

Putin is Europe's best partner

... the turbo-democrat in Moscow

Never before has Russia been governed so democratically – and this process of democratization is continuing at an impressive pace. In the space of just 10 years, the country has achieved things that Western democracies have taken centuries to attain. Under the management of Vladimir Putin, the Russian government found, for the first time, the necessary energy and resolve to lead this vast country into a future of greater internal and external security, despite all the difficulties.

Rivalling the performance of China

In the US, economic growth is being held back by the credit crisis; meanwhile, Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to expand this year by 7.5%. The Russian giant has rivalled the performance of China, whose prime minister, Wen Jiabao, announced at the Tenth National People's Congress, GDP growth for this year of 8%.

After a chaotic transitional phase, the incredible economic boom and new-found political and economic stability in Russia are not just the outcome of high gas and oil prices but also attributable to Putin's strong economic policy leadership.

The path to democracy

Throughout its history, Russia has been under authoritarian rule. The former feudal state became the dictatorship of the proletariat and after 1991 seemed likely to be exploited by a few criminal oligarchs. It took the Putin government to usher in what must surely have been the most democratic development in the country's entire history with strong political and economic leadership.

The massive political and economic transformation processes of the last few years have often received too little acknowledgement from Western opinion-formers in the vigorous debate surrounding the Russian nuclear programme, energy policy, the absence of OSCE election observers and media freedom.

The directed Russian democracy is criticized by commentators in the West because it falls far short of our own basic democratic concepts. The gaps in the legal system or in the implementation of the democratic rights of the population are still too great. But our own Western democracies did not grow up overnight. It takes time to create a democracy.

Central leadership

In the 18th and 19th centuries, unlike Western countries, Russia only had a middle class society with rudimentary education. The fact is that the Russian kingdom (especially after it had been elevated to an empire by Catherine the Great) made central leadership necessary. On a small scale, the same applies to the Canton of Berne, an old Swiss residual empire, where, alongside dynamic economic zones, large areas exist that can only be described as *stuck in the past*.

Swiss citizens, with an awareness of history, will probably remember that we in the Confederation needed the support of Napoleon to destroy existing political structures and progressively liberate ourselves from the sway of the aristocrats. These sometimes very bloody processes, leading up to today's consensus politics in Switzerland, are generally forgotten in reports about the supposedly slow process of democratization in Russia.

In Germany, between the first parliamentary assembly (which met in St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt in 1848) and the promulgation of the basic law in 1948, a good 100 years elapsed. The process will likely go ahead faster in Russia, but it will surely not be completed in a single decade.



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An idealized presentation of the process of democratization in Russia must not be allowed to develop since this vast country still finds itself confronted with totally different infrastructure problems to those of Western countries.

Internal renewal

The old competition between the US and Russia has broken out again. While Russia is being renewed from the inside, the United States is trying to export its values to other countries in an effort to "democratize" them.

The US strengthens NATO in Europe and by so doing places Russia under still greater pressure. As Helmut Schmidt, the former Chancellor of West Germany, commented recently in *ZEIT Magazine*, "Today Russia presents far less danger to world peace than America. You can print my words."

In intellectual and cultural terms, Russia is part of Europe. Geographically that applies to just one part of the country, but historically and culturally

Russia has always been and still is oriented towards Europe. We need one another. This does not simply concern our mutual dependence in the energy sector. Europe is vital as a partner for the modernisation of Russia. Russia also has an important geopolitical role. Speculation that Russia might turn its attention eastwards to China is inaccurate.

Globalization spawns worldwide interdependence

Globalization also shapes Russian behaviour patterns and Putin has long since recognized the need for his internal policy to be adjusted to take account of changes on the international scene. Globalization leads to a process of worldwide interdependence in which countries become increasingly dependent upon each other.

Europe can play a decisive part in assisting Russia in these processes. This involves not just economic exchanges between countries, but also closer cooperation at the level of universities. Closer cooperation in the military

sphere, without any role for NATO, would also be of central importance.

Unfortunately, we pay too little respect to Russia's history, the enormous difficulties of the country and its present trends – this makes cooperation in different areas more difficult. It would be preferable to understand our Russian neighbour as a partner for the future to shape a common system of values in the framework of globalization.

Never before has Russia been such an attractive partner for Europe as it has under Vladimir Putin. If Europe wishes to forge a stronger and successful future, the EU should consider it more important to attract Russia as a member rather than Turkey.

"Raoul D. Stöhlker is Managing Partner of Klaus. J. Stöhlker AG, Zollikon-Zürich and CEO of Stöhlker & Partner GmbH, Berlin. As a member of the Bureau of the EAPC (European Association of Political Consultants), Raoul Stöhlker is dedicated to the processes of democratization in Europe."