

# RUSSIA'S YEAR IN REVIEW

## OVERWATCH PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



*Nataliya Bugayova and Mason Clark*

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is about to enter his third decade in power. As we enter 2020, how Putin sees his own position on the global map reveals a lot about what the United States can expect from Russian policy in the future. ISW's Russia Team Lead Nataliya Bugayova and Research Assistant Mason Clark discuss where Putin has made progress in advancing his goals and where he has faced setbacks during this episode's 2019 year in review assessment.

### ***Maseh Zarif:***

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif, and I'm your host for this episode.

Vladimir Putin is about to enter his third decade in power in Russia. As we enter 2020, how he sees the global map and his own position can tell us much about what to expect from Russian policy. Where has Putin made progress in advancing his goals? And where has he faced setbacks? ISW's Nataliya Bugayova and Mason Clark joint Overwatch for a year in review assessment

### ***Nataliya Bugayova:***

Today we'd like to talk about where Putin stands with regard to his strategic objectives, what he was able to accomplish in 2019, where he failed, and what he's able to and aiming to achieve going forward in 2020. To my mind, Putin's grand strategic objectives remain consistent. First preserving his regime, restoring Russia as a mighty force to be reckoned with on the international stage, and ending what he perceives to be an American global hegemony.

Bottom line is that Putin played his weak hand well in 2019, he made progress on a number of goals and did so without actually having to curb his aggressive behavior. Now none of his games are irreversible, or game changing for him, or inevitable. He's also accumulated risks on a number of counts and the West continues to overlook the areas where Putin is actually making progress under the radar as well as the vulnerabilities that he has. We'll start with looking at Russia's gains globally. Then talk about Russia's core theater and finish with vulnerabilities.

So globally, Putin made progress in advancing Russia's positions as a great power, undermining Western unity and also Western structures. The first, he expanded Russia's freedom of navigation and action by further expanding Russia's military footprint worldwide. Russia sold additional S-400 air defense systems to US partners, and NATO member Turkey, received first payment also from India for the S-400 systems that they sold to India last year. Russia also deployed new systems to the Arctic and additional air defense to Kaliningrad. Russia also deployed additional limited Russian forces, both official and the private military contractors to Africa and is helping train local security forces.

Finally Putin also increased Russia's maritime presence both in the Black Sea but also Arctic, where Putin is trying to expand claims over the Northern Sea route, and actually this year, Russia had the first successful liquefied natural gas shipment from Russia to China through the Northern Sea route. I would like to remind that Putin is not trying to create a platform for global or regional wars, but rather hopes to shape US decisions through limited actions, limited deployments, and expansion of the air defense zones as Russia continues to optimize for a poor man's fight.

***Mason Clark:***

Russia also greatly improved its strategic posture in multiple theaters this year, including Syria. Russia was able to successfully leverage the Turkish invasion of Northeast Syria, playing off both its previous ties with the Turks, as well as the Kurds, to achieve a longstanding theater objective of establishing a third permanent base in Syria, in the city of Qamishli, on the border between North East Syria and Turkey. Russia has also extended its involvement in Libya this year, deploying roughly 2000-3000 Wagner private military contractors, to support Khalifa Haftar, who Russia supports in Libya.

This campaign is likely managed by the Deputy Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces and a staff of Russian military personnel. For context, the previous commander of the Russian intervention in Syria was the full head commander of the Russian Airborne Forces, demonstrating the prioritization the Kremlin is placing on the Libyan campaign. Russia's military modernization campaign has also accelerated this year on a number of key avenues, most prominently expanding Russian freedom of action by increasing the number of states both in central Asia and globally that the Kremlin has military ties with.

Russia has included central Asian states, as well as other major military powers, such as China and India, in its large scale military exercises this year, such as Center-2019 and the Union State 2019 exercise with Belarus, increasing its ability to not only work with partner forces in future engagements but expanding the platforms from which it can potentially deploy forces by growing military ties with these states.

***Nataliya Bugayova:***

Putin also made progress on another important priority expanding the network of alliances and coalitions that gravitate towards Russia. Putin is investing quite a bit of resources in this line of effort for a number of reasons. First, he seeks to boost legitimacy, find new ways to bring resources and build resiliency within the system. Putin expanded the Eurasian Economic Union, an effort that stalled for years, but this year he was able to sign free trade agreements with Serbia, Singapore, and formalized one with Iran.

Putin is also trying to link Eurasian Economic Union to other international structures such as African Union, and European Economic Union sign an MOU with the African Union this year. What we're looking for in the next year is actually the Russian chairmanship before global organizations, including the OSC, Arctic Council, BRIC and the CSTO.

Russia is also making a concerning amount of progress in the information space. First, Putin is managing to shift rhetoric in Europe in his favor without actually changing his behavior. He's outlasting West in the information space and we have seen change in rhetoric of European leaders, especially the French President Emmanuel Macron, stating their intent and willingness to bring Russia back into the international structures as well as Russia's restored membership emphasized this year.

Additionally, the Kremlin run media, such as RT and Sputnik, is expanding his global presence and signing agreements to exchange content with a dozen of media outlets around the world, including US partner Mexico. Push for Africa was also successful for Russia in 2019. Putin managed to secure a number of multi-billion dollar deals in energy, mineral resources, and also boost his diplomatic clout in Africa. This effort is actually directly tied to his strategic objectives as he is aiming, not just to gain additional resources for him and his associates, but also built platform to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions.

Finally, I would mention two successes in Europe as the Kremlin is trying to undermine the Western unity and the Western structures. First Hungary, and Russia is increasing use of Hungary in its foreign policy. We've seen

the Kremlin likely using Hungary to block some of the NATO integration steps of Ukraine. Secondly is Balkans, another area where Putin consistently continues to expand his influence, in particular in Serbia, and also subvert the normalization talks between Serbia and Kosovo, in order to block Balkan integration into the Western structure.

As we look into 2020, one of the key risks that we are focusing on is Russia's use of both Turkey and Hungary to undermine NATO. These global advances are important. However, they're not game changing for Russia's positions. What would be a game changer, and empower Putin globally, is actually success in his core theater, and by that we mean Ukraine in particular, but also a Moldova, Belarus. This is actually Putin's core objective to regain the dominant influence over the former Soviet Union, and this year he has advanced this objective, but his gains aren't game changing yet, neither they're solidified.

***Mason Clark:***

The Kremlin accelerated its campaign to integrate Belarus under its control under the framework of the Union State, an agreement signed between Russia and Belarus in the late 1990s. The Kremlin increased its pressure campaign on Belorussian President Lukashenko to enter this agreement to gain control over Belorussian military and economic structures.

However, as it often does, the Kremlin has overreached and pushed Belarus too hard. Despite the fact that Lukashenko has next to no leverage, he was strengthened by overt Russian pressure to resist further integration efforts. While Russian gains have not been halted or reversed, they will progress at a slower pace than what was initially planned for by Putin at the beginning of the year

***Nataliya Bugayova:***

In Ukraine, put it has been waging a deliberate campaign to exploit President Zelensky's genuine desire to achieve peace. To mind, Putin's priority in Ukraine is neither peace nor is Donbass. What Putin is trying to do is position Russia to regain control over Ukraine's decision-making, legitimize his foreign policy and remove international constraints such as sanctions on his global ambitions.

This year, Putin managed to for several concessions out of Ukraine, facilitate return of a number of the Kremlin linked actors to Ukraine, and also soften the European rhetoric on the issue. Now Putin achieved this progress again, not by curbing his aggression. Russian controlled forces continue to kill Ukrainian servicemen every week. Putin instead is exploiting President Zelensky's, as we said, genuine desire to achieve peace, but also European self-imposed urgency to reach a deal with Russia on Ukraine and start restoring economic relationship with Russia.

On the other hand, Putin's are rather limited and are also slowed, as we've seen at Normandy summit, that was held on December 9th, Putin, did not actually succeed as his objectives at his summit. Specifically, he wasn't able to force Ukraine's hand on the special status, which would legitimize his proxies in Ukraine, and also Russia's intervention overall. Neither, he was able to force Ukraine's hands on the energy deal, which Putin intentionally tried to bundle into the peace talks in order to dilute Ukraine's leverage. That said, Ukraine position continues to be fragile, and putting, we'll continue to push and explore Zelensky's genuine peace aspirations. It is that's critical for the West to ensure that Russia does not pressure Ukraine into compromising its sovereignty, by either conceding on Donbass, or on the energy talks.

Moldova was a successful or Putin this year, and it's also one of the most overlooked and important cases of how Kremlin is adapting in order to achieve with global objectives. Putin was able to reverse a number of major setbacks that Russia was experiencing in Moldova over the past several years. The previous Moldovan government was

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working hard to counter Russian subversion and integrate with the West. Only a year ago, a Kremlin backed candidate and President Dodon, faced his fifth no confidence vote. A lot of major bilateral mechanism between Russia and Moldova were halted and numerous Russian officials were expelled or claimed as persona non grata.

Today, Russia and Russian backed proxy, Dodon, controls presidency, cabinet ministers, and number of security services. Russia also managed to restore major bilateral mechanisms between Moldova and Russia, and host Moldovan prime ministers, for the first time after a seven year pause. Russia was able to do that by sidelining competitors to its interests, first a Moldovan oligarch, Plahotniuc, who was aligned with the West and most recently a pro European Prime Minister Maia Sandu.

The key takeaway is that Russia actually used the nominal alignment with the West to achieve this progress, and legitimize Russia's proxy, Igor Dodon. If Russia succeeds in regaining dominant influence in Moldova, which borders Ukraine and also NATO member Romania, it would put additional pressure on the NATO Alliance, and might also be able to set a dangerous international precedent by legitimizing its presence in Moldova's region of Transnistria.

Putin failed at a number of objectives this year and expose a number of vulnerabilities as the Kremlin continues to accumulate risk on number of counts. So first preserving power is becoming increasingly costly. While we've said that his regime is stable, and has a reserve of resiliency, it is becoming more difficult for Putin to keep his core constituents content, as well as the core pillar of his regime, which is security services, and the small circle of put his close advisors.

It is becoming more difficult for him in large part because of sanctions and the global restraints that he's now starting to face as he has been accumulating that risk or some time. Putin also continues to intentionally downplay the importance of the sanctions. His current solution to the problem is on one side more censorship and control over the population, and we see the record number of censorship measures and laws imposed by the Kremlin this year. And on the other side, additional foreign ventures and attempts to gain resources in places like Africa. However, that is the risk that Putin will continue to accumulate and something we're watching out for in the longer term.

***Mason Clark:***

Putin also faces limits on his human capital, exposing vulnerabilities in his worldwide subversive efforts this year. For example, the Wagner PMC Group has faced a noticeable drop in effectiveness this year. In its first major operation without the direct support of the Russian military in Mozambique, it has suffered major casualties as part of a training mission, and withdrew a large portion of its forces from Mozambique in November. Subversive actions in Africa also continued to be exposed. For example, an operative linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, commonly known as Putin's chef and the funder of Wagner, was exposed attempting to manipulate elections in Madagascar early this year.

Just months following, the same individual attempted to manipulate political processes in Libya as well and was quickly exposed by the BBC. Just this fall the Kremlin has also faced notable setbacks in Europe. Russian officials were expelled from Germany and even Russia's allies, Serbia, including both diplomats and military intelligence officials due to blown operations, including attempting to stop a German investigation into the murder of a Chechen in Berlin. The Kremlin will likely have to work to adapt to the shallowing pool of talent for its subversive actions going into 2020 or recalibrate its methods.

***Nataliya Bugayova:***

There are a number of other vulnerabilities and objective that Putin wasn't able to accomplish this year. First of

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all, European sanctions still hold despite efforts and investment that the Kremlin has put into attempt to lift the sanctions. Russia also wasn't able to acquire additional strategic basing in North Africa, which has been a longterm objective for the Kremlin.

Russia has also suffered additional legitimacy losses this year, including being banned from the Olympics and other sports competitions. Looking in 2020, Russia's progress in Ukraine actually will be one of the key factors that will determine whether Putin's ambitions will be dampened or accelerated. If Putin succeeds in regaining influence in Ukraine and even lifting sanctions, Russia will be empowered globally because Ukraine still remains a main dampener on his ambitions because it ties up a lot of the high value military assets, bandwidth, resources, as well as time.

Putin's gains and none of these places were inevitable. Many of them are also not permanent or solidified. The West needs to remember that it has a broad set of leverage points against Putin and that Kremlin is accumulating risk and has a number of vulnerabilities which provide an opportunity for the West to counter Russia subversion globally.

Bottom line is that this year Putin, played his weak hand well. He made progress in a number of goals and did so without having to curb his aggressive behavior. That said, none of the gains are irreversible or game changing, or actually were inevitable. Putin was also accumulating risks on a number of counts. The West continues, however, to overlook, the areas where Putin is actually making progress under the radar, as well as number of vulnerabilities that he has.

***Maseh Zarif:***

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit [www.understandingwar.org](http://www.understandingwar.org) to learn more about ISW's work and to sign up for a mailing list.

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