

# FINANCIAL TIMES

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## Putin deserves a little flattery

St Petersburg offers an opportunity for Russia and the west

Peter the Great created St Petersburg as a window on Europe. Over the next three days Vladimir Putin, Russia's modern-day president, will welcome 45 world leaders to celebrate his home city's 300th anniversary as a symbol of Russia's political and economic revival and its closer relations with the west.

It has also turned into a showcase of Mr Putin's political skills. By a mixture of judgment, caution and luck, he has emerged as an improbable winner from the Iraq war. Mr Putin risked jeopardising his relationship with President George W. Bush by joining France and Germany in opposing the US-led invasion. In the event, the US president opted to be magnanimous. Whereas France is to be punished and Germany kept at arm's length, Russia will be brought back into the Washington fold.

In part that is because Mr Putin is viewed as having been less strident in opposing US policy. It also reflects a calculation that Russia is a valuable ally in the war against terrorism and the US needs Moscow's co-operation on Iran, North Korea and Syria.

The result is win, win, win for Mr Putin: he has improved relations with France and Germany, kept his ties with the US intact and maintained his record popularity at home – of crucial importance ahead of parliamentary elections this autumn and a presidential poll next spring.

The St Petersburg meetings, which include summits with Asian leaders and the European Union as well as a bilateral session with Mr Bush, present

an opportunity for the Russian president to capitalise on his good fortune.

Russia wants to be flattered for its progress in reform and modernisation and its closer integration into the west. It also seeks economic co-operation, particularly the willingness of western countries to purchase Russian energy. Both those things should be freely given. The west has a need to diversify energy supply and an overwhelming interest in promoting Russian reforms. All countries must pursue that aim and not seek to manipulate Russia in a game of geopolitical influence.

Difficult issues remain. Relations between Russia and the EU are not especially good. Russia wants a formal political dialogue like the one it has created with Nato, and a "road-map" towards visa-free travel; the EU replies that Russia has yet to implement fully a partnership agreement signed in 1994. Greater vision from Brussels is needed, along with recognition in Moscow of Russia's responsibilities. Pressure must also be maintained on Russia to respect human rights in Chechnya.

Trust between Russia and the US will take time to restore. Moscow's relations with regimes Washington regards as hostile remain delicate, although there are signs that Moscow is responding to US pressure over nuclear fuel for Iran.

All sides must keep their eyes on the big prize: a stable, democratic, prosperous Russia, living in harmony with the west. Mr Putin seems to understand its value.

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