News | 04.06.2012

Forever Putin?

Russia at the crossroads

The mass protests since the falsified Duma election last December have changed Russia. The country's political system is more fragile than ever. The politics of the street appear exhausted. With Vladimir Putin back in the President's chair for the first EU-Russia summit of his third term, Green MEP Werner Schulz takes a deeper look at the current state of the relationship, the actions the EU must take and whether Russia will venture down the path toward a modern future or remain mired in stagnation.

“Party of crooks and thieves” and “Russia without Putin” were the chants heard last winter as Russia’s citizens, in their tens of tens of thousands, marched through the streets to protest electoral fraud, corruption and other abuses. It remains to be seen whether a now re-elected Putin will be willing to make concessions to the democratic movement, if only to secure his own position. Green MEP and Vice-Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee Werner Schulz has met with opposition members in Moscow, and they are not optimistic. He has written this detailed report on the future developments in Russia and what the EU must do.

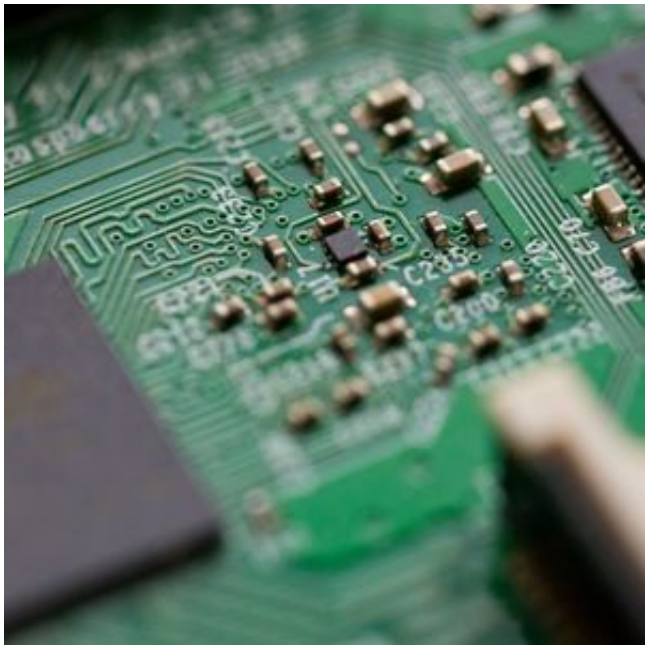
- Forever and ever – Putin? Russia at the crossroads and what Europe can do

Opposition members worry about revenge, as evidenced by the ruthless treatment of protestors such as Pussy Riot, the female rock band which publicly denounced the blurring of the lines between the Orthodox Church and the Kremlin. But they also worry about a return to fear and apathy and with it, the ebbing of the mass movement. There are now enormous differences between the EU and Russia when it comes to basic democratic values, however the EU would still like to acquire Russia as a strategic partner. Putin is still attempting to continue his strategy of bilateral relations with EU members, a modernised example of the proven “divide and conquer” method, but the EU must not let itself be taken down this road. A strategic partnership can only be viable if based on shared basic values. Moscow may be granted greater market access to the EU, for example, but not until there is a binding agreement that does not ignore democracy and human rights. At the close of the summit today, Werner Schulz questioned whether a new partnership agreement, which Russia constantly blocks anyway, makes sense to negotiate at all: *"Russia has a purely economic interest in the EU. This should not be acceptable. A partnership for modernisation must also include reforms in human rights, civil liberties and the rule of law. Russia also hinders the joint actions taken by the international community and supports dictatorships, keeping alive such destructive regimes as those of Assad in Syria or Lukashenko in Belarus. Unfortunately, Russia today is not a strategic partner."* It is high time for the EU to clear up its position on Russia and decide on what grounds the EU's policy towards Moscow should be based.

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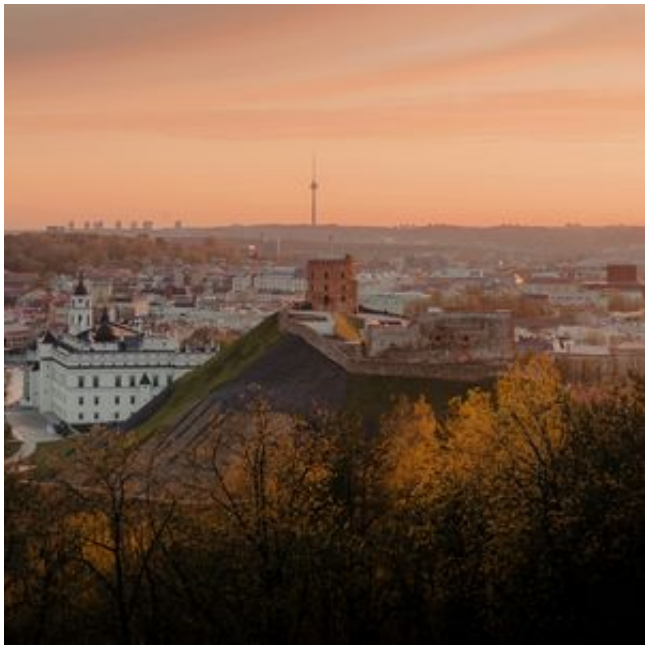
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