

"Russia doesn't care about Trump's ultimatums"

Interview with Piotr O. Tolstoy,* conducted by Guy Mettan,** Geneva



Guy Mettan
(Picture ma)

No, he doesn't have horns, a forked tail or a knife between his teeth. Nor does he eat Ukrainian toddlers for breakfast. The vice-president of the Russian Duma, *Piotr Tolstoy*, seems to be a perfectly normal man. Although not entirely. On closer inspection, the great-great-grandson of

Leo Tolstoy has a sense of irony and an openness that are well above average for the general population.

He was visiting Geneva with a high-ranking parliamentary delegation led by the President of the Russian Federation Council, *Valentina Matvi-enko*, to attend the World Summit of Speakers of Parliament. After an eight-hour journey with numerous detours. As Russian state aircraft are banned from flying in the European Union, the route had to be diverted via Turkey, Tunisia and Algeria before, thanks to a small gesture by the French, it was finally possible to fly over Corsica and Provence and land in Geneva.

So we meet on the terrace of the Treille, at the foot of the *Tour Baudet*, the seat of the Geneva government, not far from the statue of *Charles Pictet de Rochemont*, the diplomat who, thanks to his good relations with Tsar *Alexander I*, negotiated Geneva's affiliation to the Swiss Confederation and contributed to the recognition of

Switzerland's neutrality in the Treaty of Vienna in 1815. Geneva holds no secrets for Piotr Tolstoy, who knows the city well, having lived there for two years in 1992/93 and had his wedding blessed in the Russian cathedral by Archbishop Antony, who is highly revered in the Orthodox Church. The menu featured regional dishes, foie gras and whitefish from Lake Geneva, accompanied by local Sauvignon Blanc, and a lively discussion about the troubling state of the world.

Guy Mettan: Since we are in Geneva, let's start with Switzerland. Since 2014, and especially since 2022, the Swiss military leadership and secret services have been relentlessly fuelling fears about Russia. So, my first question is: should we be afraid of you?

Piotr Tolstoy: I can reassure you that Russia has no intention of invading Switzerland. In the past, the Swiss sent their children to Russia. They worked there in hotels, among other places. In Russian, we call hotel porters "schwitsars", "Swiss". So, we have always had good relations with Switzerland, and that would still be the case today if it weren't for the unrest caused by the Ukraine conflict and the media war against us.

However, it is quite difficult to answer this question because public opinion is strongly influenced, and anti-Russian stereotypes are difficult to eradicate. But when I'm in Geneva, people sometimes recognise me on the street and thank me for telling the truth. For me, relations between people are more important than the opinions of politicians.

Nevertheless, Switzerland is considered an unfriendly country in Russia. What should it do to become a friendly country again?

It's not for me to say what Switzerland should do. That's for the Swiss people to decide. I can only say that the situation is as it is because Switzerland has implemented the unilateral and illegal sanctions imposed by the European Union. There was a time when Switzerland believed it could provide good services and mediate while implementing these sanctions. However, that is impossible. These two courses of action are con-

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tradictory. Restoring good relations will take years, perhaps even decades.

Isn't there something Switzerland could do to restore its neutrality and credibility as a mediator? Switzerland is not a member of the European Union. It could send a first sign of goodwill by lifting the sanctions against Russia. Then it would be easier to travel between Moscow and Geneva ...

But that will be difficult, as Europe and Switzerland have sided with Ukraine. That is their decision. But in my opinion, it was a mistake. A lack of analysis and understanding of what has happened in Russia and around Russia over the last thirty years with NATO expansion and changes within the EU. Today, Europe has taken sides with what will remain of Ukraine. So, we must wait until today's politicians have disappeared into the dustbin of history and a new generation comes to power in Europe to restore contacts with Russia.

The problem with Europeans is that they continue to believe they are the centre of the world. But if you look at a map of the world, you see that Europe is just a small offshoot at the end of the Eurasian continent and that the largest country in Europe is Russia, which is three times the size of the European Union. So, you should take another close look at the map and think carefully before calling for aggression, sanctions, boycotts, flight bans and breaking off all relations. In my opinion, these decisions were made on the spur of the moment, and now no one can back down. The Europeans have trapped themselves.

And this seems to be continuing with the US. The European Union has just bowed to Trump and accepted his 15% import tariffs.

It has no choice. The price is high, and it must be paid. In fact, Europe could be a world power with full sovereignty if it were allied with Russia, which has the natural resources. But Europe has chosen a different path and has become a satellite of the United States. Trump has no reason to change his attitude towards Ursula. He knows very well who is boss and who calls the shots.

So, you don't see much of a future for the EU in its current form?

The EU today reminds me of the Soviet Union before its collapse in 1991. The member states



Piotr O. Tolstoy in front of the statue of Charles Pictet de Rochemont (1755–1824), Swiss diplomat, politician, and officer. Pictet de Rochemont participated in the negotiations for the Second Peace of Paris, which began in August 1815, as a representative of the Swiss Diet. On November 20, 1815, he obtained recognition of Switzerland's permanent neutrality and the inviolability of its territory from the great powers of France, Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria. (Picture gm)

think first of themselves and represent their own interests. Look at Hungary, Slovakia, Spain, Italy or even Germany. The Brussels bureaucracy is finding it increasingly difficult to coordinate these interests, especially in the event of a serious political or economic crisis. It is not very stable.

The state of the European media is also reminiscent of the Soviet Union. Russian journalists send their regards! There is no longer any freedom of the press in Europe. Russian journalists can hardly work in European countries anymore. They are banned everywhere, while Western journalists can work very well in Moscow, as you can see and hear every day.¹

It is paradoxical, but one increasingly gets the impression that European unity is only held together thanks to Russia: It is the constantly fuelled fear of Russia that now seems to be securing Europe's cohesion. If you repeat from

morning to night that the Russians eat Ukrainian children and will invade Poland and roll across Europe in their tanks, you will eventually believe it. This is the result of propaganda and Russophobia in the Western media.

Let's move on to Ukraine. Russia has set its conditions for a return to peace: the cession of territories, neutralisation, demilitarisation and denazification. At the beginning of his term in office, Trump pretended to negotiate with Russia, and now he is issuing ultimatums. The next one is due to expire soon. What do they think about that in Moscow?

If Trump made new decisions every ten days, world diplomacy would make good progress! But to answer your question: we don't care! We don't care about *Trump's* ultimatums. Let's be honest: what does Russia sell to the US? Uranium. If they impose a 500% tax on our uranium, the US will either have to pay or do without uranium. Countries that buy Russian oil and gas are threatened with a 200% tax. But how will the US deal with China, with whom it is currently concluding a tariff agreement? Will it terminate it? And if it attacks other countries, it risks an economic crisis not only in Europe but worldwide, including in the US itself, because it is impossible to do without Russian oil overnight.

So, all this is just theatre, empty words, gestures, because in practice it will not be possible to boycott Russian oil and gas.

So, you are confident?

You must understand that Russia will never give in to ultimatums, whether they come from Trump, *Ursula von der Leyen* or anyone else. Even if they imposed a 500% tax on the purchase of our oil. That has not been our custom for centuries. We have never accepted ultimatums. And Putin is not someone who can be given ultimatums. I know that. We will face up to the situation, but that will not cause us to change our policy or our position on Ukraine.

There is indeed a major problem of trust in international relations. We saw this with the assurances given to Gorbachev in 1991, with the illegal bombing of Yugoslavia and Libya in 1999 and 2011, with the Minsk agreements of 2015, and even with the talks in Istanbul in April 2022. Agreements and promises were broken.

That is the problem with a changing world. International law no longer works. We have seen this in Gaza, Iran, Libya, Iraq and almost everywhere else. The world proclaimed by the West, based on rules, is not our world. We want to live by our own rules, not those imposed on us by others, be it the EU or the United States. Russia will never accept such rules. And all the more so because we have the means to reject them, because we have the atomic bomb, the necessary resources and good relations with the whole world, except for the West. As one of my colleagues has already mentioned, Russia was subjected to a blockade from the October Revolution until the end of the Second World War. We are used to it.

Today, it is rather the Russian army that is coming to the aid of the Ukrainian people. Europe has not yet realised that it has lost this war, that Ukraine is finished and that Russia will win.

Perhaps. But at some point, you will have to rebuild trusting relations with Europe, won't you?

We were taught at school not to trust anyone. As *Tsar Alexander III* said, Russia has only two friends: its army and its navy. Unfortunately, that's the way it is. We have lost the illusions we still had in the 1990s.

But Russia will have to continue to count on its allies, such as India and China.

If India and China decide one day to stop cooperating with us, we will trade with other countries, such as Brazil, Indonesia or South Africa. Or with Korea. We have good relations with many countries. For example, we have good relations with both Koreas.

Let's talk about the Russian economy. Here in the West, it is repeatedly said that the Russian economy, which has proven to be very resilient since 2022, has been in crisis since the beginning of this year. Is that true?

Over the past three years, many companies have gone into mobilisation mode. This is because Russia is waging a war not so much against Ukraine as against the military machine of Europe, the United States and NATO. We have therefore had to triple, even tenfold, our production of weapons and equipment. This has driven growth in recent years. But otherwise, production and consumption levels and the standard of living of Russians in general have remained

stable. We stopped importing European food in 2014. Today, there are 30,000 sanctions against Russian individuals and companies. I myself am the victim of all kinds of sanctions. But if you come to Moscow today, you will see that the life-style has not changed compared to three years ago.

As for the oil sanctions, they are not working. Europe buys Russian gas or oil via India and pays more for it. But that is its own problem. It does not affect us.

Debt remains very low compared to the United States and European countries. However, there is a problem with inflation and labour shortages.

The central bank's reserves remain stable. It continues to follow the recommendations of the *International Monetary Fund* (IMF) and is focusing on inflation. This makes things difficult for the economy. But today we are pushing ahead with other economic projects. We are focusing more on domestic growth than on external growth. At the same time, we are continuing to expand our cooperation with other countries, especially with Asia and the BRICS countries.

In economic terms, Western countries are making a serious mistake if they believe that a decline in the standard of living of Russians will lead to the destabilisation of Putin's power. They are greatly mistaken. The opposite is true in our country. When we are threatened by war or an existential conflict, people mobilise. I know many ordinary people who are collecting money to send aid to the front and help their compatriots who are fighting, instead of sending their children on holiday to Europe. There is a broad popular movement collecting money. They send 200 or 500 roubles to help the fighters. This is a mobilisation of the small people, not of politicians or the big bourgeoisie. That's 80% of the population. I'm not talking about the 20% of people in the big cities who are dissatisfied and grumbling, waiting for the conflict to end.

There seems to be a shortage of labour, while immigrants from Central Asia are being treated with hostility.

Today, people from Central Asia tend to go to Germany to work. But we have many here. We want them to work legally and then return home. We want to avoid what is happening in Europe, where immigrants often settle illegally with their families. Incidentally, the independent states of

Central Asia have accepted this approach. They know that they can no longer live freely in Russia as they did in the days of the USSR and at the same time demand political independence. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, more than a third of the national budget is financed by the diasporas working in Russia. This cannot continue.

And as I mentioned earlier, Russian entrepreneurs also employ workers from other countries, especially India and Korea. We are open, we do not want to isolate ourselves, but we want this to be a controlled process.

Couldn't the sanctions still have a negative impact on the economy by isolating the country from foreign competition and leading to a decline in competitiveness and innovation, as was the case in the Soviet Union? Many European companies have left Russia, and those that have remained are also struggling.

I don't think so. Those who have stayed have retained their market share. Those who left will not come back because they have lost their place. It is not that we do not want them, but that their market share has been taken over by others. There is no intention to exclude them. We would like to remind you that foreign investors are better protected than Russian investors and that their assets cannot be seized or nationalised. And that still applies, even though Europe stole the 300 billion dollars we had invested in your banks.

In this context, Europeans should know that they will have to give us back everything, the money plus interest.

Really? It will be difficult to enforce repayment.

I am sure they will do it. They will have no other choice, neither politically, legally nor militarily. It's just a pity that the politicians who caused the problem will no longer be around to take responsibility, and that their successors and the European peoples will have to foot the bill. Between American import duties, excessive gas and oil prices, and the repayment of Russian debts plus interest, it really adds up...

We have other partners for innovation, and we buy everything we want in Europe anyway. The system with cryptocurrencies and friendly countries works. If we want to buy something in Switzerland, we can do so without any problems. However, that costs us more, so we prefer to buy the product in China or elsewhere.

And what about corruption? We know that it is widespread in Ukraine, as Zelensky has just learned to his cost when he took action against the anti-corruption authorities. But it also exists in Russia, and that can damage the economy.

That is a legacy of our Byzantine roots! It also exists in Turkey. Catholic and protestant countries are different. But here, it is one of the mechanisms that keeps the economy and life functioning. However, it is true that this is very frowned upon today and many people are caught and sentenced to very harsh penalties, with seven or ten years in prison and the confiscation of their assets. Today, you can no longer give money to a police officer in Russia. And those who try to do so at a higher level put themselves in danger.

Last question: What is happening in the Caucasus? Why these sudden tensions with Azerbaijan?

After the crash of an Azerbaijani plane that was supposed to land in the Russian Caucasus, there

were communication difficulties and misunderstandings. This is also related to tensions surrounding the Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia. But that is not the main issue. The fundamental issue is that there is a Turkification of the Turkic-speaking republics of Central Asia.

The Azerbaijanis, Kazakhs and Uzbeks are not on Russia's side in the war with Ukraine. Some are turning to Erdogan and becoming Islamists, which they never were before. They are forced to manoeuvre between us, the British, the Americans and the Turks. This could change their lives and their country. But Russia will continue its path.

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ In this context, it should be mentioned that on 28 July at 7 a.m., two uniformed Geneva police officers appeared at the hotel where two Russian journalists were staying to report on the parliamentary summit and asked them to show their ID cards as if they were common criminals. As a promotion for international Geneva and as a sign of respect for the host country's obligations towards a permanent member of the Security Council, one could have imagined something better ...