



## TINA for Putin – Or is there an alternative?

*Marc Franco*

EU Relations with Russia hit the news headlines this week. The visit of EU High Representative Josep Borrell, launched in a constructive spirit, ended up in a diplomatic catastrophe. The Navalny saga and the recent weekly demonstrations all over Russia have been commented on at length in the Western press. What is going on in Russia? How to interpret the recent surge of aggressiveness of the Russian authorities? Are the protests just a small hiccup in a stable Putin regime, or is something more going on? To be clear, this is neither the end nor, probably, the beginning of the end of a regime. But the events are far from insignificant. In this article I look at the ongoing events from three angles: what is the Putin regime up to? What is behind the recent wave of protests? And what are the implications for the EU's relations with Russia?

### **WHAT IS THE PUTIN REGIME UP TO?**

The last decade, and the last five years in particular, witnessed the increasing repression of the opposition forces inside Russia, and the

increasing aggressiveness of Russian foreign policy.

Opposition figures have been physically eliminated abroad as well as in Russia. The freedom of assembly and of expression has been gradually restricted. Demonstrations have become a dangerous activity. Organisers and participants are arrested and face fines and stiff prison sentences. Indiscriminate arrests are in the same category as in Belarus (although the treatment of arrested persons is admittedly not as brutal). The aim is clearly to frighten people off the streets. Although the written press stays relatively free, television and radio (with some notable exceptions: Doshd Channel, Ekho Moskvi) serve as the conduit for government propaganda. A strong counter current against the mainstreaming and brainwashing of public opinion exists in the still free social media, although the government has given itself the legal means for suspending sites if judged necessary.

At the same time, Russia's assertiveness, if not aggressiveness, in its external relations is illustrated by its invasion of Ukraine and its ruthless interventions in Syria, as well as less visible examples of activism in North Africa (Libya) and Africa South of the Sahara (the

Central African Republic). This show of foreign policy activism is important also to Russian public opinion. Not only to the political elite, but in the eyes of the Russian citizen as well, Russia's regional and global influence is a constituent element of Russian national identity: Russia has a mission in the world.

Good internal governance and stability, a steady increase of national welfare (rising standards of living for the average Russian citizen and consolidation and growth of business for the oligarchs), and a growing role of Russia (as a world power on a par with the US) were and remain the pillars of the legitimacy of the present regime. But as the economy has been stagnating for a decade, the dissatisfaction of the middle class with the corrupt and clumsy governance of the country is mounting – a crisis is developing. Russia cannot rely on a totalitarian ideology and an almighty party to control this dissatisfaction. Political technology – that was the soft approach to handling the opposition – no longer does the trick. Within the ruling elite, the security forces have taken increasingly over from the political technologists.

Navalny is no longer a threat to deal with but an enemy to destroy as, at this moment, he is the person who gives a face to the opposition and is able, with his activism against corruption and his campaign for “smart voting”, to make increasingly serious dents in the credibility of the regime.

For Russian public opinion, the increasing regional and global role of Russia can to a certain extent compensate for shortcomings in other policy areas. But this global power position costs money. When one knows that “great power” Russia has the economic size of the Benelux, one might conclude that “imperial overreach”, which

led to the breakdown of more than one empire in history, has become a danger not to be neglected.

To sum up: there are indications of a panic reaction in the ruling elite. To beat the opposition movement, the regime goes to the limits of what an “illiberal democracy” can allow. Massive arrests and rumours of intimidation and torture of arrested protestors are only a short distance away from the dictatorial practices of neighbouring Belarus, and evokes memories of Soviet practices.

### **WHAT ABOUT THE RECENT WAVE OF PROTESTS IN RUSSIA?**

The protest movements of the last years are not a mortal danger to the Putin regime. They are nevertheless important as they indicate that increasingly large sections of the population do not accept the practices of the present ruling establishment.

The regime lost the support of part of the Moscow and Saint-Petersburg “intelligentsia” and, more generally, the middle class in the protests of Bolotnya Ploshad in 2011-2012 against the manipulated election results. A skilful political technology approach succeeded in avoiding that the protests led to a snowball effect. Since then, protests have concentrated on specific local issues: the Moscow elections, the construction of a cathedral in Ekaterinburg, a garbage dump in Arkhangelsk, the imprisonment of the Governor in Khabarovsk, etc. The exception was the nation-wide protest against the pension reform, that required Putin's intervention. These kinds of protest are of course banal from a Western point of view, but they are relevant in a country that is only just over a generation away from a totalitarian regime that totally banned protests.

Like the earlier protest movements, the present demonstrations show Russian society is in rapid evolution. The present demonstrations are a continuation of the earlier protest movements but do have some interesting new characteristics.

In the first place, the development of the middle class should be mentioned. These people are educated, do not tolerate the manipulation of elections, and defend their own economic interests. They are increasingly assertive, want to protect their property against corruption, and to safeguard their economic perspectives. These are the educated 30-40 years old that were on Bolotnaya Ploshad, and that now have been joined by new 30-40 years old in the present demonstrations.

Secondly, a new group of demonstrators has joined the protests: teenagers. They have never known, directly or indirectly, the totalitarian Soviet regime and the fear of the state authorities. They have never been told that “the party is always right”, and feel they are entitled to express their own opinion. They get their information from and are networking through social media. Protesting is linked in part to their age, but more importantly it reflects the fact that they cannot understand why the state denies them the rights of citizenship (freedom of expression, of assembly, etc.), although they are clearly mentioned in the constitution.

A third aspect of the recent protest movement is that it is no longer limited to Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. The demonstrations of the last weeks took place in more than 100 cities. The political technologists could dismantle the 2011-2012 protests by condemning them as demonstrations of a spoilt Moscow bourgeoisie defending their own privileges, isolated from “deep Russia” that allegedly appreciated what the regime had accomplished and continued to rally around the

president. The spread of the present protests over the whole of Russia kills the “deep Russia” argument, and is an indication of a malaise that goes further than the two major cities.

Navalny’s campaign for “smart voting” did the ruling party some damage during last year’s regional election. Navalny skilfully energizes these opposition movements by targeting corruption by the ruling elite (Medvedev and Putin in the first place), and by presenting an alternative to the ruling party other than the fake opposition parties: the Communists and the Liberal (?) Democratic (?) Party.

With the national parliamentary elections scheduled for September of this year, the fear exists that the position of United Russia could be seriously dented. Would that constitute a direct danger for the regime? Probably not. But as an indication of the erosion of support for the party, the government, and the President, it may well seriously shake up the balance of power in the establishment, and strengthen the hand of more moderate, more liberal sections of the establishment. This may well be the reason why the security forces, as a pre-emptive move, have taken over the management of the protests from the political technologists. The effective outcome may well be the reverse of the intention of the security forces: the brutal and indiscriminate treatment of Navalny and of the protestors may well have the opposite effect.

### **BORRELL’S VISIT: RIGHT OR WRONG?**

Borrell’s visit was by no means a faux pas. The trip to Moscow was a courageous and correct decision. It was correct to try to explore what common ground could be found to restart a relationship that has been deteriorating for a decade and was put on ice after the Russian intervention in Ukraine. The March 2016 ["Five Principles"](#) offer a framework suitable for finding

a way forward in line with EU's "principled pragmatism", provided there is goodwill on the other side.

A perspective on a way forward could have been a good starting point for the planned discussion in the Foreign Affairs Council later this month and the European Council in March. It could have been a possibility to bridge the split between the Russia-friendly and the Russia-critical member states. Since March 2016, this split has condemned the EU to an uncomfortable immobilism, reducing political debates on EU-Russia to recycling, with six months intervals, the "Five Principles" and the sanctions.

Borrell's visit was an opportunity offered to the Russian side to break the deadlock. The HR put his credibility on the line with some of the Member States who never stop criticising (also for bad reasons) the Russian side. Foreign Minister Lavrov did not seize the opportunity. On the contrary, in his inimitable and well-exercised style he indulged in EU-bashing, and replied to every topic that the HR put on the table with his routine "what-about-ism". (Un)Diplomatic insults made a constructive exchange of views impossible. The obvious aim of Russian diplomacy was to put Borrell on the wrong foot and exacerbate the split within the EU, counting on the "Putin Versteh'er" among the member states to consolidate EU immobilism, giving them a free hand to continue business as usual in their relations with Russia. This time this calculation may be wrong.

The poisoning of Navalny, his arrest and imprisonment on the basis of flimsy legal arguments, the repression of the widespread demonstrations in Russia, the expulsion of three EU diplomats on a fake basis (during the visit of the HR), may just be pushing Russia's luck too far. Although Germany and France have made

some positive noises and seem to see no need to link the Navalny affair to North Stream II, the pressure of public opinion and of other Member States may be too strong to pretend there is no problem.

By not seizing the opportunity to engage in a dialogue and by retreating on an imagined Russian moral high ground, the Russian side showed disrespect for its interlocutor. This attitude constituted a political insult to the EU as a whole.

Minister Lavrov is one of the most experienced Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Russian diplomatic service is one of the best in the world. It is unlikely that they do not realise the damage that they were doing to the EU-Russia relations now and to its evolution in the near future. This show of aggressiveness is not a manifestation of strength, but of weakness, of fear, and of the incapacity to give up the zero-sum game approach to foreign policy. Insecurity makes it impossible for the Russian side to make concessions that can result in constructive compromises. This supports the assumption developed in the previous section: there is some form of panic in the leading elite in Russia. They fear that the basis of the Putin regime is eroding, and (even more importantly) that therefore the consensual support between the various components of the leading elite is in danger.

## CONCLUSION

The present wave of protests is an indication of the changes in Russian society. No political technologist, however skilled, and no law enforcer, however brutal, will easily be able to stop these societal changes. In the absence of other political opposition forces, Navalny can energize a movement that, not directly but through its impact on the balance of power in the ruling establishment, may have an impact on domestic and foreign policy in Russia. The security forces will

try to keep the situation under control and reinforce the authoritarian tendencies of the regime. However, Russia is no longer the Soviet Union, and the transformation of an authoritarian into a totalitarian regime is improbable. It is by no means certain how the situation will evolve in the months to come, but things may get worse before they get better. Societal evolutions are difficult if not impossible to predict, as the fall of Communism and the Arab Spring have illustrated.

Amid this uncertainty, it is a major challenge for the EU to define and implement adequate policies, inspired by EU values and interests, avoiding a further deterioration of relations, keeping in mind the great potential benefit for both sides of an improvement of

EU-Russia relations. Borrell's mission was a laudable attempt to find constructive ways forward, an attempt that unfortunately was not met with an adequate response from the Russian side.

*Marc Franco is a Senior Associate Fellow at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels. He was Head of the European Commission's Delegation to Russia from 2004 to 2009.*



The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author(s) alone, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egmont Institute. Founded in 1947, EGMONT – Royal Institute for International Relations is an independent and non-profit Brussels-based think tank dedicated to interdisciplinary research.

[www.egmontinstitute.be](http://www.egmontinstitute.be)

© Egmont Institute 2021. All rights reserved.