

What now Russia!

With leaders like this Russia does not need enemies

The latest news I read before writing this article is that Russia's foreign minister said that Russia will deepens ties with China. Mr. Lavrov said in a question-and-answer session at an event in Moscow, that western countries had espoused "Russophobia" since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine.

Speaking to Russia's RIA Novosti news agency, Lavrov added: Now the center of world development has shifted to Eurasia.

If the west wants to offer something in terms of resuming relations, then we will seriously consider whether we will need it or not, Lavrov said, according to a transcript on the foreign ministry's website.

Here is my comment to this: with leaders like Putin and Lavrov, Russia does not need enemies.

Do you really believe that the West is much concerned about whether Russia deepens its ties with China? If I was a Russian citizen I would however be extremely concerned because this "deepened relationship" will be completely on China's premises. China is a brutal dictatorship, that micro-manage and monitors its citizens every move. China will take every advantage of Russia's weaken and isolated status.

What do Lavrov, Putin and all their entourage mean when they say "we" and "Russia"? Is it the interests of the common Russian citizen they are concerned about? Or is it "we" as in "we the ruling class".

My opinion about this clear, I leave it to you to decide what you think.

Russia's misfortunes are not caused by the West

Russia is not threated from the West. To the contrary, during the last 80 years the West wanted to develop a closer relationship with Russia. Some 20 years ago even the Russian leaders were involved in the dialogue of potentially making Russia part of the EU and in one way or another include Russia in the NATO structure.

Russia's misfortune was never the doing of the West, it was always self-inflicted because of terrible Russian leaders. The contemporary problems are entirely because of Putin's mismanagement and horrible decisions.

I am a European, grown up with liberal democratic values, being able to participate in free and fair elections all my life to choose our political leaders. I do of course understand that Russians have a completely different background and a very different perception of what is right and wrong. Maybe they want a leader like Putin? What I am writing here is therefore of course my personal view based on my understanding of the world and what is good and what is bad. Maybe my "diagnostic" and my recommendations for what to do, for a Russian sounds like just fantasies. Let me however add, also in my personal view, that Russians in general does not understand their own country very well. The reasons are that Russians were always victims of propoganda and a distorted reality and it was always dangerous to express an opinion different from the official one. This was the fact in the USSR years, and it continued under Putin's regime.

Russia was in the past attacked from the west, from Karl XII, Napoleon, and Hitler. But the Russian dogma that the West therefore also today represents a threat to Russia is false and maintained only to mobilize support for an aggressive form of Russian politics, both internally and towards the surrounding world. Russia is not the only country that were attacked by these same Western despots. My own small country, Norway, is one of many European countries that suffered the same troubles as Russia in the past, and even Switzerland was occupied by Napoleon. It has become a strong lived myth in Russia that the West is a threat to Russia. Maybe the Western view on corruption and our moral standards are a threat to the Russian political leadership and the surrounding oligarchs, but that is not a threat to Russia and Russians as such.

There are on the other hand many countries in Europe that have a terrible experience with Russian attacks in the past, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Finland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine. Therefore, they all wanted to become a part of NATO to not re-experience the past. NATO didn't need an "aggressive expansion plan" and never had any intention or need to encircle Russia. All these countries voluntarily and actively applied for or aspired for NATO membership.

Russia could have been the richest country in the world

Russia consists of an enormous landmass, over 11 time-zones, with almost unlimited natural resources like forests, fish, gas, oil, precious metals like diamonds and gold, and much more. It has a population of c. 144 million people, with one language, good education, one legislation, one currency. The climate is tough, but Russia could easily have been the richest country in the world.

As a matter of fact, Russia is instead a quite poor country.

The big cities have a relatively large middle class, and a very small "nuovo" super-rich oligarch class, that makes Russia look very prosperous. The business skyscrapers and the expensive avenues of Moscow and St. Peterburg is however in this regard like a "Potemkin façade" confusing and hiding the fact that the majority of Russian's are not sharing this wealthy living standard. You do not need to travel far outside Moscow or St. Petersburg to see a very poor living standard, not to talk about how it looks like in the far away provinces. The average living age in Russia is at the level of poor African nations and it is dropping.

In my opinion, all this is because Russia has always ended up with terrible leaders, repressive mis-managers only concerned about their own wealth and power.

Russia is not a superpower

Russia's economy is smaller than South Korea's (with c. 52 million population), the export is lower than Switzerland's (with only 8,5 million people), the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is smaller than e.g., Canada's (c. 38 million people) and Italy's (c. 59 million). Still, Russia demand to be considered a super-power and an equal with the USA. The value of all products and services produced inside USA per year is worth 21 trillion USD, Russia's annual equivalent is only 1,4 trillion USD (Germany 3,8 trillion and France 2,6 trillion USD). USA's GDP per capita is therefore 64'000 USD and Russia's GDP per capita is only USD10'000. Germany or France never had the insane idea to compete with USA to be a superpower. Not to say South-Korea, Italy, or Canada. It would of course be seen as absolutely absurd.

I therefore never got this Russian logic, and I never understood why we on the Western side didn't speak clearly to the Russian leaders about this.

Russia is not a superpower and cannot become one before it stops the culture of mismanagement and corruption that penetrates all levels of political, social, and economic activity.

Nuclear weapons alone don't make Russia a superpower. North Korea and Pakistan also have nuclear weapons, and nobody would consider them superpowers just because of this.

Dangerous yes, superpowers no.

Even the Russian army is like a "Potemkin façade", now falling completely apart in Ukraine because of poor leadership, corruption, and degeneration.

If I were a Russian, I would – even stronger than I do here - tell my leader to get their acts together and stop making a fool of ourselves. Stop stealing all the wealth that belongs to the Russian population, stop the corruption, stop the incredible mismanagement at almost all levels.

Russia's economy will collapse

Tens of millions of Russians are living in remote regions, and they never bought Western products anyway. Many of them hardly buy Russian products. My wife used to have a dacha in a remote Russian village, and she tells me that the only thing the locals bought from the shop was matches and vodka. The vodka was used as "currency" for buying local services. They provided everything else for themselves, fish from the lake, vegetables, potatoes, eggs, etc., or they exchanged self-made products with each other.

Even the average Russian in the big cities will probably not feel right away how badly the Western sanctions against Russia will hurt their personal economy. This will take time.

Domestic business will even benefit in the short run by now being without the Western competition. Some smaller manufacturers that still need raw materials from the West will try to get it via third countries.

It will take time before the pain will be seriously visible and tangible. In the short run Russia's revenue from oil and gas will still benefit the Russian economy and the Rubel value. However, the import of goods from Europe and USA have stopped and when the storages are empty there will be no more Western supply of nutrition, pharmaceutical products, electronics and technology, cars, or spare parts. And the West are not buying any products from Russia, except energy, and this will also eventually hurt the Russian economy.

Russia is even kicked out of the international banking system.

Eventually Russia's economy will look like something from the worst USSR years. Russians can trade internally, grow vegetables and trade with China and a few other countries, but there will eventually be lack of important products, prices will increase dramatically, and I can predict that shopping malls will very soon be empty of both quality products and of people shopping there because they cannot even afford what is still offered. That some Russians are saying "so what" is only a stupid attempt to be brave. I would tell them to be upset with their leader's politics that brought this misfortune upon Russia and that your life is now. You should demand the right to at least have opportunities for a decent life, without having to migrate to the West.

No country or larger corporations from the west are ever going to do business with Putin again.

Europe has decided to fundamentally be free of its dependency of Russian energy. It will take some time for Europe to establish alternative energy sources, at least of the gas dependency, but Europe has learnt its lesson. Europe will never again get itself in this situation where it must choose between energy supply or to do what is politically and morally right.

What a disastrous situation for Russia this is. It is much more permanent and serious than most Russian's probably understand! Oil, gas, and coal are Russia's most valuable export products. To believe that Russia just can turn around and sell the oil and gas to China and India is based on wishful and unprofessional thinking.

Russia's oil and gas reserves are far away from where China and India need it delivered. To build pipelines takes years and transportation by railroad or ships will not suffice at all. China will take every advantage of the terrible situation Putin has put Russia in.

Russia doesn't need a strong leader, it needs good leadership

There is a fundamental misunderstanding, repeated even by some on the Western side, that Russia needs a strong leader and that a true liberal democracy is not possible to create in Russia. The argument is that Russia is so large that it needs a strong, central control carried out through a strong leader, and that Russians never agrees on anything, so they need someone to stop the disputes.

I see this very differently.

The size of Russia should rather be an argument for real decentralization with wide regional and local autonomy.

I don't know what Russians they have met, but I have only seen that Russians are almost too obedient, rather than having strong personal opinions. Russians hardly disagree about anything. But, when they do, they have a bad habit of insulting and screaming at each other, rather than behaving with some degree of respect. This can be learned however, and disagreements are never a bad thing. To the contrary, disagreements are the driving force of creativity and development.

Like any country, Russia needs good leadership. It does not need a strong leader, which by the way too often is defined as someone being brutal and tough.

So, what would good leadership in Russia look like? How do we make sure that Russia doesn't end up with another Zar-like leader after Putin?

It is entirely up to the Russians. But this time the West should be less naïve and make clear preconditions for our support in the re-construction that will have to take place. This time we cannot accept that it is the old KGB network that continues to run Russia. It is absurd that the Western world in the early 1990-ties accepted that KGB/FSB maintained all top key positions in Russia. Western governments and corporations should have insisted at that time already that the precondition for our investments and economic aid are that the political control cannot be in the hands of the old KGB network. KGB was never established to govern a democratic country, but rather to control and oppress the country's own population in order to maintain a totalitarian system. This is probably the biggest mistake that was made in the founding of the Russian Federation. It was this fundamental flaw from the beginning that had to end where we are today.

Russia has with the attack on Ukraine lost all credibility, respect, and trust from the surrounding world. Russia is today an internationally isolated pariah-state. The only “friends” left are countries like Belarus, North-Korea, Ethiopia, Venezuela, Syria, and China. Not a company that any civilized country would be in.

Whether the war will end with Ukraine’s victory - which is more and more likely - or with a year-long “entrenched” war situation is impossible to predict today, but it will no matter what take *generations* to get back to something looking like normal.

There are so many factors that can impact what will happen next, both inside Russia and from the outside world, that to describe the next few years is a guess work. As a writer I can however at least try to describe what I think *should* happen to normalize and improve the common Russian citizens living-standard.

Here is my take on what will be necessary to do for Russia to become a good country to live in after what will be remembered as “the Putin disaster”.

1. Putin and his regime must be replaced. How this can happen is up to the Russian population, but it is likely that it will not happen peacefully.
2. The existing Duma should appoint a transitional government of non-political specialist and administrators with the objective to re-establish normalized communication and connections with the surrounding world, to find a direction for the civil Russia, to make sure media is free and independent, and to prepare a new constitution to be resolved by a new Duma after the end of the transitional period. This transitional government will need several years.
3. The transitional government needs to be given full control of the police and the armed forces.
4. To normalize the economic and financial situation in Russia the government need to establish a program for how to re-allocate and reorganize the financial resources that has been stolen by oligarchs, and how to regulate FSB to make sure the institution is no longer de-facto in charge of Russia. FSB infiltrates all levels of economy and politics in Russia. FSB “approves” all leaders of the police-forces, judges, governors, top-executives of state-owned corporations, and every important position in the state administration. Putin is continuing his job as the FSB director, only covered as the President of the Russian Federation. FSB is an intelligence agency running a big country. This is going to be the most difficult and most crucial element of the “restructuring” of Russia.
5. A strong anti-corruption task force must be given resources and authority to clean up at all levels.
6. A welfare program should be created, and it should include health- and social improvements, and a pension reform securing all Russian citizens a survivable economy
7. A program for a new political and administrative structure needs to be established. The aim is to decentralize the Russian Federation. Regions, and even lower-level administrative units, should be given wide political autonomy, in taxation,

education, welfare, infrastructure and policing. Political representatives at local levels should be elected locally and not appointed from Moscow. Russia should get inspiration from Switzerland and its decentralized political structure. The extreme political centralization that has always plagued Russia needs to come to an end.

8. After a transitional period of some years, free elections, with political parties, should be held at all levels of the new federal structure.
9. A new, politically elected government should make it a priority to establish a reconciliation program to clean up in the horrors of the past, both the horrors of the USSR years and the horrors of the last 30 years. Victims need to be given an official apology, stolen and confiscated assets needs to be replaced, culprits and accomplices should collectively admit responsibility (but be forgiven, like what happened in South-Africa after the apartheid years), memorials and ceremonies should be established to ensure that the wrongs do not happen again.
10. Establish an independent court system and other institution to balance and control the power between the executive branch (the government) and the legislative branch (the parliament). Make it attractive for business to operate and for foreign companies to invest in Russia, through predictability, stability, and transparency.