up the anxiety of the Kremlin. At the EU Partnership Summit in Vilnius in 2013, it referred to the drivers of the initiative of the Eastern Partnership, the Polish and Swedish Foreign Ministers Radoslaw Sikorski and Carl Bildt, as the "Poltava Coalition". The risk of losing Ukraine was perceived as an existential threat to the Muscovite Empire and it became a *casus belli*, something the West had not realized. Moscow had not previously viewed the EU as a serious danger to Russian interests.

The Russian revolution of 1991 can be counted as an exception, even anomaly in the history of revolutions, because it did not lead to major bloodshed or internal wars. Yes, fighting broke out on the periphery of the dismantled Soviet Union, but not in the heartland. With the occupation of Crimea and the attempt to break up Ukraine by force, history caught up with Russia. But the grandiose plan to create **Novorossija** failed. It was an attempt to seize the Ukrainian Black Sea coast all the way to Bessarabia, today's Moldova harking back to the historical name of a region. As the anticipated partition of Ukraine did not materialize, the only option left was to attempt to destabilize Ukraine through a war of attrition in the Donbass.

Watching the comedy series *Sluga Narodu* (The Servant of The People) that made Volodymyr Zelensky famous and ultimately catapulted him to power, I was struck by the fact that the film is entirely in Russian, not Ukrainian. One of the crucial mistakes of Putin was to dismiss Ukraine as a nation. It is not the language that defines Ukraine. The decisive issue is the determination of Ukrainians not to return to Muscovite rule. Ukraine, though poorer than Russia and with weak state institutions, has a vibrant media and civil society. With the presidential elections of 2019 it also showed that it has the capacity to master succession and manage the transfer of power through a genuinely democratic process, something Russia still has to demonstrate.