



Putin's last term: Taking the long view

by Ian Bond and Igor Yurgens

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Relations between Russia and the West are likely to be characterised by distrust, mutual fear and confrontation for the remainder of the Vladimir Putin era and probably for some time after. But as the Cold War showed, both sides should accept it is in their interests to talk to each other in order to reduce tensions and avoid escalation, even if there's no agreement. That's the key conclusion of a new paper by the Centre for European Reform, '[Putin's last term: Taking the long view](#)', which takes an in-depth look at Russia and its relations with the West, from both a Western and a Russian point of view.

Putin faces many challenges – the economy is not performing as strongly as he said it would at the start of his previous term in 2012, and remains closely tied to the fortunes of the oil and gas sector. The reforms and investment needed to modernise the economy appear unlikely. Russia's population is declining and aging. And there is also a looming question about leadership when Putin's term ends in 2024, and whether he will seek to remain in power.

The Russian authorities have tried to boost their domestic support by portraying the country as a fortress besieged by enemies. Putin has pursued a confrontational foreign policy, with military action in Ukraine and Syria, destabilising cyber and intelligence operations, and increasing tension with the West. But he has shown he can sometimes work with other nations, for example to curb Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions, and has courted China and talked to Germany and France about the conflict in Ukraine. At the same time, Putin has proved to be adept at exploiting divisions within and between Western countries. Regardless of whether there was collusion with Donald Trump, Russia found ways to influence the US election narrative. Even though Russia has been hit with sanctions over its role in Ukraine, and the use of a chemical weapon against former spy Sergey Skripal, its international influence has grown.

Nevertheless, Russia should consider whether its interests would be better served by developing more co-operative and less hostile relations with its neighbours. Relations with the West would also benefit from more discussion, even if agreement seems impossible. There are lots of areas of mutual concern to talk about from security, nuclear arms control, and cyberspace, to less contentious areas like climate change and healthcare. For their part, Western nations need to be open to the possibility of improvements in relations with Moscow – isolating Russia diplomatically is neither desirable nor possible, even if Trump's approach to Russia and US allies has made a co-ordinated Western approach more difficult.

"Putin faces a range of economic and social problems at home in what should be his last term. No-one knows whether he will succeed in dealing with them, or manage a smooth transfer of power to a successor. But in dealing with Putin, Western policy-makers need to act as though nothing will ever change in Russia, but also be ready for everything to change overnight," said Ian Bond, director of foreign policy at the Centre for European Reform, and co-author of the policy brief.

"We have lost almost all the usual channels of communication between Russia and the West. Current diplomacy is not working. It is time to come up with something better than deadlock", said Igor Yurgens, Chairman of the Management Board at the Institute of Contemporary Development in Moscow and co-author of the report.

Note for editors:

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