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Russo-EU Relations: Impact of the Navalny Factor

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

The EU announced on 2 March 2021 new sanctions against Russia over the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny, the opposition figure. This development only confirms the already tense Russo-EU relationship but will not lead to a point of no return.

COMMENTARY

EUROPEAN SANCTIONS which covered travel bans and asset freezes of four top Russian officials in response to the jailing of the opposition figure Alexei Navalny did not come as a surprise. The officials are Viktor Zolotov, head of Russia's National Guard; Igor Krasnov, the prosecutor general; Alexander Kalashnikov, the Federal Penitentiary Service chief; and Alexander Bastrykin, who heads the Investigative Committee.

Zolotov and Bastrykin are seen as close to President Vladimir Putin. Russia has pledged to respond to the sanctions but can be expected to calibrate its moves. Its focus in the future will be on maintaining strong links with individual European Union (EU) countries, principally Germany.

EU's importance to Russia

In an interview in mid-February, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov stressed that Russia was prepared to sever its links with the EU, should the grouping impose sanctions in the wake of Navalny's imprisonment. However, his comments were meant more as a warning than a statement of intent, adding that collectively, the bloc was still Russia's largest trading and investment partner and that "if business is mutually beneficial, we will continue it".

Interestingly, the latest polls, released on 1 March 2021, show over half (55%) of Russians have a positive attitude of EU states, and nearly half (48%) wish for partner relations with the EU.

In any case, the future of Russo-EU relations will be contingent on the state of Russia's links with Germany.

Being the most populous European country with the largest economy, Russia cannot ignore Germany and hence, must bestow more importance to its links with Berlin. After China, it is Russia's largest trade partner.

The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project plays a vital role in their relationship. Germany has been under US pressure and sanctions to cancel the project; more so, in the light of the Navalny factor; not only Central European and Baltic states, but currently France as well, has called for its halt.

Nevertheless, Chancellor Angela Merkel has consistently resisted attempts to link the project to Navalny's fate. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas reiterated Germany's position on the project on 10 February during a debate in the Bundestag.

The Burden of History

The 1941-45 war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union and Moscow's support for German reunification, are major factors in bilateral relations.

Victory Day on 9 May is widely celebrated. For Russia's leaders, it is a crucial occasion to evoke national pride and patriotism. Wittingly or unwittingly, this event also serves to remind Germany of its responsibility in the conflict. The further the war recedes into history and living memory, the more urgent and important it becomes for Moscow to ensure that this event remains ever-present in the current consciousness of both countries.

German leaders have not forgotten their history with Russia. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said in an interview earlier in February that the Nord Stream 2 project was "one of the last bridges between Russia and Europe".

He added with reference to the forthcoming 80th anniversary (in June) of Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, that there had been "phases of fruitful partnership, but even more times of terrible bloodshed". While this did not justify current wrongdoing in Russian politics, Germany "must not lose sight of the bigger picture".

In reaction, Lavrov observed that he showed "political courage" in mentioning that 2021 marked 80 years since the invasion. President Steinmeier's comments were a reiteration of Germany's long-standing awareness of "its responsibility to Russia and the other post-Soviet states for the 27 million Soviet victims of the Second World War, " as stated on the German MFA website of the 21st of October 2020 on German-Russian relations.

Lavrov also took the opportunity to remind Germany of Soviet support of German

reunification, claiming that the West “only reluctantly agreed” to it and that Moscow “was the main proponent of a unified Germany”.

In expressing concern about the current state of relations between Russia and the EU, Lavrov was careful not to blame Germany but the Baltic states and other East European countries.

Russo-EU Ties after Merkel

Chancellor Merkel will leave her post in September 2021 after the federal elections. Her successor as Christian Democratic Party (CDU) leader is Armin Laschet, the presumptive candidate for the chancellorship in the elections. Lavrov’s comments on Germany reflect Russia’s wait-and-see policy in the forthcoming post-Merkel era.

Germany stands out in Russia’s calibrated approach to the EU. President Putin’s remarks on Russo-EU relations during the 27 January 2021 Davos Agenda 2021 online forum, are also indicative.

It was not mere coincidence that he quoted the late German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl as saying “that if we want European culture to survive and remain a centre of world civilisation in the future, keeping in mind the challenges and trends underlying the world civilisation, then of course, Western Europe and Russia must be together. It is hard to disagree with that. We hold exactly the same point of view “.

He argued that Europe and Russia are “absolutely natural partners from the point of view of the economy, research, technology and spatial development for European culture, since Russia, being a country of European culture, is a little larger than the entire EU in terms of territory”.

His focus on Russia’s cultural affinity with Europe was deliberate and consistent and had three goals. First, it was another subtle reminder to China that Russia cannot be taken for granted. Second, it was a renewed signal to Europe that Russia still highly valued its links there.

Finally, it was an appeal to the emotions of German and European leaders, their opinion-makers and their people at large, not to isolate Russia, given Europe’s own declared concerns about China’s rise amid long-held and widespread speculation about a de facto Russo-Chinese alliance. However, only time will tell if his effort will bear fruit.

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