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# The West Doesn't Understand How Much Russia Has Changed

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Video



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• • • By Alexander Gabuev

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Vladimir Putin's [trip to Beijing](#) this week, where he will meet with Xi Jinping and top Chinese officials, is another clear demonstration of the current closeness between Russia and China.

Yet many in the West still [want to believe](#) that their alliance is an aberration, driven by Mr. Putin's emotional anti-Americanism and his toxic fixation on Ukraine. Once Mr. Putin and his dark obsessions are out of the picture, the [thinking goes](#), Moscow will seek to rebuild ties with the West — not least because the bonds between Russia and China are shallow, while the country has centuries of economic and cultural [dependence](#) on Europe.

This wishful view, however appealing, overlooks the transformation of Russia's economy and society. Never since the fall of the Soviet Union has Russia been so distant from Europe, and never in its entire history has it been so [entwined](#) with China. The truth is that after two years of war in Ukraine and painful Western sanctions, it's not just Mr. Putin who needs China — Russia does, too.

China has emerged as Russia's single most important partner, providing a lifeline not only for Mr. Putin's war machine but also for the entire embattled economy. In 2023, Russia's trade with China hit a [record](#) \$240.1 billion, up by more than 60 percent from prewar levels, as China [accounted](#) for 30 percent of Russia's exports and nearly 40 percent of its imports.

Before the war, Russia's trade with the European Union was double that with China; now it's less than half. The Chinese yuan, not the dollar or the euro, is now the main currency used for trade between the two countries, making it the [most traded](#) currency on the Moscow stock exchange and the go-to instrument for savings.

This economic dependence is filtering into everyday life. Chinese products are [ubiquitous](#) and over half of the million cars [sold](#) in Russia last year were made in China. Tellingly, the top six foreign car brands in Russia are now all Chinese, thanks to the exodus of once dominant Western companies. It's a similar story in the smartphone market, where China's Xiaomi and Tecno have [eclipsed](#) Apple and Samsung, and with home appliances and many other everyday items.

These shifts are tectonic. Even in czarist times, Russia shipped its commodities to Europe and relied on imports from the West of manufactured goods. Russia's oligarchs, blacklisted by most Western countries, have had to adapt to the new reality. Last month, the businessman Vladimir Potanin, whose fortune is estimated at \$23.7 billion, [announced](#) that his copper and nickel empire would reorient toward China, including by moving production facilities into the country. "If we're more integrated into the Chinese economy," he said, "we'll be more protected."

From the economy, education follows. Members of the Russian elite are scrambling to find Mandarin tutors for their kids, and some of my Russian contacts are thinking about sending their children to universities in Hong Kong or mainland China now that Western universities are much harder to reach. This development is more than anecdotal. Last year, as China opened up after the pandemic, 12,000 Russian students went to study there — nearly four times as many than to the United States.

This reorientation from West to East is also visible among the middle class, most notably in travel. There are now, for example, five flights a day connecting Moscow and Beijing in under eight hours, with a return ticket costing about \$500. By contrast, getting to Berlin — one of many frequent European weekend destinations for middle-class Russians before the war — can now take an entire day and cost up to twice as much.

What's more, European cities are being replaced as Russian tourist destinations by Dubai, Baku in Azerbaijan and Istanbul, while business trips are increasingly to China, Central Asia or the [Gulf](#). Locked out of much of the West, which scrapped direct flights to Russia and significantly reduced the availability of visas for Russians, middle-class Russians are going elsewhere.

Intellectuals are turning toward China, too. Russian scientists are beginning to work with and for Chinese companies, especially in fields such as [space](#) exploration, [artificial intelligence](#) and [biotech](#). Chinese cultural influence is also growing inside Russia. With Western writers like [Stephen King](#) and [Neil Gaiman](#) withdrawing the rights to publish their work in Russia, publishers are expanding their rosters of Chinese works. Supported by lavish grants for translators from the Chinese government, this effort is set to bring about a boom in Chinese books.

Chinese culture will not replace Western culture as Russians' main reference point any time soon. But a profound change has taken place. From the other side of the Iron Curtain, Europe was seen as a beacon of human rights, prosperity and technological development, a space that many Soviet citizens aspired to be part of.

Now a growing number of educated Russians, on top of feeling bitterness toward Europe for its punitive sanctions, see China as a technologically advanced and economically superior power to which Russia is ever more connected. With no easy way back to [normal ties](#) with the West, that's unlikely to change anytime soon.

In his dystopian novel "[Day of the Oprichnik](#)," [Vladimir Sorokin](#) describes a deeply anti-Western Russia of 2028 that survives on Chinese technology while cosplaying the medieval brutality of Ivan the Terrible's era. With every passing day, this unsettling and foresighted novel — published in 2006 as a warning to Russia about the direction of travel under Mr. Putin — reads more and more like the news.