DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 28.03.2022 | Alexey Yusupov

Condemn the Kremlin's actions, not the people

The West's tough line against Russia is justified. But European societies must prevent the 'othering' of Russian people and Russian speakers

The list of European companies acting to isolate Russia seems longer than those that have not (yet) done so. The impact on Russia is far-reaching. For soon-to-be former suppliers, employees, and consumers, it concerns hundreds of thousands of jobs and radical change in the Russian economy. We are witnessing a self-inflicted violent disintegration, the virtual deglobalisation of the Russian economy. It is very doubtful that the latter will survive.

It's (sanctions) about exclusion and condemnation, the symbolic banning of Russia from Europe. Continental ostracism.

Especially noteworthy is that these Western reactions are de facto private: independent corporate decisions that reflect the views of boards of directors, shareholders, investors, and employees. Of course, there are also good arguments for ending economic involvement in Russia: payment difficulties, loss of purchasing power, collapse of supply chains, and reputational damage at home. But it's about more than that. It's not news that private actors can ride out or circumvent sanctions. But they are not just supporting the sanctions approach, they are also joining forces with their governments and multiplying the effects many times over.

Cutting off Russia from the European continent

This is no longer about trading systems and instruments of international law. It is a new dimension of Europeans sanctions. They are not purely 'political' or 'economic' sanctions: They are socially punitive measures.

They express the deep division of this continent. It's about exclusion and condemnation, the symbolic banning of Russia from Europe. Continental ostracism.

Isolating everything marked 'Russian' goes far beyond a mechanistic action-sanction logic. We are witnessing the almost complete exclusion of Russian athletes from international events. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is interrupting programmes with universities in Russia, the Frankfurt Book Fair is ending its cooperation with Russian publishers and European festivals are setting deadlines for Russian musicians to distance themselves from the Russian government's actions.

No misunderstandings here, please: Of course, now is the time to consider which international connections benefit the government in Moscow or even prolong the war. Continuing certain scientific programmes that would be technologically dicey. Some Russian literature has propagandistic overtones. There are prominent artists from Russia who are very close to the system and represent official Russian positions. In these cases it's clear why there has got to be a break.

The West's decisive support for the Ukrainians is justified and important. We needn't discuss its bitter necessity. But precisely because of its vehemence and momentum, there's no time to catch one's breath. And that means we risk overlooking the less glaring consequences of confronting Russia.

How Russophobia benefits the Kremlin narrative

A high-profile German journalist, who became famous for his enlightening, anti-racist work, baldly maintains that people from Russia living in Germany, including 'Russian Germans' (the descendants of Germans invited to settle in imperial Russia hundreds of years ago) should be asked how they feel about Putin. In a conflict like this no one can or should be neutral. The director of a private hospital in Munich no longer wants to treat Russian patients as a matter of principle, citing Russia's invasion as a violation of international law. An Italian university cancelled a lecture on Dostoevsky to 'avoid tensions'. A restaurant in Southern Germany has announced that it will no longer serve Russian citizens.

According to this credo, there's no place for

On 11 March, unknown persons firebombed the German-Russian 'International Lomonosov School' in Berlin. In Helsinki, a Russian travel

Russians, their language and their culture outside the Russian Federation.

agency whose logo includes a silhouette of the Kremlin was graffitied. German grocery chains are removing 'Russian' food from the shelves (despite their folkloric packaging , most of the 'Russian' pickles, canned sprats, and frozen dumplings actually come from EU countries). Berlin pubs and cafés with Russian names or décor are flooded with online reviews implying, 'Your food tastes like blood.'

All isolated cases? I think so. It is not a widespread phenomenon. But they do have an influence. Social media's funhouse mirror can help isolated cases become trends. Free Russian-language media and online communities are closely following these events and report with concern that there has been a real shift in sentiment. Russian governmental media are exploiting these incidents and projecting them as rampant Russophobia. According to this credo, there's no place for Russians, their language, and their culture outside the Russian Federation.

The Russian language as a marker of identity

A bleak spirit pervades conversations with Russian-speaking friends and acquaintances. A claustrophobic feeling. Often even a feeling of shame, the need to show that they are 'good Russians' and to clearly distance themselves before the issue is raised. As if every Russian person was assumed to be complicit. As for who is Russian, Margarita Simonjan, editor-in-chief of *Russia Today*, wants to define it politically: 'If you're ashamed of being Russian, don't worry: You're not.' So could the double-check really be, 'If you're *not* ashamed of being Russian, you're Putin's stooge?'

The Russian language as the main identifier of being Russian has been caught in the crossfire. Appropriated by the Russian government. Grounds for general suspicion from overzealous democracy advocates in the West. A large proportion of ethnic German immigrants to Germany speak Russian as their mother tongue but have never been to Russia or Ukraine. Many people from Ukraine speak Russian in everyday life. The Russian language is spoken by most Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. You can come from Russia and have a different mother tongue, for example, because you belong to an ethnic minority. You can be ethnic Russian and come from another country like Estonia, Uzbekistan, or Azerbaijan. You can neither speak Russian nor come from Russia but enjoy shopping in Russian supermarkets.

In 20th century Soviet history, it was the 'little people' in particular who were repeatedly crushed by wars and periods of repression.

Especially for the elderly – the last fully Soviet-socialised generation living in Germany – this war is hard to put into thoughts and words. Quite a few have connections to both Russia and Ukraine. Many are now getting involved, taking in refugees, sending aid packages. For those who grew up in the Soviet Union, the news triggers very different, forgotten, associations, and trauma responses. In 20th century Soviet history, it was the 'little people' in particular who were repeatedly crushed by wars and periods of repression. I have spoken with old men who expect to be deported by the German authorities as a consequence of the supposedly 'anti-Russian' sentiment in Germany.

The strength of democracies

There are also glimmers of hope. In recent days, I have been reading about revised decisions, public apologies, retracted accusations, admonishing words from the government to not forget what makes the co-existence of different people in Germany possible: Tolerance. Patience. Attention to details. All that is important. But the media world of the 2lst century is different: Fear sells better than moderation. A correction is shared less often than the original post. Rectifications have never the same reach as what is being corrected.

Enduring ambiguities and acknowledging complexities is something that free societies do better than their authoritarian counterparts. That's what makes them special. An open society can act cohesively without needing an imagined 'enemy within'. And yes, it does have enemies. But they are not identifiable by their ethnicity, nationality, or language. The 'othering' of Russian speakers in Germany and Europe would be the first real blow in the fight for an open society in Ukraine, Russia, and Europe.

Russian is not a language of despotism. It can be, was and will be a language of freedom and humanity.

Russian is not a language of despotism. It can be, was and will be a language of freedom and humanity. Not always in the sense of dissidence – that only happens in opposition to state repression – but in everyday life, as an unfettered and outspoken language in the family of European languages. The Russian language does not belong to the Russian

Federation any more than German belongs to the Federal Republic or English to the United Kingdom. It belongs to the people who speak it. And they are also at home in Germany and Europe.



Alexey Yusupov

Alexey Yusupov heads the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Russia programme. He was previously the FES' office director in Myanmar, Afghanistan and Kazakhstan. He also supports political actors as an adviser and moderator.