

The age of Putin

Vladimir Putin, who has maintained a tight grip on power in Russia for almost two decades, begins his [fourth term as President](#) at a time when the country is going through a difficult period, economically and diplomatically. Widely credited with stabilising post-Soviet Russia during his first two terms after the chaos of the Boris Yeltsin years, Mr. Putin presents himself as a strongman seeking to restore Russia's lost glory. This image has helped him bolster his popularity. In the March presidential election he won 77% of the popular vote, the largest margin for any post-Soviet leader. That majority is a reminder of the suffocating grip that Mr. Putin and his coterie have on the democratic process. Russia's most prominent opposition figure, [Alexei Navalny, was barred from contesting the election](#), which rendered the presidential race a formality for the re-coronation of Mr. Putin. One of his biggest promises is stability, both political and economic. The rising number of protests in Moscow and elsewhere against Mr. Putin's rule may not be difficult for him to overcome — and he faces the daunting task of fixing the economy and reversing the course of a confrontational foreign policy. In his inaugural speech, Mr. Putin said he would stay focussed on domestic issues in his new term, particularly the economy, which has just recovered from a painful recession.

Mr. Putin's muscular foreign policy is a more solid source of public support for him. He has always been fierce in his defence of Russia's influence in its historical backyard and has not shied away from taking measures to assert that influence. In 2008 he sent troops to Georgia, and in 2014 he annexed Crimea — actions that have contributed to Russia's deteriorating ties with the West. In 2015, Russia's intervention in Syria not only dragged the country deeper into a complex civil war but also put ties with the U.S. under greater strain. The allegations that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election have increased the hostility between the one-time Cold War rivals. In the short term, Mr. Putin succeeded in creating the impression that Russia is back on the global stage. But it is not certain whether his confrontational foreign policy, which has attracted sanctions from the West and hurt the already weak Russian economy, will yield the desired strategic benefits. Mr. Putin has turned to China in recent years, signing a 30-year, \$400-billion gas agreement, and enhancing cooperation on contentious global issues such as Iran, Syria and North Korea. This may not be enough of a balancing act, as it is not clear whether Beijing, given its lack of appetite for picking fights with the West, will back Moscow in this new Cold War beyond a point. As he begins another term, Mr. Putin's Russia looks increasingly like a managed dictatorship with a troubled economy and dwindling influence. It is to be seen where he takes the country in the next six years.

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