

Putin poses us a question

This week's visit to Moscow by Alexis Tsipras, Greece's newly-elected Prime Minister, did not go down well in most other European Capital cities. Admittedly, very little of substance was agreed. Russia would not exempt Greece from its trade war with the rest of the EU, so Greek farmers remain shut out from an important export market for their produce. No financial loans to Greece's stricken economy were agreed either. This is hardly surprising as Russia has been equally affected by capital flight, not to mention to fall in the price of one of its most important exports – oil. It is hardly awash with spare cash to loan to anyone else.

So the fruits of the meeting between Tsipras and Putin amounted little more than a commitment to work more closely together, including on a number of energy projects. Nothing to get hot under the collar about?

Actually, the very fact that Tsipras even went to Moscow when Putin is being demonised as the big baddie by the West meant that he received a lot of flak from a number of European politicians. For instance, Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament, warned Athens in advance of the visit not to put at risk the common EU position regarding sanctions towards Russia. However, Tsipras spoke of a new “spring” in the relations between the two countries and stressed that Greece was a “sovereign state” with the right to pursue a “multifaceted foreign policy”, not just what other EU states would like. He also reiterated his opposition to sanctions against Russia. Of course, this may all be bluff, with Greece using the Russian connection to frighten the EU and the IMF into being more flexible.

On the other hand, however, there could be more to this visit than mere posturing by Tsipras. In recent years, Putin has been keen to probe and test the idea of a “common EU

position." Greece looks a likely weak link for some obvious reasons. There is a deep historical bond between the peoples of Russia and those of both Greece and Cyprus, built on their shared Eastern Orthodox faith. In spite of Tsipras' atheism, he was happy to accept a gift of an ancient Greek icon from Putin, an icon stolen from Greece by a German soldier in the Second World War. Russia has used the religious connections to help establish a naval base in Cyprus, just a short distance from the British base. However, Russia's tactics go deeper than building ties with co-religionists within the EU. A number of reports in the media claim that the country's banks have apparently provided financial support for a real mix of EU-critical parties in several member states, including the *Front National* in France and possibly the far-right *Jobbik* in Hungary. Russian media happily offer a platform for EU-critical groups, including the withdrawalist movement within the UK. It is very clear that Russia doesn't like the EU and therefore supports anyone from within the member states with euro-critical leanings.

This poses a question for those of us seeking to withdraw the UK from the clutches of the EU. The old adage that "your enemy's enemy is your friend" needs considerable qualification. Let's face it, Russia under Putin is a long way from the small-government, free-speech accountable democracy which we desire to see the UK become once again. While it is economically a pretty minor player and is not driven by an ideology that sought to conquer the world like the old Soviet Union, it has flexed its military muscle in Ukraine and is causing great concern in the Baltic states that it may also seek to take over some of their territory under the pretext of protecting the ethnic Russians. Do withdrawalists really want to cosy up to Russia under its present leader?

EU foreign policy, ineffective as it is, has been built around the premise that Putin is a dangerous man and a threat to peace. The counter argument, as far as Ukraine is concerned,

is that the EU, and Germany in particular, has provoked Russia by supporting the removal of the pro-Russian Ukrainian premier Viktor Yanukovich last year. Faced with two thoroughly unpleasant opposing forces, it is all too easy for the UK withdrawalist movement to say “a plague on both your houses” and keep silent over this subject. However, the drumming-up of support for the pro-Western side in Ukraine will be used, if it has not been used already, as a reason why we must stay within the EU. We must, in other words, show solidarity with those the EU likes to characterise as “the good guys” and if we become independent we will be out on a limb with no influence anywhere – the sort of argument that Tony Blair used in his recent speech.

The counter argument is that what goes on in the Ukraine, or even in Estonia, is of little strategic importance to the UK. We rightly are far more interested in talking about trade links with the Commonwealth or China than being sucked in to a conflict between two parties neither of whom we feel much sympathy for. We don't like Putin, but we don't feel any enthusiasm for EU meddling in the former Soviet bloc either.

Unfortunately, this isn't good enough. To counter Europhile arguments, the withdrawalist movement needs to articulate the sort of Europe it wants to see when we leave. What do we think of the prospect of closer links between Russia and the likes of Greece and Cyprus? Would an independent UK really be happy to see the EU fall apart? And if so, what should arise in its place? This last question in particular needs careful consideration. Contrary to what our opponents might think, we do not want to pull up any sort of drawbridge, but more to the point, we aren't able to do so anyway. The world has become a lot smaller in the age of jet aircraft and the internet. What happens across the channel, and not necessarily only a few miles across the Channel, does affect us one way or other.

We can argue for giving a boost to NATO – one of the most successful organisations to emerge from the deliberations

following the Second World War. We could also seek to reinvigorate EFTA as a trade-only alternative to the EU and one that therefore will not go sticking its nose into the affairs of other sovereign states, but this is only a start. A well-articulated vision for Europe and what our role may be in shaping it from outside the EU will be as essential as a sound economic argument if we are to win the argument for withdrawal.

Photo by theglobalpanorama 