



## PERSPECTIVES

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### Russia's Troubles in 2020 Will Be Close to Home

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: From a foreign policy standpoint, Russia should be fairly secure this year. In the Middle East, its main competitors will remain divided; while on a global scale, the self-absorption of the US and the EU should give Moscow some breathing room. Internally, however, Russia will face major challenges. As its economy continues to lag, domestic protests should increase across the country, as will the need to improve quality of life.**

In a change from recent years, internal developments in Russia are likelier to be far more significant for the country this year than geopolitical shifts across Eurasia.

It is likely that little will change in terms of Russia's relations with the West. Though work on the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline in the Baltic Sea will continue and France (as well as other European states) might support improving contacts with Russia, major geopolitical problems like Ukraine will continue to block any true flourishing of bilateral relations.

Moreover, the EU is likely to maintain economic sanctions and raise its economic profile among the pro-western former Soviet republics.

All indicators point toward Moscow-Washington relations remaining strained—indeed, they may well prove more troublesome than Russia-EU relations this year. The US will keep its sanctions on Russia and might even introduce new ones against various Russian companies and individuals.

But there are limits to the deterioration of Russia-US relations. The US presidential election is coming up in November, and the country will be fully absorbed in domestic politics for the whole year. With Trump focused on getting reelected, his administration will have little incentive to ratchet up tensions with Moscow. Also, Washington will want Moscow in its corner vis-

à-vis Iran. If Tehran persists in undermining US positions in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, Washington will want Russia to put pressure on the Islamic regime. This represents an opportunity for Moscow to enhance relations with the Americans.

One front where the Russians could achieve a major win is Belarus. Minsk, which is under immense pressure from Moscow, will find it extremely difficult to deny the Kremlin major concessions regarding the unification of state structures.

The year 2020 should also see further military and economic cooperation between Russia and China. The countries should remain aligned on most strategic questions, such as keeping a unified front against US influence in Eurasia. With Iran-US relations continuing to be tense, both Moscow and Beijing will try to build cooperation with Tehran. First signs of this were visible even prior to Qassem Soleimani's killing, when the Iranian, Russian, and Chinese defense ministries held a trilateral military exercise.

Syria will remain a significant element of Moscow's Middle East strategy. The two major pillars underpinning the Russian presence in the region—Turkey and Iran—will be a focus of Kremlin diplomacy, but this cooperation is unlikely to result in formal agreements on strategic cooperation. Here, too, as in the case of Russia-China relations, the basis of the trilateral cooperation will be a general animosity toward the US presence in the Middle East.

As far as Israel is concerned, Russia is likely to maintain its existing level of cooperation. Minor squabbles will emerge from time to time, but Moscow will continue to work with Jerusalem on security and military issues involving Syria. It is in Russia's interest to do what it can to keep Israel from getting more deeply involved in the already overcrowded Syrian geopolitical landscape.

Beyond taking up the opportunity to build deeper relations with Iran presented by the killing of Soleimani, Russia is also likely to enter the Libyan quagmire, at least to an extent. This is not to say it will embark on a direct military involvement on a par with the 2015 intervention in the Syrian conflict. The probability is a larger Russian diplomatic involvement coupled with perhaps a dispatch of non-official—i.e., mercenary—troops to Libya.

These foreign policy developments are not insignificant, but neither are they particularly groundbreaking. It is more important to watch what will be unfolding on Russia's internal front in 2020.

This year will be characterized by an increase in the mood of protest across the country. This will be a continuation of 2018-19, when citizens from many major

Russian cities protested, albeit in small numbers. As Vladimir Putin's rule nears its 2024 conclusion, domestic pushback will likely mount.

A rising mood of protest will reflect the ongoing dire condition of the Russian economy, which is not projected to grow for another several years. A scheme of enormous national projects introduced and sponsored by the Russian government to stimulate economic activity across the country is also not producing the expected results. In fact, even if all the projects are completed, the Russian economy is unlikely to be significantly affected.

Thus, internal problems will loom large on the Russian political agenda in 2020. A critical challenge peculiar to the Russian state throughout its history—a lack of infrastructure to increase connectivity across the unfriendly terrain—will gradually re-emerge as an important factor.

This year will also see more questions asked about 2024, officially Putin's last year in office. In keeping with standard procedure, it is unlikely that any clear statements will be made pointing toward specific scenarios. But there will be hints in the media as well as political moves to suggest what might happen after 2024. One possibility is a changing of the state constitution, about which talks began in 2019.

Russia in 2020 will likely face a stable, even secure foreign policy front in which divisions among major Eurasian players will benefit Moscow. More troublesome will be the internal agenda: social and economic problems coupled with a rising mood of protest across the country.

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