

Putin's Offset: The Power of Perception



Featuring Nataliya Bugayova

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Russian President Vladimir Putin plays a weak hand well. Putin's center of gravity is increasingly his ability to shape others' perception and create the image of a powerful Russia based on limited real power. He has several clear strengths, but also very real limitations. Nonetheless, he continues to achieve goals that should be beyond his capabilities. Nataliya Bugayova recently published a detailed report on how Putin has used a series of offsetting approaches to achieve his goals and how Putin has evolved these approaches since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. She joined Overwatch to talk about her report and its findings.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. Russian president, Vladimir Putin, plays his geopolitical hand well, but that hand remains fundamentally weak. He has several clear strengths, but also very real limitations. Nonetheless, he continues to achieve goals that should be beyond his capabilities. Nataliya Bugayova recently published a detailed report on how Putin has used a series of offsetting approaches to achieve his goals. Her report also examines how Putin has evolved these approaches since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. She is with us today to talk about this report and its findings. Nataliya, thank you for being here today.

Nataliya Bugayova:

Thanks for having me.

Jacob:

You assert in the opening of your paper that Vladimir Putin's power comes from his ability to manipulate perceptions rather than from Russia's tangible assets. What led you to this conclusion?

Nataliya:

Sure. First, Putin is increasingly dependent on means other than real power to achieve his goals. Both sanctions and pushback against the Kremlin around the world, no matter how limited, have cumulated over the past six years and combined with Russia's already weak fundamentals, such as economic lag. While Putin's ability to project power has grown, his value proposition to both the Russians and other countries has diminished. He is thus growing more and more dependent on asymmetries to achieve his goals and the key one being his ability to manipulate perceptions or generate perception of a powerful Russia based on limited real power. Putin must also increasingly sustain the perception domestically that an alternative to his rule in Russia is either worse or too costly to fight for. Secondly and separately, the Kremlin often generate gains internationally based on perception without changing what Russia is, what it can offer, what it can threaten, essentially without changing Russia's capabilities.

Jacob:

Can you elaborate on that a bit? How exactly does Putin achieve this warping of perceptions?

Nataliya:

Sure. I want to highlight several ways, and the paper goes through them in a more comprehensive way. First, the Kremlin is exploiting peace aspirations. For example, Putin secured several concessions from Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky by exploiting Zelensky's election promise to achieve peace and without changing the reality of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine. Putin similarly exploits the forces that drive the West towards normalizing ties with Russia. He refocuses his opponent in the West away from the leverage that West holds vis-a-vis Russia, which is often plenty, towards the short-term costs that the Kremlin can inflict on them. Putin also exploits fears.

He can now leverage a credible threat of military intervention, given the precedent in Ukraine, to shape politics in other countries. As of my assessment, he's doing currently in Belarus where he's likely using the expectation of an offensive to shape behavior of actors inside of Belarus and in the West.

Putin also occasionally turns on collegial or cooperation mode to advance his goals. It's interesting that the West and the international community broadly continues to fall for Putin's cooperation models, even on the issues where Russia is a malign actor such as cybersecurity. Since 2014, Russia has signed hundreds of partnership agreements for media to security with dozens of nations. Finally, the Kremlin advances often happen in the West blind spots, and in my assessment, the West has two key blind spots when it comes to Russia. First, the West sometimes ignores Putin's activities that appear trivial, but it is exactly the slow, under the radar creep that often happens at the tactical level is how the Kremlin is making long-term gains. For example, Russia started to set up separatist structures in Eastern Ukraine as early as 2005, the process that went largely unnoticed in the West.

The second blind spot is the tendency to mistake the Kremlin's sloppy execution and adaptability for Putin's opportunism. And while of course Putin does seize on opportunities to achieve his goals, all his campaigns from Ukraine to Syria to Balkans clearly suggest that he can stay on the same goals for years. He has also shown willingness to live with certain share of losses to advance a larger objective. And the Kremlin's means, no matter how poorly coordinated and sometimes have been counterproductive, still largely support Putin's strategic intent.

Jacob:

Your paper focuses on Putin's tactics and strategy from Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014 to the present. Why did you choose that as the starting point for your inquiry?

Nataliya:

Six years after the Crimea were a major phase of geopolitical military adaptation for the Kremlin, both in theory and practice. The Kremlin overhaul key documents that define Russia's foreign policy and national security, such as military doctrine, information security doctrine, national security strategy, and others. Russian military also carried out extensive internal debates on lessons learned from the conflicts Russia has been engaged in. Secondly, the Kremlin had to adapt on the ground as well and there were several forcing functions, such as new constraints, whether sanctions or growing wariness of the Kremlin's activities globally, experience in military campaigns that the Kremlin was engaged in and especially failures in those campaigns. Another driving factor of adaptation, or actually Kremlin's evolving assessment of the threat landscape, the Kremlin assesses increasingly so that the chief threat to Russia's sovereignty will emerge from within the information space, especially from the West attempts to destabilize Russia from within by turning Russians against their government, as well as eroding Russia's power in the world.

Jacob:

How did Putin change his goals and his hybrid approaches in the last six years?

Nataliya:

Sure. Putin's objectives remain largely the same, but he has recalibrated his approaches and I will highlight six key points here. First in terms of objectives, Putin continues to seek to preserve his regime and Russia's sovereignty above all, regain dominant influence in the former Soviet Union, and reestablish Russia as a great power while diminishing the power of the U.S. and NATO. He has, however, become increasingly focused on shaping, not just disrupting, an international environment after 2014. Putin might have assessed that the long-term solution to deflect international pressure is actually to create an environment that will accept Russia's principles and narratives. For example, if the Kremlin manages to manipulate the Ukrainian government into recognizing the Russian

proxies, some Western countries could argue for lifting sanctions on Russia more easily. I want to highlight the six core lines of effort, which reflect Putin's broader adaptations and priority activities since 2014. First, the battle for minds is Putin's key battle. Putin has been investing heavily in the Kremlin's ability to shape narratives and perceptions, both within Russia and globally. After 2014, the Kremlin overhauled the information policies, but also growing information capabilities. For example, the Kremlin has incorporated information confrontation in the mandate of Russia security services and created forces of information operations. The Kremlin has also been building out a global media conglomerate. Russia media organizations, such as RT, signed at least 50 content sharing agreements with local media outlets globally in the last five years.

I want to stress that the Kremlin information space goes far beyond media and troll farms, and now it encompasses all layers of the information environment. It is no longer a supporting effort, but often the principal focus. And I want to just stress that the information effects are achieved with both information and often physical tools, including cyber attacks or even deployments of air defense systems. The U.S. should really not restrict the definitions of the Kremlin's information space to include only information operations. It would be more accurate to define it as a perception space with the emphasis on effects and not efforts, essentially on why and not how.

Another Putin's post-2014 priority has been expansion of Russia's military footprint and security coalitions, but without engaging in a costly arms race. Putin has militarized Crimea, expanding militarily in the Arctic where he has been increasingly assertive over the Northern Sea Route, as he has been in the Black Sea. He has deployed and advanced air defense systems on Russia's overseas bases and secured additional base in Syria, which by the way, he continues to expand every opportunity he gets. Global military footprint remains a core of his power projection, but it's still limited and I want to stress that it's intentionally so since Putin is trying to scale on the cheap here. Instead, the Kremlin is using security coalitions to offset this limits. For example, Putin is trying to source forces through the security partnerships as he tried to integrate forces of the former Soviet country into Russia's military campaigns, or he seeks to legitimize Russia's interventions under the umbrella of international cooperation as he tries to tie Russia-led CSGO organization and its peacekeeping missions to the United Nations.

Third is Putin's broader effort to try to cocoon Russia in a network of coalitions globally beyond security. Coalitions actually key amplifiers of the Kremlin's power. The Kremlin is both expanding and linking Russia's partnerships in order to shape international agenda, but also gain access to cash and legitimacy that the Kremlin has been lacking, especially after 2014. Reinforcing the primacy of the United Nations is a key effort because Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council is actually one of the few bases of Putin's real power. The Kremlin is simultaneously trying to engage the U.S., which is not a contradiction for Putin to want to partner with U.S. while trying to undermine the U.S. influence.

Next is the Kremlin has also evolved the approach of how it builds coalitions. It evolved the set of coherent nodes, essential causes such as counter terrorism efforts, that it uses to pull countries into Russian initiatives. And the West should recognize that while this might be legitimate causes with legitimate Russian interests, they're still primary ways for the Kremlin to build influence. Putin also diversified and consolidated foreign policy tools and has been increasingly utilizing, for example, Russia's security services in his foreign policy outreach, like Russia's National Guard is helping deepen Russia's relationship with China through numerous joint exercises and exchanges. The West should also understand that while Kremlin's foreign policy tools are not always coordinated and there is degree of freelancing, they're still guided by Putin's Russian intent, and we give the full breakdown of both tools and coherent nodes in the paper.

Putin also has evolved approach towards the Russian world, one of his core political contract. He adjusted, mostly softened, the rhetoric and the tactics after Russia's war in Ukraine resulted in pushback against the Russian world

idea. He also adapted how he uses the armed forces in the former Soviet Union now that he can benefit from the ability to leverage a credible threat of a military intervention, given the Ukraine precedent. Another shoot has been Kremlin's notable push after 2014 to peripheral theaters. Putin has been trying to expand Russia's power in Africa and Asia and South America in search for influence, legitimacy, and also resources to offset the losses that were imposed on him after 2014.

Final point I will make about Putin's adaptations, but also offsetting approaches since 2014, is his efforts to consolidate power at home. He has been offset in his declining value proposition in Russia by tightening grip on power even further and trying to center the Russian way of life on the narrative of this militaristic patriotism. He has further expanded the power of security services. He centered ties in Russia's information space. He's increasingly merging education and information policy. For example, Russia's 2020 bill on patriotic education for the Russian citizens states the need to cultivate feelings of patriotism, respect for the rule of law, and other.

Jacob:

Thank you so much for that rundown. Do these offset efforts work and what are the effects that Putin's adaptations have produced?

Nataliya:

Sure. I would say the bottom line is that Putin's offset approach enables him to play a bad hand well, but his hand remains weak. On one side, these adaptations did allow him to make advances. He's still in power. He has secured an option to run for president again in 2024. He hasn't been made to give up on his gains or goals. In fact, he's on trajectory to secure more influence in the former Soviet Union, in particular in Belarus as we discussed. The Kremlin access new revenue streams, aim in Western sanctions, and expanded Russia's freedom of navigation and global information network. Kremlin also managed to exacerbate fissures within the West on issues like Turkey or Nord Stream Two.

Finally, Putin is also outlasting the West and the information space. Several western leaders express openness to welcoming Russia back into the international organizations, and in fact, the Kremlin did manage to reinstate its voting rights in parliamentary assembly in the Council of Europe last year, despite not having addressed the problem that led to the revocation of Russia's rights in the first place. There is also another emerging wave of suggestions about reset with Russia in the U.S. currently. On the other side, Putin is facing a lot of setbacks and many of Putin's efforts have limited effects. Many of his partnerships are weak and constantly require maintenance on the Kremlin's part. Sanctions are still in place in Russia and a lot of rogue regimes that the Kremlin is propping or has created haven't gained legitimacy.

Many of Putin's strategic bets and investments he has personally made in cultivating relationships with various countries after 2014 haven't really yielded results as he likely expected. For example, Balkans continue to pursue EU aspirations and North African countries haven't allowed Russian bases. Turkey is challenging Putin's interests across multiple theaters. Finally, Putin's gains are neither solidified or reversible and he's often counterproductive. It's ironic that he himself caused likely major damage to his Russian world mission as his invasion of Ukraine generated antibodies to Russia throughout the former Soviet Union and beyond.

Jacob:

So is that to say that Russia's position as a major U.S. adversary is primarily smoke and mirrors?

Nataliya:

I would caution against simplifying Putin's regime to a third world dictatorship or mafia-run gas station with

nuclear weapons, as some suggested, because that approach hides nuanced ways in which Russia does pose a challenge to the U.S. and its allies. Putin gains a lot by perceptions, as we discussed, and information operations, especially their cumulative effect over time pose a real threat to Western societies. But it is not all perception. Putin has several sources of resilience and power that has allowed him to retain power in Russia for 20 years. He offers a limited, but nevertheless real value proposition to the Russian people in other countries, which he also dynamically adapts and updates. He has several sources of real power, such as nuclear weapons, a global military footprint, niche military capabilities that he has advanced, veto power in the UN Security Council. Another advantage is his control over Russia's domestic narrative and his ability to shape perception globally. Finally, he also constantly adapts, though we should remember as a caveat that the bar for his success is often not high and often lowered by the absence of pushback to his actions.

Jacob:

Does he have any vulnerabilities that could be exploited to limit his successes?

Nataliya:

Several in my assessment. First, Russia's fundamental, such as economy and human capital continue to deteriorate, as we discussed. And what Putin can offer to both Russia and his foreign partners is also limited and in some cases harmful. If we look at the poor conditions throughout various Kremlin created legal entities in Ukraine, Moldova, and beyond. Putin is also unlikely, in my assessment, to expand Russia's capabilities significantly. First, because his regime is antithetical to reform required to actually grow Russia's economy, but also if we look at all his post-2014 efforts, they're actually skewed towards damage control, not towards improving Russia's fundamentals. He has focused, for example, on how to better control Russian people, how to better pressure other countries, rather than reforming Russia or becoming a more appealing international partners.

Another vulnerability is actually his dependence on narratives and desire to have this legitimacy. Kremlin stopped its offensive in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 at the limit of what I call an information frontier, the point at which Russia no longer had enough information cover to advance in a hybrid manner without committing to a full fledged military offensive in Ukraine. If you recall, the Kremlin wanted to capture six regions in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, but only was able to secure portions of two, in part because Russia overestimated support to the idea of the Russian world in one population of Ukraine and this lack of support deprived the Kremlin of the information cover it needed. The Kremlin also experiences numerous setbacks as a result of its limitations and vulnerabilities, such as failing to prevent expansion of NATO in the Balkans, for example, or we are also observing effectiveness of several key foreign policy tools, such as Russian Orthodox Church or Russia's energy exports, are declining consistently.

Jacob:

Where do you see the situation with Russia heading and what actions do you recommend the U.S. take to counter Putin's techniques?

Nataliya:

Sure. I will start with a top-line forecast. In my assessment, the gap between Putin's goals and his resources will continue to grow, as will the requirement for him to offset these limitations. It doesn't mean that Putin's regime will automatically be threatened or that Putin will be less dangerous, but these gaps will provide opportunities for the West to counter him. First, I said that Putin's fundamentals, economy and all, will continue to deteriorate, but to some degree he will effectively continue to offset the gap between his aims and the needs. Domestically, he will become increasingly authoritarian and increasingly ideological as he'll try to cohere Russians around this idea of militaristic patriotism as his value proposition to them declines. While Putin is unlikely to cohere a majority

of the Russians around this identity, I think Putin's policy will likely expand the pool of hardliners within the population in the regime. And this could lead to even more aggressive foreign policy after Putin, especially if his successor is less pragmatic than he is, and U.S. must consider this scenario.

He will also continue to focus on regaining influence in the former Soviet Union. It's too critical of a base of power for him and also a major vulnerability for Putin to let it go. Russia will try to cultivate both the ruling and opposition factions throughout the former Soviet Union to hedge that. Putin will also increasingly use, in my assessment, the institutional Russian citizenship to advance both domestic and foreign policy aims. He will try to give Russian passports essentially to as many citizens in the former Soviet Union as he can to both build influence and solve Russia's demographic challenges. Internationally, expanded information space, military footprint, but in a targeted way will remain a priority. There are several things that can also accelerate his ambitions. For example, if sanctions are gone or if he gains more influence in Ukraine to free up a lot of his military assets and resources that he can then deploy elsewhere.

In terms of recommendations, I'll highlight a couple from what we discuss in the report. The first one is embracing complexity and nuance of the Russian challenge and understanding limited but real sources of Putin's power, but also his limitations, vulnerabilities, and most importantly, the ways in which he gains and loses. The Kremlin treats its varied efforts as a comprehensive undertaking and we need to confront them in the same way. The U.S. should not just focus on Russia's tools, but on the goals that they support. We should avoid bifurcated frameworks of military, civilian, state, non-state, but apply the lens that the Kremlin does, essentially looking at it as a consolidated national security space that pools whatever resources it deems necessary.

The West must also understand that when the West legitimizes the Kremlin's narratives and joins its international frameworks, it actually provides oxygen to two major amplifiers of Putin's power. Without this oxygen, Putin would likely be brought down closer to his actual size. Now, the long-term solution versus Russia in my assessment is actually creating a collective immunity through building out strategic intelligence capability in the U.S., but also U.S. partners and allies around the world so that we can recognize this slow, tactical creep before it becomes Putin's strategic advantage, and also especially recognize Putin's perception manipulation activities.

But in the short-term, the West should really retain the dampeners, whether it's sanctions or preventing Putin from offloading his problems onto someone else's balance sheet, as he's trying to do both in Ukraine and Syria, as well as constantly debunking the Kremlin's false narratives and really preventing them from solidifying because we need to realize that once they do, it will be really hard to reverse. And a lot of work can be done on this front, including investigating Russia's violations of international law and law of armed conflict as a broader international coalition. Which brings me to the final point, I think that building coalitions to achieve all of the above is key and U.S. should prioritize Europe, given how much Europe can affect the international balance and momentum on Russia's issue. But also go beyond Europe because Russia actually derives a lot of this legitimacy and offsetting value in the non-Western world. And there are indicators, however, that several citing members and governments in Asian, African, South American countries are exposing and trying to resist Russian influence and malign activity, so we ought to reinforce them.

Jacob:

Nataliya Bugayova, thank you for being here today and sharing your insights with us.

Nataliya:

Thanks for having me.

Kim Kagan:

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 to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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