

Five minutes with Sir Tony Brenton: “In twenty years’ time Russia won’t be perfect, but it will be a great deal closer to what Europe can regard as good neighbour than it is now”

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Sir Tony Brenton, former British Ambassador to the Russian Federation reflects on Vladimir Putin’s recent election win, the economic challenges Russia faces over the next two decades, and gives EU leaders some advice on how they should engage with Russia.



Vladimir Putin won the election on March 4th with 63%. Do you think this reflects his true popularity in Russia?

The elections were tainted in a lot of ways according to the international observers. In the run up, opposition candidates were quite explicitly excluded and the official press very forcefully supported Putin. The count itself was problematic; there was something the Russians call the *carousel*, where votes are shipped around from post to post.

Putin’s total was almost certainly inflated by around 10-15 per cent, and that is consistent with what has happened in previous Russian presidential Duma elections. However, even when you take out the fraud element from the elections, Putin still enjoys the support of close to the majority of Russians. There are good reasons for that; Putin has brought Russia prosperity, stability, and a certain measure of national pride. If you think back to how Russia was in the year 2000 when Putin took over, everything had gone wrong, and a lot has gone right since then. Many Russians still value Putin for that reason.

You have served as the British Ambassador to Russia from 2004 to 2008. What do you think is the most important policy challenge that it currently faces?

The core challenge that Russia faces is in fact economic which is linked to Russia’s demography. The Russians are dying off slowly. Russia is as prosperous as it is at the moment only because of its exports of natural resources, particularly oil and gas. It has a very one-dimensional economy, and an economy which is very dependent upon the global oil price. Whenever the global oil price goes down significantly, as it did in 1991, 1998 and in 2008 that has a very sharp effect on the Russian economy.

There is a cluster of economic problems that has to be the central objective of the Russian state to deal with. Russia needs to modernize its economy, to make more use of human capital, skills and scientific knowledge, in order to generate high-tech industry. An obstacle to that is, because of the very authoritarian way Russia has been run, there is rampant corruption. It is extraordinarily difficult to set up and run a successful business in Russia today, and the authorities need to deal with that corruption if they’re to get the economic dynamism and growth which they need. Linked to that, there is a problem with the rule of law in Russia. The legal authorities are linked too strongly to the state or local interests, and companies that want to set up do not have actual legal recourse if they get into problems.

In addition, Russia sees outside threats. China is growing very quickly to their East, which they have to adjust to, and the east of Siberia is full of natural resources for which the Chinese are hungry. There is a military imbalance developing there which is worrying for the Russians.

And the Russians face similar problems in the South to the UK and the USA with Islamic fundamentalism; they've had problems with Chechnya. One reason why the Russians are so active in Afghanistan is that they are more frightened about the Taliban coming back.

How do Russian leaders today see the European Union?

Slightly dismissively, though Europe has a lot of what they want. We are rich, we are well-established, we are secure, we have very well-developed and diverse economies, and we take more of half of Russia's exports. Russians think of themselves as Europeans; talk to any Russian and they will say: "I am a European". So while they value the political link, they don't see Europe as a very well-established political entity, although they do deal with individual European countries which they take seriously – such as Germany and the UK. Russia tends to play European countries off against one another in their dealings with the continent as a whole.

Do you think that Putin is capable of undertaking the reforms necessary such as tackling corruption?

Of course Putin is constrained by corruption at the top of his administration. And this corruption at the top makes it very difficult to achieve the reforms which are needed. Also, he has been strident in his rhetoric against the demonstrators over the last two or three months in Russian politics.

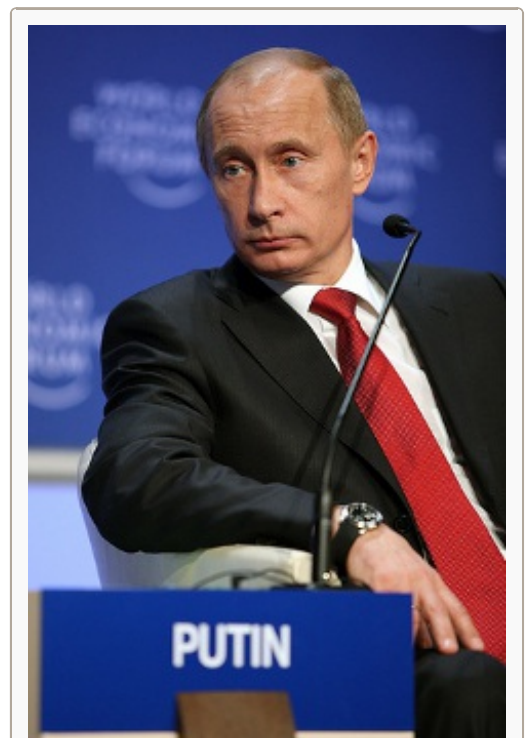
Putin is very pragmatic and sensible. He has seen what has happened in the Arab world. He does not want to end up ruling Russia by brutally repressing portions of his people, and we have already seen signs of him looking for common ground with the demonstrators. There are now a couple of laws going to the Duma trying to open up the election process a little bit, and fascinatingly, it has just been announced that the prosecutors will again look at the case of [Mikhail Khodorkovsky](#), viewed by Putin as a real threat to his regime, and sent to Siberia for 8 years. There are odd straws in the wind that he is looking for common ground. I actually believe that Putin is pragmatic enough to find a constructive way to undertake more reforms, but if he doesn't Russia faces very real problems and potentially a messy ending to his regime.

Where do you see Russia in 20 years from now?

I am an optimist about Russia. The Russians are well educated, highly sophisticated, talented people, and despite their 500 years of rotten government, there are enough good people around. They are building up experience of travel, close links to Europeans, and they have opened up massively by comparison with Communism. They will continue to go down that road and there will be bumps and, ups and downs. In twenty years' time, Russia won't be perfect, but it will be a great deal closer to what Europe can regard as good neighbour than it is now.

How do you suggest national and EU leaders should engage with Russia over the next decade?

There is a certain tendency among European politicians to pander to Russia. "They have had a bad history. We need to be nice to them.", and therefore not to criticise the bad things such as the conduct of the elections that we've just seen. I think you have to say: "Yes, we want to support Russia. Yes, we want to help Russia forward in terms of economic and other forms of cooperation, but we need to be very clear that when Russia breaches its international commitments, for example,



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not holding free and fair elections, then we will clearly criticize them and say that this is a departure from the norms of behaviour we expect, and we want Russia to do better.” So it’s a matter of being clear that Russia observes its commitments, but at the same time holding out our hand to Russia so that it develops in the way we want it to.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

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Sir Tony Brenton has worked for over 30 years for the British Foreign Office, and has dealt with European matters both in London and in Brussels, as well as being based in Washington after 2001. From 2004 to 2008 he was British Ambassador to the Russian Federation. He is a Fellow of Wolfson College Cambridge and is writing a book on Russian history.



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