

UNIVERS BLOG

The Impotence of a Power Player

On Saturday, March 21st Garry Kasparov visits Tilburg University. On invitation of Nexus Institute the former world chess champion will debate with the attending public about the political situation in Russia. As is known, Kasparov is a fierce opponent of Vladimir Putin. Preceding Kasparov's visit universonline.nl publishes a number of blogs. Both students and professors will have their say on a complex matter of present interest: 'Putin's Russia'.

The first blog is by Bert van Roermund, prof. (em) Philosophy of Law.

What to say about Russia under president Putin, in the days after yet another murder on one of his outspoken opponents, Boris Nemtsov? Perhaps no more than this, for the time being: Far too many Russians these days believe that, whoever committed it, he did Putin a favor. Putin himself may well have thought otherwise, for reasons congruent with those that speak against that other popular frame, Putin as a geo-politician.

We in the West regard Putin as a leader with geopolitical ambitions, if not plans, for Russia. Russia should regain the status of the grand nation it once was, first and foremost by expanding the territory of the Federation. We believe that the overt and covert interventions in Ukraine only continue a series of violent armed actions and severe sanctions in the Caucasus, and hold the threat of further aggression against the Baltic states and Moldavia. Though neither an expert nor a prophet, I submit that this take on Putin's strategy in geopolitical terms may well be mistaken. A ruthless power politician as he may be, Putin has other concerns. Certainly, his regime reminds us of the fact that, ultimately, politics is a struggle for power over society. Putin shows that power is exercised by carefully calculating and balancing a vast number of forces and counterforces, rather than by arbitrarily imposing one's ambitions on others.

Moreover, politics is about power indeed, but about power over society. Without reference to a polis, i.e., to society – in this case Russian society – as a bounded whole, even ruthless political power goes astray. From the early days of his regime, some fifteen years ago, Putin has consistently asked himself: which societal boundaries are within my span of control? He was able to gradually widen them, as I could infer from listening to colleagues at Russian law schools during the period 2000-2010, when we did various Tempus projects in Middle Siberia. We heard how he silenced or removed numerous people who publicly dreamt of autonomy, either in governmental or in civil society circles, including universities. Yet he has to cope with at least two factors delimiting his autocratic regime. The first is the sheer vastness of the country he has to control. The regions still have their own interests to pursue, and for them Moscow is not the center of the world but a remote place to somehow cope with. The second is that an enormous amount of Russian resources, minerals, in Siberian regions in particular, aren't owned anymore by the Russian Federation but by Chinese business, if not the Republic. Russia is not poor but sold out. On these two counts, Putin cannot afford to really pursue geopolitics: he would lose his span of control. But pretending a geopolitical agenda by destabilizing neighboring countries is part of his Machiavellian repertoire: it generates supports from the masses in Russia and conceals the profound poverty

of the great nation that was. Whether killing Nemtsov (and others) is in that same league for a calculating power politician is very doubtful indeed.

Bert van Roermund

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