

Does Canada Support Regime Change in Russia?

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It may have been "a Freudian slip of the tongue," as Russia's ambassador to Canada called it, but at a press conference on March 10, Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister, Mélanie Joly, raised the possibility of regime change in Russia.

Addressing the importance of diplomatic pressure on Russia, [Joly said](#) that

"We're able to see how much we're isolating the Russian regime right now – because we need to do so economically, politically and diplomatically – and what are the impacts also on society and how much we're seeing potential regime change in Russia."

According to reporting by *The Canadian Press*, Joly "said regime change is indeed the point of sanctions and pursuing accountability for alleged war crimes." "The goal is definitely to do that," she said, "to weaken Russia's ability to launch very difficult attacks against Ukraine. We want also to make sure that Putin and his enablers are held to account." She added that she "always make a difference between the regime and the people of a given country."

If it was a Freudian slip, an earlier statement by a Canadian official wasn't. On April 13, 2022, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, in a prepared speech to Parliament, seemed to call for regime change when she [declared](#) that

"Putin's assault has been so vicious that we all now understand that the world's democracies – including our own – can be safe only once the Russian tyrant and his armies are entirely vanquished."

Joly, herself, has made similar remarks before. In the early days of the war, discussing sanctions, Joly [said](#) that

"Our goal is to suffocate the Russian regime."

In the first several months of the war, there were several calls for regime change. The most

famous was President Biden's [cry](#) that "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power." Boris Johnson's office [said](#) the point of sanctions was "to bring down the Putin regime" before [retracting](#) the statement. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis [said](#) "From our standpoint, up until the point the current regime is not in power, the countries surrounding it will be, to some extent, in danger. Not just Putin but the whole regime because, you know, one might change Putin and might change his inner circle but another Putin might rise into his place." Ukrainian President Volodymyr [Zelensky has also hinted at regime change](#), hoping that, before the eventual peace process and the eventual talks, "we would be discussing the issues of who Ukraine will negotiate, with what president of the Russia Federation," adding that, "I hope that will be a different president in the Russian Federation."

Joly's remarks stand out because there has been less of a call for regime change since the early days of the war. In February, French President Emmanuel Macron [said](#) "I do not think like some people that Russia should be totally undone [and] attacked on its own soil" and "came down against calls for the West to try to provoke a change of regime in Russia." The White House [walked back](#) Biden's call for a coup, and in March 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz [said](#) regime change "is not the objective of NATO."

Despite what may have been early Western hopes, there has been no sign of regime change in Russia. Daniel Davis has recently [said](#) that "[t]here is presently no evidence that the Russian population is close to reaching the point it would turn on the Kremlin, and thus if more troops are needed, Putin appears able to procure them."

On January 20, *POLITICO* [reported](#) that, though one of the goals of sanctions was the "hope that the resulting economic hardship might persuade ordinary Russians to rebel, or prompt a putsch by Kremlin insiders or oligarchs," "there are few signs of any significant cracks appearing in what a Russian pollster dubbed a "broad consensus" backing Putin's war." It adds that "public support for the war appears to remain high." On February 23, Bloomberg [reported](#) that independent polls show that "the majority of Russians say they are ready to keep fighting."

A September 2022 [report](#) by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace says that public opinion polls in Russia have consistently shown "overwhelming support" of 70% or higher for the war and an increase in Putin's popularity. When the war began, government approval ratings went up from 71% to 83%.

By January 2023, [Putin's approval rating](#) had hit 82%; in February over 80% of Russians [said](#) they approved of the activities of Putin.

Western hopes of a domestic regime change in Russia have not come true. But, even if they had, it is possible that the hope was misplaced. A change in regime may not mean a change in Russia's policy toward NATO or Ukraine.

In her careful analysis of US-backed coups, *Covert Regime Change*, Lindsey O'Rourke says that one of the two necessary criteria for Washington to support regime change is the ability "to identify a plausible domestic political alternative to the target regime." If you are going to remove a leader because of unsolvable policy differences, there must be the promise of a new leader that "share[s your] policy preferences."

There are more hardline candidates that could replace Putin. In February, Macron [pointed](#)

[out](#) that “all the other options to Vladimir Putin in the heart of the current system seem worse.” Putin has often [held back the hardliners](#) who could fill his void following a coup.

And hardliner or not, no Russian government is likely to alter the key policies a coup would be intended to alter. It is not just Putin, but every Russian President since the Cold War, Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin, who has opposed NATO’s eastward expansion to its borders. And no Russian government, headed by Putin or not, would agree to return Crimea to Ukraine.

Despite the wishes of Joly and the West, they have not catalyzed regime change in Russia. And, even if they had, it is not clear that the consequence would be better, nor that it could not be worse.

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