Russian President Vladimir Putin has been described as a severe dictator trampling on democracy. He’s also been called “the most dangerous man in the world.” His growing authoritarian rule has some calling him Czar Putin, suggesting he’s acting like the imperial rulers of Russia’s past.

To many Russians, however, Putin is a hero. They see him as a strongman who’s restored Russia to its former glory as a world power. He plays up this macho image by posing with tigers, showing off his judo skills, and riding shirtless on horses. Polls show that 87 percent of Russians support Putin and his policies. (President Obama’s approval rating is around 40 percent.)

“No one will ever attain military superiority over Russia,” Putin boasted in a recent speech. He added, “We are ready to take up any challenge and win.”

Love him or hate him, Putin casts an increasingly long shadow, even as Russia faces an economic crisis that could test his grip on power.

A New Cold War?

In the past few years, relations between Russia and the United States have sunk to their lowest point since the Cold War, which ended in 1991. That makes it harder for the U.S. and Russia to cooperate on many important global issues such as the civil war in Syria, fighting Islamic terrorism, and preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Some of the tensions stem from Russia’s slide back toward authoritarianism. Russian leaders have historically kept their power by denying personal freedoms. For 350 years, the country was ruled by powerful czars. In 1917, the Russian Revolution led to seven decades of brutal Communist rule under the Soviet Union—America’s Cold War enemy.
The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The years that followed were filled with chaos and economic disaster. Putin, a former agent in the KGB (the Soviet spy agency), became president in 1999. When he took over, most Russians were relieved to have a strong leader.

Once in charge, however, Putin began gradually consolidating political power. He tightened controls over the press and passed laws that gave authorities more power to crack down on anti-government street protests. A few years ago, he even jailed members of an all-female punk band for singing anti-Putin songs.

At the same time, Russia’s economy boomed. Its growth was driven by a spike in the price of oil, Russia’s biggest export. Most Russians seemed willing to give up some freedoms in exchange for prosperity.

In 2008, Putin found a way around the term-limit law that prevented him from running for a third consecutive term. He handpicked a successor and had himself appointed prime minister. That allowed him to continue calling the shots from behind the scenes. Then in 2012, Putin won a third term as president in a disputed election. (If Putin wins re-election when his six-year term* expires in 2018, he could end up leading Russia for a total of 25 years. That would make his rule longer than anyone since Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.)

Since returning to the presidency, Putin has become more aggressive on the world stage. His behavior has brought to mind Soviet tactics during the Cold War. Last March, amid political tensions in neighboring Ukraine, Putin alarmed the world by annexing the territory of Crimea by force.

Eastern European countries like Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland are worried that Russia might threaten them too. To send a strong signal that aggression in Eastern Europe won’t be tolerated, NATO has strengthened its military forces in the region.

“You lost your independence once before,” President Obama said on a recent trip to Estonia. “With NATO, you will never lose it again.”

**U.S. Sanctions**

Perhaps more important, the U.S. and Europe have also imposed tough economic sanctions on Russia in response to its takeover of Crimea.

For Putin, the timing couldn’t be worse. Russia is the world’s third-largest oil producer. The country depends heavily on oil exports to finance its government. With the price of oil sinking, the Russian government suddenly has a lot less money to spend on programs at home and adventures abroad.

When the economy was doing well and most Russians saw their lives improving, it was easy for Putin to silence his opponents. But as Russians begin to feel the pinch of the economic crisis, that could be harder. It may explain why Putin signed a bill in July criminalizing repeated street protests.

The other question is whether Putin’s mounting problems at home will force him to tone down his aggression against the West or do the opposite. He may become more antagonistic to distract Russians from the country’s sagging economy.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, an opposition politician in Russia, predicts it will be the latter.

“If [Putin] prolongs the policy of greatness, of expansion, of confrontation with the West,” Ryzhkov says, “he will be popular and supported by the people despite any economic crisis.”

How will Putin react to Russia’s economic crisis?

*In 2008, presidential terms were extended from four to six years.*