

Corruption is not just endemic to the Russian system, it is the system. It is in the EU's interest to increase its engagement with Russian society

Jun 7 2012

Authoritarianism and rampant corruption characterize the Russian political system. [Adam Balcer](#) argues that the EU now needs to build closer relationships between the EU and Russian civil society to foster change in the country. He suggests Russia's join the Erasmus program and the establishment of a comprehensive network between Russian NGOs, think tanks, scholars, opposition parties and EU leaders.

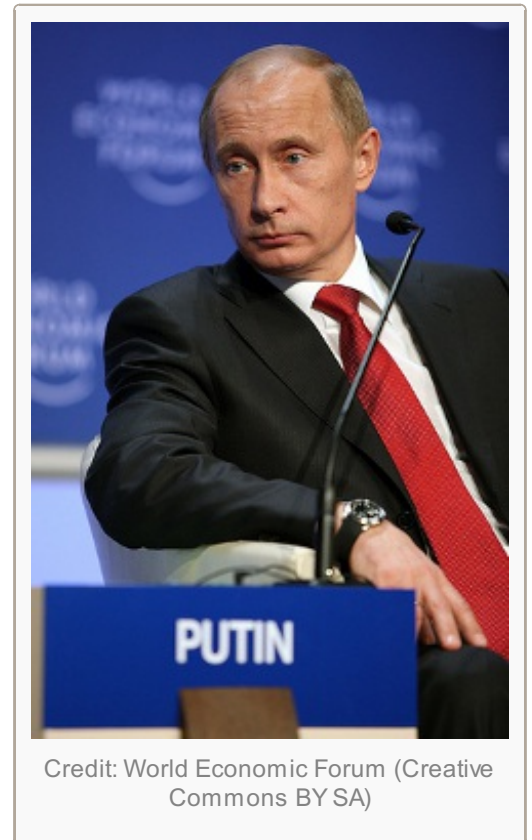


A substantial divergence of values between the European Union (EU) and Russian political systems is a serious challenge on the path towards more enhanced cooperation between Moscow and Brussels. Without at least partial democratization and modernization of Russia a tangible partnership between Moscow and Brussels cannot be established in the foreseeable future. Authoritarianism and rampant corruption of the Russian political system (corruption is not just endemic to the system, it *is* the system) puts a serious constraint on the ability of President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle to launch a genuine political, economic and social transformation.

Nevertheless, the unprecedented development of the Russian middle class taking place in recent months has substantially weakened the legitimacy of the regime and, by default, created a new and more promising social and political context. This phenomenon is irreversible because it derives from structural social changes occurring within the Russian society (rise of the middle class). Currently, Russia finds itself in a clinch. On the one hand, the popularity of Vladimir Putin has significantly decreased particularly among the most educated and dynamic parts of society. But this economic stability can turn gradually into stagnation and in the long term without necessary reforms it will be unsustainable. On the other, Putin still enjoys the support of a majority of the population and in the short term the economic foundation of the regime will most probably remain stable. In the coming years, local elections (municipal, regional, governors) could be a key test for the opposition and the regime.

Reactions of the EU to a developing Russian civil society have been rather restrained since the EU political elites have generally refrained from openly supporting the democratic forces. The performance of the EU is disappointing in comparison to the US which has been much more outspoken in the criticism of the Kremlin and support for the opposition.

EU policy towards Russia badly needs a substantial readjustment in the direction of a society-driven approach. The awakening of the Russian middle class is deeply rooted in the underlying social processes. Lilia Shevtsova seems to be right when she [points out](#) that “one thing is apparent: transformation will not happen in the shape of reform from above or within the system; if it does occur, it will be the result of the deepening (economic and political- AB) crisis and pressure from society.” Therefore, it is in the EU's interest to increase its engagement with the Russian society. The EU also cannot neglect relative softening and weakening of the authoritarian regime in Moscow. The new European strategy towards Russia should be



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based on seeking a number of small concessions from the regime.

Certainly there is no chance for the EU as a whole to present an assertive and common stance on the democratization of Russia. Nevertheless, certain member states (i.e. the UK, Sweden, Poland, the Czech Republic), and the EU institutions and organizations can increase their financial and organizational support for the Russian civil society in the widest possible scope. The strategic goal should be to establish comprehensive mechanisms of networking and twinning between Russian NGOs, think tanks, scholars, oppositional parties and associations, independent media, civil initiatives, internet social networks and their European interlocutors. First of all, these mechanisms should aim at transfer of know-how from the EU to the Russian opposition and NGOs within the framework of common platforms and initiatives. The establishment of a channel of communications with dissidents in the political elite is also recommended. The local, municipal and regional elections to be held in the coming years in many cities and regions of Russia may prove to be a test both for the opposition and the Russian government.

The above mentioned actors should increase their engagement outside Moscow and St. Petersburg. The EU should push assertively for the establishment of small border traffic along the entire border with Russia (covering St. Petersburg), mutual liberalization of the visa regime and subsequently lifting the visa requirement. The EU should support cooperation between universities and launch a special program of scholarships for Russian students. A next step should be Russia's accession to the Erasmus program. The EU should work more closely with the Russian diaspora living in the EU and the minorities living in Russia who have ethnic affiliation with the EU nations (i.e. Germans, Poles) as bridges reaching out to Russian society. Even in the economic sphere a "society friendly approach" can be implemented. Russia's membership in the WTO provides the EU with a chance to improve the conditions of doing business in the country. The EU should pay special attention to the position of private small-and-medium entrepreneurs who are engines of the protests. At the end of the day all these small steps, can have a decisive cumulative effect.

This article is a shortened version of the demosEUROPA paper [A time for readjustment: Russia and the EU after Bolotnaya Ploshchad](#).

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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.

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