

The West and Russia

No more diplomacy of lost opportunities: *Response by Erik Holm*

Introduction

The highly interesting reaction to my article by Ambassador De Vos van Steenwijk merits a response. In doing so, I can also benefit from my experience during a recent study tour to Moscow. It was my first trip to Russia and I found it extremely interesting and instructive. Above all, it taught me that Russia is a country which is even more complicated than I suspected. Of course, the impressions we received were rather scattered. The programme included meetings with about twelve Russian intellectuals from various organisations and institutions. I shall refer to some of their views below without pretending that they represent a complete picture or are representative; but they are parts of a huge mosaic.

Russians' perceptions

We can be sure that the system on which the Soviet Union was built will never come back, because as one of our interlocutors said, 'the communist ideology was a lie that could not be implemented in the real world.' But many Russians have difficulty in distancing themselves from the Soviet Union. For the people in general today, Russian history starts in 1917. The ruling elite and the intelligentsia at the time were wiped out by the totalitarian system and therefore Russians today are all descendants of peasants without cultural roots which extend further back. Their idea of Russia as a great power is based on the achievements of the Soviet Union primarily as the power that crushed fascist totalitarianism and, of course, also of the technological achievements of Sputnik, Gagarin, missiles etc. They are aware of the fact that about 30 million Russians lost their lives through Stalin's terror and the Gulag, but they are not (yet) prepared to face this historical reality. Although it is fully documented and there is free access to archives, books and articles about the subject, it does not play a role in their minds. There has been no serious attempt at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Furthermore, there is definitely a quite strong tradition in Russian history of feeling "anti-Western" and it would be wrong to suggest that Russia's present anti-Western attitude is purely a matter of communist propaganda and brainwashing.

Western policies

I agree that the policy of 'the West' since 1989 has been a 'diplomacy of lost opportunities'. It was this feeling that made me look back on the policy towards Germany of the Western allies in 1946-48 when peace was won, at least as far as Western Europe was concerned. Of course, we then had a common enemy with Germany, the Soviet Union, and that may have been decisive. In 1989 we did not have an enemy in common with the country that 'lost' the cold war, and therefore

there was no peace to win, so to speak. We had come to the end of history, some even thought.

I am not so sure that part of US policy after 1991 was not caused by the intention to humiliate Russia or at least to make sure that it would never dream of becoming a big power again. Friends in the Danish foreign service involved with NATO affairs in these years say that the Americans never became tired of maintaining that they were the victors of the Cold War. Only one of the twelve Russians we met showed some understanding for NATO enlargement. The others found it difficult to see the need for a continued existence of the organisation after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. As they see it, Russia today is not a great military power compared to the US and cannot be conceived as a threat to the West.

You are absolutely right in raising the following question: What kind of mission does the Atlantic Alliance have beyond its (original) borders? To me it seems that the US defines its mission as spreading democracy and human rights around the world, an ideological mission which would actually fit a Democratic president better than a Republican one and therefore is unlikely to be changed much after next November. Europe has gone far too far along with that messianic message as it cannot be implemented in the real world for a long time to come, and will in fact have to be adopted by people themselves and not introduced by us.

The Russians who we met stated quite explicitly that the US was the only sovereign power today — or as you put it, the only member state left with straightforwardly global interests. It was Henry Kissinger who more than thirty years ago offended many Europeans by saying so, adding that Europe had only regional interests. What these interests were, we found difficult to agree on, even though at the time 'Europe' consisted of only nine countries. Now with twenty-seven EU member states it has become a pipe dream to define them.

Diverse 'Near Abroads'

It is absolutely true that Russia has all sorts of different 'near abroads', and that Ukraine is a chapter apart. Attempts to enlarge NATO with Ukraine could be a 'casus belli', causing a split of the country into an Eastern and a Western part. There is a clear tendency on the part of Russians to see most of the former Soviet Republics as 'traitors' and they find it difficult to forgive such actions. Poland would rather fall into the category of a former 'enemy' and such people as easier to relate to.

As to the countries in the Caucasian region, I was confirmed in my view that the problems must be seen in the light of the threat of politico-fundamentalist Islam. Russia has committed great offences in Chechnya, and the present 'absence of war' rests on a state power not supported by the people. An atmosphere of revenge has been created which is strengthening the ideological islamists who have the creation of a Caucasian emirate as their goal.

China looms large towards the East and just as large in their minds, not only in economic terms as we tend to see it, but also in hard power terms with the huge

population seen in the perspective of the demographic decline that Russia suffers. The threat has many dimensions. One of our interlocutors illustrated this by referring to an opinion poll showing that Russian women in the Far East preferred Chinese men because they were nice and considerate compared to the brutal and drunk Russian men.

Thus, Russians see their country being encircled by enemies of very different kinds. Russians do not think that they can be loved or envied by the world. They must be feared in order to be respected, someone said.

Another way forward

The order that has been established in Europe since 1991 is a kind of non-order as it has evolved in a state of absent-mindedness because our leaders were unable to react constructively to the peaceful revolution. They thought that they could take refuge under the cover of the Maastricht Treaty which has proved to be an empty shell in political terms. It did not provide an alternative in security policy to NATO membership for the new democracies who needed the assurance of having returned to Europe after escaping from the Russian bear. An explicit statement from the European Council that the EU would accept them in their own right as part of the European project might have been sufficient to dampen their fears without provoking Russia.

In Europe we have to return in one way or another to 1648, to the principle of non-interference, and to allow Russia to find its own way towards democracy and civil rights. It is definitely true that the Putin regime has squeezed the freedom of expression considerably and that the political debate is kept within very narrow channels. That is not of much concern to the Russian people, who give higher priority to improving their livelihood. Who are we to blame them for that? We in the West seem to have our own difficulties in creating a democratic system at the European level (we only have to refer to the fate of the Lisbon Treaty). Some kind of 'sovereign democracy' - although not the Russian one — is needed in our part of Europe. How the Russian constitutional system will develop remains to be seen. At present it has major shortcomings. Many Russians seem to be aware of this and criticise it. They are as curious as we are to see how the system with its two power centres, the Kremlin and the White House, will work. In global politics probably better than Europe with its 27 centres of decision making.

We were told that today 'Russia's business is business'. I could not help thinking that it is not unlike what we did here when we set out to create a common market. Why not do business with the Russians and aim for a common market including oil and gas? Economics and trade is a plus-sum game, while traditional power politics is a zero-sum game.

It may be too much to hope for a George Kennan or a Jean Monnet to inspire our politicians. But perhaps the Dutch could come forward with a new Johan Beyen and suggest a Messina conference between the EU and Russia. However, something like that is probably what the Germans are aiming for. Or at least Foreign Minister Steinmeyer: Chancellor Merkel may not fully accept the

idea. But last year when I met former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt he told me that if he were chancellor today, he would never mention democracy and human rights when going abroad.

There is an obvious need for us Europeans to get our act together and become able to speak with one voice in global affairs. The Russians will never be part of our project, of course, but we must respect them and talk to them as neighbours in stead of preaching to them. A bit of modesty and sense of historical perspective would sit well on us.