

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

Dmitri Trenin, Carnegie Moscow Center, March 2015

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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.

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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.

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