

What Russia After Vladimir Putin Might Look Like

The country's future might not be so dull as its present, according to the Free Russia Foundation.

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June 04, 2019



Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Vladimir Putin's Russia has, outwardly at least, been one of the world's most stable and predictable regimes – an assertive authoritarian government propped up by a mix of repression and acquiescence at home.

So it's only natural that some of the country's leading analytical minds are looking to life after Putin is scheduled to depart in 2024: The present is too depressing to discuss.

The Free Russia Foundation, a Washington-based think tank chaired by former Assistant Secretary of State David Kramer, has just published a 170-page [report](#) what the country might look like in 2030. The authors include some of the most insightful anti-Putin commentators today: political analyst Alexander Morozov, media expert Vasily Gatov, economists Vladimir

Milov and Vladislav Inozemtsev, social anthropologist Denis Sokolov and energy expert Ilya Zaslavskiy.

While the report makes no attempt to mask the authors' clear differences of opinion, there is some consensus about the key points of tension in Russia's immediate future. These are:

- **Russia will still depend on energy exports.** For all the talk of reducing the country's reliance on oil and gas exports, they accounted for 40 percent of budget revenue in 2017, up from 25 percent in 2000. But this model will be challenged by the rise of electric vehicles, increased competition in the global natural gas market, and declining demand for coal, Russia's third-biggest export commodity. None of the report's authors expect that energy dependence to be overcome, but nor do they foresee an energy crisis before 2024. But if the price of oil drops below \$30 for a sustained period, Western sanctions may become too burdensome for any successor regime.

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- **Russia will increasingly come under China's sway.** The alliance between the two countries will strengthen, with Russia supplying more raw materials and China industrial goods. The two countries' extensive military cooperation may be bolstered by their increasing alignment against the U.S. In the most likely scenario discussed in the report, Russia will become a Chinese satellite, boosting its military power and gradually allowing its domestic market to be subsumed. Both Western sanctions and the U.S. confrontation with Beijing make this outcome likelier, despite the domestic unpopularity of such an alliance.
- **No high-cost military adventures, but watch Belarus and Kazakhstan.** None of the authors expect Russia to make any militarily aggressive moves against the Baltic states, but Belarus could be an attractive, and domestically popular, target if Putin wanted to stay in power beyond 2024 as head of a unified state. Separately, the slow leadership succession in Kazakhstan is likely to pose a threat. If the neighboring state chooses to align itself more closely with China or Turkey, it would strip Russia of one of its vaunted security buffers. Thus the report's authors see Belarus and Kazakhstan as more likely targets for Russian meddling than any other country, if only because they are uncertain about Moscow's true military strength and the potential domestic popularity of armed aggression. Recent victories in Ukraine and Syria were against only weak adversaries. The military remains underfunded, and any losses would likely be extremely unpopular.
- **No elite rebellion.** Here, the range of views is broadest. Some authors expect growing disloyalty toward Moscow on the regional level, while others are pessimistic. The latter believe all parts of the establishment, from business to the military, are too invested in the status quo to rebel. In a country where private firms accounted for 70 percent of economic output in 2004 and state companies control 70 percent of it today, both the sticks and the carrots come from a centralized source. None of the authors expect Western sanctions can cause any faction within the Russian elite to rebel against Putin because his regime is so effectively coup-proofed: The military is effectively controlled by Putin's people.

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The picture that emerges from the report is one of a mature, stable system geared toward a relatively smooth succession when Putin moves on. For the West, the best outcome would be if a still authoritarian and highly centralized Russia decided, out of self-interest, to be less outwardly assertive, giving up on the eastern Ukraine project and abandoning attempts to sow discord in the West through propaganda and cyber activity.

Rationally, I'm with the report's authors on most of this. Putin has changed the country so that it's unrecognizable to someone who lived there in the tempestuous 1990s. His incessant work to make abrupt, violent regime change extremely hard has led to the construction of an inflexible, ossified system bound in equal measure by fear and corruption. While this system doesn't make better relations with the U.S. impossible — a successor would merely need to make a few specific concessions — such a thawing wouldn't change much for Russia itself.

But on perhaps a less rational level, I don't believe ordinary Russians should be discounted to quite such a degree. The current localized protests — against [plans](#) to build a church in a public park, or against a [giant landfill](#) right next to a residential area — hardly qualify as harbingers of a revolution. But to anyone who saw Russians rebel in the final years of the Soviet Union, the grim, fearless energy of these protests is instantly recognizable. Given the regime's largely exhausted ability to engineer visible improvements to living standards and its increasing environmental damage, a violent eruption of discontent in multiple cities at once cannot be ruled out in the medium term — whether or not Putin is still leader when it happens.

Better-oiled suppression and co-option machines than Putin's have been jammed by such eruptions. It's an outcome worthy of more consideration than it gets in the Free Russia Foundation report; it's the free Russia scenario, after all.

In that event, none of the current geopolitical calculations would be valid. It would be a chance for all the major players, both Western and non-Western, to try and forge a new relationship with Russia more wisely than they did the last time the opportunity arose almost 30 years ago.

This article was originally published in Bloomberg

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