

LUCAS: RUSSIA HAS A HEADACHE, BUT NOT A HEART ATTACK

Russia has a headache, but not a heart attack. Putin's regime has serious economic problems, but it's also quite resilient - said Edward Lucas.

Jakub Wiech: Do you think that Russia may collapse due to its internal economic problems caused by coronavirus?

Edward Lucas: I think people have been predicting the collapse of the Russian Federation since 1991. They might be right eventually, but I am cautious about making dramatic predictions now. Putin's regime has serious economic problems, but it's also quite resilient. In the past they've been able to overcome serious difficulties. The effect on the budget of the low oil price is substantial. The difficulties they have with the Nord Stream 2 are another problem. And of course, the pandemic is not playing very well for Putin. So - yes, Russia has a headache, but not a heart attack.

So maybe this "headache" will make it easier for countries like Belarus to escape from the Russian orbit?

I think that Belarus has more room for maneuver than it had in the past. I'm most interested to see that Belarus is now importing oil from the West. There's a problem for Putin - when he squeezes Belarus, he increases political opposition. There's a danger that his policy is self-defeating. There's always a danger when Putin is in trouble at home, he finds some foreign political adventure - Ukraine, Syria, Georgia. We need always to be alert for this. But at the moment I don't think that there is a greatly increased chance of some foreign policy adventurism. I think Putin's got enough on his plate at home, and if there is going to be something surprising, it will happen in the second half of the year, not in the first.

Is there a chance that Putin may use aggression to hide Russian problems?

He has done it before, but there's plenty of different forms of aggression. If you watch the Russian media, you'll see that they make a big deal about the attack on the war memorials in Prague. And the district mayor in Prague has become an international hate figure because of his decision to move the statue of marshal Konev. This plays very big inside Russia as an example of ungrateful behavior of a country that was liberated by the Soviets. But it's quite low-cost for the Kremlin, they just say nasty things about some politicians in the Czech Republic. And it acts as good distraction and we don't have to be too concerned about it. Except maybe for the mayor himself, he is under police protection.

Do you think that China may use post-pandemic weak Russia as its resource silo?

This is a big new development that Russia has moved quite substantially towards Chinese positions since the beginning of pandemic. I think that it's really a big deal. We see Russian propaganda

machine taking similar position to the Chinese, blaming things on America, standing up for China's position in international organizations. I think that an anti-Western, anti-American front has been built between Russia and China. Whether this is a long-term development – I don't know. Fundamentally, Russians are quite scared of the Chinese.

You mentioned propaganda - do you think that some countries fabricate coronavirus-focused fake news?

I am very cautious about using the term "fake news". I don't think it's helpful. I think that we have information operations and these information operations are usually a part of a wider operations conducted by hostile states - Russia, China and Iran being the three most important. So, I think that it is a mistake to overfocus on the information side. But I do think that this has been the major activity since the outbreak of the pandemic by both Russia and China combining diplomatic tactics in the WHO and other international organizations, humanitarian aid shipments often rather exaggerating their importance, anti-Western propaganda saying that EU, NATO and the US are useless and also the promotion of conspiracy theories and scare stories. But you have to see these things as a whole, not just pick one particular element.

Is coronavirus used to weaken the EU or NATO by Russia or China?

That's clearly happening. We've seen a spectacular Chinese display of influence in Serbia, where president Vucic said that EU was useless, and China is the only friend. This is the latest manifestation of the program by the regime in Beijing to build their influences in the Western Balkans. This is a wake-up call. We've also seen a big Russian and Chinese operations in Italy. There's a lot going on and the pandemic created great opportunity for both Russia and China.

Some experts say that Russia may use this opportunity to lift the EU sanctions...

Russia is clearly taking the opportunity to lobby for relaxation of sanctions. No doubt about that – they're trying to link the sort of emergency international economic help measures, which are a part of the response to the pandemic and say: well, if you're trying to organize international economic assistance measures, then let's drop the sanctions. I don't think that's getting anywhere. People have been prophesizing ever since the 2014 that these EU sanctions would be lifted as a result of Russian pressure and it doesn't seem to happen. Certainly, everyone in Europe should be grateful to Angela Merkel and the German government for holding the line very firmly on this, despite pressure from Hungary, Italy and also pressure from inside Germany.

But the era of Angela Merkel may end by 2021.

It will be very interesting to see what happens in Germany, clearly if you have a different German government. That would shift the central gravity in the EU. It seems quite unlikely, but you can't exclude it. We don't know who is going to be the successor of the Angela Merkel.

And what about the US presidential elections? Do you think that the victory of Democrats may result in another reset in US-Russian relations?

The history of resets is pretty discouraging for anyone who wants to have another one. Even president Trump was not able to put US-Russian relations in the friendly track. I think that if Joe Biden wins, we will go back to the sort of Clintonesque policy, being really tough on Russia. I think that Biden we'll be closer to Clinton than to Obama, Obama made several mistakes on Russia.