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## What do we do about Russia? – Part 1



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“Putin’s demonisation is not a policy but an alibi for the absence of one”

Henry Kissinger

### Summary

*Relations between Russia and the West are in their worst state since the height of the Cold War. A paranoid, resentful Russia faces a West whose assertion of global authority is tainted and slipping. We are in a dangerously escalating cycle of (ineffective) Western sanctions and (increasingly egregious) Russian provocations. Western hopes that the fall of Putin will turn things round are unlikely to be fulfilled. Our problem is not just with Putin, it is with Russia. And, as confrontation with China becomes the central issue in global politics, Russia is being pushed to the Chinese side.*

### The Problem

Things have gone badly wrong between Russia and the West over the past thirty years. The expectation when Communism fell was that Russia would become a normal European nation, a market economy, a democracy, and a constructive contributor to the international order. As Russia diverged from this path so Western hostility grew; initially through political coldness, then through several rounds of economic sanctions, and, most recently, a couple of proxy wars in Ukraine and Syria (the latter of which prompted Russia to remind the West that it has a nuclear option). As things stand there is zero trust and minimal communication between the two sides; and no real sign – at least between the principal players, the US and Russia – that anyone is looking for a way out. UK exasperation at the failure of the early hopes was rather superbly summed up in the operational conclusion of the recent House of Commons Intelligence and Security

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Committee (ISC) report on Russia – “The UK as a Western Democracy cannot allow Russia to flout the Rules Based International Order without commensurate consequences”.

### Two Narratives

How have we got here? The Western narrative is clear. Russia did indeed start hopefully as it emerged from the rubble of the USSR. But through a sort of historical recidivism it abandoned democracy in favour of increasingly oppressive autocracy; diverged from a market economy to a much more state dominated, hydrocarbon dependent, and corrupt model; and turned into a serial bully of its neighbours and breaker of international norms. Important milestones have been the 2006 murder of Alexander Litvinenko, the 2008 Georgia war, the 2014 seizure of the Crimea and war in the Donbass, the intervention in 2015 to support the appalling Assad regime in Syria, and a growing wave of cyber intrusions and assaults – notably in the 2016 US Presidential election (whose unforgivable consequence in the eyes of many Americans was the election of Donald Trump). Most recently we have seen the poisoning this August of Russia’s most effective opposition politician, Alexei Navalny, which, even if Putin didn’t directly order it, certainly came out of the darker recesses of the Russian State.

The Russians of course see things differently. In their view Russia, largely as the result of Western economic advice, collapsed in the 1990s into penury, international humiliation and near anarchy. They needed, and found, a strong leader to pull them out of the mire and reestablish international respect. He, Putin, essentially succeeded in this task, however unpleasant his political techniques, and has enjoyed the gratitude of most Russians since. Meanwhile the West took full advantage of Russian weakness. The charge list is long: the illegal Kosovo war, the expansion of NATO (having promised not to), moral support for the brutal and violent Chechen insurrection, a further illegal war in Iraq, support for the Georgian attack on Russian peacekeepers which provoked the 2008 war there, overt and explicit support for large popular demonstrations in 2011/12 demanding Putin’s departure, support for the overthrow in 2014 of the democratically elected President of Ukraine (forcing the Russians to intervene to protect their interests in Crimea and the Donbass), and a series of inept and illegal interventions in the Middle East which simply boosted Islamism – notably in Syria where a fundamentalist outcome was only stopped by the Russian intervention to save Assad. All of this has left a massively outgunned and outdollared Russia (with GDP and defence spending about one twentieth of those in the West), convinced that the West’s ostensible commitment to democracy and human rights is in fact cover for a determined effort to bring down Putin and weaken the Russian state. As they search for affordable means to show that there is still a cost to taking them on, they have increasingly turned to cyberattacks, overseas murder and electoral interference.

The point about these rival narratives is not which one is true. Both in fact have glaring weaknesses. Russian paranoia about Western aims, and readiness to engage in almost nihilistic international hooliganism in order to be taken seriously, is one clear example. But, on the other side, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the West following its victory in the Cold War committed similar errors of indifference and humiliation towards Russia as it did towards Imperial Germany in 1918. Certainly the Western habit of regularly breaching the international order while expecting lesser nations such as Russia to be firmly bound by it has not helped. No, the point is

that each narrative is seriously believed by its proponents. The result, as noted above, is that trust and indeed communication between the two sides is now at least as bad as at the worst moments of the Cold War. We have found our way to a quite dangerous escalatory spiral; accumulating Western sanctions on one side are met by a rising tide of Russian provocations on the other.

### Russia's Putin: Putin's Russia

Western policy towards Russia is obviously not improving Russian behaviour. When I ask friends in London and Washington what we are actually achieving I am regularly enjoined to "strategic patience". This seems to mean two things. Firstly, a realistic acceptance that it is now politically impossible for Putin and his regime, even if they wished to, to retreat under Western pressure. And secondly the confident expectation, implicit in virtually every Western political commentary on Russia I read, that Putin's style of government cannot last much longer, and will be replaced by something much easier for the West to live with.

There are some grounds for this expectation. The ordinary Russian has seen his living standards stagnate for a decade (partly because oil prices are low; but official rapacity, corruption and lack of rule of law all also play a part) and is about to take a big further hit from the pandemic. Putin's leap in popularity from seizing Crimea has faded. He has now been in charge for twenty years; young Russians know no other ruler, and have no memory of the chaos which preceded him. The young, the liberal and the urban are increasingly ready to demonstrate against the regime and have on a growing number of occasions forced official retreats on local acts of injustice or maladministration (long running demonstrations on behalf of the local governor in Khabarovsk, which the government can't contain and doesn't want to repress, are a good current example). Putin's political party has become unresponsive and corrupt (and has been enduringly dubbed the "Party of Thieves and Swindlers" by Navalny). It now faces sharp losses and maybe (despite the inevitable ballot fixing) even defeat in next year's elections. If, as at the time of writing looks possible, Belarus succumbs to democratic revolution that will add to pressures for the same in Russia. And finally Putin himself is visibly bored with most aspects of his job, seems increasingly disengaged (notably with regard to dealing with the virus) and has allowed an entirely uncharacteristic feeling of slackness to appear in some of the ways Russia is currently run.

But there are good reasons why regular bursts of Western optimism about Putin's political demise have so far not come to fruition. The evidence is that even with the depressed economy, the coronavirus, and the fading of the Crimea effect, a significant majority of Russians continue to back him. He after all is still the man who on coming to power stood Russia back on its feet, tamed the oligarchs, defeated the Chechens, brought order back to the streets and saw off humiliation by the West. The impression that even the most effective of his opponents lacks national resonance has been rather reinforced by the absence (so far) of any mass reaction to Navalny's poisoning. Putin's polled popularity rating has never fallen far below 60%. Two recent electoral tests - the 2018 Presidential election, and a constitutional plebiscite in July this year potentially extending his rule until 2036 - both gave him majorities of close to 80%. You have to aim off for the ballot rigging, but few believe the fraud can be so extensive as to invalidate these results entirely. And what the results point to is a Russian people, driven by restored national pride, memories of state collapse and fears of a hostile world, who support the President they have got.

The other key source of Putin's power is his domination over Russia's ruling elite. He is not a dictator (and sometimes loses policy arguments) but presides as umpire over a bunch of squabbling clans (security agencies, liberal economists, state enterprises etc). This is a crucial role and requires real political skill if the balance between rival forces is to be maintained. When it was thought in 2008 that Putin was leaving, the whole system nearly imploded. So, barring a sharp deterioration in political circumstances, the elite is solidly behind him – not because they all endorse everything he does but because they fear what would happen if he went.

Putin's long term survival is not guaranteed. All autocratic regimes are to some extent brittle. Some unexpected spark (Belarus? A fatal long term collapse in oil prices?) could provoke the outburst of mass protest which could bring him down. The regime is very aware of this possibility, is constantly on the lookout for foreign interference which might fan the flames (to which it views its own external electoral interference as a legitimate response), and has set up domestic forces to contest the streets on its behalf if needed. That's the emergency brake, but even without it the central realistic expectation has to be that, unless he decides to go voluntarily, Putin will be around for the duration, and will be able to pass on the succession to someone in his own image. We in the West may like to think we merely have a Putin problem. In fact what we have is a Russia problem. And it would be prudent to expect that problem to be with us for the foreseeable future.

Part 2 will follow on 29 October.

*An earlier version of this essay was published by the Global Strategy Forum.*

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