

Russia: Putin ally Kudrin pushes for rapprochement with the imperialist powers

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Alexei Kudrin, one of Vladimir Putin's closest allies, has stepped up his campaign for a rapprochement with the imperialist powers.

In recent days, Kudrin made several statements indicating that a powerful wing in the Kremlin seeks to mend ties with the West. On Wednesday, Kudrin argued that the sanctions by the West "create great risks for the speed of [economic] growth." They would make it virtually impossible for Putin's outlined goals for social improvement to be realized, Kudrin said.

This comes after years in which the Kremlin has officially tried to argue that the Western sanctions have had no significant impact on the Russian economy. Then, Kudrin warned that the sanctions which are now being discussed in the EU and above all the US "could lead to a recession already in the next year."

Therefore, he continued, Russia's foreign policy had to be oriented toward "minimizing the tensions with other countries and at least maintaining and lowering of the sanction regime, and not its escalation." He added that he "would measure the effectiveness of [Russian] foreign policy" on the basis of whether or not sanctions would continue.

A few days earlier, Kudrin was in Riga, the capital of NATO-member state Latvia, and made a case for the improvement of Latvian-Russian relations. This is under conditions where Latvia, like the other two Baltic states, has been at the forefront and a major staging ground for the NATO military build-up against Russia.

In none of these remarks did Kudrin even so much as mention the systematic encirclement of Russia by NATO, denounce the endless imperialist provocations over the alleged "Russian hacking" of the US 2016 elections and the alleged Skripal poisoning, or describe the sanctions as the economic warfare on the part of imperialism they objectively constitute. Judging by

Kudrin's line, the question of mending ties with imperialism was solely a matter of Russia changing its foreign policy.

Kudrin also recently expressed concerns about prevailing mass poverty in Russia, stating that "given the GDP per capita that we have, it is dishonourable to have such levels of poverty in our country."

Kudrin's remarks reflect broader discussions and shifts within the Russian oligarchy. Now the head of the Audit Chamber, which functions as a watchdog for the budget, Kudrin has been a key figure in Russian politics for decades. He rose to power and wealth alongside Putin under the shadow of Leningrad mayor Anatoly Sobchak in the 1990s. In the first two presidencies of Putin, he was finance minister and responsible for a major wave of social cuts in the early 2000s. If there is mass poverty in Russia, Kudrin is amongst those primarily responsible for it.

A few years ago, he founded the Center for Strategic Research, a think tank which has provided the blueprint for the deeply unpopular pension reform bill that Putin signed just last week. While meeting suspicion and opposition from sections of the elites, especially in the military and the military-industrial complex, Kudrin is viewed as a possible link to the pro-US liberal opposition and is popular in international finance circles.

In this year's state of the nation address in March, Putin had already signalled that his fourth presidency would involve much more far-reaching concessions to the liberal opposition. Numerous pro-Kremlin outlets greeted his reelection as an opportunity to enact the very reforms of the liberal opposition that voters had expressed their opposition to in voting for Putin.

The widely hated pension reform is itself part of this attempt by the Russian oligarchy to make concessions

to both the imperialist powers and the liberal opposition, which for decades have been demanding such an assault on workers' living standards.

The fact that US imperialism has made absolutely no sign of lowering its pressure on Russia in recent years, no matter what concessions the Kremlin was willing to make in domestic and foreign policy, but, on the contrary, has only continued to escalate it, underscores the desperation of the Russian oligarchy. Without any prospect of being rewarded for its concessions to imperialism, it is frantically trying to manoeuvre itself out of its historical dead end.

Underlying the recent push toward improving relations with the imperialist powers are above all the class tensions in Russia itself. In light of an ongoing economic crisis, which has been significantly exacerbated by the Western sanctions, there is enormous anger about the oligarchy's decade-long monopolization of wealth and political power. The ramming through of the pension bill, which will raise the retirement age for Russians by five years in the face of opposition by some 90 percent of the population, has significantly exacerbated social and political tensions.

The social discontent has found an initial reflection in the recent regional elections, which saw opposition candidates from the far-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) and the Stalinist KPRF win in several regions, while the votes for United Russia plummeted in numerous regions by 10 to 20 percent. (See: Kremlin suffers defeats in regional elections)

The election results have caused enormous nervousness in the Kremlin. While both the KPRF and the LDPR have proven over decades to be a reliable "loyal" and right-wing nationalist opposition to the ruling United Russia party, the oligarchy is well aware that the votes for these parties express much broader political and social opposition to the status quo. The growing struggles of workers internationally add to the concerns of the oligarchy that the working class in Russia too will sooner rather than later be driven into struggle.

These fears were spelled out quite concretely in a lengthy piece published October 10 in the Kremlin controlled *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*. The author is Valerii Zorkin, the 75-year-old head of Russia's Constitutional Court, who for decades worked for the Stalinist regime before becoming a major figure in Russian legislation

during capitalist restoration. In his piece, he raised alarm about the potential political fall-out from the prevailing extreme poverty and social inequality in Russia.

According to Zorkin, the Constitutional Court is receiving a large number of complaints about the lack of social welfare assistance in Russia. There was enormous discontent, Zorkin argued, over economic and social injustice and the impact of "three decades of reforms," meaning— even if Zorkin did not dare put it this way—almost three decades of capitalism.

He wrote: "Society perceives most acutely and sharply the extremely unequal distribution of the burden of the economic reforms that have been conducted in the country, the main testimony of which is first and foremost the extraordinary social inequality. ... Over 20 million Russians live beneath the poverty line. In this context, one cannot fail to note that a year ago we celebrated the centenary of the events of 1917, which, as is clear today, were provoked above all by the deep socio-economic divide within Russian society."

Among the proposals Zorkin presented was greater "political pluralism," including the opportunity for the opposition to actually get into positions of power, and constitutional reforms. None of his proposals would benefit the working class. Rather, like Kudrin's proposals, they amount to a plea for greater collaboration of all sections of the oligarchy with US imperialism and sections of the upper middle class that back the liberal opposition, with the aim of uniting against what they perceive to be their common enemy: the working class.



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