



Russia on the Move

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To the casual observer, Russia is stuck where it was a decade ago. Vladimir Putin has once again assumed the presidency and any semblance of organized political opposition largely faded away after the March elections. But popular protests persist, and the existing politico-economic system can no longer adequately address the shifting social realities inside the country or the challenges of the global environment. The system must change if Russia is to develop further, and Moscow's policies of economic modernization alone are neither sufficient nor possible without political reform.

Though most of these reforms are taking place on a domestic scale, Russia's changing character has broader implications—especially for Europe. The European Union is searching for ways to extend its strategic depth into Eurasia, and Russia would be a valuable partner in that endeavor. But to forge an effective partnership with Moscow, the EU must first understand Russia's political, economic, and security designs, and how best to deal with another round of Putin.

European leaders need to look beyond the usual stereotypes of Russia and realize that it is not neo-Soviet and neo-imperial, and it is not on a path toward inevitable stagnation and certain decline. They must also understand that Vladimir Putin is a transactional, results-oriented politician who will bargain hard to get the best deals he can. Europe would be wise to make use of its strongest soft-power tool: liberalization and a gradual phasing out of the visa regime between the Schengen countries and Russia.

Political change in Russia, however, will be domestically driven. While Europeans are free to offer value judgments and comment on Russian developments, they would be wise to stay away from Russian politics. And the countries that lie between the EU and Russia should be viewed primarily in terms of their domestic evolution, not as sites of competition for spheres of influence.

The European Union's common foreign policy strategy should include Russia—but not merely as a source of energy and raw materials, an object of European human rights and democracy discourse, or even a field to exercise European soft power. If the EU can begin to think strategically about Russia, it will begin to emerge as a global strategic player.

The Russian Awakening and the Putin Presidency

Vladimir Putin began his third term as president in May 2012—his fourth term in a top Kremlin position—but his inauguration did not usher in a new era. That watershed was reached after the State Duma elections in December 2011 and was marked by mass anti-Putin demonstrations, mainly in Moscow but also in other cities across the country. Street demonstrations, of course, are a transient phenomenon whose momentum cannot be sustained indefinitely, but the change they signified is palpable. The previous formula of Putin’s rule, “authoritarianism with the consent of the governed,” no longer holds; that consent has been partially withdrawn.

By the official count, Putin received over 60 percent of the votes in the March presidential election, and he probably did in fact get well over 50 percent of the ballots nationally. But in the capital, his support is, even officials admit, below 50 percent. The Kremlin’s tacit pact with Russia’s conservative popular majority is still intact; Moscow continues to deliver public goods and the conservative majority votes for the leaders and legitimizes their continued rule. But the other unwritten pact, with the modernized minority of the population—the Kremlin promises not to interfere with those Russians’ pursuits and they in turn stay out of politics—has frayed, probably beyond repair.

Precisely those Russians who under Putin have enjoyed virtually unlimited freedom of self-expression and self-fulfillment are now broadening their vision to include civic values and political issues. With many of them, the private no longer trumps the public—a phenomenon not confined to Moscow. According to the respected Levada Center, an independent polling organization, around 30–35 percent of Russia’s population nationwide now has a negative opinion of Putin’s rule. By comparison, between 40 and 45 percent of Russians still stand by Putin, down from absolute majorities before 2011.

To respond to this abrupt and widely unexpected change, the Kremlin moved swiftly to modify its method of governance. It has made it easier to register political parties and is bringing back direct elections of governors, although both come with notable restrictions. It has stopped ignoring protests as non-events and has even allowed some opposition viewpoints to be aired on state-run television. And it has mobilized its own supporters to publicly counter the opposition and reached out to various groups of less radical or hard-line opponents, offering them buy-ins into the system through, for example, consultative mechanisms.

At the same time, it has sought to strengthen its own instruments of power: control of the key electronic media, the law enforcement system, and the political machine. The Kremlin is pushing back against its political opponents and remains generally in control, a new course that Kremlin supporters call “flexible

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stability.” In essence, the idea is to preserve the existing political system through both partial or token concessions and targeted repression.

The opposition, in contrast, looks weak and divided. It still has no credible leadership, no strategy, and no recognized moral authority among its ranks. So far, it has proven unable to capitalize on the mass protests and turn the Kremlin’s reluctant concessions into a political opportunity. The Communist Party is passive and ineffectual, still saddled with its veteran and long-tamed leader Gennady Zyuganov. A Just Russia is fragmented, torn between Putin loyalists and genuine opposition supporters. Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, having attracted much of the liberal constituency to come in third in the presidential elections, has all but disappeared from public view, reinforcing the suspicion that he was brought in by the Kremlin to play the part of opposition during the vote and then fade from the scene promptly. The announced formation of a new liberal party has been postponed indefinitely.

Meanwhile, the non-systemic opposition—the opposition that is not represented in the Duma and is seeking to end the “Putin regime”—is becoming ever more radical. It has rejected government-proposed political reform as window dressing. Liberal and left-wing radicals have instead chosen to continue to press the authorities by organizing street rallies. They hope that a combination of a deteriorating socioeconomic situation, the further discrediting of the corrupt political order, and growing Putin fatigue among the elite will create a revolutionary situation in Russia, resulting in the collapse of the czarist presidency. Kremlin supporters warn that, should this actually happen, it could lead to a replay of the 1917 revolution and a new national catastrophe.

Widespread discontent with stifling corruption and mass vote rigging has not gone away. The recent wave of civic protest by the relatively affluent big-city middle classes—mostly professionals, entrepreneurs, private sector managers, and other members of the post-industrial economy—could be followed by a uptick in socioeconomic demands from the less well-off across the country should their material condition deteriorate. The governing party, United Russia, now formally under Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev’s leadership, has far from recovered from the losses sustained during the Duma elections last December.

Opposition candidates have already won mayoral elections in the midsize cities of Togliatti and Yaroslavl, and the flawed election in Astrakhan was turned into a national media event when an opposition candidate and his supporters protested a United Russia victory, even resorting to a hunger strike. With the scheduled hikes in tariffs on public services and, inevitably, pension reform, new political activists are sure to emerge as local political leaders. A stress test for the Putin majority looms, and Putin is hardly ignoring it.

Governing is certainly becoming more complex. The political elite have not yet split with Putin, but they have taken note of their leader’s cracking Teflon

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coating. Putin's own electoral majority, meanwhile, does not want change but will have to face it. And Putin is struggling with his own popular image as the benevolent provider for his people at home and a tough guy abroad.

If Putin cannot handle all of these moving parts, he risks being seen by the elite as less of an asset and more of a liability. Should that happen, the elite will probably not follow the model of the color revolutions in Ukraine or Georgia by splitting with Putin in favor of some challenger, mainly because they fear that one clan will become too powerful at the expense of the others. A more probable scenario will be for the elite to work to limit Putin's power and strengthen deal-making institutions, which will better guarantee their continued survival. This could be Russia's path from an absolute monarchy to a limited one.

Russia is half awake and will not slide back into slumber. The clock cannot be turned back on the Kremlin's political concessions, which have already brought major changes to Russia's 80-plus federal regions. In mid-2011, United Russia began holding regional primaries for its national candidates. Now, the regional elite are gearing up for gubernatorial elections, which will be held starting in October. The elite will be trying to win back some of the authority they lost to the central government at the beginning of Putin's first term. Because they will be directly elected, however, they will be accountable not just to the Kremlin but to the voters as well. This may spur genuine political competition at the regional level, reinvigorate political parties, and, over time, even start transforming Russia's current political model of a "federation of corporate clans" back into a "federation of the regions," or more likely a combination of the two. The Moscow Duma election in 2014 will be a particularly important test.

It is thus not a given that Putin will win another term and rule through 2024, and it is not clear exactly how he will rule until the end of his current term, which expires in 2018. But the real nature of the change is murky. How and from where change will come, when it will happen, or what forces, and in what proportion, will be the primary beneficiaries of the change remain uncertain. Bumpy and haphazard—rather than gradual—evolution toward a more open political system remains the best but not the only scenario.

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Economic Policy

The legitimacy of Putin's renewed rule will be tested by his government's economic performance. The cabinet Putin has formed, nominally under Medvedev, is composed of technocrats and will be closely supervised from the Presidential Administration at the Kremlin. Putin understands the challenges ahead. The Russian economy is currently projected to grow between 3 percent and 4 percent in 2012, down from 6–7 percent per year before the crisis. Still heavily dependent on the price of oil, Russia feels the impact of eurozone's

woes, China's slowdown, and America's sluggish recovery. In fact, these external factors may bring Russia itself to the brink of stagnation.

Yet, Putin is not lacking in ambition. He has called for the creation of 25 million high-technology jobs by 2020, an increase in the rate of investment to 27 percent of the gross domestic product by 2018 from the current 10 percent, an increase in the high-technology sector's share of the economy by 30 percent in six years, and an uptick in labor productivity by 50 percent in the same period. He also seeks to elevate Russia from 120th to 50th place on the World Bank's Doing Business Index by 2015 and to 20th place by 2018. Moving up so significantly would require a massive overhaul in a number of functional areas, starting with the notoriously sluggish Federal Customs Service, and it will be impossible without a drastic reduction in the level of corruption.

Putin's popularity—and ultimately his power base—hinges on his capacity to fulfill his massive campaign promises of social spending, which amount to 1.5 percent of the GDP. At the same time, Putin's political priority is a balanced budget. So far, high oil prices have helped the Russian economy, but, unlike in the past decade, they will not be enough to assure success. To balance the budget today, the price of oil must be at least around \$110 per barrel; that target was \$40 in 2007. A prolonged period of sluggish or zero growth in Europe and the deceleration of the Chinese economy could decrease both the oil price and the volume of Russia's energy exports, which would be destabilizing, both economically and socially. Putin realizes that and has ordered contingency plans for the possible drop in the oil price to \$80.

Putin's larger goal, however, is to change the structure of the Russian economy. His plans to diversify Russia's economy center on the idea of state-promoted reindustrialization. He has prioritized several areas: aerospace, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, shipbuilding, electronics, and agriculture. A separate priority is the development of Russia's Far Eastern and Siberian provinces. To be successful, these plans demand investments and technology transfers from advanced economies, primarily European Union countries. Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization in mid-2012 is an important step toward closer economic relations with the EU.

Putin's other priority is attracting the world's leading companies to Russia, particularly in the energy field. In the recent weeks, new agreements have been signed with America's ExxonMobil, Italy's Eni, and Gazprom is negotiating with Norway's Statoil, France's Total, and the Anglo-Dutch Shell. Additionally, Putin hopes to build a more solid economic foundation for Russia's relations with the United States and to strengthen relations with Europe's powerhouse, Germany. In the Asia-Pacific region, Moscow prioritizes economic ties to China, Japan, South Korea, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, India, and Australia.

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Security Policy

For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has embarked on a major rearmament program, worth nearly 600 billion euros (23 trillion rubles). Moscow sees its immediate threats coming from the radicalization in the Muslim world in the south and so will focus its conventional forces on that region. The Russian military and security agencies are already bracing for the impending withdrawal of U.S./NATO forces from Afghanistan. Instability in Pakistan, the ongoing crisis in Syria, and a possible U.S./Israeli attack on Iran promise more instability and the rise of radicalism along Russia's southern frontiers. Within the Russian Federation itself, the North Caucasus remains a source of religious militancy, insurgency, terrorism, and violent crime. Against this backdrop, the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi are a serious security concern.

Islam is deeply politicized across the entire North Caucasus. Sharia law is increasingly applied not only in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia, but further west in the regions of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Adygeya. In all these areas, the mosque has become the center of social and political activity. Traditional Islam is being challenged by more radical trends that draw support from a significant portion of the population—estimated, for example, to be up to 40 percent in parts of Dagestan and between 300,000 and 400,000 people across that republic. The radicals, whose goal is the creation of an Islamic state, take on the local authorities and the more traditional religious leaders.

Even though the security situation has improved in Ingushetia and stabilized in Chechnya, it has worsened in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. In fact, the North Caucasus is still gripped by a low-intensity civil conflict, with a few thousand Islamist fighters active in Dagestan and around a thousand each in Chechnya and Ingushetia. Measures taken by the federal government, antiterrorist operations conducted by special forces, economic projects undertaken to create employment, and political dialogue held with the opposition have been only partially successful. It is important to note that while the radicals call for the separation of the North Caucasus from Russia and the traditionalists prefer to stick with Moscow, both aim to Islamize society—whether by creating an Islamist state next to Russia or an Islamist enclave within it.

But strategically, the United States is still Russia's de facto main potential adversary: Many influential Russians suspect that Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, not Barack Obama, reflects the U.S. establishment's real views on Russia. In their analysis, U.S. global missile defense efforts bespeak a consistent desire to neutralize Russia's nuclear deterrent and make the country vulnerable to U.S. non-nuclear strategic weaponry. A U.S.-Russian agreement on missile defense, if it is reached in a second Obama term, could thus defuse a looming crisis in the relationship. However, a failure to agree could lead to deeper and more pronounced hostility. In today's geopolitical context, that

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would probably mean Russia drawing further away from the West and closer to China, amounting to a major geostrategic shift on a global scale.

Putin and the Russian political elite as a whole do not fear China. However, while almost never stated explicitly, if Beijing's foreign policy takes a more nationalistic turn, China's growing military could be a cause for concern in the future. As things are, China's focus is not on Russia, at least in the near to medium term. Given that, a U.S. refusal to address what Russians regard as their vital national security interests—protecting the Russian deterrent against U.S. missile defense—may make Moscow consider the U.S. threat as increasingly real, and seek to counterbalance it through closer ties with Beijing.

Foreign Policy

Putin's long-term goal is to restore Russia's role as a great power among a half-dozen or so all-round big players in a polycentric world. He sees Russia as a strategically independent actor, particularly vis-à-vis the two biggest powers of the twenty-first century: America and China. In terms of military power, Putin sees Russia as one of the Big Three alongside Washington and Beijing.

Given that overall goal, Putin's foreign policy strategy has evolved over the years. In his original incarnation, Putin I sought an alliance with the United States and NATO in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The manifesto of that period was Putin's October 2001 Bundestag speech, delivered in German. Putin II reversed course and Russia withdrew from the orbit of the West. Eventually, growing mutual alienation led to the war between Russia and NATO-aspirant Georgia. That period's salient piece of oratory was Putin's Munich speech of February 2007. Putin III was formally Medvedev's term, but the paramount leader definitely approved every major move, such as the U.S.-Russian "reset" and the EU-Russian "modernization partnership." On historical reconciliation with Poland, Putin personally led the way.

Putin the foreign policy pragmatist is not guided by some ideology or carefully thought-through strategy. His overall goal is to make Russia strong. More of a tactician and a trained operative at heart, he responds to challenges and looks for opportunities. Thus, what a Putin IV will be in terms of foreign policy does not wholly depend on the man in the Kremlin. It also hinges on his counterparts, particularly those in Washington, Beijing, and Brussels.

By now, Putin's preferred method of promoting and defending Russian interests is essentially balancing among the principal players. That is illustrated by Russia's simultaneous membership in institutions such as the G8, the BRICS, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and by Moscow's attempt to create a Eurasian Economic Community both to turn Russia into a magnet for its near neighbors in Eurasia

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and to increase its bargaining power with the EU, Moscow's most important economic partner.

Putin's idea of a greater Europe as a single economic and humanitarian space "from Lisbon to Vladivostok" (which might mean continental Europe only) is based on the notion of cooperation, essentially, between the EU and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community. His vision of Russia is that of a leader and magnet for "all Eurasia." The idea of integrating with Belarus and Kazakhstan makes sense economically for Moscow, but it has little traction as a means to create a new political union. Minsk and Astana welcome the broadening of their countries' markets, but they are as unwilling as ever to give up major chunks of their national sovereignty to their former imperial capital. Moscow, for its part, will hardly agree to complete equality with its much smaller partners within the new union. The prospect of bringing Ukraine in is bleak because Ukrainians fear that integrating too closely with Russia would erode their country's sovereignty. That might be just as well; economically and politically it makes much more sense for Moscow to deal with Kiev as an outsider than as an insider.

Even though Russia's role in the global economy and financial markets is modest, Moscow values its membership in the G20 and the G8. It will host the G20 summit in 2013 and the G8 in 2014, seeking to highlight Russia's importance as a global player. Of all international bodies, however, Russia's favorite is the United Nations Security Council, which it promotes as the world's highest political body and where it wields veto power and can block measures to which it objects. In the future, Moscow will insist that no major decisions on the use of force are taken without the Security Council.

On Syria in particular, Russia argues against a Libya-style military intervention in the country. Moscow also insists that outsiders refrain from interfering in changing other countries' political regimes. And it has a less-than-rosy view of the Arab Awakening generally, seeing the uprisings as a popular movement that brings forth Islamists and, in their tow, radicals and even terrorists. Russia's Security Council veto on Syria in February 2012 was thus aimed at blocking both foreign intervention and the ouster of Bashar al-Assad under outside pressure. As long as those two conditions are avoided, Moscow is prepared to cooperate with others looking for ways to prevent a full-blown Syrian civil war and to help engineer a political settlement, giving full support to Kofi Annan's peace plan.

Moscow's view of Syria has less to do with human rights per se than with geopolitics. Russia, of course, also wants to keep control of at least some of its material interests in Syria. Initially it hoped to achieve this by banking on Assad's defeat of the opposition. Now the same goal is thought to be achievable through facilitating some kind of a domestic settlement in Syria proposed by the international community, with Russia playing a role. The Syrian issue has underlined a divergence between the West on the one hand and Russia and

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China on the other on matters such as national sovereignty, humanitarian issues in domestic conflicts, and international intervention.

Moscow believes that only a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue is acceptable. It has reservations about the use of sanctions, seeing them beyond a certain point as counterproductive. Should there be a military attack on Iran by Israel and the United States, Russia can be expected to strongly condemn it. The Kremlin will not take Iran's side, but it will sympathize with the Iranian people and seek to limit the damage it could suffer from a possible upsurge of anti-American feelings.

The forthcoming leadership change in Beijing notwithstanding, Russia will maintain close relations with China. Moscow is not worried about China's continued rise, since the Russians see the Chinese leadership as overwhelmingly preoccupied with China's domestic agenda. They note Beijing's recent assertiveness but also that it is mainly directed eastward and southward. Where Chinese and Russian interests compete, as in Central Asia, Moscow seeks to bolster its position through promoting various forms of post-Soviet integration, such as its Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan or the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Russia is not shy about competing with China where it has a chance to hold what it regards as its own. Russians, however, will not do anything that could make China revisit its generally benevolent attitude toward Moscow. Seen from Beijing, Putin's return to the presidency will make Russia's foreign policy more predictable and balanced—that is, less focused on relations with the United States and Europe.

Policy Recommendations

Before developing policy, the European Union should attempt to understand Russia's domestic sociopolitical developments, its economic opportunities, and the implications of its evolving foreign policy posture. European leaders need to look beyond the usual stereotypes of Russia as neo-Soviet and neo-imperial and to drop the illusion that Russia is gradually liberalizing to be “like Europe” in order to “join the West.” The Putin regime being suddenly overpowered by a revolution led by Russia's thoroughly modernized and pro-Western liberals is not in the cards; there will be neither a return to the Soviet Union nor a Russia within the EU or NATO. Similarly, expectations of Russia's inevitable stagnation and certain decline need to be revisited and checked against available evidence.

In reality, Russia is moving forward but faces a very uncertain future. Change is, above all, socially driven: the middle classes are already on the move, to be followed by broader and poorer constituencies across the country and ultimately the elite. The Left and the nationalist Right are rising; the liberals are habitually disunited; and the largely conservative center is weakening. The resources of Putin's system are being exhausted, and new political crises are ever more likely.

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Living next to such a neighbor, Europeans should be watchful, broaden their civil society dialogue with Russia, keep the lines of communication open with all major protagonists, and support Russian institution building and the rule of law. But they must avoid taking sides in political battles in Russia.

Meanwhile, European leaders must deal with Vladimir Putin, putting the focus on attainable, practical results. To be effective, they need to understand his agenda, his methods of carrying it out, and his resources. Putin is a transactional, results-oriented politician. He can be an important and valuable partner, but he will bargain hard to get the best deal he can. Despite the increasingly complex and complicated nature of ruling Russia, Putin still has all the domestic authority he requires to pursue his foreign policy objectives. Primarily focused internally, Putin will often employ Medvedev as his ambassador-at-large, especially with Western leaders.

The EU would benefit from finalizing its long-stalled new basic agreement with Russia that seeks to improve economic exchanges between the two powers. Russia's imminent accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Putin's economic modernization agenda create, in principle, the right environment for tightening economic relations. In the first instance, however, the EU must closely watch and assess Russia's compliance with WTO rules and Moscow's willingness to use WTO membership as a driver of structural reforms. Eventually, the EU should stimulate Russia's efforts to win accession to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and in the long term, the EU should consider the possibility of establishing a free trade area with Russia.

Moscow has accepted and will continue to adopt many European norms and regulations, but EU membership for Russia is not an option. While the Europeans will not accept Russia's ideas of equal relations between the EU and the Moscow-led Customs Union, they need to at least acknowledge the changing geoeconomic dynamics in the former Soviet Union. Europeans need not think of the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union proposed by Putin as a reincarnation of the USSR. While these efforts naturally complicate EU-Russia relations, Europeans should strive for the maximum amount of progress that can be achieved with Russia bilaterally. At the same time, they should view Russia's economic integration with Belarus and Kazakhstan pragmatically and seek to stimulate the voluntary efforts of those two countries along with Russia that would promote modern economic institutions to the EU's east.

The EU will also benefit from progressive humanitarian rapprochement with Russia, whose cultural roots lie in Europe. Millions of Russians who visit Europe and return home appreciate the practical value of the rule of law, property rights guarantees, and government accountability to the citizenry. While many of these Russians would not want or be able to adopt all European ways, their collective basic interests can help make Russia more compatible with the EU over time.

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And the EU's power of attraction for the states of Eastern Europe, including for Ukraine, is still considerable despite the present euro crisis. But these countries are not sites of competition with Moscow for spheres of influence. Europeans need to view the future orientation of the countries that lie between the EU and Russia primarily in terms of their domestic evolution. The relevant choices about whether to move closer to the EU or Russia will eventually be made locally.

The European Union and Russia also need to upgrade their foreign and security policy cooperation. Protracted conflicts in Moldova and the South Caucasus are natural areas for EU-Russian cooperation on conflict resolution. It is clear, however, that even if they act jointly, the EU and Russia cannot impose solutions. Once again, key decisions will have to be made locally.

The European Union's evolving common foreign policy strategy should include Russia—but not merely as a source of energy and raw materials, an object of European human rights and democracy discourse, or even a field to exercise European soft power. A partnership with Russia would, in the long term, provide a rejuvenated European Union with strategic depth stretching across Eurasia similar to the reach across the Atlantic that Europe has gained through its alliance with the United States or in the Middle East through Turkey. If the EU can begin to think strategically about its relations with Russia, it will begin to emerge as a global strategic player.

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