



PERSPECTIVES

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Putin's 20th Anniversary as the Leader of Russia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Vladimir Putin's government might be proud of many internal as well as foreign achievements, but strategically, Russia has fallen well behind the West. Putin is partly to blame, though titanic shifts in world politics and Russian history have dwarfed his ability to influence events. Russia's geography and poverty also limit his ability to pull off grand reforms inside the country.

This month marks Vladimir Putin's 20th anniversary at the helm of the Russian state. (He was nominated as president on December 31, 1999, but had become prime minister in August of that year.) Before that, he was head of the state security apparatus. Putin's rise was meteoric, and it led him directly to the Kremlin.

Twenty years of rule is remarkable for any leader, and Putin has much to be proud of. Under his rule, Russia rejoined the club of global decision makers. The country's economic situation has improved exponentially. The fight against terrorism inside Russia has been largely successful, notwithstanding the attacks that took place at the beginning of Putin's tenure in the early 2000s. The Russian army has also improved its position. Moscow's influence has expanded to Venezuela, the African continent, Syria (where Russia had had a presence dating back to the Soviet era), and other locations.

Russia waged war with Georgia in 2008, annexed the Crimea, and instigated unrest in eastern Ukraine, all of which were indications of a resurgence of strength. These events occurred after the demoralizing 1990s, when, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, misery and deep instability swept Russian lands. Thus it is not surprising that Putin's actions made him popular among the people (for the most part).

But his popularity is also anchored to his actions at a much higher level – the geopolitical battle he has waged with the West over the arc of states running from the Baltic to the Caspian and the Central Asian states (inclusive). This battle echoes the efforts of the Romanovs and the Soviets, and is thus profoundly meaningful to much of the Russian public. Putin defended Russian state interests – even when faced with unfavorable Eurasian geography, an unstable economy, long land borders that are vulnerable to enemy attack, internal nationalism, and the expansion of NATO and the EU, as well as the rise of China.

In a way, Putin can be compared with Mikhail I, the first Romanov ruler, who stabilized the country after the terrible “Time of Troubles” of the late 16th-early 17th centuries – or even with Lenin, who steadied a devastated Russian state after WWI. In those cases, too, the task facing the ruler was not only stabilizing the internal front but also thwarting foreign invasion.

Putin’s actions along these lines define the Russian meaning of “crusade” – in other words, taking the battle to the country’s archenemies. He has thus been praised by many Russians as a crusader: a true defender of the nation. And indeed, he has succeeded on many fronts. In addition to improving the Russian economy and military posture, Putin stalled the EU/NATO membership bids of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

Much of his success came in the first half of his tenure (2000-08). The second half has come under considerable stress, the result not so much of bad policy as the inevitability of Russia’s systemic failure.

Putin is often regarded as all-powerful, and all Russia’s failures are attributed to him. But in the context of Russian state development over the past five centuries, Putin has faced the same foundational problems all his predecessors did.

We like to suppose that because Russia is big, it should also be rich. (Canada, for example, has similar geographic parameters and is a prosperous state.) Few pay much attention to the fact that the hostile lands of northern Eurasia are terribly difficult to tame, limiting their potential to contribute to the accumulation of wealth. Only around 35% of the Russian landmass is available for massive agriculture – an exceptionally low figure. The climate is extremely unfriendly. When massive wildfires – the size of Belgium – broke out recently in Siberia, the government was unable to get vital resources to the epicenter to fight them, showing how underdeveloped Moscow’s capabilities are.

But geographical and climate challenges are only the beginning. Russian leaders have to contend with contentious ethnic minorities inside the country as well as unstable neighbors along the borders, making it difficult for them to be democratic and develop the country economically. When Russians set out

to accomplish the latter, the steps they take are often largely tantamount to establishing a dictatorship. One could argue that Stalin started the bloody collectivization not because he was a dictator, but because Russia was so poor that the only resources available were people.

This leads us back to Putin. Notwithstanding his successes, he will still be remembered as a mid-level Russian leader on a par with Alexander II, Alexander III, Brezhnev, and others. Stabilizing the economy and bringing order might be brilliant feats, but Russian history is much more nuanced. Order isn't everything.

Every Russian ruler has faced the problems of an underdeveloped economy, backward technologies, and a creaky state apparatus. These factors spill over into every aspect of life in Russia and cause discontent. Putin knew this all too well. But he did not respond as Peter the Great or Stalin might have done: accumulate the resources required to pull off massive industrialization and bridge the gap with the more advanced West.

Putin's personal traits differ from those of Peter and Stalin, and the time may not be ripe for such radical policies. But a historic chance was missed when Putin, having accumulated prestige and money in 2000-08, declined to embark on a massive reorganization of the Russian state.

As Russian history shows, that kind of radical restructuring would have required a much stricter mode of rule (nearing dictatorship). Putin's choice not to go down that road was the tipping point at which his prestige began to decline – not necessarily according to the popular polls, but among the progressive elite, which demanded reforms in every sector of the state.

Thus began the second half of Putin's rule, when pressure from the population started to grow. The first signs were visible in 2012, during the Bolotnaya protests. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 somehow quieted the situation, and high oil prices benefited the country sufficiently to allow the mood of protest to diminish somewhat. But as the situation worsened – both economically, with the drop in oil prices, and in terms of foreign policy, as reflected in Western sanctions as well as the gradual shift towards China – Putin's rule became more heavy-handed.

Moreover, a major myth in Russian history has largely come apart: that the ruler (tsar) is always good and benevolent, while his ministers are bad and always to blame for the country's ills. This myth prevailed under the Romanovs as well as the Soviets. Tsars and Soviet general secretaries were supreme leaders. Many mechanisms were used to distance them from the bureaucracy, their ministers, and the people. When strategic blunders occurred, the rulers were shielded

from the mistakes. This model worked under Putin for a while, but began to change – and now the entire system is associated directly with him.

Many analysts pay close attention to Putin's approval rating, but it does not reflect the true picture. Even if Putin enjoys 90% popular approval, his troubles remain undiminished. Russia's strategic aims are still not met.

We should focus not only on the current protests (though they are important: 50,000 people turned out on one weekend day in August). Nor should we focus solely on issues like discontent about the government's raising of the pension age. Russia's real problem is its inescapable fate, which Putin is powerless to change.

Added to the grand theme of internal Russian politics is the foreign front. Russia has lost much of Eurasia under Putin's rule. Though it is fashionable to dwell on Moscow's successes and growing influence in Syria, Venezuela, and Africa, the real source of Russia's geopolitical power is Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. It is in those lands where Russian power has undergone huge changes. The loss of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and Moscow's diminishing economic influence in Central Asia, all took place during Putin's rule.

Putin's 20th anniversary, though a magnificent achievement, is nevertheless tainted by fundamental problems that are rooted in both Russia's historical cycles and his government's blunders.

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