



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Russian Elites and Why They Matter

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Mainstream analysis of Russian foreign policy decision-making often neglects to factor in the influence of the Russian elites. Despite the inclination of the current Russian government to centralize, elite groups continue to exert considerable influence. Their support for the government is crucial for Vladimir Putin, and their disenchantment with him would be fatal to his rule.**

Russia might be economically weak, but it is nevertheless one of the world's major geopolitical players. To varying degrees, almost every Eurasian state's foreign policy depends on what happens in, and to, Russia.

Problems in the Russian economy might be causing reverberations in neighboring and geopolitically weak states of the former Soviet space, but this is not a long-term problem. What should concern us more fundamentally are internal developments within the Russian ruling class, changes in the government, struggles among powerful groupings, and relations between the civil and military branches.

In other words, we need to pay closer attention to the elites that govern the country and therefore control its foreign policy. Russia's internal situation often has a bearing on foreign policy, a dynamic we would be wise to heed.

To be sure, watching developments within a country's ruling elites is crucial for almost every modern, geopolitically active state. But with Russia, it is even more important to do so. Political power in the country does not derive from the people, as it does in European democracies, but rather from powerful security and military agencies that enable the central government in Moscow to control large swathes of territory, often in hostile geographic conditions.

It is often believed that Russian rulers, whether during imperial (Romanov) or Soviet times, wielded ultimate power over the fate of the population and the governing elites. The same is thought to be true of Vladimir Putin. Westerners often portray him as sole ruler over all affairs both Russian and non-Russian. True, Putin is powerful, but he gained that authority by balancing several powerful groups of interests. They include military, economic, security, and cultural factions, as well as numerous smaller factions inside each of those larger groups.

Many might find it hard to believe that the Russian president balances rather than rules. But in general, Russian rulers – despite the country's historically autocratic models of government – have always had to pay attention to changing winds among the country's elites. If things go badly, the elites might stay silent for a while out of fear of oppression, but eventually they always try to influence the government. If that does not work, they do not hesitate to abandon the sinking ship.

Russian history shows how powerful the elites are and how vital is their support for a government.

Take, for example, the Romanov dynasty before WWI. At that time, there was great disenchantment among the elites with the way the government was operating. When Tsarist rule failed in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 and WWI, the result was swift: the elites turned their backs on the Romanovs, and the empire ceased to exist in 1917.

Perhaps an even better example is the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. By that point, it had become established in the hearts and minds of the ruling Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, and other governing circles that the idea of a common state had failed.

Nowadays, Russia has big problems ranging from economic to educational to purely geopolitical, and there are signs that the country's elites are growing worried about Russia's prospects. If, before the Ukrainian crisis, there was still hope of a European-Russian rapprochement in which Russians modeled themselves on Europe, that idea is now dead. Along with social and foreign policy troubles, the Russians are also experiencing a spiritual problem.

Too many serious issues have accumulated during Putin's rule, and there is a growing understanding that his path is not taking Russia to a particularly good place on the world stage.

This brings us to the pivotal question of what Russia will be like after Putin. Is a change to the status quo possible? Many developments suggest that it is

plausible. Considering how many problems have built up, and how difficult it has always been for Russian elites to act openly against the government, it is possible that once Putin is out, infighting among the elites will take place with consequent reverberations in foreign policy. This is not wishful thinking on the West's part, but rather a conclusion reached through analysis of Russian history and mentality. Changes at the top of government, whether peaceful or otherwise, almost always have an impact on the foreign and internal situation.

Russian elite groups still influence many developments in the country. Their support for Putin's government is crucial for maintaining general order, while their disenchantment with him would be fatal to his rule. Russian elites bear close watching.

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