

Turkey to Press Putin on Negotiating End to Assad's Rule

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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ISTANBUL — Turkey will press President Vladimir Putin this week to cooperate in engineering as rapid an end as possible to Syrian President Bashar Assad's rule and try to assuage his fears that Moscow could lose out after Assad's departure.

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan sees Putin, who was scheduled to visit the country on Monday, as key to quelling a conflict that has sent 100,000 refugees fleeing to Turkish soil and stirred warnings of a sectarian war beyond Syria's borders.

Turkey's carefully nurtured relationship with Russia, governed by its need for energy supplies and mutual security interests across an array of regional hotspots, has already been strained by differences over Syria.

Moscow, one of Syria's closest allies, has vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions aimed at putting pressure on Assad, blocking Turkish, Western and Arab efforts to provide UN

support for the rebel forces trying to topple him.

Turkish officials say Russia must be assured that it does not stand to lose from the departure of Assad, who has been Moscow's chief Middle Eastern ally. Syria has been a major client for Russian arms and hosts a naval maintenance facility that is Russia's only military base outside the former Soviet Union.

The loss of influence in Libya after the Western operation to topple Moammar Gadhafi has also made its mark in the Kremlin.

Moscow has argued in the past that the Syrian rebels are dominated by radicals and jihadis who would change the face of the nation if they took power. Turkey will reason that the longer the conflict continues, the greater the traction of those very forces will become.

Ankara is worried about Syria's chemical weapons, a growing refugee crisis and Syrian support for Kurdish militants on its soil. It has been a major opposition backer, leading calls for international action and repeatedly scrambling jets to the border in a warning to Damascus.

Putin's visit, as officials on both sides are keen to point out, will also focus on a long and deep business and energy relationship.

Russia provides nearly two-thirds of Turkey's gas supplies and often ramps up its exports to the country during frequent cuts in Iranian gas supplies in the winter.

Russia is also set to help build Turkey's first nuclear power plant, while Russia has long been one of the largest markets for Turkish construction firms.

Improved relations with Russia are invaluable for Turkey at a time when its leading role in opposition to Assad has cost it other friendships in the region. But it has been a fragile relationship in recent months.

Erdogan's public accusation that Russia was ferrying military equipment to Damascus after Turkish jets forced down an airliner flying from Moscow in October also did little to foster his good relations with Putin.

A month and a half after the plane was intercepted, the Turkish authorities have yet to give any public details on what was in the seized cargo, which Erdogan said included Russian-made munitions bound for Syria's defense ministry.

Putin had been expected to visit Turkey the following week, but his trip was postponed hours before the plane was grounded.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Western states on Saturday of trying to advance democracy abroad through "iron and blood," defending Moscow's refusal to join nations seeking the exit of Assad. "Russia is not opposing Western influence or putting a stick in the spokes of Western-initiated projects out of spite," Lavrov said, according to Itar-Tass. "The fact is, advancing democracy through iron and blood just does not work, and this has been made clear in recent months — the past year and a half," he said.

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