

Russia's Putin Exploits War, Crisis, and Disease to Expand his Power in 2020

Featuring Mason Clark and George Barros



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Vladimir Putin enjoyed a successful 2020 despite a slate of setbacks to his agenda. New constitutional amendments will allow him to rule the Russian state for life. Putin manipulated the crisis in Belarus to gain leverage over that country and successfully expanded Russian military ties to several other states in the former Soviet Union. He exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to fuel disinformation campaigns against the United States and undermine sanctions imposed on Russia by the West. These successes came amid milder setbacks for Putin's ambitions in the Balkans and Ukraine. The collapse in oil and gas prices ravaged the fuel-driven Russian economy but failed to derail Putin's campaigns. On this episode of Overwatch, ISW Russia Team Lead Mason Clark and George Barros discuss Putin and the Kremlin's biggest successes and setbacks in 2020.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War.

I'm Jacob Taylor. ISW's Russia Team has published an extensive line of insights and analyses on Russia this year. Russia team lead, Mason Clark, and his teammate, George Barros, are with me today to talk about the biggest successes and setbacks experienced by president Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin over the course of 2020. Mason, George, thanks for being with us.

Mason Clark:

Thanks for having us, Jacob.

George Barros:

Thank you for hosting us, Jacob.

Jacob:

All right, Mason, I would like to start with you. Can you give us a general overview of what we've seen from the Kremlin this year? What have been their successes, their setbacks, and what are you and your team watching for in 2021?

Mason:

Sure, Jacob. Overall 2020 was a successful year for Putin. He leveraged his limited sources of real power well and successfully turned several crises in the former Soviet Union, not to mention the global COVID-19 pandemic, to his advantage. Putin's efforts in 2020 largely focused on shaping perceptions in the information space to amplify his real bases of power, giving him ability to punch above his weight and create real effects. ISW Fellow, Nataliya Bugayova, published an excellent paper on this phenomenon in September 2020 called Putin's Offset, and throughout discussing several of these successes and setbacks that Putin has had this year, we'll be talking a lot about the information space and how Putin concentrates his efforts on shaping perceptions.

Jacob:

Over the course of 2020 it seemed like much of Putin's activity related to his preparations for a future of Russian state that does not include him, for his successor or for his future. Can you tell us about that?

Mason:

Yes. In part Putin's decisions in early 2020 were certainly intended to set conditions for if he chose to leave office as the president, but more of what he did was intended to set conditions for the future and ensure continuity of his vision for Russian policy and Russia's place in the world, whether or not he was still in office. Most notably, he reset his terms as president through constitutional amendments. So, if he chooses to, he could effectively die

in office, ruling through 2036. However, he also took several steps through reordering power structures and empowering the Russian Senate and is currently moving forward on an amendment that would make himself a permanent Senator if he left the presidency to grant himself other pathways to rule the country and beyond being president. And that's the key point to remember about these constitutional amendments that Putin enacted in 2020, is that he is creating flexibility for himself. He could either stay on as president, move into another role, or simply ensure continuity in his vision for Russian policies or steps down carrying forward into the future.

Jacob:

Can we talk a little bit more about these amendments? You mentioned they were very important, but what specifically have they done in the context of how the Russian government operates?

Mason:

Sure. Aside from the ones that got the most coverage of extending his ability to run for president, most of the amendments actually centered on ensuring that the Russian Constitution aligns with Putin's view of the world and desired path forward for Russia. He really focused on getting several of the most important points of what's often discussed as Putinism into the constitution. For example, one of the amendments is that the Russian constitution is now above all international law and individual Russian laws that disagree with the constitution in favor of say, something the UN says, are fundamentally unconstitutional.

There's several other points enshrining his view of the Russian culture and people, such as making Russian the sole language of the country and enshrining the centrality of Orthodox Christianity. Finally, he included an amendment, making disputing Russian control of territory, including the illegally occupied Crimean Peninsula, a constitutional offense. These amendments are both markers of policy and also efforts to ensure that his worldview continues to drive Russian policy as an element of the constitution, whether or not he's still president.

Jacob:

Well, hazard what might be a kind of naive question, but how did Putin get these amendments passed, given their scope and it sounds like their severity? How was he able to get enough support to get these through?

Mason:

Sure. That's actually one of the most fascinating parts of this entire process, is that he really didn't need to make a big deal of it or carry out the national vote that he did. He could have done this through the Russian Parliament, which he controls entirely, and simply push these amendments through. However, he carried out this long, drawn out process beginning in January, where at first he denied that he wanted to stay on as president and he opened it up to the Russian people and allowed for any interested party to submit amendments to frame this as sort of a consultative path for him to hear what the Russian people wanted.

And he ended with carrying out this overtly fraudulent and legally unnecessary national vote, pardon me, on July 1st, to legitimize these carefully chosen amendments. As I said, he could have just changed the constitution unilaterally, but he really cared about the narrative, of framing it as a consultation of the Russian people and essentially a rubber stamp, not only on him continuing on as president, but on his entire worldview.

He explicitly framed the vote for the amendments as a referendum on his rule. And several Kremlin spokespeople made this point afterwards. He argued he is essential to protect Russia, that you don't figuratively change horses mid-race during a struggle with the United States, and claiming that he's continuing on at the behest of the Russian people, despite, as I said, this vote not being legally necessary and overtly fraudulent.

Importantly, there's also going to be more amendments likely coming down the pipe in 2021, and Putin is going

to continue to cement his worldview. This package of amendments was not a one-off deal. And the Russian parliament and Putin himself has continued to discuss other ways they could modify the constitution going forwards, which is something that we're going to be watching closely.

Jacob:

Very interesting. I'd like to turn to 2020's really elephant in the room, the COVID pandemic, which has certainly affected Russia. And I'm curious to know if you have thoughts on one, how the COVID crisis has affected Russia and affected Putin's plans over the course of the year, and also what we see coming down the line with his response to the COVID pandemic?

Mason:

Sure. In a very cynical sense, Putin didn't let the COVID-19 crisis go to waste and exploited it to his own ends through very, very intentional attempts to manipulate the information space, both internationally and domestically. It's actually a little difficult to evaluate how Russia has dealt with COVID, again, on purpose, but it was likely poor, as Putin sought to cover up COVID and instead exploit it to advance his preexisting policy goals. George, could you talk a little bit about how Putin exploited COVID domestically?

George:

Sure, Mason. Thank you. It's difficult to evaluate how poorly Russia dealt with COVID because the Russian government likely deliberately ostracated the extent to which the state mishandled the pandemic. For example, the Russian government actually deliberately misdiagnosed patients and misreported infection rates in order to justify less stringent shutdowns. Moscow City reportedly lifted its quarantine earlier than initially planned so to increase voter turnout at the July 1st national vote on Putin's constitutional amendments that you just mentioned, for example.

The Kremlin also used the pandemic in order to justify testing a whole litany of domestic control tools. We assess that Putin seeks to revive Soviet-style internal policing in order to suppress his opponents and control the Russian population. To this end, Putin used the pandemic in order to test a bunch of control tools on a wide scale for the first time. The Kremlin empowered Russian security services at home, deployed the national guard and also used a number of mass digital surveillance tools, like facial recognition and geolocation, in order to keep tabs on the Russian people. Putin will likely use these tools and leverage them in the future in order to offset the financial burdens of maintaining large conventional security apparatuses that are necessary to control regimes like his own.

Mason:

George, can we talk a little bit more about the specifics of the Kremlin's messaging on COVID-19? What specifically did we see there?

George:

The Kremlin used COVID-19 disinformation in Ukraine to influence Ukraine's local elections in October, and also used disinformation on COVID to pressure the Ukrainian government as part of the Kremlin's ongoing Hybrid War against Ukraine. For example, the Kremlin also used disinformation on the Coronavirus in order to sow dissent and undermine competence in the Ukrainian government's early response to the virus.

More globally, outside of Russia's core theater, the Kremlin also unsuccessfully tried, along with Iran, China, Cuba, Syria, Nicaragua and Venezuela and North Korea, in order to get the United Nations to sign blanket waivers banning all economic sanctions by framing US sanctions during a global pandemic as inhumane. This of course is inside of the Kremlin's larger effort in order to try to undermine the legitimacy of sanctions.

Jacob:

George, I know Putin and the Kremlin made a very big deal about Russia developing a COVID-19 vaccine earlier this year. Can you tell us a bit about that messaging and how they used it?

George:

Sure, Jacob, the Kremlin and Putin, they're currently leveraging this very hyped up Russian manufactured COVID vaccine as a foreign policy influence tool. The Russian military began distributing it to its troops around Thanksgiving. And as a foreign policy tool, the Kremlin has already offered it to several promised recipients all around the world. This is part of the Kremlin's efforts to try to build influence with strategic partners.

For example, in Ukraine, the Kremlin framed votes for Ukraine's Pro-Russian Opposition Party as a vote for ending the COVID pandemic early, by getting their hands on the Russian vaccine. The Russians simultaneously also pushed disinformation claiming that other vaccines were not safe. However, the Kremlin might actually be setting itself up for some setbacks with this case, as we can't speak to the vaccine's effectiveness and it's possible that this sort of medical aid will be declared useless as was early COVID-19 aid to Italy and the Balkans in the spring of 2020.

Jacob:

I'd like to switch gears a little bit. Mason, I'd like to turn back to you. ISW wrote extensively over the course of 2020 about the Kremlin and Putin's effort to expand Russia's military ties to post-Soviet and former Soviet States, as well as their militaries. Can you talk about that effort a bit? Its successes, its setbacks, and so on?

Mason:

Sure, Jacob. To be clear, the Kremlin has had a long standing goal of regaining dominance over the militaries of the former Soviet Union, but it made several alarming advances in this effort this year. Putin wants to grow his control over these former Soviet militaries, not only to gain leverage over the other former Soviet States as a whole, but to gain the ability to use their forces to his own ends and justifications. Putin made several alarming new gains on this line of effort this year, most notably centered around the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the CSTO. George, could you tell us a little bit more about the CSTO and what Putin has carried forward this year?

George:

Sure, Mason. The CSTO is a military alliance among former Soviet States that was created in 1992. It's essentially Russia's knockoff of their version of NATO. And in this year, the Kremlin has actually increased its use of this organization and has conducted a series of exercises emphasizing this organization's structures, using this organization's structure synthetically across multiple theaters, such as in Belarus and other places. The Kremlin seeks to legitimize and empower the CSTO. And this organization, of course, that's important because it's never been tested in combat.

In 2020, the Kremlin's exercises prioritized developing the CSTO with an emphasis on coalition building and military interoperability with other nations. For example, Russian capstone CSTO military exercises from 2020 indicate that they really are prioritizing expeditionary capabilities that are interoperable with other States. The Kremlin conducted unprecedented exercises using Russia's principle expeditionary force as the sole command backbone for what the Kremlin framed as a joint CSTO force for example.

In end of year reviews for 2020, senior Russian officials have emphasized overhauling the CSTO's rapid response frameworks to enhance the organization's effectiveness. The Kremlin has also explicitly said Russia is prioritizing setting conditions to involve the CSTO in UN peacekeeping operations. And to that end is actively adapting

CSTO peacekeeping frameworks to align with official UN peacekeeping systems.

I really want to emphasize that this matters, because the Kremlin seeks to use the CSTO as an international organization to justify conventional Russian military deployments. And this is a very important Hybrid War capability that the Kremlin is developing. The CSTO is already providing informational cover to Russian regular military personnel, the so-called peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, even though that peacekeeping mission is an exclusively Russian undertaking and does not include any CSTO personnel structure or frameworks.

Jacob:

Has this effort extended beyond the scope of the CSTO and these former Soviet States?

Mason:

Yes, it absolutely has. Russian military exercises and developments in 2020 definitely focused on international cooperation outside the former Soviet Union, which Putin intends to increase Russia's ability to act as an expeditionary power. A lot of Russian exercise emphasized new command and control structures and interoperability with partner forces, including Iran, China and Pakistan, among others. Putin seeks to use these sorts of coalitions and international organizations, like the CSTO, to legitimize Russian military fraud so he can frame actions as not just Russian, but internationally supported.

For example, Putin included the International Committee of the Red Cross Observers in military exercise in Belarus in order to frame Russian deployments to Belarus as legitimate and internationally accepted, for example, despite Russia's intensified efforts to undermine Belarus' sovereignty.

Jacob:

Which I think brings us nicely to Belarus, which was a very significant crisis in the latter half of 2020, that Putin and the Kremlin became involved in. Can we talk about that a bit? What Russia is doing there, why they're doing it?

Mason:

Yes, Jacob. Another Kremlin success in 2020 has been Putin's efforts to exploit the crisis in Belarus to subdue Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who for Moscow has been a difficult target to pin down. Essentially the Kremlin seeks to regain control over Belarus. And the protests in Belarus starting in August following Lukashenko overtly manipulating his presidential reelection, has brought Lukashenko to the most vulnerable position that he's ever been in since he assumed the presidency in 1994.

This has made Lukashenko very reliant on the Kremlin. And the Kremlin has not let this opportunity go to waste. The Kremlin is exploiting Lukashenko's vulnerability to integrate Belarus into Russia via the so-called Union State, a supernatural rather structure that the Kremlin is using to subvert Belarus' sovereignty. The Kremlin intervened in Belarus in August 2020. And we have been tracking it very closely, but there's a couple highlights that I'd like to elevate about this evolving situation.

The Kremlin actually began its intervention in Belarus when the Kremlin secured supremacy in the information space by deploying Russian state media personnel to Belarus to regain control of the narrative and also launch an information operation falsely framing the protest as a NATO backed color revolution. The second point is that the Russians have been developing a creeping military presence inside Belarus. Russia has been deploying conventional Russian forces to Belarus on an almost monthly basis through joint military exercises since August. And these are going to continue into 2021.

The Russian military's access to Belarus is much higher than it has been before, evidenced in the level of geography to which Russian forces are able to deploy. And the level of military integration between Russian and Belarusian units in these exercises is much deeper than it ever has been before, judging from previous exercises. Putin has also secured several other military concessions from Lukashenko, such as the adoption of a common military doctrine, among other advances.

Jacob:

What did these successes mean for the West and for NATO?

Mason:

Putin's successes in gaining this control over Belarus and the ability to deploy military sources directly threatens NATO. The Kremlin set conditions for a Russian intervention into Belarus if protests deposed Lukashenko by falsely claiming that the West was waging a color revolution against both Belarus and Russia, as George mentioned. This narrative is still dangerous and the Kremlin may use it in 2021 to target Lithuania and Poland, which have supported the Belarusian opposition. More directly, the enhanced freedom of movement in Belarus that Russian forces now have makes the most dangerous option of a Russian attack on the Baltic States more dangerous. Though that still does not at all seem to be Putin's current priority, but the danger is increased prior to Putin being able to exploit this crisis in Belarus.

Jacob:

That's been a lot about some very dangerous successes that the Kremlin has had over the course of this year. Can we now turn our attention to setbacks that the Kremlin has seen in 2020?

George:

Sure, Jacob. I'll start in the Balkans. The Kremlin was unable to stop the NATO ascension of North Macedonia in March. This was a significant setback for the Kremlin's efforts to prevent NATO expansion in the Balkans. The Kremlin unsuccessfully tried to use information operations to disrupt processes that were required for North Macedonia's joining NATO, but it failed. And North Macedonia became NATO's 30th member.

2020 was also a bad year for the Kremlin pocket book as well. The Kremlin incurred large financial losses due to the global collapse of energy prices and its early price war with Saudi Arabia for oil in Spring 2020. The Kremlin actually initially forecasted a budget surplus of over 11 billion US dollars for 2020, but revised this financial forecast after the start of the price war and the Kremlin now anticipates deficits going several years. The Kremlin also failed to complete the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline with Germany, despite numerous and insistent Kremlin claims that it would do so in 2020. American sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 project were effective in this case.

Then in Ukraine, the Kremlin faced several setbacks in Ukraine this year. The Kremlin failed to coerce Ukraine into holding subversive Ukrainian elections in Russian-controlled Eastern Ukraine in October, and also failed more broadly to legitimize its proxies using some of the initial breaks they had given the new Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, as he was coming into office from 2019.

Jacob:

Thanks, George. Mason, going to you and going to the future, are there any other theaters that you and your team are planning to keep a close eye on as we enter 2021?

Mason:

Sure, Jacob. There's several items we're watching, some of them related to what we've already talked about, such

as Ukraine and Belarus and several other ones, such as efforts to gain basing around the world and military power projection capabilities. George, could you talk a little bit about how we're going to be watching Ukraine in the next year?

George:

Sure, Mason. We're going to be watching to see how exactly the Kremlin is going to evolve its approach towards dealing with Ukraine. We noticed that in late 2020, the Kremlin started increasing pressure on Ukraine and will likely continue doing so in the new year. The Kremlin initially deescalated its pressure campaigns against Ukraine in a bid to extract concessions from Zelensky in 2020, but actually failed as I just said.

The Kremlin failed to conduct those elections and also failed to hold subversive peace talks that would legitimize its proxies, but it failed on both of those counts. The Kremlin re-invigorated its military, diplomatic and information pressure campaigns against Ukraine in this fall and response. How the Kremlin continues building out that pressure against Zelensky in 2021 and beyond will be a key question for us to watch as Ukraine is a key dampener on Putin's global ambitions.

Mason:

Thanks, George. Similarly, we're going to continue to closely watch Belarus. First, we're going to be looking at the fate of the opposition movement as the protests have lost steam in recent months. Will the opposition changed their tactics or will Lukashenko successfully continue to diffuse the protests and perhaps reach some sort of compromise he can exploit? We're also conversely looking at what the Kremlin is going to do. Will the Kremlin be able to successfully exploit Lukashenko's current vulnerability to further formalize a union state and will it be able to expand its deployment of military forces into Belarus? We're going to be keeping an especially close eye on major Russian military exercises in 2021, which are scheduled to occur in Western Russia and Belarus.

Related to this, we're also going to be looking at the Kremlin's ongoing efforts, as George has talked about, to legitimize the CSTO as a peacekeeping force under the auspices of the UN, which is an explicit Kremlin effort that the foreign ministry has talked about wanting to do in 2021. Related to this, we're going to be looking at Russian global power projection ambitions advancing more basing deals, like the naval base that Russia was able to establish in Sudan in November, and elsewhere around the world as Putin tries to grow Russia's limited military capabilities.

Finally, going back to the first point we talked about today, we're going to be looking at the further consolidation of Putin's worldview and goals for Russian policy as he seeks to contest the new US administration and preserve his basis of power going into 2021.

Jacob:

Mason and George, thank you so much for taking the time to join us on the podcast today and I look forward to hearing more about all of your insights through the end of 2020 and going into 2021.

Mason:

Thanks for having us, Jacob.

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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