

• Author: [Anton Barbashin](#)

## [It's time to get used to Russia's new "normality"](#)



It is unlikely that anyone was surprised with the results of Sunday's presidential "elections" in Russia. Putin yet again confidently won with 76% of the vote and 67% of the turnout. The difference between this victory and all others is that this is the first presidential election since the annexation of Crimea and Russia's subsequent large-scale confrontation with the West. Putin's confident victory, who only two weeks before the election made the most "[missile](#)" message in the history of the Russian Federation, underscores the complete political defeat of the those who seek a more conciliatory, peaceful tone.

Support for Putin's actions, especially in foreign policy, is considerable among Russians. Of course, no "party of peace" formally exists, and those who criticize any aggressive foreign policy have a limited opportunity to present their views. But the big question is, what exactly did the Russians vote for - Putin's rhetoric about the war, or for preserving everything as it is - the so-called "status quo," or simply a vote against any potential turmoil. Regardless, both the Russian authorities and Western policymakers are likely to interpret such support for Putin's presidency a sign of societal consent.

On the one hand, such support gives Putin the right to continue neglecting issues of internal development, focusing on bones of contention with the West like the war in Syria and Ukraine. On the other hand, the thesis that the Kremlin and Russia are two very different things is becoming more difficult to defend, which means

that it will be a little easier for the leaders of the West to take not only elite personal sanctions (like the Magnitsky Act), but also those sanctions that would hit average Russians.

It is impossible now to imagine how Russian foreign policy will look like in six years, but certain trends will inevitably remain dominant throughout the new term of Putin's presidency.

### **Confrontation with the West as a constant**

You do not need to be a visionary to conclude that the protracted conflict between Russia and the West will only worsen over the next 6 years. The likelihood that Russia under Putin will make significant concessions, as well as the likelihood that the West will offer Putin a compromise that Moscow would deem as a victory, is nonexistent. Moreover, the image of confrontation with the West (and the multitude of facts confirming it) only strengthens Putin's support among the Russian population. What is interesting in this context are only the forms that this confrontation will take. How far are Western leaders willing to go to "punish" Putin? Will active supporters of sanctions and deterrence of Russia manage to hold sway over countries in Europe that favour a more conciliatory approach toward Russia? How far can the case be made -- and won in capitals across Europe and America -- that it is necessary to fight Russian corrupt investments, shady business partnerships and other attempts to conduct "business as usual" in spite of recent developments? And what's the most interesting here is how far President Donald Trump willing to go in trying to prove his own independence from Russia?

Taking aside all the emotional and irrational motives in the relations between Russia and Western countries, we get an extremely small scope for potential cooperation. Arms proliferation (at best, just the extension of START III) is the most realistic on the list of possible joint achievements. No matter how much we would like not to label the current state of affairs as "Cold War 2", even if not in form, but in spirit, we have long been living this reality.

Obviously, we have not yet reached the point where the parties to the conflict are interested in "normalizing" this confrontation. Both Russia and Western countries are still forming their attitude to current events, which makes any attempts to define the "lowest point" practically meaningless.

### **Ukraine, Syria, ... ?**

Twice "victorious" in Syria and twice officially ending its operation to support Assad, Russia continues to plunge deeper into the cauldron of the various internal contradictions of the Syrian Civil War. Russia is perhaps ready to be slightly more flexible in the matter of the post-war arrangement of Syria (possibly agreeing to Assad's departure), provided that all Russia's Syrian conquests will be recognized by key regional players. Nevertheless, participants in the Syrian settlement, both on the ground and at the negotiation tables, have contradictory aims and outlooks, which indicates the inevitable continuation of Russia's Syrian presence. Even among the optimistic scenarios, there is still no option for Russia's immediate withdrawal from Syria. The realistic scenario is that Russia will remain in Syria for many years, at least with its military bases and as a permanent participant in the political process.

A similar logic could be observed with regards to Donbas (let's not even mention Crimea). All recent attempts to find a form of conflict resolution aren't effective when it comes to any practical implementation, and Moscow's willingness to wait until Kyiv yields, remains unshakable.

Obviously, we should not exclude new military campaigns at the "far frontier". Putin consistently proves his commitment to the idea of the unexpected launch of "new fronts" not only physically on the ground, but also in the cyber and information space. The freewheeling unaccountability that the Kremlin values so much is what allows it to quickly respond to almost any external challenges. There is no incentive for the Kremlin to change its tried and tested tactics, which, as the claim goes, allowed Russia to return to a great power club, a status that is seemingly recognised in Berlin, Washington and Beijing alike.

### **Closest friends**

Perhaps the most unexpected political surprises for Russia may come from its allies on Eurasian integration and partners from Central Asia. While Russia is actively engaged in resolving the question of "who rules the world", its closest allies both to the west and to the south are actively trying to adapt to a world of "toxic"

Russia. Belarus, which until recently was considered to be the most authoritarian country in Europe, is slowly trying to increase contacts with EU countries, and opening up spare airfields in a bid to ward off any overbearing behaviour from Moscow. The countries of Central Asia, especially after the change of leadership in Uzbekistan, demonstrate an [interesting tendency](#) --- attempting to broker agreements among themselves without the participation of their large neighbors, Russia and China. Balancing between the need to maintain friendly relations with Russia and solving the tasks of economic development (investments play a huge role and Russia can't give much) are of no small importance, Russia's "closest friends" will inevitably expand their capabilities to minimize the risks coming from Russia, thereby reducing Russia's role in region.

It is not surprising that after the demonstration of Russia's aggressive policy in Ukraine, the reduction of Russia's investment attractiveness and its limited attempts at Eurasian integration, the centrifugal process in the former USSR is only intensifying. Can Russia somehow change these trends? The example of recent years shows that either Moscow simply does not want to, or due to the number of limitations, it is no longer capable.

### **What's next?**

How long can Putin's foreign policy circa 2018 be sustained? The answer is simple - quite a long time. Contrary to the predictions of 2014-2015, the Russian economy did not crumble and was not drowned by the sanctions; yesterday the Russian population demonstrated that big changes are not among the top priorities; the political will of the new/old president looks rather solid. Neither the Syrian campaign nor the war in Ukraine imposes significant restrictions on the Russian budget, nor does the inefficiency of the economy and dependence on the price of oil paralyze it. Indeed, a big blow to Putin's determination to achieve new rules of the game with the West could only come from a sharp and prolonged drop in oil prices. Western sanctions are a game of long-term weakening; they are unable to change Kremlin's main priorities. It's time to get used to this new "normality."

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