

'Russia Is Being Used As a Meme in U.S. Politics' — An Interview With Fyodor Lukyanov

Political scientist Fyodor Lukyanov on Russia's place in the world.

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Since Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014, it has come under fire for propping up the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria and meddling in elections.

To help shine a light on Russia's view of deteriorating ties with the West, The Moscow Times spoke with Fyodor Lukyanov, chief editor of Russia in Global Affairs, a foreign policy journal.

There is a view in the West that Russia is a re-emerging superpower with nefarious intentions. How does Russia view its own resurgence on the world stage?

Yes, reading Western press or statements made by Western officials, you could be left with the impression that Russia is expanding its presence abroad and that President Vladimir Putin wants to implement a completely different world order while destroying the Western, liberal rule-based system.

But this isn't reflected in the behavior of Western powers. Even though there is a very tense relationship with, say, the United States, Germany, France or even Britain, their policies don't reflect the view that Russia is a significant threat.

Look at Donald Trump, for example, and his behavior vis-a-vis Russia. No one would treat a superpower the way he does, canceling meetings last-minute by tweet, despite the fact that the previous tweet two hours ago said exactly the opposite. This is not the way emerging superpowers are treated. Trump, for instance, can't afford to do the same with China. He treats Beijing with more respect.

As an aside, the concept of superpowers dates back to the Cold War and is outdated. Even if we think of the United States or even China as superpowers today. Russia certainly isn't one, because it lacks resources. And even the United States is losing its status.

What I see unfolding is something else entirely. What I see is an attempt by Western officials, particularly in the U.S., to use Russia as an instrument in their political conversations back home. Russia has become a kind of meme in very brutal infighting in U.S. politics. A meme is a passive object of someone else's will.

Even if Russia wanted to improve relations with the West — and I think that the Russian leadership is interested in de-escalating tensions — it would be difficult. Whatever Russia does, positive, negative, even nothing at all, it is being used as part of political processes within Western countries.

When you are another country's powerful opponent or even an enemy, there is a framework for both sides to interact. Real confrontations like the Cold War are, in a way, a joint project. Being someone else's meme makes you almost helpless. So, Russia is in a very unfavorable position.

Recently, Russia has been expanding its presence in the Middle East and Ukraine, among other regions. Does Moscow have the economic or military resources to sustain its expanding role abroad?

Yes and no. First, I wouldn't overestimate these advances. Yes, Russia's move in the Middle East was pretty bold. It was a pretty efficient investment; the Syrian operation didn't cost very much. In 2015, when the operation started, no one in Moscow expected that by 2018 Russia would universally be seen as the most powerful country in the whole Middle East. As far as resources are concerned, both the Russian economy and its military forces can sustain this strategy.

Ukraine is a burden, of course. The situation in the east is deadlocked and relations with Kiev are absolutely awful. Russia is trying to limit the damage and keep the confrontation under control, which is difficult. But for now it has no other choice.

Neither of these cases is exhausting Russia's resources. But, taken together, it does add up. I don't see available resources to significantly extend Russia's role in Libya or Afghanistan, for example.

What can fatally limit Russia's capacity to act abroad is U.S. sanctions. That is, if the United States decides to use all the means it has, because the American ability to harm other countries, including Russia of course, is almost unlimited. The country that controls the international financial system can paralyze almost anybody.

Will Putin's falling approval ratings influence foreign policy?

I don't think so. Yes, Russians are increasingly preoccupied by domestic problems, whether it's the retirement age or rising inflation or fuel prices. Society is not improving and people are no longer optimistic. The question is whether people will connect these problems with Russia's foreign policy and, personally, I don't think they will. The danger is not that pensioners will suddenly say "Enough is enough. Stop Syria. Stop Ukraine! Give us our money back!" It would be worse for the Kremlin if Russians started to relate the country's poor economic performance to the authorities' inability to tackle corruption. Before, Putin was beyond the reach of these frustrations, but now, he is more involved personally and more often. And this means his political potential could be affected.

Broadly speaking though, many Russians who are unhappy with their lives are proud of Russia's advances in the world, especially as those advances are promoted on state-run television every day.

This is likely to be Putin's final term. Do you think questions surrounding his successor will have an impact on Russia's presence abroad?

We can look at Russian history to see that personnel changes do matter. There could be extremely significant fluctuations, even if there is an orchestrated and smooth change in leadership.

Traditionally, Russia's foreign and domestic policy was measured based on the relationship with the West. That was the case in the late Soviet Union and in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

But what's happening now? There is a fundamental shift in which the West is no longer the political, economic or technological centerpiece of international development or innovation. And this is unusual for Russia because it removes the traditional paradigm where all changes were either pro-Western or anti-Western, closer to Europe, further from Europe. It is not relevant anymore.

Europe is distracted by internal problems, while Asia is rising. We might welcome the Chinese rise, we might fear it. But this is a fact of life. Russia can't afford to still be European or Western-centric. And I think this is the profound story of change that might happen, regardless of who the next president is.

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What changes are you expecting to see in Russia's foreign policy in 2019?

As long as Putin remains in place, there's no reason to expect profound changes in Russia's foreign policy. For one, he's not that young anymore, and his strategies on the eastern, western — on all fronts, actually — don't leave that much room for maneuvering. What's more, Putin has been demonized in such a way that I cannot imagine the West being ready to engage in efforts to change the relationship with him.

What will happen later is another issue. I think we might see big changes earlier than we think. But considering the pace of politics today, it's pretty meaningless to try to speculate what those changes may be.

A version of this article appeared in our special "Russia in 2019" print issue. For more in the series, click [here](#).

Correction: due to an editorial error, an earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to Russia in Global Affairs as a state-funded journal.

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