

# Putin's Russia

by Allen C. Lynch



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends an annual televised phone-in with the country's citizens "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin" at Moscow's World Trade Center studio in Moscow on June 30, 2021. (SERGEI SAVOSTYANOV/SPUTNIK/APP/GETTY IMAGES)

On New Year's Eve 2021, Vladimir V. Putin will have completed his 22nd year as Russia's undisputed ruler, giving him a longer tenure than any Kremlin leader in the past century save Joseph Stalin (ruled 1927–53). In that time, Putin has presided over the economic recovery of Russia (1999–2008) from a decade-long depression that started in the Gorbachev period (1985–91); the survival of his state-oriented, fossil-fuels dependent model of political economy after the collapse in world oil prices in 2008 and 2014; won a war in 1999–2000 against the secessionist province of Chechnya that his predecessor Boris N. Yeltsin had lost in 1994–96; enforced a "red line" against further NATO expansion eastward through a successful five-day war against post-Soviet Georgia in August 2008 and the

annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014; and ordered an air- and naval-intervention in Syria in the fall of 2015 that achieved its goal of keeping Damascus's dictator Bashar al-Assad in power at reasonable cost to Russia. Putin has also built a personalist political machine that has

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respected the quadrennial timetable of national parliamentary and presidential elections while ensuring that such elections cannot be the means of removing Putin and his network from power. Such accomplishments, among others, help explain why independent Russian polling agencies have registered popular support for Putin in the range of 60–80% throughout nearly the entirety of his tenure in office.

Under Putin's tenure, Russian-American relations—after a brief alliance to defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001—deteriorated to the point where in 2015–16 Russian internet agents and intelligence operatives intervened in the U.S. Presidential election through a combination of hacking of computer systems and networks, disingenuous Facebook and other social media posts, etc. Putin and his network evidently concluded that Russia had so little to hope for from the bilateral relationship with Washington that the inevitable costs of such interference would be tolerable. In fact, the political fallout in the United States was so great that

Congress passed veto-proof legislation preventing President Trump from lifting economic sanctions against Russia, imposed after Russia's seizure of Crimea, without Congress's prior approval.

U.S., and especially European Union, economic sanctions against Russia, in place since 2014, have reinforced a marked economic stagnation in Russia that was apparent before their imposition. The Russian economy, which grew on average about 7% per year during Putin's first two terms as President (2000–08), recovered to just half that after the rebound from the world recession of 2008–09 and by 2013—before the onset of Western economic sanctions and while the price of Russia's most important export oil was at a historically high average of \$100 per barrel—Russian economic growth was tending toward zero. Once again, while the Russian economy survived the twin shocks of historically low oil prices and economic sanctions, the country struggled to grow much beyond 1–2% per year, even as oil prices recovered from lows of approx. \$30

per barrel in 2014 to over \$80 at time of writing. This suggests that Putin's economic model of a state-dominated natural resource (especially fossil fuels) economy may have reached the limits of its capacity for development.

To the extent that this is true, this economic impasse (not yet a crisis) intersects with a political challenge that bedevils every authoritarian regime: how to arrange for a succession that preserves the leader's legacy without undermining his authority in the interim? From this perspective, a central strength of Putin's political system—the intense personal loyalty toward him of the network of military, paramilitary, intelligence and others—could serve to work against the future political stability of Russia were Putin no longer in the picture: authoritarian government is not necessarily the same thing as well-institutionalized governance. The analogies with the Soviet Union in the late Brezhnev period, when the government continually deferred hard choices until there were no longer any good ones, are highly suggestive.

## The Putin political machine

When Putin was appointed prime minister by then President Yeltsin in August 1999, Russia was in many respects teetering on the verge of becoming a failed state: national political and economic institutions barely functioned and where they did, they were often captured by small networks of well-financed private banking interests exploiting the state for their own purposes. As already noted, the government had lost the war of secession against Chechnya between 1994–96. The Russian state was precariously dependent on foreign creditors, including the strongly U.S.-influenced International Monetary Fund; by the late

1990s, the cost of servicing Russia's external public debt was approaching 80–90% of government revenues. Not surprisingly under these circumstances, in August 1998 the Russian Treasury defaulted on its domestic and foreign debt obligations. Barter exchange had replaced cash payment throughout much of the economy and the government was frequently unable to pay the budgeted salaries of military officers, police, and border troops, not to mention teachers, doctors, and millions of ordinary workers still dependent on the state for employment. Amidst this widespread social and economic dislocation, suicides and divorces skyrocketed, births plummeted, and male life expectancy declined into the high 50s, where it remained throughout the decade. The Russian military-industrial base survived principally due to sales abroad, especially to China, as the Russian government was in no condition to

pay for the weaponry produced in local factories. In foreign policy, NATO had begun to admit former Soviet satellite allies Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic while almost at the same moment (March 1999) NATO launched a three-month air war against Russian historical ally Serbia; Russia protested without effect as NATO bombers (99% of which were U.S.) devastated the Serbian economy. From Moscow's vantage point, there seemed to be no limit to NATO's future expansion and Russia's geopolitical retreat.

A significant, though now waning, source of Putin's popularity in Russia stems from the comparison that most Russians make with life and policy under his rule with the Russia of the late Gorbachev period and 1990s. The establishment of economic and financial stability at home and the assertion of Russian interests abroad in the Putin years are seen as a major improvement

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over the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years. Indirect confirmation may be found in a September 2021 poll conducted by the independent Levada Center that found that a plurality of Russians nostalgically prefers the economic, social, and even political security—real and imagined—of the Soviet system, even in its later, declining years, to alternatives associated with the liberal West. In addition, specific policy decisions taken by Putin as well as his demonstrated capacity for crisis management in key instances have reinforced his hold on Russian opinion. For instance, early in his tenure, Putin imposed a 90% charge on oil exports earned by Russian firms above the price of \$28 per barrel. Enough of those funds were directed into state-managed accounts so that by 2006, Russia had fully paid off its foreign sovereign debt; and in 2008–09, when a truly existential crisis struck the Russian economy in the form of the collapse of global oil prices, Putin could exploit a \$600 billion reserve fund of dollars and euros to act as a financial shock absorber and avoid the collapse that Gorbachev and Yeltsin experienced under comparable circumstances in 1986 and 1998, respectively. To the present day, Russia's public finances and trade balances are remarkably healthy by international standards: that \$600 billion financial reserve has been periodically replenished; Russia's public debt as a percentage of GDP (less than 20%) is a small fraction of that of more developed economies such as the United States (more than 100%), Japan (nearly 250%), and Germany (more than 80%); and the country runs significant foreign trade surpluses year in, year out. Moreover, in 2018, after his overwhelming reelection as president, Putin pushed through parliament a controversial bill reforming the country's social security system, progressively raising the eligibility age for men and women by five years. Though Putin's popularity took a short-term hit (down to about 60% approval), the measure solidified the long-term financing of the Russian public pension system. In sum, while Putin's Russia faces major challenges



*Gas pipes at the Comprehensive Gas Treatment Unit No.3 at the Gazprom PJSC Chayandinskoye oil, gas, and condensate field, a resource base for the Power of Siberia gas pipeline, in the Lensk district of the Sakha Republic, Russia, on Oct. 11, 2021. Amid record daily swings of as much as 40% in European gas prices, Russian President Vladimir Putin made a calculated intervention to cool the market by saying Gazprom can boost supplies to help ease shortages. (ANDREY RUDANOV/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES)*

in modernizing its economy to be less dependent on fossil fuels, his economic team has managed the country's assets with a degree of prudence that reflects the impact of the twin shocks of the financial collapses of the late 1980s and late 1990s. By all evidence, a significant majority of Russians appreciate the relative economic and social stability that this has made possible.

Putin and his network have also built a political machine that, while authoritarian in its essence, has succeeded in attracting impressive levels of popular support over two decades. The cultivation of public opinion takes various forms.

First, Putin's upper leadership team—drawn disproportionately from military and paramilitary circles (Putin himself was a career intelligence officer in the KGB)—have exploited a favorable vacuum in Russian national politics in order to present Putin and those loyal to him (such as in the United Russia party) as the only plausible choice before the country. Russia's liberals were discredited by the disaster that befell the country in the “liberalizing” 1990s and have remained uncompetitive for national office since. In addi-

tion, the anti-liberal Russian Communist Party is commonly seen a party of nostalgia, one without a true program for what remains a post-communist Russia. Communist participation in national elections thus gives them the appearance of competition without the substance: in the last several presidential elections, Communist candidates have struggled to reach the 20% mark. With both liberal and communist alternatives being non-competitive, it has been simpler for Putin to present his national-patriotic program and persona as the only viable one for Russia.

Second, what Russian scholar Olga Kryshtanovskaya has termed Putin's “militocracy” has taken no chances. Electoral laws have been changed scores of times in the Putin era. These include: prohibiting foreign non-governmental organizations (NGO's) from monitoring Russian elections; changing the threshold of votes needed for parties to be represented in parliament as parties' fortunes waxed and waned; raising the membership minimums for parties to be legally registered; alternating between direct and proportional representation in parliament; prohibiting electoral alliances among parties;

## Russian Cyber and Information Measures

The Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was conducted by methods and agencies characteristic of earlier such interventions in European politics. It is based on the assumptions that: (a) a series of efforts to “reset” Russian-U.S. relations have failed and that there are no prospects for a revival of ties in the foreseeable future; (b) that Russia is now on its own and involved in a zero-sum competition with the United States and European Union for influence along Russia’s historical borderlands, including inside Russia itself; and (c) that as the inferior power Russia must resort to every effort short of open war to defend its interests. This includes the use of relatively cheap electronic measures targeting the internet and computer systems of influential Western leaders, the exploitation of social media networks to spread information and disinformation unfavorable to the U.S. and most EU governments, as well as the targeting of vulnerable infrastructure systems. Non-governmental as well as official governmental organizations participate in these. A dramatic recent example was the ransomware cyberattack launched by DarkSide, a Russia-based but unofficial criminal organization that targeted the Colonial Pipeline gasoline distribution system covering much of the American southeast, disabling it and causing serious gasoline shortages for most of a week in May 2021. President Biden brought this issue up with Putin in his meeting with him in mid-June 2021 in Geneva and apparently made it a priority item with the Russian leader, who knows that the U.S. government has penetrated the Russian electricity grid with potentially disabling malware. DarkSide quickly ceased its operations.

Russia thus employs unofficial, including openly criminal organizations, as well as official government departments in conducting its cyber operations abroad. This assists in providing the Kremlin with “plausible deniability” when faced with accusations of interference by Western governments. No doubt, some of these operations are rogue in nature; but there is also no doubt, based on the nature of Putin’s political regime, that he can put a stop to them when he has determined that they have gone too far and are harming Russia’s international interests. This seems to have been the case with the DarkSide intervention just mentioned.

According to Andrew Bowen of the Congressional Re-

search Service, the principal Russian government agencies involved in these cyber activities include:

The Main Directorate of the General Staff (GRU in Russian), which is responsible for Russian military intelligence. GRU used cyberattacks to great effect during the Five-day Russia-Georgia War of August 2008 but it also is in charge of a number of agencies conducting foreign political operations. The U.S. government has identified one such unit as the hacker of Democratic Party sites in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and another as the principal coordinator of hacked computer operating systems and e-mail accounts in that campaign.

The Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR in Russian), which is Russia’s counterpart to the CIA and National Security Agency. While mainly concerned with the collection of intelligence on Russia’s external adversaries, SVR has also been charged by the U.S. government with hacking activities during the 2016 U.S. presidential race.

The Federal Security Service (FSB in Russian), akin to the FBI. Once headed by Putin before he became President, FSB works with a network of unofficial and even criminal cyber experts, according to U.S. Department of Justice indictments of Russian cyber agents. These unofficial cyber units are often given leeway to conduct profit-making ransomware operations abroad in exchange for providing their technical expertise to FSB, so long as they do not negatively affect Russian international interests. DarkSide’s attack on the Colonial Pipeline gasoline distribution system in May 2021 fits this profile.

The Internet Research Agency is technically a private, non-governmental organization but is headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a former high-level chef and caterer with close ties to Putin. Specializing in troll-type disinformation efforts and propaganda, Prigozhin’s agency and officials working for it have been indicted by the U.S. government for disseminating anti-Clinton and generally inflammatory disinformation during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The Agency also played a significant role in trying to reinforce the pro-“Brexit” movement during the 2016 referendum in Great Britain.

alternating between appointment and election of regional governors; introducing a constitutional amendment extending the presidential term from four to six years (2011); holding a national referendum allowing Putin to remain president until 2036 (2020); etc. Putin’s regime has long supplemented such legal changes with other measures

designed to suppress votes for opposition candidates. For instance, several candidates with identical or similar names (and even looks) are often registered to run in a district where an opposition candidate might have a serious chance of winning; in the September 2021 national parliamentary elections, such candidates appeared in fully 10%

of all individual races. During that same campaign, the Putin-controlled Central Election Commission disqualified more than 90% out of 174 candidates for parliament running as independents. New but fake opposition parties and candidates appear from time to time to siphon off votes from genuine opposition slates (this practice was first tried on a major

scale in 1996, when the Yeltsin government sponsored the presidential candidacy of General Aleksandr Lebed, who attracted enough votes from otherwise communist voters to assure Yeltsin's victory in the first round of the presidential vote that year). In another practice dating back to the 1990s, key constituencies such as soldiers, pensioners, and families with school-age children receive cash payments from the national government on the eve of balloting. Direct (through ownership) and indirect (through appointment of board members) government control of national television, radio stations, and other media companies has allowed Putin's government to maximize positive coverage of Putin while restricting routine access of critics to a national audience. In addition, closing opposition websites, selective arrests, harassment, imprisonment, and apparently even the poisoning of prominent critics of the regime—such as the social media-savvy critic *Aleksei Navalny*--reinforce the message that you “can't fight the Kremlin.”

Navalny, an active Kremlin critic since he played a crucial role in organizing election protests in December 2011, has found it difficult to expand his political appeal beyond a core base of mainly urban, younger, well-educated Russians. He has his finger on the one issue—corruption—that Putin's Kremlin evidently fears could potentially escalate into a crisis for the regime. Yet even after Navalny disseminated on social media seemingly devastating videos detailing the opulence and malfeasance of Putin's circle, including former President and Prime Minister *Dmitri Medvedev*, as well as Putin himself in early 2021, the overwhelming majority of Russians reacted with indifference, as recorded in polling done by the independent Russian polling agency *The Levada Center*: fully 77% of Russians polled, evidently seeing corruption as an endemic condition of national life and fearful of change after two decades of relative stability under Putin, had not changed their predominantly positive view of Putin in light of such material. In June 2021, *Levada* registered approval for Navalny



*Russian opposition activist and blogger Alexei Navalny holds a poster reading "I'm against repression and torture" during his lone protest in Moscow on October 27, 2012. About 200 people gathered near the headquarters of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) to protest the latest wave of arrests and allegations that one opposition leader was tortured into making a confession. (ANDREY SMIRNOV/AP/GETTY IMAGES)*

at 14% and disapproval at 62%, nearly the inverse of opinion on Putin.

The world-famous “Pussy Riot” case from 2012 likewise revealed the enormous gap between Western (and Russian liberals’) perceptions of Putin and his regime and those of the Russian “silent majority.” In that instance, five young women clad in balaclavas danced, suggestively in the minds of some worshipers, in front of the altar inside *The Church of Christ the Savior* in Moscow, chanting anti-regime slogans. Arrested for “inciting religious hatred” and “hooliganism,” two of the women served out the two-year prison terms meted out and confirmed by Russian courts. “Pussy Riot” became a cause célèbre among liberals in Western Europe and the United States; the prosecution of the women involved was decried as persecution and a violation of core civil rights. Yet when polled on the subject, again by the independent *Levada Center*, 78% of Russians—many of whom regarded the incident as an act of sacrilege--either agreed with the sentence or thought that it was too short.

In this case, Putin benefited from

his close and considered identification with the Russian Orthodox Church, and more broadly with Russian traditionalism. In May 2007, he brokered the reunification of the domestic and foreign branches of the Church, rent asunder by the Russian Revolution and ensuing Civil War (1918–20). Since becoming president in 2000, he has taken great pains to be seen wearing the baptismal crucifix that his mother had him bless in Jerusalem in the 1990s. Since about 80% of Russians identify culturally (if not religiously) with Russian Orthodoxy, Putin's embrace of the Church reinforces a legitimacy that is based significantly on the conceit of Putin as the restorer of continuity in Russian history: his embrace of selective Soviet motifs such as victory in World War II and triumphs in outer space as well as non-Soviet motifs (given the persecution of the Church by the Communists) allows Putin to make a broad appeal to at least those Russians not very interested in politics. (This is in almost every society, including the United States, a significant majority of the population.)

Putin has thus combined a degree of charismatic legitimacy with a re-

cord in power that enough Russians have found defensible, certainly in comparison to perceived likely alternatives. Combined with the efforts of the Putin Machine, which includes the Central Electoral Commission, to limit the competitiveness of political challengers, a series of multi-candidate national elections held since 2000 reveals the scope of Putin's appeal to the Russian public. Putin's performance in these elections may be summarized as follows:

2000: 53.4%  
 2004: 71.9%  
 2012: 63.4%  
 2018: 76.7%

Moreover, in the 2008 presidential election, Putin's hand-picked candidate and protégé Dmitri Medvedev garnered 71.2% of the votes, which were cast in full knowledge that Putin would remain the power behind the scenes as Medvedev's publicly announced, to-be-appointed prime minister. This was in fact a maneuver to avoid violating the Constitution's two four-year presidential term limit; in 2011, the government moved a

constitutional amendment to extend that term to six years' each. In 2020, Putin moved another amendment to extend his term limit potentially to 2036: it received 76.1% approval in a national referendum. These levels of support correspond closely to the degrees of popular support for Putin that the independent Levada Center has recorded over the past two decades, underscoring the success of Putin's machine in capturing the public as well as the state.

Elections for the Russian Duma, or parliament that were held on September 17–19, 2021, reflected Putin's grip on the Russian political system. Most true opposition candidates had been disqualified by the Putin-controlled Central Election Commission in the months leading up to the vote. The most prominent opposition figure, Aleksei Navalny, was in jail. In what he termed "smart voting," Navalny urged his supporters to vote for the strongest party outside of United Russia in the given electoral district by exploiting on-line apps available on Google and Apple systems; in this way, a semblance of a protest vote might be engineered. On the eve of the

elections, under tremendous pressure from the Russian government, the two U.S.-based internet companies dropped those apps from their Russian stores. Finally, mysterious delays in tabulating votes from the new on-line voting system saw dramatic improvements in United Russia's standing. The results? Putin's United Russia party, which consistently polled at just under 30% approval by both independent and government pollsters, registered 50% of the vote (with 52% voter participation) and won 198 out of 225 parliamentary seats determined by races by individual candidates. Combined with proportional distribution of votes by party for the other 225 seats, United Russia retained a two-thirds supermajority in the Russian national legislature, allowing it to pass any constitutional amendments that may be desired by the government. The Putin machine had managed to preserve the Russian legislature as a de facto extension of the presidential administration. And unlike during the aftermath of the comparable December 2011 elections, there were few large-scale public protests.

## Putin's foreign policy

Putin's popular support is reinforced by the widespread Russian perception that he has asserted Russian influence in the outside world prudently and effectively.

Even before Putin came to power in 2000, the post-communist government of Boris N. Yeltsin had striven, mainly unsuccessfully, to combine a relationship of partnership with the United States with Washington's recognition of a Russian sphere of influence throughout former Soviet territories. Moscow termed the latter policy *Monrovskaia doktrina*, or Monroe Doctrine Russian-style, in an attempt to legitimize it in U.S. eyes. On the eve of Putin's appointment as prime minister in August 1999, while he was head of the Russian National Security Council, the U.S.-led NATO military alliance had begun its expansion eastward toward Russia's borderlands and



*Russian soldiers prepare to attack a Chechen military post just outside of Chechnya's capital Grozny on October 20, 1999. A Russian rocket strike in a crowded market area of Grozny on October 21 killed and wounded scores of people. Russian forces said they had targeted an "arms bazaar." (WALTER LASH/GETTY IMAGES)*

waged a three-month air war against Serbia against strong Russian opposition. That war was a catalytic moment in Russian politics and public opinion: Russia's liberals were discredited because of their identification with the United States while Russian opinion, encouraged by the government and the media under its influence, rallied to an anti-American consensus.

In the fall of 1999, as Putin had begun to wage all-out war in order to recover the lost province of Chechnya, the Clinton administration began to criticize the Russian government and military for its conduct of the conflict in ways that it had not done when Putin's predecessor Yeltsin waged (and lost) the first stage of the war between 1994–96. In the event, Putin's policy of total war galvanized Russian opinion and cemented his relationship with the Russian military. By early 2000, the capacity of Chechen rebels to conduct large-scale, organized combat operations against Russia had been broken; this, more than any single factor, catapulted Putin to the Russian Presidency in the March 2000 election. As far as Putin and his national security team were concerned as they assessed U.S. policy, Russia was on its own.

It is all the more remarkable, then, that after the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, Putin rejected the consensus advice of his advisers and allied Russia with the United States in the war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Ironically, it was the presence of Russian troops outside of Russia, in Tajikistan along the Afghan border, that allowed Russia to reinforce anti-Taliban rebels in the north of Afghanistan quickly and effectively: it was these Russian-supplied troops that captured Kabul in November 2001.

Putin quickly discovered that Washington was uninterested in his agenda of a broader partnership. Against Putin's preferences, the United States maintained military bases in post-Soviet Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan years after the initial intense combat phase of the Afghan war was over in late 2001. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was only the most dramatic in-



*U.S. President George W. Bush and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili (R) wave to the crowd May 10, 2005, at Freedom Square in the Georgian capital Tbilisi. The peaceful resolution of separatist conflicts on its territory is "essential" for Georgia to be integrated into the West, President Bush said in an open-air speech to tens of thousands of locals in this strategic ex-Soviet republic. (AP/GETTY IMAGES)*

stance of Washington ignoring Moscow's (and Paris's and Berlin's, among others) interests. By 2004, the United States was supporting Ukrainian presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko against Putin's choice, Viktor Yanukovich, in a contested election that eventually saw the defeat of Moscow's candidate. At the same time, Bush administration officials were encouraging the new Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in the latter's effort for Georgia to join NATO as rapidly as possible. At NATO's summit meeting in Bucharest, Romania, in April 2008, U.S. pressure induced NATO to issue a communiqué to the effect that both Georgia and Ukraine would one day join the trans-Atlantic alliance. In the meantime, NATO continued to expand eastward to include Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, all part of the Soviet Union between 1940–91, as well as ex-Warsaw Pact members Bulgaria and Romania.

This is the political context for the five-day Russia-Georgia War of August 2008. Twice, Putin had offered to withdraw Russian troops from Georgia's border provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where they had been

stationed since the early 1990s, in exchange for a treaty in which Georgia would renounce NATO membership for 40 years. Twice had Saakashvili's government refused. When Saakashvili recklessly sent ground troops into South Ossetia in early August 2008 in the hope of eliciting U.S. support before Putin could react, Putin ordered the Russian Army across the border and in five days the Georgian army was defeated decisively. Fortunately, there was no contact between the Russian army and several hundred U.S. soldiers in Georgia training and equipping the Georgian army. Russian troops were suddenly withdrawn from Georgia proper but the message had been sent: Georgian (as well as Ukrainian) admission for NATO was a red line for the Kremlin that it was prepared to police by force. Putin had managed to assert Russian interests forcefully and without provoking a military confrontation with the United States or NATO. Russian opinion overwhelmingly supported this move.

In 2009, the Obama administration proposed a "reset" of relations with Moscow, based in part on the belief that the Bush Administration had overreached

in its foreign policy in general and its approach toward Russia's borderlands in particular. Yet in spite of a number of impressive accomplishments—including a new nuclear arms control agreement, the expansion of Russian land and air space to assist NATO operations in Afghanistan, U.S. commitment to accelerate Russia's admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO), and even Russian restraint in arms sales to Iran pending the conclusion of a nuclear materials deal—the reset began to unravel in less than two years. This reflected in part the continuing enormous disparity in power between the two countries in favor of the United States and American unwillingness to grant Moscow the status of substantive equality; but it was also the result of deep policy differences over the international status of Russia's borderlands and the increasingly deep-rooted animosity in the bodies politic of Russia and the United States toward each other.

In March 2011, the Russian government had assented to UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which granted NATO the authority to engage in “humanitarian” intervention in the Libyan Civil War, in particular to prevent what was believed to be an impending genocide of Qaddafi's opponents in Benghazi. The Obama administration assured then Russian President Medvedev that such authority would not be used for purposes of regime change. By the summer, however, Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime had indeed been overthrown by an opposition strengthened by the presence of NATO air power and Qaddafi himself had been killed. Putin, nominally prime minister but still the power behind the throne, was outraged, concluding that the Kremlin had been lied to by Washington and that Russia—with its veto on the UN Security Council—would never allow such authorization of NATO power again. The progressive destabilization of Libya, with consequent massive refugee flows outside the country, informed Putin's determination to prevent such intervention in the subsequent civil war in Syria, much closer to Russia. It was a simple mat-

ter for the Russian media machine to use video of the anarchy in Libya to persuade most Russians of the justice of this policy and of the danger allegedly posed by NATO (French and British warplanes, with U.S. logistical support, had flown most of the sorties over Libya.)

A few months later, in December 2011, protests broke out in several Russian cities against the apparent manipulation of parliamentary election results in favor of Putin's United Russia party. It was then that Aleksei Navalny emerged as a talented exploiter of social media to encourage and organize crowds against the Kremlin. The Obama Administration, led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the newly appointed Ambassador Michael McFaul, quickly and publicly sided with the protestors against Putin's government. In the end, such remonstrances had no effect on those elections or on Putin's election once again as president just four months later but they reinforced the conviction in the Kremlin that the United States was bent not just on rolling back Russian power abroad but on undermining Putin's power from within.

The unraveling of the Obama-Russia reset was also driven by domestic-level factors in the United States beyond the control of the White House. In the fall of 2012, a major goal of the reset was achieved when Russia entered the WTO. One consequence of this was that cold-war era human rights legislation still on the books, namely the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Trade Act that tied trade levels to Soviet emigration practices, was illegal under WTO rules. In order to protect U.S. companies from likely legal action, the U.S. Congress not only abrogated Jackson-Vanik (favored by the Obama administration) but substituted new human rights legislation in the form of the Magnitsky Act (opposed by the White House). This bill targeted individual Russian officials that the Congress deemed responsible for the death of the eponymous Russian lawyer of a U.S.-born businessman who died in a Russian jail after

abusive medical neglect: their assets in the United States could be seized, visas denied, etc. Almost immediately, Putin pushed through the Russian parliament a bill that prevented Americans from adopting Russian orphans: predictably, the law passed almost unanimously. Shortly before, Putin's government had expelled the U.S. Agency for International Development from Russia, fearing that it was encouraging Russians to organize civically and politically against Putin's regime.

By summer 2013, the bottom was falling out of the bilateral relationship. U.S. intelligence defector Edward Snowden wound up in Moscow and Putin refused to extradite him to the United States. In reply, President Obama cancelled a summit meeting with Putin scheduled for September 2013. Thus, even before the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in late fall 2013, U.S.-Russia relations lay in tattered shreds.

That crisis revealed that Moscow and Washington were engaged in a “zero-sum” game for influence in Ukraine, whose international status Moscow regarded as a vital Russian national interest. In late November 2013, Putin had rewarded Ukrainian leader Viktor Yanukovich with an immediate \$15 billion credit and assurances of continued low prices for the import of Russian natural gas for not signing an Association Agreement with the European Union. Subsequent protests throughout Ukraine were met with force, entailing deaths of demonstrators shot by police in early December; this triggered a massive escalation of protests and the effective loss of control over much of Ukraine's territory by Yanukovich's government. For the next two months, the national government in Kiev was paralyzed and Yanukovich, who retained Putin's support, seemed politically isolated. In mid-February, U.S. Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland was recorded, no doubt by Russian intelligence, on an open cell phone call in Kiev with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, reviewing the acceptability to the United States of candidates to run a post-Yanukovich Ukrainian government, one that all ob-

servers were convinced would pursue a strongly anti-Russian and pro-NATO policy once in power. In late February, an EU-brokered deal for accelerated national elections collapsed when street protestors, many well-armed, refused to support any deal that had Yanukovich remain as President, even provisionally. Yanukovich, whose taste for lavish corruption was well known, suddenly fled Ukraine to find protection under Russian jurisdiction and a new, pro-American government took power. This was the immediate context for the Russian seizure of Crimea in March 2014, the subsequent instigation of armed resistance in eastern Ukrainian regions bordering Russia, and the imposition of trade and financial sanctions by the United States and the European Union that remain in force to the present day.

Since that time, Putin's government has pursued a foreign policy based on the premise that Russia's core interests cannot be achieved through collaboration with the United States. In turn, a bipartisan U.S. consensus has emerged to the effect that Washington cannot maintain good relations with Moscow so long as Putin rules the Kremlin. Economic sanctions by the United States and the EU, most of whose members also belong to NATO, have induced Putin's government to find ways to counteract the overwhelming economic superiority that the Western states collectively have over Russia, on the order of 20:1 in terms of dollarized GDP. These ways include, but are not limited to, the cultivation of privileged bilateral relationships with key European countries, above all Germany; financing of nationalist and anti-EU parties throughout the EU; as well as intervention in electoral campaigns, including the 2016 U.S. presidential race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Russia has also sought to diversify its foreign policy, for instance, by intensifying its relationship with China in order to reduce the impact of growing economic isolation from the trans-Atlantic world. And, as Russia's Syrian intervention has shown, Putin is prepared to directly assert Russian



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military power abroad, regardless of U.S. and EU opposition.

The EU as a bloc is Russia's most important trading partner, although the Russian economy is much more dependent on the EU than vice versa. At the same time, many EU countries, above all Germany, import a significant percentage of their oil and natural gas from Russia (about 40% for Germany). Such imports are so important to EU states that the economic and financial sanc-

tions that Brussels imposed on Moscow in 2014 over Moscow's interference in Ukrainian affairs do not extend to Russian fossil fuels exports. Moreover, much of that fuel transited Ukraine and Poland on its way from Siberian producers to West European consumers, a legacy of Soviet-era infrastructure practice. This has meant that disputes between Kiev and Moscow allowed Ukraine a certain leverage over Russia, as Ukrainian governments have from



Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) shakes hands with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban during their meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia, September 18, 2018. (MIKHAIL SVETIOV/GETTY IMAGES)

time to time blocked or siphoned off Russian deliveries to Western Europe (those customers pay the highest prices of all of Russia's energy clients). In response, and well before the outbreak of the 2013–14 Ukraine crisis, Russia concluded a bilateral agreement with Germany for the construction of two natural gas pipelines under the Baltic Sea that directly connect Russia and Germany, bypassing Ukraine and the rest of Eastern Europe. In this way, Russia hopes that it can isolate its relations with Ukraine from those with the EU, where Germany remains the leading power. Russian pressure on Ukraine would thus no longer lead to a significant cut in fuels deliveries to key European customers, thereby reducing the incentives for the EU to intervene in disputes between Moscow and Kiev. In summer 2021, as the second pipeline was being completed, the Biden Administration effectively dropped its opposition to the project, implicitly acknowledging that it could not influence Germany on a question of such obvious economic importance to Berlin. Putin, himself an energy expert, had thereby established a balance between Moscow and the EU that Russia's macro-level economic dependence on the EU would not otherwise justify.

At the same time, Russia has cultivated relations with EU nationalist

and populist parties and leaders in an effort to sow division and weaken the Union's capacity to act en bloc against Russia. These include the Hungarian populist leader Victor Orban, who has met at least annually with Putin since 2017 and has taken a number of initiatives on Russia that place him outside of the EU mainstream. These include: calling for an easing of EU sanctions against Russia; approving a contract with Russia (signed on September 27, 2021) for a natural gas pipeline that would bypass Ukraine by moving fuel under the Black Sea and thence through the Balkans to Hungary, a major consumer of Russian fuels; and approving for use in Hungary Chinese and Russian Covid-19 vaccines before they were approved by the EU. In this case, Putin is mainly reacting to an opportunity that Orban's own assault on EU influence in Hungary has presented but it underscores Moscow's preference for bilateralism versus multilateralism in relations with Europe. In Western Europe, official Russian institutions as well as internet agents with often murky ties to Russian intelligence have embraced far right parties advancing anti-EU agendas. The most prominent such case involved France's extreme right wing National Rally (at the time National Front) party, led by Marine Le Pen. Le Pen's party, openly

anti-immigration and anti-EU, could not obtain financing for its political operations within France or the EU in spite of approaching a dozen banks; in 2014, it was eventually able to obtain a \$11.7 million dollar loan at 6% interest from the First Czech Moscow Bank, which is under the supervision of the Kremlin controlled Central Bank of Moscow. Le Pen's father Jean-Marie, founder of the party, secured a \$2.5 million personal loan from a Russian-controlled holding company based in Cyprus belonging to an ex-KGB agent. In effect, Moscow is committed to supporting forces that weaken the EU and thus the bloc's potential to act as a unified whole against Russian interests in Europe, East and West.

Putin has also reinforced Russia's relationship with China in the face of growing hostility with the EU and the United States. In spring 2014, at the height of the crisis over Russia's seizure of Crimea from Ukraine, Russia signed a 20-year, \$400 billion energy deal with China, guaranteeing China essential supplies of fuel for its booming industrial economy while affording Russia financing from China that was now unattainable on global capital markets dominated by the United States and European Union countries. Russia-China bilateral trade, which includes major Russian arms exports to China, now approaches \$100 billion annually, up dramatically from less than \$10 billion per year in the 1990s. In recent years, Russia has conducted regular naval maneuvers with the Chinese navy in the Sea of Japan and consults closely with China on matters related to Central Asian security through the Shanghai Cooperation Council. The two countries tend to vote in unison on the UN Security Council in opposing U.S. and/or EU countries' resolutions condemning human rights abuses by governments in situations like the Syrian Civil War and are determined that the UN not be made an instrument of Western military pressure against "sovereign" states. While far from a formal security alliance, Moscow's relations with Beijing have acted as an economic, diplomatic, and

security shock absorber in the wake of Russia's semi-isolation from the West since 2014.

Along Russia's western border, EU and U.S. sanctions against the Belarusian regime of Aleksandr G. Lukashenko—over election fraud and the apparent hijacking of a commercial airliner in May 2021 to arrest a Belarusian dissident—have driven Minsk ever closer to Moscow. In September 2021, Russia pledged \$630 million in new loans to Lukashenko's government and the continuation of deliveries of natural gas from Russia at prices well below those on the world market. In light of the end of immigration controls between the two countries and regular, large-scale joint military exercises, Belarus now clearly falls within an exclusive Russian sphere of influence.

### Concluding reflections

The collapse of the Obama-Russia reset that began in 2011 was the third failure to stabilize bilateral relations since the onset of the post-Soviet period in U.S.-Russian relations. By 1999, the Clinton-Yeltsin attempt to establish a comprehensive partnership died in consequence of Russia's socio-economic collapse, NATO expansion, and NATO's air war against Serbia. The U.S.-Russia alliance on Afghanistan after the 9/11 terror attacks imploded shortly after the overthrow of the Taliban in November 2001. In all three cases, the imbalance of power between Moscow and Washington in favor of the latter combined with irreconcilable objectives about the international status of Russia's historical borderlands undermined leaders' efforts to build a stable and mutually beneficial relationship. By October 2014, in the aftermath of the Russian annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, President Obama stated that the United States faced three principal threats: from the Ebola virus, from the ISIS terrorist group, and from Russia. His former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in running for president in 2016, implicitly made the case that in voting for her one would be voting for Obama's third term. The personal rancor between Putin and Clinton,



*U.S. President Joe Biden (2L) and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands as Swiss President Guy Parmelin (R) looks on during the U.S.-Russia summit at Villa La Grange on June 16, 2021, in Geneva, Switzerland. Biden is meeting his Russian counterpart, Putin, for the first time as president. (PETER KLAINIZER/POOL/REXSTONE/GETTY IMAGES)*

stemming from her public criticism of the 2011 Russian parliamentary elections, was intensified by Clinton later publicly comparing Putin's policies to those of Hitler. By all evidence, Clinton would be the handy winner of the 2016 presidential election against Donald Trump and be inaugurated in January 2017, just 14 months before Putin was to stand for yet another reelection. In sum, prospects for Russian-American relations seemed bleak; Putin had little to hope for and much to fear from a Clinton presidency.

This is the political context for assessing Russia's interference in that election. That Russian agents, both official and non-official, sought and in some cases succeeded in penetrating confidential and politically charged electronic accounts connected with the Democratic National Committee, is not in doubt. That these agents then sought to exploit such information to the embarrassment of the Hillary Clinton campaign is also well established. The scale and scope of such efforts, however, are not easily compatible with the thesis that their objective was to help elect Donald Trump President. How was the self-styled realist Vladimir Putin to believe that Trump had a serious chance of being elected when virtually every U.S. electoral expert held this to

be virtually impossible? Rather, taken in the context of the collapse in Russian-American relations since at least 2013, Putin sought to sow embarrassment about the U.S. political process in the expectation that Clinton would be elected. In this way, he sought to hinder a future President Clinton's ability to launch an anti-Putin campaign of political pressure based on allegedly superior U.S. political values precisely at the time when he was preparing his own campaign for reelection (March 2018). Ironically, had Clinton in fact been elected, Putin's efforts could be judged effective. But with Trump elected, and the poorly disguised Russian interference becoming a matter of common knowledge, the bipartisan political backlash in the U.S. Congress led to veto-proof legislation that prevented now President Trump from lifting economic sanctions against Russia without prior Congressional approval. Trump was thus powerless to offer Putin concessions on the single-most important item on the bilateral agenda. An otherwise polarized American political establishment now agreed that there could be no significant improvement in ties between Washington and Moscow so long as Putin remains in power. Russian-American relations have remained barren since.

## discussion questions

1. Why has Putin enjoyed such high levels of popularity? Does he deserve this admiration?
2. Both Aleksei Navalny and Pussy Riot received low levels of support in response to their acts of resistance. Despite this, should they and other dissidents continue to challenge Putin's regime? Is it worth doing so?
3. Obama's "reset" of relations with Russia began to unravel only two years after it was established. This is in part due to the U.S.

unwillingness to see Russia as its equal. Should the U.S. reconsider this perception of Russia in order to improve relations with Putin?

4. Should the United States be seeking influence in Ukraine? Is it important for American foreign policy to be supporting an anti-Russian government in that country?

5. Is there hope for a better relationship between Russia and the United States? Why or why not?

## suggested readings

Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman. The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). Frye introduces the reader to the Russia which is often overlooked. By answering such questions as: "How popular is Putin?", and "Why are relations with the West so fraught?", Frye offers a new reassessment of Russian politics that provides a detailed examination of this modern autocracy.

Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Neil Munro, *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime: The Changing Views of Russians* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Rose, Mishler, and Munro use a series of surveys from 1992 to 2009 to show how popular support for the Russian regime has increased over the years, despite becoming more undemocratic. They explore why this phenomenon has occurred.

Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia and America. The Asymmetric Rivalry* (UK: Polity Press, 2019). Tsygankov argues that Russia, being the

weaker power, exploits its relations with non-Western allies to defend and promote its interests and avoid yielding to U.S. pressures.

Richard Sakwa, Henry Hale and Stephen White, eds. *Development in Russian Politics 9* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). Sakwa, Hale, and White explain recent developments in Russian politics including such topics as: executive leadership, political parties, and elections.

Angela Stent, *Putin's World. Russia against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Twelve Books, 2019). Stent examines Russia's turbulent past, its influence on Putin, Russian's understanding of their position on the global stage, and their belief that the West has denied them a seat at the table of great powers.

<https://www.levada.ru> (a bilingual website of the independent Russian polling agency The Levada Center with data and analysis of Russian public opinion going back to the 1990s).

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