

Meeting on Russia's Foreign Policy

On 3 June 2008 the Netherlands Atlantic Association organised a seminar on 'Russia's foreign and security policies under Medvedev'. The speaker on this occasion was Dr **Nadia Arbatova**, head of European Political Studies at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow. On behalf of the Atlantic Association, Piet Bukman chaired this meeting, which was attended by some 90 guests.

Ms Arbatova started with the recent presidential elections in Russia. These were unique because for the first time in Russian history, a young, popular politician decided to step down from power, although it is true that Putin remains influential as a Prime Minister. Even though the West criticised these elections as being neither free nor fair, they nevertheless reflected the opinion of almost all Russians. Putin was the strategic architect of these elections, and without his support Medvedev would never have been elected. He acknowledges that the current political and economical course of the country is a dead end. Since this is for a great part the result of his own policies, he can not just renounce them. But by 'appointing' a reformist president, and by becoming the new Prime Minister, Putin can set a new course. He already announced that economic modernisation, fighting corruption and reducing bureaucracy are his new priorities.



The second point of Ms Arbatova's speech was the Russia's foreign policy. Here, there are distinct differences between Putin and Medvedev. Putin was focused on Russia's equal place in the 'concert of European nations', while Medvedev is focused on the 'Europeanisation' of Russia, which roughly means the modernisation of Russia's economy and state institutions. That is, in the long term. Until he has built his own power base, independent of the current 'nomenklatura'-like elites,

who each have their own power and their own interests, Medvedev must follow Putin's policies.

According to Ms. Arbatova, Medvedev's future foreign policy will be influenced by three factors. The first is the legacy of the nineties. Former president Yeltsin followed the West, made considerable concessions, but gained virtually nothing. Like Putin, Medvedev will claim an independent position in international affairs, according to Russia's own interest. The second factor is the domestic situation of Russia. It is a 'petrol-state', in which the government has a monopoly on the one industry it depends most on: the oil and gas industry.

The reactions of the West form the third factor. American unilateralism, the case of Kosovo, the question of NATO enlargement: these are all causes of strained relations between Russia and the EU. Arbatova explained that for Russia, both the EU and NATO sometimes seem to be hijacked by former Soviet-states like Poland or Lithuania, in order to follow a

more anti-Russian policy. But the presidency of Medvedev is an opportunity to change this animosity towards Russia.

Q&A

After her speech, Ms. Arbatova gave the members of the audience the opportunity to ask some questions.

An important question was whether 'Europeanisation' meant that the so called 'Copenhagen criteria' would be implemented. Arbatova answered that these criteria are for countries who want to join the EU, but Russia needs another kind of Europeanisation, adapted to its own national situation. If Russia for example had had absolutely free elections last March, a radical nationalist could now have been president. Such big changes must come slowly and controlled, and under the presidency of Medvedev some little steps can be made. The Council of Europe can play a role in this process, according to Arbatova, since it is the only western organisation which has accepted Russia. One participant asked whether the position of Putin was reinforced by him being the leader of the ruling party. Arbatova thinks that the ruling party needs Putin more than he needs them, since it is Putin who is popular, not the party.



On the subject of foreign policy, questions were asked about Russia's relations with Iran, with NATO and with the EU. Regarding to Iran, she answered that Russian relations with such countries are purely based on economic interests. Relations with the EU could have been much better, but in the past, several opportunities have been missed. However, now the EU has finally approved to start new negotiations with Russia, a huge step can be made in promoting better mutual understanding and cooperation. Furthermore, according to Arbatova, intensive relations with the EU are complicated, because the EU shares its sphere of security with NATO, so these relations become triangular. And many Russians regard NATO's eastward expansion as 'aggressive'.

So, Arbatova concluded, the Europeanisation of Russia's economic and political model shall take some time, and has to be done by the Russians themselves. But if the EU really wants Russia to play a role in Europe, they can help Russia to "find her proper place."

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