



Thierry de Montbrial: Putin may not finish his mandate

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Thierry de Montbrial.jpg

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Vladimir Putin's first decade in power was a positive one, but the series of mistakes he made recently augur for a difficult mandate, said Thierry de Montbrial, founder and Director General of the French Institute for International relations IFRI, in an exclusive interview with EurActiv. Putin will be inaugurated as President on 7 May.

Thierry de Montbrial has a long experience of Russia and has had several meetings with Vladimir Putin. He recently published his book "Journal de Russie 1977-2011". He will present his book in Brussels on 2 May at Librairie Filigranes, Av. Des Arts 39-40

He was speaking to EurActiv Senior Editor Georgi Gotev.

Your book "Journal de Russie 1977-2011" is both a diary of your experience with Russia and an analysis about where is Russia going. But maybe you would like to explain yourself...

In English the title of this book would be "Russian Diaries". My very first visit to the Soviet Union was in 1977, it was my first physical and human discovery of Russia. And the last one which is taken into account in the book was in September 2011. I am not myself an ideologue. I wanted to perceive the Soviet Union first and then Russia with my own eyes, my own feelings, with being too 'invaded' so to speak by ideology...

And stereotypes about Russia...

And stereotypes, absolutely correct. I have always been personally attracted to that part of the world as by the way many French persons are. Indeed it has to do with history, with also certain books which influenced me when I read them when I was very young at school.

I'm attracted to Russian culture and people. Very early I developed positive feelings vis-à-vis this country which go far beyond politics. For me politics is one thing but the reality of the country is much more important than politics.

Over the years I had many trips, and many encounters. Because as you can see I have met many people, some of them very well-known, such as the big leaders Gorbachev, Putin and many others. But many of my interlocutors were also much more common people, sometimes very young people with whom I had a lot of discussions, which I try to report in these diaries.

I have also made a number of friends. So it's a very personal account of a French observer and analyst trying to understand Russia better.

I don't know if it was calculated or not, but your book appears just before the inauguration of Vladimir Putin for another presidential mandate, on 7 May. What is your perception of Putin?

The date of publishing was the choice of the publisher who thought that there would be more attention and that is why we rushed to have the book published I think the first two or three weeks after the [4 March] elections.

As for my perception of Vladimir Putin, well, first, I think that it was very clear to me and it's very clear in reading the book, that the nineties were horrible years for the Russian citizens.

I was very much struck during those years. At the time people, including very educated and also some experts, started to believe that the Russian Federation itself could fall apart and that this disintegration process could go as far as going back to the Grand Duchy of Moscow.

These things were seriously discussed in the nineties. It was very clear to me in those years that the Russians were looking for a strongman. I referred specifically to General Lebed [General Alexander Lebed was a charismatic politician who was placed third in the 1996 presidential election. He died in 2002 in a helicopter crash] who has been guest here at IFRI, who took himself for [a Russian-style] De Gaulle.

There was clearly a strong demand in Russia for a strongman succeeding Yeltsin [Boris Yeltsin served as President from 1991 to 1999]. That strongman happened to be Vladimir Putin. Of course nobody knew Putin, even when he started his top career as a prime minister, it was taken by most observers as a joke – they thought that he would survive as prime minister for three or four months...

My first point about Putin is that his fate was to be '*the*' strongman that the Russians were waiting for. Also, he was very much helped by events in the sense that the price of oil increased over time and helped him of course to re-establish order and to put the economic development in the right direction.

But on the whole I think that the Putin Decade was quite a positive one. That's point number one.

Point number two, I met him personally several times. The first time was in the year 2000, just after his first election as president. I hosted a dinner-debate for him in Paris and on this very first occasion I found him extremely intelligent and sharp-minded. I think in French terms he could be certainly considered to be as '*the best technocrat in France*'.

His mind works extremely well. He knows problems and issues in detail. He is certainly a very hard worker. Later on as one of the first participants to the so-called '*Valdai Club*' to which I participated regularly for a number of years, I saw him in action on the occasion of these meetings, sometimes you know discussions with him in a small group for three or four hours, and I was very much impressed by his performance.

On the whole I am convinced that history will judge more positively than negatively this first decade.

Knowing Russia a little bit myself, it is relatively easy to agree with what you said but the big question is about the future. Is Putin the right person to lead?

You said that it is very easy to agree with what I say, but it is certainly not the dominant view in France for instance.

For the future, my vision is relatively simple. I think Putin himself did not expect the kind of social consequences of his own success. All the demonstrations which took place at the end of last year were by people who during his own years reached a certain social status and certain economic level.

These people now want to have freedom and live in a more democratic way, in the Western sense. And I think this is something that he certainly had not anticipated.

Very clearly looking at the way he reacted to those events and weeks, he did not understand them fully. He was a bit shocked I think.

One of his merits he did not even try, probably he thought about doing it, to crush those forces. But the fact is that paradoxically thanks to his own successes over the last decade, he has released social forces that now are here to stay.

He suddenly made a big mistake. The big mistake was [his deal with Medvedev](#), to say "OK now we switch." I think this in fact discredited him and Medvedev, who is in fact probably much more discredited than he is.

To go to the conclusion, first I think that when he decided to modify the constitution, to have a six-year term renewable once, he probably had in mind to be president for the next years up to 2024.

My first conclusion is that it is extremely unlikely that he will do a second term and it might even be quite difficult for him to end the first term. Because the next six years will I think see a continuation of huge social changes in Russia. Especially if Russia is developing well economically.

That will be continuation of the same paradox. In other words, my perception is that the great paradoxical consequence of the successes achieved in the previous decade is that Russia is now entering a new phase which is totally unprecedented in Russian history.

That is a gradual move towards more democracy in the Western sense. That would be gradual of course. I think from a historical viewpoint it would be recognised that to a large extent it is thanks to Putin.

But paradoxically again the consequence will be that Putin will certainly not stay as president for twelve years. Maybe six, maybe less.

Europe is in crisis, and geopolitically it is 'downgraded' compared to other players. Should Europe seek to become closer to Russia precisely to regain its geopolitical status? Or do you think that this is impossible for the decades to come?

Well I think there are two different issues here. One is that, when you say Europe of course you mean the European Union, we still have a lot of work to do to put our house in order. There is absolute necessity to restore financial equilibria, fiscal consolidation, all these things, which have nothing to do with the relationship with Russia.

That is a first point and of course with the likely election of François Hollande in France in a few days now, there will be a new test. But I'm absolutely convinced that the future of the European Union depends first and finally on the capacity to put its house in order economically and financially. That's point number one.

Second, I fully agree that in broad geopolitical terms it's absolutely essential to build up a more consistent and more coherent relationship between the European Union and Russia.

Of course we can continue to have bilateral political relations because the European Union is not going to be a unified political unit soon. So we will continue to have various foreign policies and bilateral links.

But I think it is absolutely essential to have a more coherent, structured, well-framed policy between the EU and Russia. And this of course is directed against nobody. The common geopolitical and economic interests are absolutely obvious not only in the field of energy, say, it's a geopolitical reality.

And these developments can be accelerated if Russia continues to develop gradually in its own way in a democratic direction.