This week, Vladimir Putin was sworn in for a third term as Russian president, and France's presidential election continued the trend of losses for incumbent European governments when French President Nicolas Sarkozy lost to socialist challenger Francois Hollande. Putin's return to the presidency was not unexpected; he was never really unseated as Russia's leader even during Dmitri Medvedev's presidency. Nevertheless, the changes in Europe exemplified by the French presidential election will require Russia to change its tactics in Europe.

Putin's plans for Russia and beyond, by George Friedman of Stratfor

Russia has been on the path to resurgence since Putin won the presidency in 1999. He inherited a broken, weak and chaotic Russia. As Stratfor has noted over the years, Putin did not seek to re-create the Soviet Union. He is a student of geopolitics, and he understands Russia's constraints and the overreaching that led to the fall of the Soviet Union. Putin's mission was to return Russia to stability and security -- a massive undertaking for the leader of a country that not only is the world's largest but also is internally diverse and surrounded by potentially hostile powers.

During his first presidential term, Putin launched a comprehensive series of reforms that recentralized power over the Russian regions, cracked down on militancy in the Russian Caucasus, purged the oligarch class and centralized the economy and political system. Putin implemented an autocratic regime and used the military and Russia's security apparatus (including the Federal Security Service), following the example of previous leaders, from the czars to the Soviet rulers. Putin's maneuvers were the natural evolution of how a successful leader rules Russia.

With Russia strong and steady, Putin was able to focus on his country's near abroad. However, the countries surrounding Russia were hostile to the Kremlin's view, with NATO and the European Union pushing ever closer to Russia's borders and forming partnerships with numerous former Soviet states. The czars and Soviet rulers used two primary tactics to counter such a situation.

The first tactic was to mobilize Russia's military to push out foreign influence, whether directly (as Moscow has done with Georgia) or indirectly (by forging military alliances with former Soviet states such as Belarus and Kazakhstan). Although Putin's Russia could do this for one or two countries, it could not use this tactic everywhere in its periphery.

The second tactic was to create alliances of convenience in Europe to help Moscow divide pan-European and NATO expansion and sentiment against Russia while bolstering Russia economically, financially and technologically. Czarist Russia made such arrangements with the United Kingdom during the Napoleonic Wars and with France ahead of World War I, and Soviet

leaders formed an alliance of convenience with Germany ahead of World War II. It is not that Russia ever trusted any of these countries (or vice versa), but the Russian and European leaderships shared an inherent understanding that certain alliances are necessary to shape the dynamics on the Continent.

During Putin's era, Russia set its sights on what it considered three of the four premier European powers: Germany, France and Italy. The Kremlin considers the United Kingdom the fourth main power, but London's firm and traditional alliance with the United States has made it resistant to Russia's overtures. The Kremlin saw Germany, France and Italy as the countries holding the economic, political and military heft that, if unified within Western alliance structures, could oppose Russia in Europe. In order to forge partnerships with these countries, Putin built relationships with their rulers.

Putin's Personal Approach

Germany was Russia's natural first choice for a partnership; not only is it the core of Europe, but it is also the European state that the Kremlin fears most. Moreover, Putin has an affinity for Germany that dates back to his days with the KGB, when he was stationed in Dresden, Germany. In the early 2000s, Putin was able to use his fluency in German to develop a strong friendship with then-German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. Schroeder saw the relationship first as an economic opportunity, since Russia is the world's largest energy producer and exporter and also a place for potential heavy investment.

During Schroeder's chancellorship, trade between Germany and Russia boomed, and Russia gave Germany special benefits as an energy partner. Germany -- in accordance with Putin's plan -- began supporting Russia's position in Europe on specific strategic issues. Schroeder's Germany was alone among Western governments in not vociferously supporting Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004-2005. Schroeder also led European opposition to U.S. efforts to begin the NATO accession process for Ukraine and Georgia.

As his friendship with Putin grew, Schroeder purchased an estate outside Moscow near Putin's home and even sought Putin's assistance in adopting two Russian children. Schroeder's ejection from office in 2005 did not end their friendship -- or Schroeder's usefulness to Putin. Despite widespread German criticism, even from Schroeder's own party, the former chancellor accepted a position with Russian state natural gas firm Gazprom to lead the Nord Stream project, a pipeline designed specifically to maximize Russia's energy leverage over Belarus, Ukraine and Poland.

Having created a strong relationship with Berlin, Putin established a similar relationship with France's then-President Jacques Chirac. France's position is different from Germany's in that France is not connected economically or politically with Russia. However, Paris understands the history of strong Berlin-Moscow ties and what those mean for all of Europe. France thus has an interest in making sure it is not left out when Russia and Germany meet. The relationship between Chirac and Putin took this a step further.

At the beginning of their relationship, Putin and Chirac allied politically against the U.S.-led war

in Iraq. This was important to Moscow because it undermined NATO's unity on a critical issue. More important for Russia's interests, Chirac lobbied against NATO's expansion to include the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The Baltics were admitted despite Chirac's objections, and when the next NATO summit occurred -- in Latvia -- Chirac invited Putin to the meeting as his guest.

Putin was close friends with the French and German leaders, but he was like a brother to Italy's then-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. This relationship was more personal, because Italy was not as strategic (or threatening) as the other two European powers. Putin and Berlusconi vacationed together, spent birthdays together and bought each other expensive gifts. In 2011, when Berlusconi was on trial for sexual improprieties, Putin publically defended his friend, saying the allegations were "made out of envy." The Putin-Berlusconi friendship led to relationships between Russian and Italian energy companies, banks and military industrial projects. Most notable, Putin was able to use his relationship with Berlusconi to get Gazprom access to Italian state-linked energy giant ENI's assets throughout North Africa, particularly in Libya.

Putin's personal connections with Germany, France and Italy did not change with the leadership shifts in each country from 2005 to 2007, nor did they change when Putin left the presidential spotlight to become prime minister in 2008. Putin used the momentum built under the previous governments to forge relationships -- even if not as personal -- with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and (for a time) Italy's then-Prime Minister Romano Prodi. Putin's circle of friends and associates helped him shape some of Russia's most important strategies in Europe: complicating NATO expansion, pushing Moscow's agenda with NATO, expanding military relationships and becoming capable of invading Georgia without European or NATO intervention. It is not that all of this was possible because of Putin's personal relationships with the leaders of Italy, France and Germany, but those connections facilitated many of the deals that made Russia's progress possible.

Changes Across Europe

As Putin returns to the presidency, he faces a very different Europe -- one in which nearly all of his close friends are out of power. As prime minister, Putin focused on Russia's internal issues while Europe became embroiled in a political and financial crisis that has affected the Continent as a whole. Europe is not as concerned as it once was with the wider world (including Russia). Instead, each state is focused on keeping itself -- and some form of the European alliance -- intact.

Voters have ejected two of the three Russian-friendly European governments during these crises. Berlusconi and his political machine were forced from power in favor of technocrat and now Prime Minister Mario Monti. Monti lacks the political mandate or the will to become involved in geopolitical alignments like a close relationship with Russia. France's Chirac has retired from politics, and Sarkozy was voted out of office the day before Putin was inaugurated. France's Hollande surrounds himself with politicians who have not been in government at any point when Putin was in charge in Russia. This leaves Merkel, whose ties with Putin are the weakest in the Russian leader's European circle. Furthermore, Merkel is concerned with holding Europe

together, leaving little time or interest for Russia's plans for Europe.

Thus, Putin's tactic of using personal relationships to help strengthen Russia's position in Europe seems to be outdated. The French and Italian governments are still young, so Putin could try to build relationships with Hollande and Monti. But, like Germany, France and Italy are more interested in what is happening in Europe than in Russia.

This new attitude toward Russia already has surfaced in Rome. In the first talks between the new Italian government and the Russian government, Italian President Giorgio Napolitano made it clear that the Moscow-Rome relationship would undergo a "depersonalization." The first evidence of this was Italy's embrace of U.S. ballistic missile defense plans for Europe. Italy -- like France -- long supported Russia's position on missile defense in Europe. Although this did not prevent Washington from moving forward with its plans, it did create disagreements within NATO. Italy's shift toward unity with NATO and the United States comes just before what was to be a NATO-Russia summit in Chicago, but Russia has been disinvited.

The changes in Europe's leadership and focus come amid Russia's adjustments to other new dynamics in Europe. Before the Continent's financial and political crises, Russia had forged a new strategy for foreign policy regarding Europe in which strategic European partners -- especially Germany, France and Italy -- would invest heavily in Russia's economy and financial sector. With Europe nearly broke, however, this strategy has been cut back and could be abandoned altogether. Russia is proceeding with European partners on some projects, but Moscow must financially step up more than it anticipated for these projects to succeed. It is an expensive foreign policy choice.

Russia's main goal regarding Europe is to keep European powers divided while extracting what Moscow wants financially and technologically. The days have passed when Putin could call a friend in Europe to help with NATO or with technological deficiencies. Russia has to design a new strategy to deal with a very different Europe and adhere to its deeper imperatives rather than rely on personal and political relationships, which are fleeting compared to the forces of geopolitics.