



20 Years of Leading Analysis

Russia's Breakout From the Post-Cold War System: The Drivers of Putin's Course

Dmitri Trenin

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SUMMARY In 2014, Russia broke out of the post-Cold War order and openly challenged the U.S.-led international system. Moscow's new course is laid down first and foremost by President Vladimir Putin, but it also reflects the rising power of Russian nationalism.

In 2014, Russia broke out of the post-Cold War order and openly challenged the U.S.-led international system. This was essentially the result of the failure of attempts to integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic community. The new period of rivalry between the Kremlin and the West is likely to endure for years. Moscow's new course is laid down first and foremost by President Vladimir Putin, but it also reflects the rising power of Russian nationalism.

Russia's New Foreign Policy Course

- Russian-Western relations have palpably deteriorated since the last failed attempt at rapprochement during President Dmitry Medvedev's term, in 2009–2011. Ukraine is the main geographical locus and symbol of the new rivalry, but not its primary cause.
- To Putin, the West's approach to Russia barely respects Moscow's interests and views. Russia's failed rapprochement with and perceived humiliation at the hands of the West have opened the way to a more nationalist domestic and foreign policy course that replaces the remnants of Russian liberalism and internationalism.
- The centerpiece of this approach is winning full sovereignty for Russia by eliminating foreign political influence in the country and ensuring that Moscow's special interests in its former borderlands are recognized. Fundamental to this vision are conservative values, rooted in the Orthodox Christian tradition.

Takeaways for Western Leaders

- Both the Ukraine crisis and the sanctions regime imposed on Russia by the United States and the

European Union mobilize Russians in support of the country's new foreign policy course.

- Confrontation with Russia carries the non-negligible potential of a direct military collision of former Cold War adversaries, with unforeseen consequences. The situation in Ukraine must not be allowed to escalate dangerously, and Russia and the West should forge a set of strategic confidence-building measures to prevent a clash.
- While official communication between the Kremlin and Western government offices is exceedingly difficult and mutual trust is nonexistent, reliable channels of communication need to be built and credible dialogue partners found on both sides to avoid miscalculation.
- To Putin, Russia should be, above all, an independent and influential nation. To achieve that and avoid squandering its resources and losing independence to more powerful states, Russia needs a national, meritocratic class of elites.
- The urge to shut Russia out and pressure ordinary Russians should be resisted by all means. While Russia's integration with Europe and the West more broadly as originally designed is off the agenda, ways must be found to open the door even more widely for people-to-people exchanges.

Introduction

The abrupt end of the quarter-of-a-century-long era of cooperation and partnership between Russia and the West, and the return of confrontation and hostility between them, did not come out of the blue. The root cause of the dramatic reversal was the failure of Russia's integration into the Euro-Atlantic political, security, and economic systems despite repeated attempts.

In 2012 and 2013, the pretense of partnership became increasingly untenable. The Syria crisis found Moscow and Washington not only backing opposing sides in the strategically important Middle Eastern country but also disagreeing fundamentally about the global order: sovereignty, intervention, and the use of force. Russia's granting of political asylum to Edward Snowden, who had leaked classified U.S. documents to the media, came as a personal affront to President Barack Obama, leading to an unprecedented cancelation of an American president's visit to Russia. The competing offers to Ukraine, one from Brussels to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), and another from Moscow to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), turned Ukraine into the site of a tug of war, which soon resulted in a violent crisis with global implications.

These dramatic changes have often been portrayed as consequences of Vladimir Putin's decision to return to the Russian presidency, a move announced in the fall of 2011. And they are signs, some say, of his need to boost his popularity in the wake of the urban classes' protests in 2011–2012 through appeals to Russian nationalism, which required mobilization in the face of a putative foreign threat. Thus, for the authoritarianism at home to be sustained, aggression abroad was required, and Ukraine was the ideal place for it. What is more, if Ukraine had been allowed to move closer to Europe, its example would have presented a clear and present danger to the current Russian political system and those at the top of it.

This explanation correctly points to the link between Russia's domestic and foreign policy, but it offers a narrative that reduces a complex issue to a simple ideological dilemma: democracy or authoritarianism. Time and again, that construction has proven inadequate as a tool of foreign policy analysis and an unreliable guide to foreign policy making. In reality, there are many drivers of Moscow's foreign policy, from the Kremlin's ideological underpinnings to its domestic needs and international ambitions. With few places to turn internationally and a fragile domestic landscape, the prospects for Russia's confrontation with the United States and its estrangement from the West are real. The stakes for Moscow are higher than at any time since the fall of communism.

When Putin returned to the Kremlin in May 2012, Russia's foreign policy changed course. The centerpiece of the new foreign policy tack has been—and remains—winning full sovereignty for Russia. That means essentially two things. The first is the total exclusion of any outside influence on Russian domestic politics or

policies, as well as the consolidation of the Russian people around a reinvigorated national idea. The second is the attainment of a degree of freedom of action on the international stage that would allow the Kremlin to protect and promote Russia's national interests globally and regionally, within what has come to be known as the "Russian world."

This sovereignty bid, in practical terms, represents Moscow's clear breakout from the international system as it has been widely, if informally, understood since the end of the Cold War. It challenges the unipolar world order both by erecting barriers to U.S. democracy promotion and by refusing to submit to the norms and practices laid down, policed, and arbitrated by the West. Vladimir Putin raised this challenge as a consequence of his assessment of the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, his protégé, who stayed in the Kremlin from 2008 to 2012.

Assessing Medvedev's Term

In the fall of 2011, Putin decided against allowing Medvedev to run again for reasons that were both political and personal. Foreign policy considerations played a major role in the decision. In a nutshell, in 2008 Medvedev had been sent by Putin, formally the prime minister but still Russia's top leader, on a sort of scouting mission to the West to determine what was possible to achieve with the United States and Europe. As Putin looked at the balance sheet three and a half years later, the results were not promising.

From 2008 on, Putin kept Medvedev on a very long leash. Essentially, he gave him a mandate to pursue a liberal foreign policy, which focused on improving Russia's relations with the West as the main resource for its economic and technological modernization. In particular, Putin allowed Medvedev to respond positively to the reset policies of the Obama administration that were aimed at starting fresh with Russia after the bilateral relationship had deteriorated and run into deep trouble under former U.S. president George W. Bush.

In particular, Putin encouraged Medvedev to negotiate not only strategic arms reductions with the United States but also joint ballistic missile defense arrangements with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); to abstain at the United Nations (UN) Security Council in a vote on whether to create a no-fly zone to protect Benghazi, which entailed the use of force by the West against Libya; and to pursue modernization alliances with the leading Western economies. Medvedev was also given the task of finalizing what Putin himself had failed to accomplish during his two terms: Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Joining would open the accession process with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the global assembly of advanced economies and democracies.

When the time came to assess the practical results of these efforts, however, Putin was hardly pleased. Some accords had been signed, notably on reducing nuclear arms (the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty of 2010, known commonly as New START) and on joining the WTO (completed in 2012). But on key security issues, such as ballistic missile defense, no breakthrough had been achieved. Moreover, the UN Security Council resolution that established the no-fly zone over Libya in 2011, which Russia had allowed to pass, was then misused by the West to remove strongman Muammar Qaddafi from power, Moscow's protestations about the illegality of that regime change notwithstanding.

Putin also concluded that the West's approach to Russia offered scant respect for its interests or views. Moscow's June 2008 proposal to conclude a new European security treaty based on the principle of a Europe "without dividing lines"¹—in reality, a commitment by NATO not to admit new members from former Soviet republics—was politely acknowledged but essentially dismissed. Instead, in August 2008, the United States permitted Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's president at the time and an ardent NATO accession proponent, to attack the rebel enclave of South Ossetia, killing Russian peacekeepers in the process. In the brief Russo-Georgian War that followed, the Western media and political circles sided with Tbilisi against Moscow.

The U.S. response to the 2010 Russian proposal to create a joint ballistic missile defense, a joint defense perimeter with Russia and NATO as de facto military allies, was so tepid that it allowed Putin to conclude that the West continued to view Russia as a potential adversary. Thwarted in his attempt to build defenses with NATO, he went ahead with plans to build them against NATO.

In Libya, Russia's major concession of allowing NATO to use force against a sovereign government—which

caused considerable tensions within Russian political circles and the senior bureaucracy—was not appreciated by Moscow's nominal partners, but taken for granted and then misused. This led to a feeling in Moscow of being deceived and then ignored, as well as a firm resolve not to allow such things to happen again—for example, in Syria.

Putin also inferred that the West's treatment of Russia was not linked to a particular person in the Kremlin. Medvedev, unlike Putin, carried no KGB baggage. His reputation in the West was generally good, and he ostensibly had liberal credentials. Yet the result was essentially the same: Russia was free to cooperate with the United States and its allies, but only on their terms and on the agenda developed in Washington.

It hardly escaped Putin's attention though that the West counted on Medvedev staying in the Kremlin after the 2012 election and gradually seeing Putin off. Medvedev was viewed as more modern, meaning softer and more accommodating, than Putin. Welcoming Medvedev in Germany in summer 2011, Chancellor Angela Merkel—known for her penchant for making no secret of her political preferences—called the Russian guest her candidate in the presidential elections the following year, even though Medvedev had not announced his candidacy. To Putin, this might have sounded like foreigners having the audacity to pick Russian leaders. Although the U.S. administration of Barack Obama had no illusions about who was the top man in Moscow, it, too, clearly preferred that Medvedev get a second term as Russia's president.

When Putin did finally decide in September 2011 to run again and make Medvedev his prime minister, the choice was greeted with a groundswell of genuine disappointment and bitter criticism from Russia's liberals and the Western public alike.² To Putin's ears, this must have been a vindication of his longtime suspicions that the West wished to keep Russia under some form of control, with the Russian liberal elite acting as its accessory.

The protests that broke out in December 2011 steeled Putin's determination to substantially revise Russia's domestic and foreign policy. Immediately following the elections that month for the Russian State Duma (the lower house of parliament), which were called flawed, members of the country's new urban middle classes began a series of protests against Putin's rule. Young professionals, entrepreneurs, and office workers who had emerged during the economic boom of the 2000s took to the streets in Moscow and other cities across the country. They now saw Dmitry Medvedev, who had been charged with outreach to the IT generation and liberals at home, as a fraud, and they were angry with a political regime that had manipulated them. On May 6, 2012, on the eve of the presidential inauguration, the protesters, until that time peaceful, clashed with the police across the river from the Kremlin.

Western public opinion hailed this as the beginning of a Russian spring and the end of Putin's Russia. Yet in the Kremlin's eyes, the Russian protests, like the Arab Spring that had begun a year before and the color revolutions of the preceding decade, were largely part of a U.S.-led effort to subvert previously stable regimes around the world. They would be replaced with feeble but loyal democracies or, failing that, with controlled chaos—all in order to expand U.S. global influence. Vladimir Putin publicly suggested that the U.S. Department of State was engaged in rent-a-crowd activities in Russia, relying on Russian recipients of foreign grant money. The Medvedev interlude was over, at home as well as abroad.

To Putin, the West has historically been trying to hold Russia down for fear of competition. After the end of the Cold War, with Russia weakened, the West refused to respect Moscow and its interests, as demonstrated by NATO's eastward expansion. With Russia's own integration into the West no longer an option, Putin had to balance power in Russia's relationships with the United States and the European Union. The problem, however, was forging equal relationships between two pairs of visibly unequal entities.

The Roots of the New Vision

This assessment matters greatly because on all important issues, the Russian political system is driven by one and only one decisionmaker: Vladimir Putin. His power is often likened to that of a monarch or a czar and is supported by a long tradition of Russian governance.

Putin's real impact is not of the same quality across the board of policy issues. On economic policy, the Kremlin heavily relies on experts, most of them politically loyal liberals, who are given executive positions in the Russian

government. There are other major figures, both in private business and in the state-controlled corporations, who can and do weigh in on the decisionmaking process, as well as lobbies in different sectors. On social policy, the Kremlin is very attentive to public opinion polls and is careful to maintain broad support for its policies, which is essential for the continuation of the paternalistic political system.

On foreign affairs and security policy, however, Vladimir Putin has to make all the important decisions himself, with others either advising him or implementing them. These decisions are based on the Russian president's interpretation of the country's national interest and his philosophical views—or just his gut feeling—of what is right and what is wrong.

Of course, even in foreign and security policy matters, Putin cannot decide everything on instinct. There are many specific interests he must weigh: the security and defense establishments; the top government bureaucracy and the political establishment as a whole; the business community; the regional governments, especially along Russia's lengthy borders; the various religious and ethnic communities; and—indirectly—the bulk of the population, which the Kremlin cannot ignore. Nor can the president ignore the fact that Russia is integrated with the rest of the world economically, intellectually, and physically. Those links cannot be fully undone even by the sanctions regime the West imposed on Russia in 2014 as a result of the Ukraine crisis.

Yet it is Putin, and Putin alone, who must decide. His views on foreign affairs and on Russia's place and role in the world are of the utmost importance. And in his decade and a half in power, Russia's second and fourth president has come a long way.

Putin started out in 2000—right after the Kosovo War—as a leader trying to restore and upgrade Russian-Western relations. In his first few weeks in the Kremlin, Putin reached out to Lord George Robertson, then NATO secretary general, and to then U.S. president George W. Bush, who was starting his own first term. Putin sought an alliance with the United States before and especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks, including membership in NATO and integration into Europe in the name of Russia's European choice. In 2001, Putin ordered immediate, massive, and highly valuable support to the U.S. operation to defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

From 2003 onward, however, Putin has felt increasingly alienated by the West. The U.S. invasion of Iraq that year distracted Washington from seeking closer engagement with Russia. Putin's hopes of an alliance with Washington were dashed. Russia had to live with the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which severely limited missile defenses of both countries to bolster nuclear deterrence. It also had to accept the reality of NATO expansion to the Baltic states and a U.S. military presence in Central Asia and Georgia. Putin's own attempt to resolve the conflict in Transnistria—the Kozak memorandum—was scuttled on the verge of his November 2003 visit to Chi in u to sign the agreement, a result of U.S. diplomatic intervention with Moldova's then president.

The case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky persuaded Putin that Russia needed to keep its energy riches under national control. Khodorkovsky defied Putin politically even as he tried—without the president's knowledge—to sell his oil company, YUKOS (Russia's largest) to an American oil major. The media campaign by Khodorkovsky's allies and sympathizers in the West against the Kremlin after the businessman's arrest in October 2003 dimmed Putin's view of the motives of Western policies toward Russia.

By the time of the September 2004 terrorist attack in Beslan in the North Caucasus that left hundreds of children dead, Putin had dropped his early expectations about Russia becoming part of an enlarged, Atlanticist and European West. After accusing unnamed foreign powers of seeking to weaken and dismember Russia and using the terrorists to advance their goals, Putin took Russia out of the West's political orbit. He began developing an independent trajectory focused on the national interest rather than, as before, aimed at integration into the West.³

Putin soon became a vocal and public critic of U.S. global domination, as evidenced in his February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, in which he lashed out against the post-Cold War world order.⁴ The issues in contention were not all philosophical; they included the potential for serious conflict, which loomed in 2008 when the United States and other NATO members pushed membership action plans for Ukraine and

Georgia. In April of that year, Putin went to the NATO summit in Bucharest to impress upon U.S. and European leaders the dangers of division and domestic strife in Ukraine if that country were offered a path to join the alliance.

Western leaders, however, generally took the Russian president's admonitions as a sign of Moscow's resurgent neoimperialist ambitions. Even though Germany and France succeeded in blocking Kiev's plea for a NATO membership action plan, Ukraine and Georgia were promised membership in the alliance at an unspecified date. Just four months later, Tbilisi moved against South Ossetia, apparently in an effort to solve ethnic conflicts in Georgia by force and to thus make Georgia eligible for NATO membership. Putin went on record suggesting that Saakashvili had been encouraged by anti-Russian elements in the Bush administration, such as then vice president Dick Cheney.⁵ By the time the war broke out, Putin had handed over the presidency to Medvedev and was visiting Beijing, a fact that may have been interpreted by Putin as a U.S.-backed attempt to "test" his young successor.

Laying bare the deficiencies of the Russian military organization, the Georgia War spurred Russia's military reform, which had been formally launched a few months before. In 2011, despite the difficulties of recovery from the global financial crisis, Putin made a major decision to begin a wholesale modernization of the Russian military through 2020—a program worth 20 trillion rubles, or \$700 billion at the time. Ever since, Putin has remained true to this decision. Russia, he continues to believe, needs a strong military before many other things, and the defense industry can be the locomotive of Russia's reindustrialization.

During his four years away from the Kremlin, Putin stayed in charge overall, but he kept a low international profile. He spent far less time on foreign visits and much more time traveling in Russia. This included a long trek in a small Russian car along the sparsely populated and underdeveloped Russian-Chinese border in 2009, as well as numerous trips to rediscover the Arctic for Russia. He confessed to reading much on Russia's history and comparing his actions with those of his predecessors, both czars and Communist Party general secretaries. He reportedly became close with Father Tikhon Shevkunov, head of a monastery in central Moscow and a prominent Orthodox Christian intellectual.⁶

At the end of his four-year premiership, Putin appeared imbued with a sense of history and a mandate from God. The renowned pragmatist and self-avowed public servant, a country manager, had turned into a missionary. Not only did Putin invoke God in his public remarks, he behaved like someone who was performing the work entrusted to him by the Almighty. Later, amid the 2014 Ukraine crisis, this allowed Putin to stay relaxed and confident that God was on his—and Russia's—side in the new bitter contest with the United States.

Putin set out his new foreign policy program in a series of articles published ahead of the 2012 presidential election.⁷ In contrast to the now-abandoned attempts at integration with the West, his new program focused on his words on "preserving Russia's distinct identity in a highly competitive global environment."⁸ Accordingly, Russia's independence and sovereignty have been elevated to supreme national values.

The Keeper of Conservative Values

In Putin's view, Russia needed a sense of spiritual sovereignty. Putin became preoccupied with helping Russia achieve self-determination, aided by answering questions such as "What are we?" and "What do we want to be?" Putin's answer to the first question was that Russia is a distinct civilization, the core of a special "Russian world," a supranational community of people who associate themselves with traditional Russian values, mainly Eastern Slavs like Belarusians and Ukrainians. To the second question, he replied that Russia should be the centerpiece of a large geoeconomic unit, a Eurasian union, complete with political, cultural, and security arrangements, that would bring together the former Soviet republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States. In particular, Putin touted this Eurasian union as a means for Russia to escape becoming peripheral to both Europe and Asia, and to deal on equal terms with the EU and China.

Fundamental to this new geopolitical vision was the issue of values. In a quarter century, Russia has transitioned from former president Mikhail Gorbachev's optimistic but naive universalism to a much more realist worldview and the reassertion of the uniqueness of the Russian experience. Support for globalization and Western integration has given way to promoting cultural and political diversity around the world. Indeed, under

Putin, Russia has taken up the role of global defender of indigenous values.

For the first time in modern times, Russia has rejected Europe, not only as a mentor, but also as a model. For Putin, old Europe—existing before the late 1960s, approximately—seemed still essentially solid and acceptable, but the twenty-first-century European mainstream is just the opposite. “Post-Christian” Europeans embraced “equality of good and evil,” as Putin put it, and they distinguished themselves by moral relativism, a very vague sense of identity, and excessive political correctness.⁹ Putin concluded that European countries have begun “renouncing their roots, including Christian values, which underlie Western civilization.”¹⁰ Even worse, having gone off track, Europeans sought to impose their incorrect views on others, including Russia. Illustrating this was Western support for the band Pussy Riot, which staged public protests at Moscow’s main Orthodox cathedral and elsewhere, as well as the strong Western reaction, particularly in the run-up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, to Russia’s legislation that banned the distribution of “gay propaganda” to minors.

To counter this trend, the Kremlin reached out to European far-right conservative parties, like France’s National Front, the UK’s Independence Party, and Hungary’s Jobbik, to create a coalition in defense of traditional values. This mechanistic effort, however, gained little traction.

As it turned out, styling Russia as a keeper of conservative European values was only a way station en route to stressing unique Russian ones, rooted in the Orthodox Christian tradition. These values included the sanctity of the family as a union between a man and a woman, the indispensable role of religious faith, the function of traditional religions as spiritual compasses, the centrality of the state among all political and social institutions, and, of course, patriotism. The values that the Kremlin identified as Russia’s own also included moral guidance provided by the four established religions under Russian law: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.

That has naturally called for a further strengthening of the Kremlin’s relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, its close domestic partner, and outreach to other traditional confessions. The Orthodox Church, headed by the energetic Patriarch Kirill since 2009, has cooperated with the Kremlin in an attempt to build the Russian world. In geographical terms, this community roughly coincides with the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church, including Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova.

The Church was also instrumental in the Kremlin’s short-lived attempt, in 2009–2011, to achieve a historic reconciliation with Poland. It has been actively engaged in a difficult dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, which it has eyed as its spiritual ally against aggressive secularism. And it has sought to amplify Russia’s presence in the Middle East by supporting Christians there.

The Kremlin, meanwhile, has sought to deepen its ties to Islam over time. A decade ago, in the wake of the second Chechen campaign, Putin called Russia a staunch protector of Muslims. Whether in the North Caucasus or in the Volga region, Moscow has been relying on traditional Islam and moderate Muslim clerics to isolate Islamist radicals. With Russia’s Muslim population growing due to a high birth rate and migration from Central Asia and Azerbaijan, Moscow has had to pay more attention to the developments affecting the Muslim world: the Arab Spring, civil wars, sectarian strife, and outside interference.

In addition, as Russia reenters the Middle East, the Kremlin relies on domestic allies to carry out a number of diplomatic missions. Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov in particular has been active in gathering support for Russia across the region. Chechen-staffed units guarded a Russian engineering battalion that was sent on a peacekeeping mission to Lebanon following the 2006 war with Israel.¹¹ Kadyrov and the president of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov, were active in Moscow’s March 2014 attempt to reach out to the Crimean Tatars, an indigenous minority in Crimea that was important to placate as Moscow proceeded to incorporate the territory into the Russian Federation.

Putin—ironically, given his KGB background—is the Russian leader friendliest to the country’s Jewish community. This community has dwindled dramatically in the last quarter century as a result of mass emigration to Israel, but it still includes some of the leading lights of Russian culture, science, and the arts. Putin regularly meets with its leaders and often invokes the Holocaust. In return, they have helped the Russian president

establish close relations with the leaders of the World Jewish Congress and other influential organizations, particularly in the United States. In Putin's mind, the Jewish people are among Russia's most sincere allies in keeping the memories of World War II—and Nazi atrocities in Europe—alive.

Buddhism, the fourth indigenous religion under Russian law, stands somewhat apart. It is strongly present in only two Russian regions, Kalmykia on the Caspian Sea and Buryatia in eastern Siberia. The Kremlin respects both republics' Buddhist legacies and seeks to tie them into Russia's confessional diversity, while making it clear that visits to Russia by the Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of Buddhism, are not welcome lest they damage Moscow's relations with Beijing.

Countering Revolutionary Trends

In Putin's view of history, quality of leadership is measured not in terms of ideology but rather in terms of the attitude toward the Russian state. The czars of the Romanov dynasty, which reigned from 1613 to 1917, were of uneven quality as statesmen, but they were all—by definition—loyal to Russia, their realm. By contrast, Vladimir Lenin and his fellow Bolshevik revolutionaries were initially against the state and saw Russia as little more than a trigger for a world communist revolution. In the name of an imported ideology, they destroyed traditional Russia. Joseph Stalin was guilty of mass atrocities, but he was also a state builder who led the country's defense in World War II and then turned the Soviet Union into a superpower. His successors were of varying degrees of competence, too often unworthy of the country that they ruled, but Mikhail Gorbachev was most responsible for losing Russia yet again, ushering in the other major geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century—the crumbling of the Soviet Union.

Consistent with this general view, and in the context of Russia's political system, Putin often considers opposition to the existing regime to be tantamount to opposing the Russian state, even the country itself. He has even called this a tradition of sorts, going back over a hundred years. During World War I, the Bolsheviks wished for a Russian military defeat as a way to provoke a revolution; in 1917, Lenin returned to Russia from Switzerland with the assistance of the German military's high command, while Leon Trotsky came back with money collected by socialist sympathizers in the United States.

For Putin and his associates, preventing a new upheaval in Russia has been a principal concern at least since the 2003–2005 color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Moscow's responses to those revolutions were dictated not only by geopolitics but equally, if not occasionally more so, by domestic political considerations. Particularly consequential were the revolts in Ukraine: the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005 and the Euromaidan revolution of 2014, which Moscow officially treats as a coup. The Kremlin saw both as having been conceived, funded, organized, and guided by the United States. At best, the aim of those operations, according to the Kremlin, was to ease Russia away from strategically important areas on its borders, and through NATO membership, to turn Ukraine into a military base aligned against Russia. At worst, they were dress rehearsals for regime change in Moscow.

Within Russia, Putin has been lashing out at elites who oppose the government's policies and maintain close ties with or are sponsored by foreign groups. Since protests broke out in 2012, these radical opponents have been branded as internal enemies: “a fifth column,” “national traitors,” “foreign agents,” and the like.¹² “Liberal,” in the loyalists' rhetoric, has become a dirty word, and “opposition” means “enemies.”

Putin construed a link between the Russian liberal opposition and the interests of the country's foreign competitors, primarily the United States. Accordingly, he turned his attention to the foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations that engaged in “political activity” in Russia, a term very loosely defined. Under legislation approved in 2012, such organizations were obliged to register as “foreign agents.” That term was borrowed from the 1938 U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act but resonated with the popular Russian association of the word “agent” with the word “spy.” The stigma was meant to stick to neutralize foreign-funded protesters as agents of a foreign power.

After demonstrators scuffled with Russian police on the eve of the 2012 presidential inauguration, more stringent rules were applied to the public's activities, including demonstrations, rallies, and marches. Attacking police officers on duty was regarded as a particularly grave offense. The Russian state-run media branded the

radical opposition as U.S. stooges.

Even before that, in January 2012, leading Russian liberals were given an object lesson in patriotism. After a group of them had sat down with then U.S. ambassador Michael McFaul on his first meeting on the job in Moscow, the liberals were subjected to a fierce and highly personal campaign by Kremlin loyalists. McFaul himself, the architect of the Obama administration's reset policy, was branded a prime instigator of Russia's anti-Putin revolution. His successor, John Tefft, arrived in Moscow in August 2014 and was credited by the Kremlin-friendly media as the mastermind of the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, where he had previously served as U.S. ambassador.

Besides "naming and shaming" potential troublemakers, countering the revolutionary trends within Russia also required consolidating conservative—healthy, according to Putin—forces. Since 2012, the Kremlin has sought to rally those forces around a set of traditional values deemed better suited to Russia than Western ideological innovations.

Moving up to the higher echelons of society, Putin toyed with the general idea of raising the new elites through municipal self-governance, while disciplining the old elites at the top. Ideally, he has sought to promote new, more nationally conscious younger people to important positions while expanding his control over the political and economic establishment formed in the previous two decades. This policy is full of internal tensions and dangers, because the various constituencies that require the rotation of elite members are also key to preserving the stability of Putin's system of power.

Putin's essential statism and his reliance on the bureaucracy demand that the bureaucracy be protected from foreign influence. New regulations include a ban imposed in 2012 on owning assets abroad and a requirement to declare foreign property. Government officials are only permitted to have Russian citizenship, and they must report contacts with foreigners to the state. And military and police officers must seek permission to go abroad on vacation and other personal trips.

These measures are not exactly aimed at isolating Russians from the rest of the world—Moscow has not formally given up seeking a visa-free regime with the EU and even with the United States, however improbable that is given the post-2014 circumstances. But they do mean more official control in areas linked to national security.

And in a way, outside actions have helped Putin's efforts. When, as a result of the Ukraine crisis, the United States and its allies imposed further sanctions on scores of senior Russian officials, effectively barring their access to the West, Putin expressed satisfaction that the elites would be less vulnerable to foreign pressure and more controllable inside Russia. He even publicly commended the United States for sanctioning members of the Russian political and economic elites because it helped him with his own effort to nationalize them.

Paralleling his efforts to discipline the elites, Putin has sought to elevate their thinking and unify them—including some members of the intelligentsia—around a platform of state-centered patriotism. The Kremlin has revitalized certain organizations with a reach beyond Russia's borders, such as the Russian Geographical Society, the Imperial Russian Historical Society, the Russian Military Historical Society, and the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society. These societies are patronized by the president and chaired by top officials, such as State Duma Chairman Sergei Naryshkin, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. Putin has energetically supported efforts to provide Russian schoolchildren with a common view of their country's history. The adult population, meanwhile, has been treated to a rich menu of television series about the czarist and Communist periods, which have sought to show the complexities of Russia's historical path while extolling the values of patriotism.

The primacy of national sovereignty, with strong references to the patriotic wars that Russians fought against foreign invaders, most notably the German Nazis during World War II, chimes with the sentiments of most ordinary Russians, especially but not exclusively those who were educated during the Soviet era. The memory of the war against the Nazi invasion is elevated in Russia almost to the level of a secular religion. For Russia's government and most of its citizens today, honoring Waffen-SS veterans in Estonia, Latvia, or Ukraine who sided with the Nazis to fight Soviet communism and the Red Army is sacrilege.

Efforts to stress the “old glory” of the imperial and Soviet past also resonate with many because those ordinary people have become more cautious about the present and the future as a result of the 2008–2009 financial crisis and the growth stagnation that began in 2014, with the country sliding into recession. These efforts also signify an open and growing values rift between more traditionalist Russia and the increasingly postmodern European Union, suggesting a reversal of the dynamics that have prevailed since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet communist system.

Seeking Equality With the West

Since the beginning of his third term, Putin has sought to nail down the principles of equality and reciprocity in relations with his U.S. counterpart and the U.S. government. To the Russian president, full sovereignty demands both independence of Russian domestic politics from outside influence and Moscow’s diplomatic equality vis-à-vis Washington.

In his drive to minimize Western support for projects within Russia, Putin was consistent. He ordered a review of U.S.-Russian agreements, and he ended those that still listed the United States as a donor country and Russia as a recipient of U.S. aid. He did so even when that aid was provided to the Russian government, as it was in the matter of disposing of nuclear weapons to carry out treaty-ordered reductions. The Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, initiated in 1991 by then U.S. senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, was one such example. Similarly, Moscow ended agreements in which the United States was materially supporting Russian law enforcement agencies, particularly in the area of counternarcotics. For the Kremlin, government policies funded by foreign money were no longer tolerable.

Having freed itself from Western largesse, the Kremlin also decided not to allow anti-Russian moves in the West to go unanswered. In response to the 2012 Magnitsky Act passed by the U.S. Congress,¹³ which imposed sanctions on Russian officials suspected of human rights violations, the Russian parliament banned the adoption of Russian children by U.S. citizens, a practice that had been well established since the 1990s.¹⁴ At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs intensified its efforts on behalf of Russians who were seized in third countries on criminal charges at Washington’s request and then delivered to the United States, where they were tried and sentenced.

Where Moscow thought it necessary, tit for tat became an established practice. Several U.S. officials were barred from entering Russia.

When Putin realized in May 2012 that Obama would not come to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit hosted by Russia in Vladivostok due to the requirements of the U.S. presidential campaign, he retaliated by pulling out of the U.S.-hosted G8 meeting of the world’s leading industrialized nations at Camp David in the United States. He became the first leader to ever do this. Just before that, Putin had also declined to attend the NATO heads of state meeting in Chicago that was to have been held in conjunction with the G8 summit.

Exhibiting virtually the same logic as the U.S. president—that domestic issues trump foreign policy considerations—Putin explained his absence by arguing that he needed to work on forming a new cabinet, even though this was nominally the job of the new prime minister. Medvedev, however, was dispatched to Camp David to sit in for Putin. The Putin-Obama meeting did eventually take place in June 2012, on the margins of the G20 meeting of the world’s major economies in Los Cabos, Mexico, but it failed to establish a rapport between the two leaders.

The relationship was definitely not helped by the differences over Syria. There, Moscow was not simply taking revenge on Washington for Libya. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russia did not just protest against U.S. foreign policy; it actively opposed it. Moscow refused to accept Washington’s verdict on Bashar al-Assad’s regime and ramped up its own support for Damascus. Russia was only prepared to engage with the United States on the basis of equality and compromise, which was not the Obama administration’s idea of cooperation. The only time this worked was in 2013 on the issue of Syria’s chemical disarmament, when Putin masterfully delivered Assad’s acceptance after having stayed the U.S. president’s hand, preventing a strike on Syria. To some, this looked like a humiliation of the U.S. leader.

The U.S.-Russian rift over Syria was compounded by the case of Edward Snowden. The former U.S. government contractor arrived in Moscow in the summer of 2013 after leaking numerous classified U.S. documents to the media. Snowden's saga became a global test of national sovereignty for a whole range of countries. China sought to wash its hands of him; Latin American leftist regimes, under U.S. pressure, withdrew their early offers of asylum; and several EU countries closed their airspace to a Bolivian presidential plane, forcing it to land, because they were tipped off that it might have been carrying Snowden. By contrast, Russia was only prepared to hand over the fugitive to U.S. authorities if Washington agreed to a mutual extradition treaty—something the United States categorically rejected. When deciding Snowden's fate, Putin must have been imagining what the U.S. president would do if a Russian citizen with Moscow's secrets ended up at a major U.S. airport.

In the end, Putin appeared proud that Russia was the only country that did not bow to the U.S. government's pressure to hand over the contractor-on-the-run, risking Washington's full wrath. Putin was not even deterred by the prospect of Obama canceling a rare visit to Moscow and thus damaging their personal relationship still further. In February 2014, Obama and most Western leaders stayed away from the ceremonies associated with the Sochi Olympics, a \$50 billion project that the Kremlin had hoped would be a showcase of modern Russia. Later in 2014, Snowden's permission to stay in Russia was extended by another three years.

Foreign Policy Turns Eastward

Having restored control inside the country, stared down or co-opted the liberal, leftist, and nationalist opposition that demonstrated against his rule in 2011–2012, and made it clear that he was going to deal with his counterpart in Washington strictly on equal footing, Putin looked ready to reconnect with Obama by the summer of 2012. By that time, however, the United States was not the main focus of Moscow's new foreign policy—unlike during the preceding reset period, when high hopes were attached to the relationship.

In 2012, against the general background of Putin's sovereignization project, Russia began to pivot to post-Soviet countries in central Eurasia (with integrationist projects like the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union) and to Asia (with development projects in Siberia and the Far East and outreach to leading economies in the region, starting with China). These pivots were driven by Putin's desire to enhance Russia's independence from the West and build a more balanced relationship with both the United States and the European Union, as well as to benefit from the rise of China and East Asia to spur Russia's economic development.

During the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, Putin had already begun to favor regional integration with post-Soviet countries in Eurasia over integration with the European Union. As far back as 2004, Moscow and Brussels had reached an agreement on four areas of cooperation, but further integration soon stalled. Putin put forward his own idea of a "Greater Europe" during a 2010 visit to Germany, but it found few takers there or in Europe as a whole. Indeed, as early as 2009 the European Union was pursuing its Eastern Partnership project with six former Soviet republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Moscow interpreted this as a way to tie those countries more closely to the EU at the expense of Russia's interests in the region.

Disappointed by the EU's propensity to treat Russia as an object of its policies rather than as an equal partner, Putin decided to strengthen Russia's home base and build a power center in the middle of the Eurasian continent. A key part of Putin's response was his plan for a Eurasian Economic Union. This effort was not just economic; indeed, the word "economic" was only reluctantly and belatedly added to the name. To Putin, the Eurasian Economic Union was and remains an important means to stake out a space where Russia is still the most influential player. It could stop the advance of Russia's competitors—the EU in the west, China in the east—into former Soviet territory and create a better position for bargaining over the terms of engagement with those competitors, which are also partners.

Seeking to better balance Europe, Putin has begun paying more attention to Asia. This shift is necessary anyway due to the uncomfortable fact that Russia's most economically depressed and sparsely populated regions, the Far East and eastern Siberia, physically touch the world's most dynamic and populous one. Conversely, for the first time Russia has an opportunity to use Asia, not just Europe and the West, as a factor in

its own domestic modernization. Moscow is also fully conscious of the changing global economic and political balance, which favors East Asia.

Seeing the rise of the non-West as a positive development leading to a global environment with more checks and balances, Moscow has been eager to benefit from Russia's physical presence in Asia, including its long border with China and proximity to Japan and South Korea. The EU's slow recovery from the euro crisis has added to Russia's urge to rebalance and take into account Asia's growing importance.

Consolidating the Russian World: From Theory to Practice

This turn toward Asia, then, is an example of Putin's desire to solidify Russia's position both at home and abroad. But no recent issue has brought Russia's domestic and foreign policies as intimately together as Crimea and Ukraine. With this crisis, Putin turned the concept of a Russian world, until then a low-key, soft-power exercise, into a geopolitical project.

Throughout 2013, Russia's policies toward Ukraine were informed by the Kremlin's competition with the EU in its desire to bring Kiev into the Eurasian integration project. Putin first showed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich the stick in the form of losses that would be sustained as a result of Ukraine's choice in favor of association with the EU, and then Putin offered the carrot in the form of Russian credits, stimulating Ukraine's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union.

Yanukovich's suspension of the EU association process in the fall of 2013 was hailed by many Russian commentators as a major victory over the EU and the West; it would result in the emerging Eurasian Union, with Ukraine as part of it, reaching a critical mass of 200 million residents.

The victory turned out to be a purely tactical one. After protests began in Kiev in late November 2013, Moscow used them to send a strongly antirevolutionary message to the Russian people, aimed at convincing them that overthrowing the existing order was a path toward destruction, dictatorship, and misery. At the same time, Russia remained remarkably passive in Ukraine, counting on Yanukovich to cling to power or, failing that—which was initially considered unlikely—finding new interlocutors and partners within the Ukrainian political oligarchy.

The Euromaidan revolution in Kiev that reached a climax in February 2014, however, scrapped both scenarios. Faced with the prospect of a Ukraine led by the people who, in 2008, wanted to bring it into NATO (Arseniy Yatsenyuk and Yulia Tymoshenko), and by groups that represented virulently anti-Russian western Ukrainian nationalism (such as Svoboda, or Freedom, and Praviy Sektor, or Right Sector), Putin put contingency plans for Crimea and Sevastopol into action. He used the armed forces to secure them for Russia and then, in a truly audacious move, held a referendum there, which overwhelmingly supported the territories' accession to the Russian Federation. According to many accounts, this fateful decision was Putin's very own and can only be compared to the crossing of the Terek River in Chechnya in the fall of 1999, which represented the beginning of the second Chechen campaign. As a result, Crimea was incorporated into Russia without a shot being fired, and Putin's popularity among Russians skyrocketed.

Putin's other moves in Ukraine were less successful. Having branded the Euromaidan-installed authorities in Kiev as illegitimate and even fascist, Moscow began supporting the anti-Euromaidan opposition in Ukraine's Russophone eastern and southern regions, accounting for around half the country's territory and population. These efforts were undertaken without serious preparation, simply on the assumption that the Russian-speaking regions would instinctively rise to protect their Russian-world identity against Ukraine's western regions and Kiev's pro-Western elites.

This was a major miscalculation. Had Moscow seriously worked over many years to help Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the country's east and south find their voice to weigh in on national decisionmaking, it would have assisted in the development of regional elites to balance Kiev. By February 2014, however, it was too late. Moscow was left with a few pro-Russian activists who were willing to take up arms against the new regime in Kiev, amid a largely passive population—the equivalent of the Irish Republican Army operating without a Sinn Féin.

Operationalized as Novorossiia (translated as New Russia), which Putin mentioned in his March 2014 Crimea speech to parliament,¹⁵ the plan aimed to unify eastern and southern Ukrainian provinces, from Kharkov to Odessa, in their opposition to Ukraine's central and western regions and the new government in Kiev. Moreover, Putin vowed to defend the rights of ethnic Russians and those who identify themselves with Russia, wherever they might live.

The emphasis Moscow placed on the issues of language and ethnicity in Ukraine marked a dramatic change from its previous agenda of backing the territorial and political status quo and dealing exclusively with sitting governments toward a proactive policy of rearranging parts of the post-Soviet space where sizeable Russian minorities live. It appeared that Putin began to implement the ideas of the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who had proposed in 1990, before the fall of the Soviet Union, the creation of a Russian state on the territory of the then Soviet republics of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and the mainly Slav-populated northern part of Kazakhstan.

Neighboring countries with large groups of ethnic Russians immediately took note of the change in the Kremlin's policies. While the Baltic states sought support from their NATO allies, Belarus and Kazakhstan publicly insisted that they would keep full sovereignty even as they acceded to the Moscow-driven Eurasian Union.

Within Russia, Putin's popularity shot up to 87 percent in August 2014,¹⁶ one of his highest ratings.¹⁷ For the Russian public as a whole, Putin's policy of materially supporting armed anti-Kiev militants in the province of Donbas in eastern Ukraine while avoiding being drawn into a large-scale war against Kiev struck the right balance.

Putin's standing up to the pressure of the sanctions that the United States and the West imposed on Russia as a result of the 2014 Ukraine crisis won him additional respect among ordinary Russians, Putin's key constituency. In response to the sanctions, the Russian government took a series of protective measures. In March 2014, in response to a brief interruption in Visa and MasterCard's servicing of some Russian bank cards, Moscow decided to go ahead with a national payments system based on China's UnionPay model. Faced with a threat that it would be excluded from the international system of interbank payments (SWIFT), Russia started developing a domestic equivalent. When serious sanctions followed in the wake of the July 2014 downing of a Malaysia Airlines passenger jet in eastern Ukraine, which was immediately blamed on Russia, Moscow responded with a series of import-substitution measures, as well as its own sanctions against Western agricultural products.

With interdependence now seen as a vulnerability rather than an asset, Moscow has begun to use the sanctions as a stimulus for domestic production and other activities, such as technological research. It also intensified its efforts to secure Russia's segment of the Internet, for example, by legally demanding that all personal data on Russian citizens be kept on servers inside Russia.

The oligarchs—a misnomer ever since the early 2000s when Putin eliminated the tycoons' influence on policymaking—are less concerned with nation and state building. The house arrest in September 2014 of Vladimir Yevtushenkov,¹⁸ the head of the conglomerate AFK Sistema and one of Russia's richest men, has demonstrated that political loyalty is no longer enough: members of the elite are now expected to accept the business offers they receive from the Kremlin's allies. The shrinking pie calls for reapportioning assets, all in the name of national mobilization.

U.S.-led sanctions have even played a major role in helping Putin rally the Russian people around opposition to foreign pressure. The Russian public's attitudes toward the United States have grown decidedly negative. Patriotic mobilization has made it impossible to mount anti-Kremlin campaigns of the sort that Moscow and other major cities witnessed in the winter and spring of 2011–2012.

An attempt to protest against Putin's policies on Ukraine in spring 2014 was attended by several times fewer demonstrators than protests two years earlier. The so-called Moscow peace march in September 2014 drew a somewhat bigger group, but the authorities had no reason to fear political consequences from this. Local and regional elections across the country in the same month demonstrated solid support for pro-Kremlin candidates.

The outcome of such nation building through consolidation of the Russian people in response to foreign

pressure is open-ended. Putin will neither give up nor back off.

Looking Forward

Russia's political system is clearly czarist, and Putin is the leader closest to a present-day absolute monarch. But the Russian president is not as detached from reality as he is often portrayed in Europe. Rather, it is the current European leadership that operates in an environment with no parallel elsewhere. While Putin's liberal critics long ago lost patience with him, and some Russian elites may feel increasingly uneasy amid his drive to "nationalize" them, the president manages to stay in touch with ordinary Russian people. This fact, rather than government propaganda or various forms of manipulation, is the secret to Vladimir Putin staying in power—with the consent of the governed.

After seven decades of communism and two decades of official preaching of liberal values, Russian state—not ethnic—nationalism is now on the rise. Competition with the United States not only tests the strength of these nationalist leanings but can actually invigorate them. Once again, Russians feel threatened by the world's most powerful country of the day, and the response requires mobilizing all available resources, tightening discipline, and rallying around the national leader.

Putin calls himself Russia's top nationalist.¹⁹ His popularity will not stay above 80 percent forever, but for the foreseeable future the bulk of the Russian population is likely to stand by him, especially if Russia remains under attack in the form of sanctions and other restrictions. Should severe economic problems develop, the Kremlin can plausibly blame them on the economic warfare waged by the West. Putin can draw inspiration from the fact that the Russian people have been historically best at home defense, willing to sacrifice much for the common cause.

In the next few years, there is unlikely to be any letup in the U.S.-Russian confrontation. The United States will not accept Russia carving out a sphere of influence in its neighborhood. For its part, Moscow will continue to defy U.S. global hegemony and act in its own self-interest, guided by its own set of values and without seeking prior U.S. or EU approval. It will only agree to the norms and principles that are negotiated by all important actors and apply equally to them all.²⁰

But confrontation with Russia carries the non-negligible potential of a direct military collision of former Cold War adversaries, with unforeseen consequences. The situation in Ukraine in particular must not be allowed to escalate dangerously, and Russia and the West should forge a set of strategic confidence-building measures to prevent a clash. Moreover, while official communication between the Kremlin and Western government offices is exceedingly difficult and mutual trust is nonexistent, reliable channels of communication need to be built and credible dialogue partners found on both sides to avoid miscalculation. The West will have to promote engagement and resist by all means the urge to shut Russia out and put pressure on ordinary Russians. While Russia's integration with Europe and the West more broadly as originally designed is off the agenda, ways must be found to open the door even more widely for people-to-people exchanges.

Now in his early sixties and having spent fifteen years at the pinnacle of power, Vladimir Putin is increasingly concerned with his legacy. He probably sees his mission as much more than avoiding a new revolutionary catastrophe in the mold of 1917. He is determined to return Russia to the top as a key member in a new global system of checks and balances, succeeding the present U.S.-dominated order. For Putin, Russia should remain, above all, an independent and influential nation, but for that it must become much stronger than it is now. The issue is how to acquire that strength.

In the near and medium term, apart from defense-driven reindustrialization and import substitution in response to sanctions, Moscow will have to lean closer to Beijing. China is the only major world economy impervious to U.S. calls for sanctioning Russia. Yet, Putin will seek to minimize Moscow's one-sided dependence on Beijing by developing ties to other BRICS countries—Brazil, India, China, and South Africa—starting with India. Russia's long-term objective is establishing equality with all major centers of power: China, Europe, and the United States.

This will be hard. In Beijing, scholars talk—and some officials probably think—that multipolarity is just an empty

phrase due to the lack of multiple poles, now or in the foreseeable future. In reality, the world is moving toward new bipolarity, this time between the United States and China, with all other countries aligning themselves with either of the two poles. Thus, Europe and Japan would side with the United States, and Russia would go to China.

From the Chinese perspective, Russia is not an all-round “major power.” It has territory, resources, and a sizeable nuclear arsenal, for all that is worth today, but it lacks real economic strength. Unless it deals with this massive deficiency, Russia will not be able to play in the top league. And, given the present circumstances, it will have nowhere to go other than to China. Exit Greater Europe stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, enter Greater Asia reaching from Shanghai to St. Petersburg.

What Russia needs is to turn inward if it is to avoid squandering its resources and ultimately losing its cherished independence to China, if not to the United States.²¹ It needs a new, national class of elites that is based on meritocracy and devotion to the country and its people, not proximity to a leader or membership in particular clans. It also needs fair and transparent domestic regulations that are based on the rule of law and backed by independent courts and a professional law-enforcement apparatus that is free of corruption. The demonopolization of the Russian economy is also key, including streamlining profligate and inefficient state corporations and supporting responsible private businesses at all levels. And Russia should build up a modern science-technology-education complex and administrative system that is accountable to the public.

The question is: Will Putin use his immense political capital to embark on the hard path of modern nation building or will he prefer the comfort of Kremlin control, which will gradually become more and more elusive as the problems mount? An alternative would be creating a semi-isolated national regime under one leader that would hardly survive its creator. Indeed, the stakes cannot be higher.

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