

• Author: [Anton Barbashin](#)

[The Kremlin Remains Fixated on its Relations with the US](#)



Vladimir Putin will certainly win next month's presidential elections, which will usher in another six-year term. Putin's pre-election proposals, in comparison with those he made in 2012, are not wide reaching. His statements this time round contain few [big promises](#) and it is hard to decipher much of a vision. Any intrigue ahead of these elections is mostly to do with the [sanctions lists](#), the [secret visit of the heads of Russia's security services to the US](#), and the uncertainty around future Russian-American relations. The issues of domestic policy have been, for the most part, pushed into the long grass.

It is worth noting that presidential elections in Russia are held on the almost the same day as the fourth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea. Since that moment, Russia has sought to move away from the West, minimizing any dependence it might have had on Europe and America. But to what extent has this actually happened?

Pivoted away to the East?

Despite the rhetoric at all levels of power in 2014-2016, Russia has never managed to replace the West with the East. [Limited success](#) in finding loans for state corporations, increased imports from China and moderate progress in developing relations with Japan and South Korea prove the limits of the resources that the Kremlin has at its disposal, rather than serving as proof of any vast pivot.

In a sense, the pivot to the East has hit [the same problems](#) that previously curtailed cooperation with Western countries. Namely, the lack of confidence in the protection of private property, the concerns over the limited independence of Russian courts and, in general, the absence of a transparent environment for doing business. So there are few investors rushing in from the East. Countries in the Asia Pacific region like Japan and China have companies that still work according to the same business principles as those in the West — they require acceptable and transparent conditions for investment, which help them accurately report back to their shareholders. Currently, the Kremlin is capable of achieving success only with the direct participation of the heads of the states involved and in most cases, the beneficiaries are state corporations. This is not enough.

In terms of geopolitical joint positioning with China to build a "multipolar world", the victories have been mostly propagandistic. China turned out to be a much more cautious and rational partner than Kremlin had hoped for in 2014-2015. Even if we discard China's economic activity along the entire perimeter of Russia's borders from Kyrgyzstan to Belarus, which to some extent lowers Russia's economic role for these countries, China remains extremely cautious in supporting Russia, whether that is on issues like Crimea or Donbas, or assisting in Russia's view of how to resolve the Syrian conflict. Beijing does not help in mitigating the sanctions issue either, the significance of which is increasing from year to year. Moreover, there is no doubt that if Western (and in particular) American sanctions become tougher, China ([and not only](#)) will primarily think only of itself, avoiding any possible risks that will follow from working with sanctioned entities, banks and individuals. Four years after the annexation of Crimea, it becomes obvious that no matter how weak the West might have seemed, the United States in particular, the rules of the game are still formulated in large by today's so-called "former world hegemon".

To divide the West

In parallel with building partnership relations with China, Kremlin had actively tried to drive a wedge, both in the transatlantic unity of the EU and the US, and between individual EU countries. One should specifically mention a number of attempts to influence the outcomes of elections in a number of EU countries: direct support for Marie Le Pen in France, close relations with Miloš Zeman and unambiguous contacts with the "Alternative for Germany" among others. Undoubtedly, the topic of Russia's intervention in European politics is speculative. Against the backdrop of actual operations to support the "proper political forces" one can now see an almost indiscriminate attribution to the Kremlin of any defeats of liberal democracy in the region. Let's be honest, the crisis of liberal democracy is not a direct achievement of the Kremlin, although it does not contradict Kremlin's desire to use all weak spots possible. Nevertheless, the Kremlin has failed in achieving a significant success — a Europe immersed exclusively in its problems. And the pressure of sanctions does not get any weaker, despite many attempts to move the issue from today's dead end, both through proposals for a "big compromise", and via lobbying work through individual European countries and politicians who are unhappy about the sanctions due to some losses for business interests.

It should be noted that, perhaps, the only valuable victory for the Kremlin in the matter of the division of transatlantic ties was the situational "alliance" with Turkey to resolve the Syrian issue. But here it is worth remembering that alliances of autocrats, even if they share the same values, are rarely long-term (remember the episode with a downed Russian fighter for a sign of how fragile trust remains between the two countries). Nevertheless, today there is now a NATO member, Turkey, that behaves more like a "Russian insider", striking both the unity of the organization and complicating the US's tactical capabilities in the region.

The West is no longer united, but its non-unity is not a result of the Kremlin's actions, and has not been to the benefit of Russia. As for resolving the issue of Donbas without Washington, Moscow's attempt to negotiate some sort of agreement with Europe directly, while avoiding the United States has failed. Moscow is increasingly returning to the early 2000s, when its political future on the international arena was associated almost exclusively with Washington. Although today's agenda, putting it mildly, is quite different.

Washington is Moscow's best enemy

Just a few months before Putin's re-registration for a new presidential term, there are fewer and fewer hopes that Moscow can do without Washington. The Ukrainian crisis can only be resolved with the Americans (Volker-Surkov); the resolution of Syrian crisis is impossible without some sort of coordination with America (or at least reducing the costs of Russia's participation in it); saving the Russian economy, and a good half of Russian elite from even great sanctions shock once again can be achieved only with Washington's goodwill. All of this must be done under conditions of unprecedented toxicity of the topic of Russia in Washington, with pressure coming from Congress to expand the sanctions regime.

It does not matter whether Moscow likes it or not: the United States will become the central theme of Russian foreign policy for years without any significant chance to shift the foreign policy priority away from it. If for the past 3-4 years, Russia was often setting the tone of the game, creating circumstances with which Europe and the US had to reckon, Russia's agenda for the end of this decade will be exceptionally defensive.

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