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The International Aspects of Vladimir Putin's Re-election Campaign

Agnieszka Legucka

In December, the campaign for president of Russia will officially begin in anticipation of the vote in March 2018. Vladimir Putin and his allies will use the tensions in Russia's relations with the U.S. and the EU to build a climate of danger and to convince voters about the potential of interference in Russia's electoral process. This will be Putin's response to the concerns of Russians who see him as the guarantor of the security and international standing of the state.

Russian President Putin is notably active in foreign policy. Since becoming president, he has paid official visits to 70 countries, most frequently visiting Kazakhstan (25 times), Ukraine (22), Belarus (20), Germany (16), and China (15). In this term in office, from 2012 to 2017, he has been outside Russia a total of 149 days.[1] With the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the deterioration of relations with Western states since then, including sanctions, there has been a marked reduction in Putin's contacts with NATO countries in favour of greater activity in the Middle East, Asia, and South America. This has been accompanied by an ideological confrontation with Western states, especially with the United States. The president's high level of foreign activity is intended to demonstrate to Russians that their country is not isolated and that these efforts fit into the state's strategy of building a multipolar world in which Russia plays a greater role.

International Elements of Putin's Campaign. Foreign policy will play an important role in consolidating the election programme of the Russian leader. He presented these elements on 19 October during a speech at the "Wałdaj" discussion club. According to Putin, Russia's disinformation campaign in the U.S. was successful and President Donald Trump has been left with no instruments to conduct an independent foreign policy. Putin also played down the increased activity of NATO and the U.S. in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Baltic States. He also referred to various crises in the EU, such as the recent independence referendum in Catalonia, and accused Europe of a lack of consistency on separatism (referring to the recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008). He renewed his offer of cooperation with Western states on Syria in the context of the fight against international terrorism, and on North Korea to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The Russian president said he favours UN primacy over regional groupings. He also stressed the role of the UN Security Council and the standing of its permanent members, which should be read as a call to treat Russia as an indispensable participant in talks on major international security issues.

Despite the tense relations with the U.S., Putin had counted on meeting with Trump to discuss international security issues during the APEC summit on 11 November. Ultimately, the face-to-face meeting did not take place, apparently because the American side believed it would reflect negatively on Trump,

[1] Status as of 6 November.

especially in the context of the ongoing investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election on his behalf.

By emphasizing Russia's willingness to play a constructive role in international relations, Putin is aware of the mood prevailing in Russian society. According to an opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center, 59% of respondents in Russia say their government is keeping the peace and ensuring the survival of the country, while 49% say Russia is recovering its international standing. At the same time, support for "widening the Russian sphere of influence" has decreased in comparison with previous surveys—from 21% in 2007 to 14% in 2017. At the same time, within the context of Putin's election campaign, Russian media will accuse the U.S. and the EU of escalating the international rivalry and conflicts with Russia. Russians appear to be convinced that the sanctions introduced by Western states in 2014 on Russia were meant to weaken the country internally and prevent its participation in the globalised world. According to pro-Kremlin media, Western states have failed to uphold Russian confidence, so Putin must defend Russian interests, including utilizing the military potential of the state.

"Interference" in Russian Elections. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov predicted his country would be able to deflect any negative U.S. actions to affect the election. This stems from mass demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 against the Medvedev-Putin tandem. The Russian authorities argued then that diplomats and U.S. officials—including Hillary Clinton—had called for a "colour revolution" in Russia. In pro-government media, the protests were attributed to external interference. Further accusations of cooperation with other countries and foreign funding will again be used to discredit Putin's political opponents. Alexei Navalny, at one time a potential challenger to Putin and opposition organiser, remains a favourite Kremlin target. According to a final court verdict, Navalny cannot run for president, but he regularly meets with Russian citizens. The meetings are documented and then made available on the internet.

The Russian authorities also claim to be focused on cyberthreats. Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of Russia's Security Council, has called for a fight against foreign cyberattacks. According to him, in 2016, the service has had three times as many cases, both individual and companies (52 million cases total). Putin claims that the internet is a CIA project aimed at harming the Russian Federation. In 2012, the Russian part of the network was nationalized. The official reason for this action is to protect against external interference in the social and political processes of the country. In fact, it has led to increased control of internet services used by Russian society. During the election campaign, information disseminated by independent bloggers and oppositionists will be marginalised. On 1 November, a law to block virtual private networks (VPNs) was introduced, limiting the anonymity of Russian internet users.

Citing foreign influence, the Russian authorities also want to limit external financing of media. Amendments to the Media Act introduced on 15 November, state media outlets must register as a "foreign agent" if they receive financing from outside Russia (NGOs have faced similar restrictions for a while now). Putin signed the changes into law on 25 November. It will affect such stations as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Voice of America. This was also a response by Russian authorities to a new U.S. rule that forced Russia's RT network (formerly Russia Today) and the Sputnik news agency to register as a "foreign agent" in the United States. The Russian authorities used this move to further discredit foreign media.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Russian pro-Kremlin media have fostered Putin's image as an experienced president with a well-established international position and extensive contacts with other leaders, particularly those in Asia and the Middle East. This strategy is useful internally to counter Putin's lack of contacts with U.S. and EU officials. Although the president clearly wants the Western sanctions lifted, that would require too many concessions, including the return of Crimea to Ukraine and the end of the occupation of Donbas. Moreover, an improvement in relations with Western states is probably not possible without political changes in Russia itself, which would threaten to undermine the current political system. Therefore, the Russian authorities are trying to get the sanctions removed through negotiations and a combination of threats and offers of cooperation on Ukraine (such as its proposed UN mission), Syria, and North Korea.

This competitive foreign policy strategy has allowed Russia's current elites to survive and remain in power. The myth of a "besieged fortress" (Russia) strengthens the need for a strong leader to defend the Russian nation. The Russian Federation will continue its rapprochement with states whose policy challenges the U.S., notably China, Iran, and Syria. At the same time, Russia is trying to undermine American influence in the world and question the credibility of the U.S. as an ally. The Russian authorities will focus on the internal conflict between Trump and the U.S. Congress. Poland, too, considered part of the Euro Atlantic community, is the object of these actions. Russian propaganda is likely to raise growing Polish nationalism as "Russophobic" and will attempt to use tensions in Poland's relations with Germany, Ukraine, and EU institutions to its advantage.