

Russia transmits love beams to post-Raisi Iran

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The May 19 death of Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash represented a damaging blow for the country's hardliners, following the assassination of several senior military leaders in recent months. For Russia, it meant the loss of a leading international ally.

The Kremlin is acutely aware of its dependence on Iranian expertise as perhaps the world's most successful sanctions evader, as an unquestioning transporter of Russian goods through its warm water ports, and as a supplier of military supplies. Any change in approach would likely have an outsize influence on Russia's war against Ukraine. It is important that, at a minimum, Tehran feels Russia's love in moments of crisis.

So, the deaths of Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in hills near the border with Azerbaijan were greeted with despondence and public lamentation from the Kremlin. Russian President Vladimir Putin sent condolences to Iran's Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and lionized Raisi as a true friend. Memorials to the Iranians appeared in Kazan, the capital of the Muslim-majority region of Tatarstan.

These outward displays of grief were paired with predictions of enduring cooperation. State Duma International Affairs Committee Chairman Leonid Slutsky argued that Russia-Iran cooperation was "on the rise" and predicted collaboration on major infrastructure projects. Former Russian ambassador to Iran Levan Dzagharyan emphasized that Tehran's foreign policy orientation is determined by Iran's leader.

Is the Kremlin's outward confidence in Russia-Iran cooperation justified?

Mostly yes. Raisi's death removes one of the most fervent champions of Russia-Iran cooperation from the arena. His close relationships with Russian officials predate his ascension to the presidency in 2021. During the 2017 Iranian presidential election campaign, which saw Raisi emerge as then-president Hassan Rouhani's hardline rival, Raisi met Tatarstan's President Rustam Minnikhanov, a leading Putin surrogate in the Islamic world. The meeting fueled speculation that he was Russia's preferred candidate. Raisi's steadfast emphasis on Iran's partnerships with the so-called Global South and anti-Western foreign policy outlook made him a reliable partner for Moscow. His appointment of Amir-Abdollahian as foreign minister was

also welcomed in the Kremlin. Amir-Abdollahian engaged with Russian officials in Syria-related negotiations from 2012–17 and effusively praised Putin's leadership in a January 2020 interview.

Despite the abrupt loss of these carefully honed personal relationships, Iran's acting President Mohammad Mokhber is another Russia-friendly figure. In his capacity as Iran's first vice president, Mokhber accompanied two senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officials to Moscow in October 2022 and allegedly pledged surface-to-surface missile transfers to Russia as well as drones.

Mokhber has also actively promoted Russia-Iran energy sector cooperation in the Caspian Sea and the North-South Transport Corridor, a railway link connecting Russia with India via Iran. Sina Bank, a US-sanctioned entity that Mokhber oversaw during the first de-