The West courts Russia's Putin

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On the eve of the Russian presidential elections, leading representatives of NATO and Western governments have followed one another to Moscow. Since early February, a series of Western politicians have travelled to Russia for discussions, including German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, NATO Secretary-General George Robertson, British Foreign Minister Robin Cook, German Defence Secretary Rudolf Scharping and, finally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Their avowed aim was to improve relations between Russia and NATO, which have been disturbed since the Kosovo war.

This hectic diplomacy can only be interpreted as political support for the expected winner of the election, acting president Vladimir Putin. Each visitor uttered the obligatory phrases about "observing human rights" in Chechnya, where Putin is conducting a brutal and bloody war. But these were empty diplomatic words, in no way meant to impede an improvement in relations with Moscow.

NATO Secretary-General George Robertson, who arrived in the Russian capital in mid-February for negotiations, expressly called the Chechnya war an "internal problem". He was said not to be anxious about it and only wanted to express "criticism about the methods with which Russia solved this internal problem".

In an interview with *Der Spiegel* prior to his trip to Moscow, Robertson rejected any comparison of Russia's actions in Chechnya with those of Serbia in Kosovo: "These are two completely different things. I want to clearly repudiate those who draw this comparison. We can understand why Russia became active in Chechnya. Moscow is anxious about ... the increase in terrorism [and] the possible connections to urban terror groups in Russia."

Responding to the point that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) had likewise committed acts of terror and had been originally classified as a terrorist organisation by the American State Department, Robertson replied, "I cannot remember anything about that."

During his visit, Robertson said that Russia and NATO must "turn over a page in their relations, in order to concentrate on establishing contacts, confidence and cooperation again." One day later, the resumption of relations between Russia and NATO, disrupted since March 1999 because of the NATO attack on Yugoslavia, were celebrated as a fundamental change in relations between Russia and the West.

The visit of German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping to Moscow in early March also served to normalise political and military relations with Russia. Although he raised the German government's criticisms concerning the “overbearing military force” used in Chechnya, he said it would be “a political mistake to break off relations with Russia over Chechnya”.

Scharping said Russia is “absolutely important for European security and must remain a partner. These questions should not be covered over by the undeniably terrible conflict and its equally terrible consequences. Of course, Russia has the right to defend its territorial integrity, and fight against terrorism.” He said any criticism of the West's attitude towards Russia was just “arrogant know-all” talk.

He agreed a resumption of military collaboration with Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeiev. The “extensive bilateral programme for the year 2000” foresees political discussions, the training of Russian officers in Germany and joint military manoeuvres.

The Americans have also indicated their support for Putin. The State Department says, “Russia has an educated and pragmatic leader, who is sensible enough to keep the country out of any confrontation.” Shortly before Robertson's visit, President Bill Clinton said, “Putin is a man we can do business with.”

Putin understood the rapprochement this signalled and decided to meet Robertson to restore relations with the former “aggressor”. The *Russiajournal* summed up this cynical attitude in its February 28 edition, “Bill Clinton found nicer words for Putin than for his own vice-president in the US presidential elections.”

The contrast with NATO's behaviour towards Belgrade a year ago could hardly be more glaring. At that time, NATO cited human rights violations by the Milosevic regime in Kosovo as the reason for the bombardment of Yugoslavia. Resting on meagre evidence, including grossly exaggerated estimates of the number of victims, the Western governments accused Yugoslavia of committing "genocide" against the Albanian population.

The actions of the Russian government in Chechnya are on quite a different scale from the atrocities attributed to the Milosevic regime. Chechnya has been virtually reduced to rubble. Normal life will be impossible for years to come. In the capital of Grozny, where 30,000 to 50,000 people defied the Russian bombing by hiding in their cellars for five months, hardly a house is still standing. Some 250,000 people are still on the run.

In February, accounts multiplied of mass executions of civilians and mistreatment by marauding Russian soldiers. The Russian government largely barred news reports from the theatre of war; critical journalists were persecuted by the secret service, which obstructed their activities.

Such questions occupied at most a perfunctory place on the agenda of the negotiations with Putin. The thin veneer of morality was thrown off and the real interests emerged. There are two

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things, above all, which the Western governments seek from Putin.

First, they look to him to guarantee their economic interests in Russia. Resting on the army and secret service, Putin promises a tough regime, a "dictatorship of law", as his central election slogan reads, whereby the stress is on "dictatorship".

Initially, capitalist market conditions were introduced into Russia under a somewhat threadbare banner of "democracy". Now the Western governments see their interests better served if the regime does not adhere too closely to democratic rights and liberties. The containment of corruption and criminality, on the one hand, and the threat of unrest from an impoverished population, on the other, call, in their opinion, for strong measures.

Putin, for his part, has made clear that he will not use his close relations with the old Soviet security apparatus to restrain the process of "reforms"—the spread of capitalist economic relations—but rather to accelerate the process. He has the full support of the most powerful Russian branches of economic activity, the so-called oligarchs.

The Western politicians who recently travelled to Moscow all stressed the economic aspect of their visit. In the race for economic influence, no country wants to draw the short straw. Parallel with the politicians' talks, meetings of economic delegations took place.

The European Union ambassador in Moscow, Ottokar Hahn, explained: "The European Union's relations with Russia have cooled substantially due to Chechnya. Everything has frozen, and I do not see yet how relations can be unblocked. Around Putin, however, interesting people are gathering, who might be possible prime ministers or business experts."

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented about a recent meeting of German economic representatives in Moscow as follows: "It was a special evening for the representatives of the German economy, and it was probably the same for Vladimir Putin. It has not been a frequent occurrence for the acting Russian president to receive a Western delegation without immediately feeling the anger of the foreign country regarding the Chechnya war. This time, however, it concerned other things in Moscow. It concerned economic relations, future investments and confidence."

Germany already has more extensive economic interests in Russia than every other country. Over 1,700 German companies are active in Russia and many more want to invest their cash there. However, the necessary conditions must first be created.

Klaus Mangold, the new chairman of the Eastern Affairs committee of the German Trade and Industry organisation, explained during the above-mentioned meeting that Germany is placing its hopes in Putin: "He knows how the problems of the country should be dealt with, and is endeavouring to do so." Germany wants to help the Kremlin with further credits, which the US and the IMF are less ready to dispense. Discussions were held concerning a possible role for Germany with a specially founded Russian bank for reconstruction and development.

The assertions of British Foreign Minister Robin Cook, who briefly visited Moscow after Robertson, were no less cynical. It is important “that we express our concerns directly and consistently,” Cook said, but equally important is "that we can maintain a relationship with Russia, which enables us to cooperate constructively in areas of mutual need". In other words: concerns over "human rights" must not stand in the way of Britain's economic and strategic interests. Thus Cook explained he had spoken with Putin about larger British investments in Russia.

Tony Blair expressed himself even more bluntly. After his short visit to St. Petersburg on March 11, he said, "Putin is a reformer, whom the West can do business with." Putin returned the gesture and assured Blair he would create the conditions for up to $2 billion in British investment to flow annually into the country. After the discussions, Blair adopted Putin's rhetoric, explaining that he understood his "fight against terrorism in Chechnya".

The second reason for courting Putin is foreign policy. With the Kosovo war, the aggressive penetration of the Western powers into the Caucasus and Caspian, and US demands that Russia agree to amend the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to allow an American missile defence system, Russia has been systematically humiliated and pushed on the defensive. The consequence has been a growth of Russian nationalism and increasingly wild sabre rattling, which threatens to destabilise Europe and other regions. Once Russia has been shown its place in the new world order, NATO is quite willing to "normalise" relations once again.

Moreover, the unfortunate experience in Kosovo showed that NATO is not able to bring such centres of conflict under control without the support of regional powers. The mission in the relatively small province threatens to tie up a large part of Europe's military capacity for years.

Therefore NATO is quite ready to grant Russia the role of a regional power in the south of the former Soviet Union, as long as Western access to Caspian oil is not obstructed, something which is considered beyond Russia's capabilities, even should she so desire.

Under conditions of increasingly sharp conflicts for control of the global economy, the present approaches to Russia cannot be anything more than a pause for breath. Tensions between Europe and the US will inevitably sharpen.

The European Union ambassador in Moscow, Dr. Ottakar Hahn, recently gave vent to the thinking that prevails within broad sections of the ruling elite in Europe: “The energy in the Caspian must get to the West by way of the Caucasus. A stability pact with international participation, along the lines of the Kosovo model, would be necessary to check America's aggressive policies towards Russia and also towards the EU. The [US-backed] planned oil pipeline to Ceyhan [in Turkey] is an insult to Russia.”

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