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Nataliya Bugayova

PUTIN'S OFFSET

THE KREMLIN'S GEOPOLITICAL ADAPTATIONS SINCE 2014

MILITARY LEARNING AND THE FUTURE OF WAR SERIES

ISW
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR

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Cover: Russia's President Vladimir Putin, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko stand before posing for a group photo during the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) summit at the Kremlin in Moscow May 15, 2012. REUTERS/ Denis Sinyakov

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The West has had some success in countering the Kremlin since Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea, but Russian President Vladimir Putin has found ways to offset external pressures on Russia without relinquishing his gains and goals. Putin's center of gravity is increasingly his ability to shape others' perceptions and create the image of a powerful Russia based on limited real power.

Putin's efforts since 2014 to offset the weaknesses of Russia's position and advance his goals have focused on creating a Russia-favorable global information space; growing Russia's military footprint in a targeted way that provides asymmetric opportunities to influence decision making; cocooning Russia in a network of coalitions and international organizations to amplify Russia's limited power; diversifying the tools and means of Russia's influence and subversion; expanding Russia's influence in peripheral theaters; and consolidating power inside Russia.

Putin's evolving approaches enable him to play a bad hand well, but his hand remains weak. Putin's dependency on asymmetrical approaches will grow as the gap between his means and aims likely increases. This gap will not necessarily threaten the survival of Putin's regime, but it will provide opportunities for the US to counter the Russian challenge.

The West should cut oxygen to two key amplifiers of Putin's power — narratives and coalitions. The long-term solution versus Russia would be building collective immunity to the Russian challenge, including strategic intelligence capabilities in the US and its partners to recognize Putin's slow tactical creep before it becomes his strategic advantage.

How Does Putin Succeed or Fail at Achieving His Goals?

Several sources of resilience have allowed Putin to retain power for 20 years. Putin understands Russia. He offers a limited and periodically changing but nevertheless real value proposition to the Russian people and other countries. He has several sources of real power, including nuclear weapons, a global military footprint, and veto power on the UN Security Council. Putin's grip on Russia's domestic narrative and the capabilities he has developed to influence the global narrative are other major sources of strength.

Putin adapts to the changing geostrategic environment. He has dynamically updated his value proposition to his constituencies in Russia over the past two decades. Putin recalibrated the methods he uses to achieve his foreign policy objectives after 2014 without fundamentally altering those objectives. Most recently, Putin has shown he is willing to experiment with less oppressive tactics for taming public discontent in Russia. He has allowed the 2020 anti-Kremlin protests in Russia's Far East to simmer without suppressing them for far longer than he would have done in the past, for example. He is evolving Russia's hybrid warfare approaches as he is exploiting anti-government protests in Belarus to regain control over that former Soviet state.

Putin's power has real and growing limits, however. Putin is accumulating risk on fundamentals such as Russia's economy and human capital, as both deteriorate. What Putin can offer Russia and its foreign partners is also limited, and in some cases harmful.

Putin recognizes these problems but is unlikely to be able to significantly expand Russia's resources and capabilities. His kleptocratic regime is incompatible with the reform required to meaningfully grow Russia's economy. Additionally, Putin's efforts post-2014 have skewed toward damage control and constraint mitigation, not toward improving Russia's fundamentals. He has focused, for example, on controlling Russian society more effectively and pressuring other countries in a more lasting way rather than reforming Russia or becoming a more appealing international partner.

Putin must increasingly sustain the perception that an alternative to his rule in Russia is either worse or too costly to fight for. Putin's reliance on his ability to shape the narrative is thus an existential requirement.

Putin no longer has the luxury of covering his actions in Russia in legalisms. For two decades, Putin tried to maintain a façade of democracy in Russia and repeatedly stated he would not change the constitution to suit his political agenda.[i] Putin, however, openly did just that in 2020 to give himself effectively the opportunity to rule for life.

The façade of legitimacy, which Putin has generally seen as important to the effectiveness of his approach, is also a limit on the Kremlin's actions globally. The Kremlin stopped its offensive in eastern Ukraine in 2014 at the limit of its "**information frontier**"—the point at which Russia ran out of information cover to advance its campaign in a hybrid manner—without openly committing to a full-fledged military offensive on Ukraine. The Kremlin planned to capture six regions in Ukraine but was only able to secure portions of two regions in part because the Kremlin greatly overestimated support for the idea of the "**Russian World**"[i] among the population in Ukraine. That lack of support stripped the Kremlin of the information cover it required to seize additional areas. As a result, Putin had to accept a lesser objective, at least for a while, than he initially planned to accomplish.

Some of Putin's post-2014 efforts exposed Russia to additional vulnerabilities. For example, Putin's pivot to non-Western powers, especially China, to offset losses resulting from deteriorating relationships with the West may backfire in the long run. The economic power imbalance between Beijing and Moscow is so great that Putin cannot be confident in his ability to prevent China from imposing costs and limitations on him over time that he is in principle unwilling to accept.

The Kremlin has experienced numerous setbacks as the result of its limitations, such as failing to prevent the expansion of NATO in the Balkans in 2017 (when Montenegro joined) and again in 2020 (with the admission of North Macedonia) despite Kremlin efforts. The effectiveness of several key Russian foreign policy pressure tools, such as the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia's energy exports, is also falling as many countries are trying to limit their exposure to Russia's influence.

Putin nevertheless continues to make gains—often in the West's blind spots. Putin is still securing additional influence in former Soviet Union countries, as well as expanding Russia's military footprint and information influence globally.

Putin exploits the forces that drive the West toward accepting his gains and dropping pressures on him. He accelerates the erosion of memory of Russian aggression. He uses legitimate causes such as counterterrorism cooperation to pull countries into Russian initiatives and legitimize his malign activities. He refocuses his opponents away from their long-term interests and from the leverage they hold vis-à-vis Russia towards the short-term benefits or costs the Kremlin can inflict on them. He benefits from the desire for normalcy in the West and the ingrained reluctance to engage in confrontational policies toward Russia.

The West's tendency to ignore Russia's trivial activities is another major opportunity for Putin. Slow, under the radar creep, often at the tactical level, is

i. **Putin defined the "Russian World" as "uniting all those spiritually connected to Russia and who consider themselves carriers of Russian language, culture, and history."**

generally how the Kremlin sets conditions for strategic gains.

Another Western vulnerability is the inclination to mistake the Kremlin's sloppiness and adaptability for opportunism. This inclination results in part from the fact that Putin does move rapidly when he sees opportunities and often jumps from one theater to another in a way that appears to lack coherence to a Western audience that regards, say, the Middle East and the Baltics as entirely separate issues. In reality, Putin has pursued the same goals consistently for years. He has shown a willingness to accept losses to advance his larger efforts. The Kremlin's means of pursuing these goals are being designed and improved to support them, even though their execution is often ineffective, poorly coordinated, and even counterproductive.

The West must also understand that when the West legitimizes the Kremlin's narratives and joins its international frameworks is provides oxygen to two major amplifiers of Putin's power. Without this oxygen, Putin would likely be brought down closer to his actual size.

Putin's Efforts and Adaptations post-2014

Putin's efforts since 2014 have been increasingly focused on shaping, not just disrupting, an international environment that will foster Russian interests and provide the Kremlin with resources and legitimacy. Putin likely has assessed that the long-term solution to deflect international pressure is to create an environment that will accept Russian principles and narratives and limit the need for it to use coercive measures against Russia.

Putin's core lines of effort that support this aim:

1. **Creating a Russia-favorable global information space and expanding the Kremlin's information capabilities.** The battle for minds is Putin's key battle. Russia's national security paradigm shifted toward the information space around 2014 likely in response to the informational successes and failures of its hybrid offensive on Ukraine as well as recognition of the increasing requirement to shape the narrative internationally to advance Russia's foreign policy. The Kremlin also assesses that the chief threat to Russia's sovereignty will emerge in the information space—from the West's attempts to destabilize Russia from within by turning Russians against their government, as well as eroding Russia's power in the world.

   The Kremlin has overhauled its information policies and increased its information operation capabilities and the area of its information impact globally. This area of impact is vast and goes beyond media and troll farms. Its purpose is strategic. It is no longer a supporting effort, but the principal focus. It is supported with both physical and information tools. It would thus be more accurate to define it as a ***perception space***—the Kremlin's efforts to promote specific narratives and create specific perceptions in support of its objectives or as an end in themselves.

2. **Expanding the security space around Russia without engaging in a costly arms race.** Putin is expanding Russia's military footprint in a targeted fashion, reflecting the Kremlin's assessment that Russia should rebuild its power without falling into an expensive arms race trap. The Kremlin has thus prioritized building security coalitions to offset the limits of Russia's growing but still limited military footprint. The Kremlin is using these security partnerships with other countries to source forces for the Kremlin's military campaigns, legitimize Russia's interventions under the umbrella of international cooperation, and advance the Kremlin's broader goals—such as regaining influence over the former Soviet states.

3. **Cocooning Russia in a web of coalitions and international organizations.** Putin is expanding and interlinking Russia's formal and informal partnerships to shape the international agenda, withstand Western pressure, as well as to gain access to sources of cash and legitimacy. Russia has signed hundreds of agreements in areas from media to military cooperation since 2014.

Putin is also trying to engage the US. It is not a contradiction for Putin to want to partner with the US while trying to undermine US influence. US-granted legitimacy is a major power amplifier for Putin in the short-term, while diminishing America's overall influence remains Putin's long-term goal.

4. **Reinforcing the primacy of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).** The post-WWII order and Russia's status as one of the the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the G5) is a key base of Russia's real and perceived power. The Kremlin aims to both revive G5 cooperation and reinforce the primacy of the UN, where Russia holds veto power on the Security Council, as a key international arbiter. Preserving these powers is vital to Putin.

5. **Diversifying foreign policy tools and means of building coalitions.** The Kremlin has evolved its set of "nodes"—legitimate causes such as counterterrorism efforts—that it uses to pull countries into Russian initiatives. These causes are often not the primarily goals of the Kremlin's outreach, but rather ways to build influence. Putin has expanded on the umbrella notion of sovereignty and has been engaging countries via an expanded set of "sovereignty"-related offerings, such as financial or digital independence from the systems of the "hegemonic" West.

   Putin has evolved his approach toward the "Russian World"—one of Putin's core geopolitical constructs. He adjusted its rhetoric and tactics after Russia's war in Ukraine resulted in pushback against the "Russian World." Putin has also adapted how he uses armed forces in the FSU; they are not his first resort, nor his last resort. The Kremlin can leverage a credible threat of military intervention, given the precedent it set in Ukraine, to shape FSU politics without the use of force.

6. **Investing in new bilateral relationships while expanding Russia's influence in peripheral theaters.** The Kremlin launched outreach campaigns into the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and South America in search of influence, legitimacy, and resources after 2014.

7. **Consolidating power inside Russia and pushing for the "sovereignization"[ii] of Russia.** Putin has been offsetting his declining value proposition to the Russian people by tightening his grip on Russia, increasingly isolating Russia—especially from the global information space, as well as pushing Russian identity toward militaristic patriotism.

Recommendations

Putin's sources of resilience and his adaptations will allow him to maintain his regime and his international campaigns on the current trajectory for a while. Putin's offsetting efforts do not fundamentally change Russia's strengths, but they help Putin buy time while he attempts to erode anti-Russia efforts globally and gradually build influence in multiple theaters.

Putin's future gains are not a given, however. Putin's hand remains weak. The cost of maintaining Putin's power will only grow, as will the cost of his foreign adventures.

The US can take several steps to halt the Kremlin's malign activities and gains:

1. **Embrace complexity.** Simplifying Putin's regime to a 'third-world dictatorship, a mafia-run gas station with nuclear weapons' as some US officials have done hides nuanced ways in which Russia poses a challenge to the US and its allies. Putin gains a lot by perception—in the blind spots the West often does not realize exist. Information operations, especially their cumulative effects over time, pose a real threat to Western societies. But it is not all

ii. **Putin's framing of his policies increasingly focuses on making Russia independent from Western influence, including creating Russia's "sovereign internet," decreasing the use of the dollar, and solidifying the priority of Russian laws over international laws in the constitution. These efforts isolate Russia from the international community.**

perception—we should not forget about the real power Putin holds.

The Kremlin treats its varied efforts as a comprehensive undertaking, and the West needs to confront them the same way. The US should focus not only on Russia's tools of malign influence, but also on the strategic campaigns they support. The US should avoid bifurcated frameworks of military and civilian, state and non-state tools but rather apply the Kremlin's lens of a consolidated national security space that dynamically draws on whatever resources it deems necessarily to achieve its goals.

2. **Build immunity against the Kremlin's malign activity.** Develop strategic intelligence capabilities in the US and within US partners to recognize the Kremlin's campaigns and perception manipulations early—before they amount to strategic gains. Monitor, prevent, and counter the Kremlin's efforts to destroy antibodies to its influence.

3. **Retain dampeners.**

   - Keep sanctions and legitimacy restrictions, such as access to international organizations, on Russia unless the Kremlin stops and reverses its belligerent acts.

   - Prevent Putin from offloading his problems on someone else's balance sheet, such as transferring financial responsibility for Russia-created illegal republics in Ukraine without restoring Ukraine's sovereignty; or offloading the financial struggles of Assad onto the balance sheet of the international community.

4. **Prevent Putin's false narratives from becoming accepted as truth.**

   - Constantly debunk the Kremlin's false narratives and perception-altering activities that are malign. Enhance international mechanisms to keep the 'truth' in place.

   - Build a broad international coalition to investigate Russia's violations of international law and the law of armed conflict.

5. **Do not empower Putin by legitimizing his actions.** Do not fall for the Kremlin's cooperation frameworks. Watch for and when possible disrupt early Russia's emerging cooperation frameworks. Recognize the vital importance of the Kremlin's web of partnerships to Putin's ability to amplify Russia's power. Contest Putin through these international platforms, especially at the UN.

6. **Help Ukraine win its fight against Russia's efforts to regain dominant influence over Ukraine's decision-making.** Recognize that Ukraine is the major dampener on Putin's ambitions globally by tying down limited high-end resources Putin would use elsewhere if he could. Work with European partners to prevent Putin from manipulating Ukraine into a peace deal on Russia's terms, in particular; counter the Kremlin's false narratives about Ukraine; empower Ukraine's reform efforts.

7. **Test Putin's commitment to his aggressive foreign policy** by challenging him across multiple theaters.

8. **Build coalitions to achieve all of the above.**

   - Prioritize Europe as it can significantly affect the international balance and momentum on Russia's issue.

   - Broaden the coalition. Russia derives a lot of legitimacy from the non-Western world.

9. **Keep the information exchange with Russia open.** Understanding why Putin exists as a phenomenon is equally important to understanding the threat he poses to the US and its allies.

Introduction

Russian President Vladimir Putin's center of gravity is increasingly his ability to shape perceptions and create the projection of a powerful Russia based on limited real power.

Putin launched a military intervention into Ukraine six years ago. That action was part of a long-term effort to retain and then regain control over Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union, among other objectives. Putin's goals have not changed in the intervening years but his approaches to achieving them have evolved.

Putin's campaigns in Ukraine, Syria, and beyond expanded Russia's influence and allowed Putin to project increasing Russian power, but at a price. The cumulative effects of sanctions and wariness of and pushback against the Kremlin's aggression globally have combined with Russia's technological, economic and demographic limitations to weaken other pillars of Putin's power and diminish his value proposition to Russia's people and its international partners. Putin's resources thus remain insufficient to achieve his goals if used in a straightforward manner.

Putin is instead exploiting asymmetrical approaches to project greater Russian strength than actually exists and offset the limits of his real power. He has increasingly focused on shaping, not just disrupting, an international environment that will foster Russian interests and give Moscow resources and legitimacy. The Kremlin's chief effort is shaping the perceptions of other actors by creating a global Russia-amenable information space. The Kremlin is using informational and physical tools, including military pressure, to shape the perceptions. If Putin wins the narrative, he can translate perceptional gains into reality. For example, if he can persuade Kyiv to voluntarily accept the Kremlin's principle of Ukraine's truncated sovereignty then parts of the international sanctions regime would likely collapse, solidifying the success of his narrative efforts.

Putin seeks to avoid being forced into a defensive information posture that could call into question narratives about his value and strength.

Putin's power has limited but real bases and transcends his ability to manipulate perceptions. The US cannot lose sight of these bases of power that include a global military footprint that Putin continues to expand, albeit in a limited and targeted fashion; a large nuclear arsenal; asymmetric military capabilities, particularly in the realm of anti-access, area-denial systems; and a veto on the United Nations Security Council.

The creation of a web of overlapping coalitions around Russia to amplify Russia's limited real power is another key element of Putin's offset approach. Posing as the defender of the post-WWII order and cooperation among the permanent members of the UN Security Council (the G5) is another increasingly critical effort for Putin because of the importance of Russia's UN veto in Moscow's limited toolset.

Putin has also expanded Russia's influence into peripheral theaters to offset losses of legitimacy and resources that have resulted from his deteriorating relationship with the West.

Domestically, Putin has tightened his grip on Russia and consolidated power to offset his declining value proposition as his popular support—once bolstered by Russia's occupation of Crimea—has started to wane and economic pressures have grown.

Putin's offset efforts in Russia and globally allowed the Kremlin to continue to secure gains without changing what Russia offers its partners and without curbing its malign behavior. However, most of these

offset efforts do not significantly improve Russia's fundamental capabilities. Putin's real power limits remain and will likely tighten.

Putin's reliance on his ability to shape perceptions combined with his inability to meaningfully expand sources of conventional strength means that even his hybrid wars can go only so far. For example, in 2014 the Kremlin stopped an offensive aimed at securing six regions of Ukraine after taking only two in part because the optics on the ground no longer allowed Putin to pursue Russia's military campaign in a hybrid manner. Putin seeks to avoid being forced into a defensive information posture that could call into question narratives about his value and strength. Therein lies one of the key and least-exploited vulnerabilities in Putin's offset approach.

The US is Not Well-positioned to Counter the Russian Challenge

The US has been catching up to the Russian challenge, but Putin has evolved. The US has intensified its analysis of Russia's ways of war since Russia illegally occupied Crimea in 2014. The 2018 US National Defense Strategy elevated strategic competition with Russia and China to the level of key national security challenges.[2] The US countered Putin's malign behavior through sanctions, building military and governance capacity among partner states, and creating new capabilities within the US.[3]

The Kremlin has gone through a phase of major geopolitical and military adaptation since 2014, however.

- *Theory:* The Kremlin overhauled all key doctrines and concepts that determine Russia's foreign policy and national security priorities and approaches.[4] The Russian Armed Forces also carried out extensive internal debates on the character of future conflicts and necessary Russian military development to counter the US.[5] The Kremlin adjusted Russian capabilities based on these revisions.

- *Practice:* The Kremlin had to adapt its approaches on the ground for several reasons: new constraints, including sanctions and legitimacy setbacks such as the exclusion of Russia from international organizations; experience from military campaigns in Ukraine and Syria, including failures in those campaigns; increasing global wariness of the Kremlin's subversion; and emerging opportunities, such as the growing inward focus of the US and Europe.

The West has had some success curbing Putin's aggression. Sanctions have dampened Putin's military modernization, increased the costs of keeping his inner circle and the wider population content, slowed Putin's geopolitical projects, such as the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Europe, and undermined Putin's plans to turn Crimea into an economically vibrant area.[6] Western military aid and defense-capacity building in Ukraine played a major role in deescalating the conflict by increasing the costs of Russian military action.

Putin nonetheless continues to make gains and reverse setbacks. He has maintained power for 20 years and will be able to run for president again in 2024. Putin preserved and, in some cases, expanded his gains in the former Soviet space since 2014.[7] He gained strategic positions in Syria and expanded Russian influence in Libya and throughout Africa.[8] Putin's cooptation of Turkey increased friction within NATO. *(See the "Effects" chapter on page 52 for the overview of Putin's gains).*

The Kremlin's aggression also persists. Russia's targeting of civilians in Syria continues; Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has resulted in over 13,000 deaths.[9]

The West inadvertently empowers Putin. Putin benefits from the West's conflicting efforts to engage the Kremlin on some issues, while trying to counter it on others. Western leaders have expressed openness

to returning Russia back into international organizations. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe reinstated Russia's voting rights in 2019 despite Russia's continued illegal occupation of Crimea, the action that had led to the revocation of the rights in the first place.[10] Europe is proceeding with Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline despite the likelihood that Russia will use this pipeline to pressure Europe in the future. European endorsement of the Russia-driven peace process in Ukraine reinforces the Kremlin's efforts to cast itself falsely as a mediator in a conflict where Russia is a belligerent.

It is critical for the West to remember why it took issue with Putin in the first place. Putin's ambition to reinstate Russia as a great power has not been the issue; his means of pursuing this goal have. Putin illegally occupied portions of countries whose sovereignty Russia had formally recognized, such as Georgia and Ukraine; his forces target civilians in Syria in support of a campaign to secure military basing; he continues to attack democracies through disinformation and interference in their elections.

The West misses Putin's advances and often does not act on opportunities to counter him. The Kremlin's gradual reversal of its political setbacks in Moldova attracts less attention in the West than Russian force posturing, but this slow creep of influence is how Putin advances efforts that, if successful, will have implications for NATO members that border Moldova and thereby for US national security.[11]

Europe missed an opportunity to counter Russia in 2019 by allowing the Kremlin to pressure Ukraine into a gas deal that provided Ukraine with short-term benefits but stripped Ukraine's long-term leverage, even though the Kremlin had a weaker hand in those negotiations.[12] The Kremlin would have incurred losses had it not secured the energy deal with Ukraine, which came at the last minute before its expiration in December 2019. Allowing the deal to expire would have limited Russia's ability to export gas to Europe. The Kremlin was vulnerable at this time due to construction delays on the Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream gas pipelines, which the Kremlin is building to diversify its energy transit options to Europe. A gas shutoff would have challenged Russia's promise to deliver discounted gas to Moldova—one of the Kremlin's enticements for the Moldovan government. Europe could have used this leverage to pressure Russia on either the energy deal itself or on issues beyond energy, such as the Ukrainian peace process. Doing so would have required seeing an opportunity to constrain Russia's policies overall—an approach thwarted by the constant compartmentalization of Russia-related issues in Western policy discourse.

The West's partial effectiveness in countering the Kremlin reflects blind spots in the West's conception of the Russian challenge — rather than Putin's strengths. Putin is resilient in a number of ways, but weak in others. The converging global crises of 2020 have worsened Putin's weaknesses. He often achieves gains by slim margins. His behavior is sometimes counterproductive to his own objectives. He nevertheless remains on a trajectory to gain more influence in his core theater and beyond. The West misperceives Putin's areas of strength and weakness, as well as his threat perceptions. As a result, Western states periodically and inadvertently empower Putin or miss opportunities to counter him. Putin is thus gradually winning a war of wills that many in the West do not even recognize is occurring.

Methodology

This paper assesses how Putin has evolved his geopolitical thinking and approaches since 2014 and the ways in which he has worked to offset growing international pressures without relinquishing his gains or goals. The paper unpacks the Kremlin's evolved assessment of threats to Russia and the future of conflict. It assesses Putin's sources of resilience and the limits of his power. This paper assesses how Putin advances his goals and why he faces setbacks. Finally, this paper analyses the effects of Putin's adaptations since the illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014, presents a forecast of trajectory of Putin's efforts, and recommends a set of actions the US can take to counter the Russian challenge.

This paper's arguments are founded on analysis of what the Kremlin says and what the Kremlin does. The author has analyzed dozens of Russian doctrinal documents as well as interviews with Kremlin national security and foreign policy officials throughout Putin's tenure with specific focus on the period from 2014 through 2020. The paper builds upon the insights of ISW's two 2019 foundational reports: "The Kremlin's Worldview" tracked the evolution of Putin's thinking since 2000 and "Confronting the Russian Challenge" defined the nature of the Russian threat.[13]

This paper is also informed by ISW's extensive analysis of the Kremlin's campaigns, including in its core theater—Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, as well as the Kremlin's efforts in the Balkans, in the Middle East and Africa, and Putin's cross-theater efforts, such as campaigns to expand Russia's military footprint, information space, and global coalitions.[14] This paper presents meta-analysis of these campaign assessments without repeating their argumentation and evidence. The reader can find added granularity in the footnotes.

Finally, the paper highlights and synthesizes parallels with ISW's upcoming analysis of Russian military learning since 2014.

Chapter 1:

How Does Putin Succeed or Fail at Achieving His Goals?

Putin has several sources of resilience that have allowed him to endure in power for 20 years, but his power has real limits. The value Putin can offer Russia and its foreign partners is even more limited. This chapter analyzes the ways in which Putin advances his goals and the reasons he faces setbacks. This chapter also provides an assessment of Putin's sources of resilience and vulnerabilities, including his own evaluations of Russia's weaknesses and the threats it faces, which differ from the West's perceptions.

1. Putin's Strengths: Limited, but Not to Be Underestimated

Putin understands Russia and has dynamically updated his value proposition to his constituencies over the past two decades. The essence of Putin's first social contract in the 2000s was providing order and stability to the Russian people in exchange for their liberties. Putin's next iteration in the 2010s offered to restore Russia's national greatness and make the West respect Russia again.[15] Putin proposed a revised social contract in 2020 as his popular support—previously bolstered by Russia's

illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014—started to wane. [16] He pledged increased social spending and promised to enshrine core Russian values in the constitution along with measures that further strengthen the Kremlin's powers and allow Putin to run for president in 2024.[17]

His hold on power is not invulnerable, but so far Putin has been able to accurately assess how far he can push the Russian people during each ebbing and flowing of his popularity. He has not yet faced major backlash against his power retention efforts in 2020, which included reportedly unprecedented fraud during the national vote on the constitutional amendments. His societal control measures are strong and some of his constituencies are accepting of his continued rule.[18] Putin has managed steadily to reduce civil liberties in Russia over the past 20 years, solidifying the powers of the security services and increasing governmental control over Russia's information space.[19] He has effectively suppressed all anti-government protests during his tenure. However, Putin has shown that he is willing to change his tactics of taming public discontent. Putin has chosen not to crack down on the anti-Kremlin protests in Russia's Far East Khabarovsk region that emerged in July 2020—at least as of the publication of this report.[20] Instead, Putin has allowed the protests to continue and sent Kremlin officials to engage the protesters—likely betting that rallies will eventually die out naturally.[21]

Only an extraordinary confluence of crises, namely the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and low energy prices, has meaningfully increased the costs of Putin's efforts to maintain power and highlighted the limits of his value proposition. He will face growing challenges to his rule, as we discuss in the sections on Putin's limitations and prospects, but he likely has enough resilience to carry him on his current trajectory for a while.

Putin offers some credible domestic value. There is substance to the narrative that Putin made Russia stronger—especially during the first decade of his rule. He did bring order and stability to Russia after the devasting aftermath of the USSR's collapse. He stopped the war in Chechnya through a brutal military campaign. He restored the prestige of Russia's military and security services within Russia by expanding their funding, power and capabilities.

Putin created an incentive structure that has sustained his regime for over 20 years. He maintains a small core circle of advisors— most of whom came from Russia's security services, subscribe to Putin's narrative, and have worked with Putin for two decades.[22] Putin's incentive model combines:

- Credible threats, such as losing one's job, freedom, or being expelled from Russia.[23]
- Benefits, including key roles in Russia's state-owned enterprises and lucrative deals at home and abroad for his associates as well as prestige and benefits for those joining Russia's security services.[24]
- Denying alternatives, such as restricting foreign travel even for former members of Russian security services,[25] limiting the ability of those with experience living abroad to occupy high government positions,[26] allowing sanctions to erode the wealth and freedom of movement of his associates.[27]

Putin maintains a perception that his continued presidency provides value and that an alternative to him would be worse or too costly to fight for. In addition to appealing to some in Russia with economic benefits and promise of Russia's greatness and stability, Putin has forced out or marginalized his opponents, keeping Russia's civil society in a nascent state. He also pushed some Russian young people into political apathy and others into patriotic activism by launching numerous Kremlin-sponsored patriotic youth movements.[28]

Putin's control over the domestic narrative through his dominant influence over Russian media and the broader information space is one of his core strengths. The Kremlin uses this influence to push the narrative that, without Putin, Russia risks major internal destabilization and loss of sovereignty.[29] Putin's grip on his narrative makes him resilient to developments that would have threatened the power of other leaders.

Russia has several sources of real power globally. Russia is a nuclear power. Putin expanded Russia's

military footprint and strategic basing in the Middle East, Crimea, and the Arctic. He modernized the Russian armed forces and developed niche military capabilities, such as advanced air defense systems, naval capabilities, electronic, and cyber warfare. These capabilities give Putin meaningful, if limited, power as they pose challenges for the US and even more for its allies.[30] For example, the expansion of Russian anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems in Syria and the MENA region could complicate American freedom of navigation and future counterterrorism efforts. Putin's aggressive posture versus the Baltics and increasingly so versus Scandinavian countries, even if limited, poses a threat to these weaker NATO states and partners.[31]

The Kremlin has the means to offer niche political and economic benefits to would-be partners. These benefits include items such as security services training, the construction of nuclear power plants, a veto on the UN Security Council, and the ability to provide a global outreach platform. Putin uses these offerings in a highly targeted way to build influence.

Putin is able to pivot. Putin has shown he is willing to live with some failures and setbacks to advance an overall narrative and his larger efforts. Putin is able to step back, recalibrate, and buy time to get his influence and military campaigns back on track, as we explore in the next section on *"How Putin Makes Gains."*

Putin takes care to preserve his ability to pivot. For example, he rolled out the 2020 constitutional changes in a highly controlled manner. He presented the general contours of the amendments in January 2020. Two months later, he inserted the key amendment that would allow him to run for president in 2024.[32] Putin likely phased the roll-out to muddy the information space and to disarm potential opposition to the prospect of 12 more years of his rule while preserving his ability to shift course—maneuvering space that turned out to be very important as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged.[33]

Putin has a big picture view across time and space. Putin has the benefit of a two-decade tenure leading a country that has engaged in numerous campaigns globally. Additionally, his long time in power provides Putin and his associates—many of whom worked in intelligence services—continuity of knowledge about the Kremlin's subversive tradecraft across the world.

These two factors provide Putin with an advantage over nations whose leadership changes more frequently. This advantage is particularly pronounced over emerging democracies in the former Soviet Union (FSU), where leaders often change, and strategic intelligence capabilities are nascent and often intentionally undermined by the Kremlin.[34]

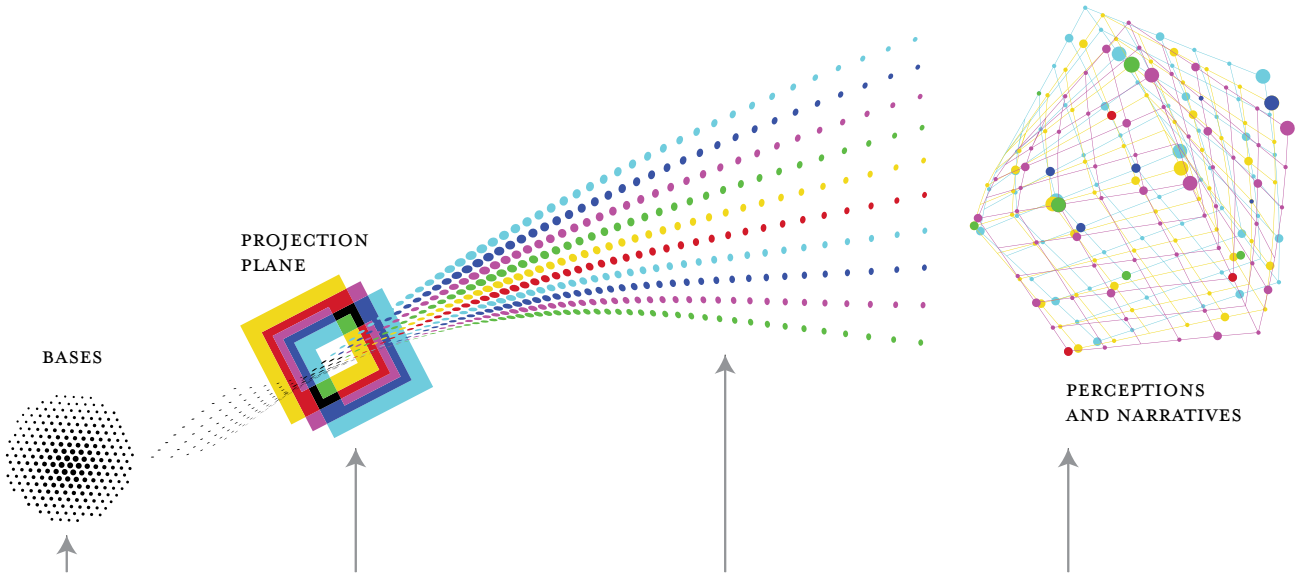
Putin is willing to use force and ignore international law. This willingness provides Putin with an advantage over other actors who are constrained by international law. His willingness to crack down on the Russian people helps preserve his regime when his softer efforts of maintaining popularity falter.

2. How Does Putin Gain?

The Kremlin often generates gains based on perception without changing Russia's capabilities. These gains emerge at the nexus of the Kremlin's efforts to manipulate perceptions and the West's inherent blind spots about Russia's intent and capabilities. Minimizing the West's perception of its own leverage over Russia is a core component of this effort. The Kremlin generates perceptions by using both informational and physical tools to manipulate the behavioral forces that drive governments and individuals.

Coopting aspirations for peace. Putin secured several concessions from Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky by exploiting Zelensky's desire and election promise to achieve peace, as well as the European urge to reach a deal on Ukraine and restore economic relations with Russia.[35] The Kremlin secured concessions, such as the disengagement of Ukrainian forces from several areas on the frontlines, without changing the reality of Russia's aggression.[36] Russia-controlled forces continued to regularly kill Ukrainian servicemen, and the Kremlin's proxies violated the very disengagement zones the Kremlin pressured Kyiv to agree to.[37]

The Kremlin's Projection of Russia



Bases of Putin's real power:
- Nuclear weapons
- Niche military capabilities
- Limited global military footprint
- Energy sales and pipelines
- Veto power in the UNSC
- Societal control tools
- Resources of the former Soviet states

Blind spots and pre-existing perceptions of other countries:
- Perceiving Putin as a purely an opportunist or a strategist
- Ignoring the Kremlin's trivial activities
- Fearing the psychological cost of being in a confrontation with Russia

Amplifiers and offsetting factors:
- **Russia-driven**
  - Ideas and narratives
  - Partnerships and coalitions
  - Human networks
  - Foreign policy tools
- **External/Exogenous**
  - Forces that drive others toward normalization of ties with Russia
  - Time

Perceptions the Kremlin seeks to generate:
- Russia is a great power
- Russia deserves its sphere of influence
- The West can partner with Russia on global issues
- Sanctions against Russia do not work

 Graphics by Nataliya Bugayova

Putin is exploiting forces driving the West toward normalization with Russia. One such force is the uncomfortable reality that standing up to Russia imposes costs—direct costs such as military aid to partners, opportunity costs of not doing business with Russia, and psychological costs of being in a confrontation with Russia. The fear that a minor confrontation with Russia even in Putin's non-core theaters could lead to a major military escalation influences Western actions versus Russia. ISW has refuted this assumption in its previous report but it remains, of course, widespread.[38] Putin has shown himself to be a rational actor who has backed down, rather than escalated, on many occasions when the campaign did not go his way.[39] Russian officers also often stress the importance of containing escalation until the right moment in a hybrid offensive.[40] This approach reduces the possibility of uncontrolled retaliation in response to escalations by the West. But the risk of miscalculation always remains, and Putin uses rhetoric to amplify that small risk into a seemingly unacceptable danger that often paralyzes Western action.

Putin uses these fears and misperceptions to distract his opponents from their long-term interests and the leverage they hold vis-à-vis Russia. The Kremlin,

for example, pushed Ukraine and Europe into an energy deal that provided short-term benefits for both Europe and Ukraine, but forced Ukraine to give up multibillion dollar claims against Russia's state-owned energy giant Gazprom—as discussed previously.[41]

Putin is also hijacking the notion of peace. The Kremlin is pushing for seemingly normal steps toward peace in Ukraine, such as additional disengagement zones or platforms to facilitate discussions between the Ukrainian government and representatives of the Kremlin proxies. These initiatives, however, help legitimize Russia's illegal invasion and undermine Ukraine's sovereignty because they are unaccompanied by any admission of Russia's own direct role in the conflict or any commitment to reduce that unacknowledged role.[42] The Kremlin has also attempted to hijack the Syrian peace process via its parallel Astana talks.[43]

The Kremlin's means—despite being often ineffective, poorly coordinated, and even counterproductive—largely support Putin's strategic intent.

Coopting fears. The Kremlin's hybrid offensive in Ukraine in 2014 relied on Russia's preceding, decade-long campaign to create negative sentiment about the Ukrainian government and the West in Ukraine's eastern region of Donbas. Fueling fear was at the heart of this effort. Around the time of the 2004 Orange Revolution, when the Kremlin-preferred presidential candidate in Ukraine lost the election, the Kremlin intensified efforts to spread false narratives about Donbas being exploited by the US, Kyiv, and Ukrainian nationalists in order to cultivate separatist sentiments.[44] The Kremlin tapped into these perceptions to set up and control its proxy force in Donbas in 2014.[45]

Kremlin disinformation networks employ fear-based tactics globally; these include trying to frame the US as being behind the COVID-19 pandemic through alleged bioweapon-producing biolabs in the former Soviet states and accusing British forces of planning to stage chemical accidents in Ukraine.[46]

In the FSU, the Kremlin can leverage a credible threat of military intervention, given the precedent it set in Ukraine, to shape FSU politics without the use of force. The Kremlin has likely been leveraging the expectations others have about the Kremlin using force overtly or covertly to shape the behavior of political actors in Belarus, as well as the West, during the 2020 anti-government protests in Belarus.[47]

Exploiting the West's blind spots. The West has two key blind spots with regard to Russia. First, the West sometimes ignores Putin's activities that appear trivial. However, these trivial activities are essential to Putin's gains. **Slow, under the radar creep, often at the tactical level, is how the Kremlin sets conditions for strategic gains.** A decade of information and subversion operations in Ukraine enabled the Kremlin's hybrid operation in Donbas in 2014. The Kremlin started to set up separatist structures in Donbas as early as 2005—the process that went largely unnoticed in the West.[48] Seemingly minor advances in Moldova enabled the Kremlin to gradually reverse its influence setbacks in 2019—and the West was largely unaware of its loss.[49]

The second blind spot is the tendency to mistake Putin's adaptability, deliberate or forced pauses, and sloppy execution for opportunism. Putin stays on the same goal for years. The Kremlin's means—despite being often ineffective, poorly coordinated, and even counterproductive—largely support Putin's strategic intent.

The Kremlin's campaigns in Ukraine and Moldova, for example, take advantage of opportunities, but they are not primarily opportunistic. They are multi-domain, coordinated, and phased. They support a clear set of Putin's objectives centered on regaining dominant influence of the decision-making in both countries. The Kremlin faced numerous setbacks in Moldova in 2016–2018, when Moldova paused key bilateral cooperation mechanisms with Russia and expelled numerous Russian officials. However, the Kremlin never stopped working to

Snapshot of the Kremlin's Campaign to Advance a Kremlin-Favorable Peace Process in Ukraine March 2019–August 2020

	***Phase 1:* Courting President Zelensky**	***Phase 2:* Pressure Campaign ahead of the Normandy Talks**	***Phase 3:* Normandy Talks and Gas Talks**	***Phase 4:* Advancing Objectives Further**
	March 2019 – August 2019	**September 2019 – November 2019**	**December 2019**	**January 2020 – August 2020**
Pressure campaign against Zelensky	Kremlin-controlled proxies continue attacks on Ukrainian forces on the frontline Coopting Europe into the Russia-preferred peace process *AUG*: Kremlin increases control over DNR/LNR infrastructure	*OCT*: Russian forces delay their disengagement from the frontlines *NOV*: Putin demands Ukraine disengage from the entire frontline	*DEC*: The Kremlin reportedly increases cyber operations against Ukraine	*JAN-FEB*: Kremlin proxies launch regular and false flag attacks on disengagement points *FEB*: Likely Kremlin actors launch COVID-19 disinformation campaign *JUN*: Kremlin threatens to break off peace process after Kyiv declines to include parts in Donbas in Oct 2020 local elections *APR - present*: Intensified campaign to grant Russian citizenship to Ukrainians in Donbas *SEP - JUL*: Putin launches disinformation campaign accusing Zelensky of stalling the peace process
Superficial Kremlin concessions & posturing	Kremlin and loyal media deploy optimistic rhetoric and refrain from criticizing Zelensky	*SEP*: Prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine	*NOV*: Kremlin agrees to the Normandy talks *DEC*: Prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine	*JUL*: Kremlin agrees to a new ceasefire, postures as a responsible actor and softens the rhetoric about Ukraine again
Forcing Concessions from Zelensky	*JUL*: Ukraine disengages from Stanitsa Luhanska	*SEP*: Russia receives MH-17 witness as a part of the prisoner exchange	*NOV*: Ukraine disengages from Zolote and Petrivske *OCT*: Ukraine agrees to Steinmeier Formula *DEC*: Russia gets 5 members of disbanded Berkut service in the prisoner exchange *DEC*: Kremlin secures gas deal	*MAR*: Ukraine officials agree to March 11 Protocols in Minsk (though the Kremlin's efforts to force Kyiv into direct talks with Russian proxies have stalled as of August 2020)

Graphic by Nataliya Bugayova

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empower its preferred political forces and sideline their opponents, and eventually managed to regain some of its lost influence in Moldova by 2020. The Kremlin's political proxies in Ukraine are similarly relentless in their efforts to regain power six years after the 2014 EuroMaidan Revolution.[50] Putin is also persistently pursuing several global efforts, such as expanding Russia's strategic basing, despite setbacks.

The West should recognize that, while Putin can be opportunistic and while the Kremlin's campaigns can seize on opportunities, the Kremlin has a clear set of interests and goals it has been consistently pursuing and that many of Putin's gains have stemmed precisely from his persistent push. *(See chapter 2 on pg. 31 for analysis of Putin's priority efforts post-2014).*

Using time. Putin succeeds when the world forgets his transgressions. The West's will to resist naturally erodes over time, especially as a generation of politicians emerges for whom a "counter-Russia policy" is an inherited stance. The West has some mechanisms to hold the truth in place, but its political structures struggle to maintain awareness of even Russia's major atrocities, such as the massacre of several hundred Ukrainian servicemen retreating through a Kremlin-approved "humanitarian corridor" in Ukraine's city of Illovaisk in 2014.[51]

Putin is working to accelerate this erosion of memory by diverting the West's attention from the Kremlin's malign behavior to Russia's potential as a partner. The Kremlin is similarly working to normalize his aggression in Ukraine by continuing to push the narrative of Ukraine a brotherly nation and falsely frame the current setback in the relationships between Russia and Ukraine as merely driven by Ukrainian radical nationalists and not Russia's war against Ukraine.[52]

Keeping opponents on the defensive through multiple pressure points. The Kremlin also advances its goals by pressuring its opponents from multiple angles to overwhelm and shrink their perceived room to maneuver.

In Ukraine, the Kremlin is able to press on several pain points using military force in Donbas and the Black and Azov seas, cyber and disinformation attacks, and low-burning subversion in western Ukraine.[53] The Kremlin can scale its pressure up or down depending on interim objectives. In March 2020 for example, the Kremlin escalated militarily in Donbas, likely Kremlin actors helped fuel protests around COVID-19 in Ukraine through disinformation, and the Kremlin ramped up its efforts to isolate Ukraine internationally by promoting a false narrative that Ukraine is intentionally delaying the peace process—as the Kremlin was trying to extract additional concessions from Zelensky.[54] The Kremlin then reduced the pressure on Zelensky in July 2020 by agreeing to a new ceasefire and softening the rhetoric about Ukraine.[55]

Putin has been expanding his available pressure points on Europe. The Kremlin is growing its military influence in the Balkans by supplying weapon systems to Serbia and supporting secessionist forces in the Republika Srpska.[56] Russia has increased military pressure on the Baltics and the Scandinavian countries through additional military buildup.[57] Putin is also investing in sources of economic power in Europe, such as energy pipelines Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream.

Diversifying political investments. Russia likely invested in several political entities to increase the likelihood of an outcome favorable to Russia in Ukraine's 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections.[58] This diversification marks a shift from the Kremlin's previously overt support to its favored political forces in Ukraine, as Russia did with Ukraine's former President Victor Yanukovych, who was ousted by the 2014 EuroMaidan Revolution. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov also openly talks about building relationships with all sides in other theaters and countries, such as Libya, as part of Russia's strategy.[59]

Bundling and cooperation model. Putin bundles negotiation on unrelated issues to dilute his opponents' leverage. Putin diluted Ukraine's leverage on energy by bundling energy and peace talks with Ukraine at the Normandy Four meeting in December 2019 and, as a result, secured the deal by the deadline.[60] The Kremlin likely achieved this bundling by exploiting Zelensky's urgency to advance the peace talks with Russia.

The Kremlin also uses legitimate causes such as counterterrorism to pull countries into Russian initiatives *(see section 4 of chapter 2 on pg. 44 for more on how Putin is evolving Russia's foreign policy tools)*. These causes are often not the primary goals of the Kremlin's outreach, but ways to build influence.

The Kremlin sought to coopt the US into a diplomatic counterterrorism-focused alignment in Syria.[61] In 2015, the UK pledged to work with Russia to combat ISIS, while the US praised Putin for his "constructive" role in international efforts to achieve a political settlement in Syria.[62] The West eventually learned that supporting a Russia-friendly regime in Damascus and gaining military basing, not counterterrorism, were Putin's primary goals.

The international community continues to occasionally fall for Putin's cooperation models—even on the issues where Russia is a malign actor, such as cybersecurity.[63] Russia has also signed hundreds of partnership agreements with dozens of nations since 2014.[64] These partnerships include media, information security and military cooperation deals.

The international community continues to occasionally fall for Putin's cooperation models—even on the issues where Russia is a malign actor, such as cybersecurity.

The Kremlin also turns on its collegial mode to achieve its goals. A nominal alignment with the West on the formation of a Moldovan parliamentary coalition in June 2019 likely helped Russia reverse its failing position in Moldova. The Kremlin helped facilitate a coalition between pro-Russian and pro-European parties in 2019—in part likely by exploiting the West's urge to end the political deadlock in Moldova. This coalition sidelined a key opponent of Russian interests, oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, and preserved the power of the Kremlin-favored political actor, Moldovan President Igor Dodon. The Kremlin regained some of Russia's lost influence as a result.[65]

The Kremlin changed its Ukraine campaign manager in 2020 in part to posture for diplomacy. The Kremlin appointed Dmitry Kozak, who was likely perceived by the Ukrainian government as being more inclined to dialogue than his hawkish predecessor, Vladislav Surkov. This change in posture has not reflected a change in the Kremlin's intent to regain dominant influence over Ukraine's decision-making.[66]

Eliminating resistance and worst-case scenarios. The Kremlin advanced several objectives by eliminating the possibility of worst-case scenarios and sources of resistance to Russia's interests.

Russian strategy for reversing its influence setbacks in Moldova focused on eliminating the sources of those setbacks and competition to the Kremlin-favored powerbroker Dodon, including sidelining oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc and weakening pro-European Prime Minister Maia Sandu.[67]

In Ukraine, the Kremlin follows a similar approach that targets resistance to its influence—especially after the Kremlin grossly underestimated this resistance during its hybrid offensive against Ukraine in 2014. The Kremlin went after the former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko—Russia's least-preferred outcome in the 2019 Ukrainian presidential elections—by investing heavily in an anti-Poroshenko information campaign in Ukraine. If reelected, Poroshenko would have mostly likely continued to refuse any revival of the ties with Russia, while other candidates were amenable to the dialogue with the Kremlin.[68]

After Poroshenko lost the election, the Kremlin refocused on efforts to eliminate the key remaining resistance to the return of Russia's influence in Ukraine — Ukraine's civil society, military veterans, and analysts who expose Russian activity in Ukraine. The Kremlin is trying to marginalize these groups by framing them as radical and blaming Poroshenko's

The Kremlin's Efforts to Reverse its Setbacks in Moldova

Key Takeaway: In 2019, the Kremlin reversed some of the setbacks in experienced in Moldova in 2016–2018

Russia Faces Setbacks in Moldova 2016–2018

- ***October 2016:*** Moldovan Parliament Speaker accuses Russia of election meddling.
- ***March 2017:*** Moldova asks its government officials to abstain from visiting Russia, citing concerns over harassment by Russian security services.
- ***August 2017:*** Moldova declares Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin persona non grata.
- ***May 2017:*** Moldova expels five Russian diplomats.
- ***November 2017:*** Moldova denies entry to Russian journalists.
- ***February 2018:*** Moldova bans Russian broadcasting in Moldova.
- ***February 2018:*** Moldova calls for Russian troops to withdraw from Trasnistria.
- ***June 2018:*** UN urges Russia to withdraw troops from Transnistria.
- ***August 2018:*** Moldovan government states intent to diversify gas supplies away from Russia.
- ***November 2018:*** Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia create a platform to study Russia's hybrid influence methods.
- ***December 2018:*** Moldovan Constitutional Court temporarily strips Dodon of presidential powers for the first time in 2018.

Russia Starts to Reverse Setbacks June–September 2019

June 2019 Inflection: *The Kremlin facilitates a coalition between Dodon's Socialist Party and the pro-European ACUM party under a veneer of cooperation with the West to keep Dodon in power and remove oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc from power.*

The Kremlin says that relations between Russia and Moldova are officially "unfrozen" and launches an outreach campaign:

- ◊ ***June 21:*** Russian Ministers Dmitry Medvedev and Dmitry Kozak meet Dodon in Minsk.
- ◊ ***June 24:*** Russian delegation, including Russia's National Security Chief Nikolai Patrushev, visits Chisinau.
- ◊ ***June 27:*** Moldova's Parliament Speaker Zinaida Greceanii speaks at the Russian Parliament.

- ***June 2019:*** The Russia-Moldova Inter-Parliamentary Commission resumes its work after a three-year hiatus.
- ***August 2019:*** Russian Defense Minister Sergei Soigu visits Moldova—the first visit by a Russian defense minister since Moldova's independence 28 years ago.
- ***September 2019:*** The Russian-Moldovan Inter-Governmental Commission on Economic Cooperation resumes its work. Putin meets Dodon in Moscow.
- ***September 2019:*** Russia and Moldova sign numerous deals at the major Russia-Moldova Economic Forum in Chisnau.

Russia Accelerates its Campaign to Regain Influence Novemeber 2019

November 2019 Inflection: *Dodon forces his pro-European coalition partner, Moldovan Prime Minister Maia Sandu, out of office through a no-confidence vote on November 12.*

The Kremlin launches the next phase of its outreach campaign.

- ***November 14:*** Dodon forms a new government comprised of his advisors.
- ***November 20:*** The Moldovan prime minister visits Moscow for the first time since 2012.
- ***November 20:*** Moldova and Russia reach new deals in infrastructure, energy, and trade. Russia announces that it will sell gas to Moldova at a discount and provide a major infrastructure loan.
- ***November 20–22:*** Speaker Greceanii attends the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly in Russia and meets with her Russian counterpart.
- ***November 20:*** The Russian National Security Council signs a cooperation plan with its Moldovan counterpart.
- ***November 21:*** Dodon invites Putin to visit Moldova in 2020.
- ***November 26–29:*** Dodon says that Moldova is considering joining the Russia-led Eurasian Development Bank. Moldova's PM says that Moldova might pause cooperation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Graphic by Nataliya Bugayova and Andre Briere

legacy and his proponents for the slow peace talks between Russia and Ukraine.[69]

Amplifying limited investments and creating a perception of Russia's momentum. The Kremlin boosts its limited bases of real power, such as its military footprint or financial investments, through amplifiers, such as international coalitions and information operations.

Russia's investment in Africa is strategic but modest compared to other global players. The Kremlin has amplified this limited investment with a vast information campaign, as well as outreach to cultivate relationships with African powerbrokers and build human networks. The Kremlin secured economic deals in Africa and boosted Russia's image as a global convener through the inaugural Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, which Putin personally co-chaired with Egyptian President Abdel al-Sisi.[70]

Russia's limited dispersal of medical aid to combat COVID-19 targeted countries where Russia has strategic interests, namely the US, Italy, and select Balkan states, fed the Kremlin's efforts to portray Russia as a humanitarian actor on the global stage.[71]

The Kremlin amplifies even the smallest narrative wins. Putin has exploited the UN Secretary General's proposal of temporarily waiving select sanctions during the COVID-19 pandemic to push for the removal of all sanctions on Russia without reversing its malign behavior.[72]

The bar for the Kremlin's success is often low. Putin can maintain a limited presence, like he does in Moldova, Georgia and to some extent in Ukraine, because the Kremlin's focus is not on developing these countries and making them prosper, but rather on constraining their decision making. The latter presents more modest requirements in terms of military force and financial presence on Russia's part.

Sometimes Putin just needs to buy time. Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea extended Putin's political runway by boosting his ratings—only two years after the Kremlin faced the largest anti-government protest in Russia since the 90s.[73] Similarly, the Kremlin's energy deal with Ukraine in 2019 bought time to continue advancing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project in Europe.[74]

Finally, the Kremlin does not always need to achieve the end state of its initiatives to strengthen its influence. The Kremlin uses its cooperation initiatives to cultivate its human networks and posture as a collaborative player even when its actual initiatives fail.[75]

3. Limitations of Putin's Power

Putin is accumulating risk on fundamentals, such as Russia's economy, human capital, and his own ability to offer tangible value to Russia's population and other countries. Many of his post-2014 efforts are essentially damage control and do not improve Russia's fundamentals. He is also empowering forces he cannot control.

The Kremlin's need to adjust the ways it builds influence—as described above—is in itself a reflection of the growing limitations of Kremlin's power, such as the fact that the Kremlin can no longer overtly support its preferred political players in other countries without triggering resistance to Russia's actions.

The Kremlin's value proposition to its foreign partners is limited and, in some cases, negative. Few countries deliberately seek membership in Russia-led organizations, such as the Eurasian Economic Union.[76] Many still prefer partnership with the West or a balance between Russia and the West when given the opportunity.[77]

The "Russian World," one of Putin's core geopolitical constructs, also has limited appeal—especially given poor socio-economic conditions and stagnation in the areas where the Kremlin imposed the "Russian World," mainly Kremlin-created or supported breakaway regions, such as the Kremlin-controlled self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR, respectively), Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.[78] The Kremlin's web of alliances thus requires constant maintenance in the form of the Kremlin's continuous cultivation of its partners through incentives and pressure.

Putin is unlikely to increase Russia's power and value proposition significantly in the coming years. Putin has developed niche capabilities that provide Russia with asymmetric leverage, but he was unable to expand Russia's resources significantly. Russia's conventional military forces have never recovered to the level of the Soviet military. Putin has been unable to reform Russia's economy despite his efforts to do so.[79]

Putin is unlikely to grow Russia's power significantly in future. First, Putin's system of governance is antithetical to Russia's need for reform and economic growth. Putin's empowerment of Russia's security services (often referred to as "*siloviki*") disincentivizes risk taking and investment in Russia's private sector due to fear of extrajudicial business takeover by *siloviki*.[80] Putin understands this challenge and is prioritizing—at least rhetorically—improving Russia's business climate.[81] His efforts, however, conflict with his own regime-preservation framework, which relies on securing the support of the security services via the very patronage systems that would have to be removed or significantly curbed to improve Russia's business climate.

Secondly, Putin's efforts post-2014 have skewed toward constraint mitigation and not toward addressing Russia's underlying problems. *(See Chapter 2 on pg. 31 for analysis of Putin's priority efforts post-2014).* For example, many of Putin's policies focus on how to control Russia's society more effectively or how to pressure other countries in a more lasting way—not on how to reform Russia's economy or emerge as a more appealing international partner. Many of these post-2014 efforts are also extensive rather than intensive, such as the Kremlin's venturing out to Africa and the Arctic to obtain access to resources instead of increasing the productivity of Russia's own economy. This approach will likely produce diminishing returns in the long-run.

Finally, Putin employs many of Russia's key companies, such as the state energy giants Gazprom and Rosneft, in support of his foreign policy objectives. Over-mobilization of those entities diverts them from their core purpose—generating economic value.[82]

Putin increasingly relies on his ability to generate perceptions. Putin increasingly needs to maintain the perception that an alternative to him in Russia is either worse or too costly to fight for. Putin's regime remains stable, but it is becoming costlier for Putin to keep his circle and the Russian people content. The pressures of the pandemic, low energy prices, unsuccessful efforts to grow Russia's economy, and the effects of sanctions, the importance of which Putin is downplaying, are starting to expose the limitations of Putin's value proposition. Putin's public approval ratings took a hit in April 2020.[83]

The ability to control the domestic narrative is thus becoming an increasingly existential requirement for Putin, reflected in his efforts to boost his societal control tools.[84] Putin likely faces the strongest challenge in keeping support among young people. Young Russians, who did not live through or do not remember Russia's catastrophic condition in the '90s in the aftermath of the USSR's collapse, are likely to be less susceptible to Putin's narrative.

Putin also cares about legitimacy as an end unto itself. Putin and his inner circle, many of whom came into power from Russia's security services, are primarily products of the Soviet's '70s and post-Soviet '90s. Russia's security services were among the hardest hit during the 90s. They lost their privileged position in domestic affairs and the USSR's international might. But they also remembered the highs for the Soviet Union. They likely seek to ensure they will never face weakness or the prospect of irrelevancy again.

The Kremlin's low-cost strategy works, to a point. The convergence of crises in 2020 has challenged Putin's approach of targeted, limited investments of military force, money, and time across theaters. He has been in a damage control mode in Libya due to Turkey's growing ambitions there and the weakening of the Kremlin's local partner, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. The Kremlin is failing at its strategic objective of preventing expansion of Western structures in the Balkans. Putin is finding ways to turn setbacks into gains in these theaters, but it is important to recognize that the Kremlin faced a period of weakness when it could not have

allocated enough resources to meaningfully change the balance in either theater.

Putin's clients, such as Assad; partners, such as Iran and Venezuela; and proxies, such as the LNR and DNR, all have growing economic needs that Russia cannot support. The Kremlin is instead trying to shift the economic burdens of its partners on to other nations by trying to unlock reconstruction aid for Syria, shift the economic burden of maintaining the LNR and DNR to the Ukrainian government, and remove sanctions on Russia and its partners—so far unsuccessfully.[85]

The Kremlin faces major demographic constraints, including a growing shortage of personnel and expertise throughout its operation. Largely the same group of Kremlin officials, including Putin's core circle, is executing Putin's global campaigns from Africa to the Balkans.[86] The Kremlin may struggle to maintain its influence if confronted on multiple fronts or if a domestic crisis absorbs the bandwidth of its leaders. Shortages of qualified personnel likely exist at the operational level as well. Libya detained two men accused of working for a Kremlin-linked online-troll farm in 2019 for attempts to influence the 2019 Libyan Presidential Election.[87] One of the men had previously participated in a separate alleged plot to influence the 2018 presidential election in Madagascar.[88] The decision to reuse an exposed asset, the man known from his activity in Madagascar, could indicate human capital constraints.

Russia is trying to source forces from other countries, *(See section 2 of chapter 2 on pg. 38 for more on Russia's expanding security space)* potentially indicating a current or an assessed future shortage of personnel in Russia's armed forces. Russia also faces a nationwide demographics crisis, with its natural population growth declining.[89]

Putin is empowering forces he cannot control

- Deepening ties with China have been a priority for Putin, especially post-2014. Putin has gained some investment and support of Russia's narratives from China. He is likely trying to counterbalance China by engaging it. He may assess he can meter China's access to Russia's resources—an assumption that might not hold in the long term.
- Putin has empowered Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in an effort to pull Turkey away from the West. Erdogan presents a growing problem for Putin in Syria, Libya, and beyond.[90] Erdogan's benefits to Russia—as a vector to create frictions within NATO—likely outweigh his costs for now. The calculus might change if Erdoğan pursues his ambitions further.
- The Kremlin has been investing in fear and tensions throughout the world, but Russia is not immune to the negative effects of its own campaigns. Putin's policies might be exacerbating ethnic tensions and other negative sentiments inside Russia. Russian investments in scare disinformation campaigns globally—recently on COVID-19—may also backfire.[91]

4. How Does Putin Lose?

The Kremlin experiences failures or setbacks for a number of reasons, including the following key ones:

- Limits of what value the Kremlin can offer to its foreign partners and how much leverage the Kremlin holds over them
- Limits of the "information frontier"—the point at which Russia runs out of information cover to advance its campaign in a hybrid manner
- Intelligence failures and sloppiness resulting from human capital and other constraints
- Resistance mechanisms and dampeners on Putin's ambitions, such as opposition to Russian activities in the countries that the Kremlin targets and within broader international community

Failed Novorossiya project. The Kremlin planned to seize control over at least six regions in Ukraine

in 2014 and form Novorossiya, a confederation of self-proclaimed republics in eastern and southern Ukraine.[92] The Kremlin secured portions of only two regions—Donetsk and Luhansk—and was able to hold those areas only after Russia's military openly intervened.[93] This marked a major failure considering that Ukraine is a part of Russia's core theater, where the Kremlin had vast access and influence.

Assessed reasons for failure: Russia's intelligence miscalculations, limits of the information cover and Ukraine's resistance foiled the Novorossiya project. The Kremlin likely did not forecast that thousands of Ukrainian volunteers, barely equipped and trained, would rush to the front to combat Russian aggression.[94] The Kremlin also misjudged the loyalties and capabilities of Ukrainian powerbrokers, including the oligarchs and, perhaps most importantly, the sentiments of the population in Ukraine, which was not as open to the "Russian World" idea as the Kremlin expected. The latter stripped the Kremlin off the information cover it required to seize additional areas.

Expansion of the Western structures in the Balkans.[95] Russia tried and failed to prevent Montenegro's and North Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2017 and 2020 respectively. The Kremlin's efforts included a likely attempt to facilitate a failed coup in Montenegro in 2016 and efforts to disrupt the process of North Macedonia's renaming, a condition for North Macedonia's NATO membership.[96]

Assessed reasons for failure: The Kremlin has likely underestimated the determination of certain states to join the Western structures and the limits of the Kremlin's value proposition to the Balkan states.

Efforts to boost the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church globally. The Kremlin suffered a major influence loss when the Ukrainian Orthodox Church gained autocephaly in 2018 despite the Kremlin's pressure campaign against Ukraine and Bartholomew I, the archbishop of Constantinople who granted the autocephaly.[97] Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow continues a campaign to discredit Ukrainian autocephaly. He tried to rally global Christian Orthodoxy to a summit in Jordan in early 2020 to discuss Ukrainian autocephaly but many participants reportedly refused to attend.[98] The Kremlin is also trying to prevent—so far with no apparent success—Montenegrin efforts to limit the influence of the Russia-aligned Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro.[99]

Assessed reasons for failure: The Russian Orthodox Church has major credibility challenges. It a known tool of the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy. The church suffers from allegations of corruption. It also made questionable decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic to ignore quarantine measures, drawing criticism as a result.[100]

5. Putin's Assessment of Russia's Vulnerabilities: Erosion of Russia's Sovereignty through Hybrid Means

Putin increasingly acknowledges Russia's vulnerabilities that align with the West's perceptions of Russia's vulnerabilities. Putin stated that Russia's technological lag is a direct threat to its sovereignty.[101] He acknowledged that the "economy, first and foremost, is the foundation of Russia's greatness."[102] He is prioritizing ethnic integration, migration, and reversing Russia's demographic crisis.[103] He is unlikely to achieve a breakthrough in his efforts to patch these vulnerabilities, however, as his governance system is antithetical to reform, and demographic trends are difficult to reverse.

It is impossible to understand Putin's actions solely through the prism of an external evaluation of his strengths and weaknesses. Understanding Putin's own notion of Russia's vulnerabilities and the threat landscape is key. Putin's assessment has evolved since 2014, though its fundamentals remain consistent with those that have underpinned his rule for the past 20 years. His assessments diverge from the West's and drive behaviors and priorities that sometimes seem odd to Western observers or support the notion that Putin is opportunistic by adding apparently random motion to his actions.

Putin's concept of Russian sovereignty is central to his threat assessment and priorities. Putin has repeatedly stated that "Russia can only be sovereign or there is no Russia," and that while other countries can exist with truncated sovereignty, Russia cannot. Putin believes that Russia's sovereignty must be "unconditional."[104] Putin stated in 2020, "Russian destiny depends on how many of us [Russians] there will be …. and what values [they] will have," stressing the need both to grow the Russian population and to focus on developing certain beliefs among Russians that will reinforce Russia's sovereignty. Putin continues to assess that Russia requires strong governance to avoid instability.[105]

Putin stated in 2019 that Russia is "facing attempts to artificially, crudely and absolutely unceremoniously reduce the space of the Russian language in the world and to oust it to the periphery."

The Kremlin assesses that the West intends to strip Russia of its sovereignty—one of the key threats to Russia—in two main ways:

- Destabilize Russia from within by corrupting the values Russians hold and turning the Russian people against their government and each other
- Erode Russia's power and rightful place in the world and curb Russian ambitions

The Kremlin assesses the information realm will be a key path through which the West achieves both of these goals; this assessment likely drives Putin's prioritization of winning the narrative *(see section 1 of chapter 2 on page 32)*.[106]

The Kremlin states that the West is undermining Russia from within: Russia's National Security Strategy and Russia's Information Doctrine identify the use of information-psychological tools by "certain countries to undermine stability of other countries" and "increased informational activity targeting Russians, particularly young Russians, to undermine traditional Russian spiritual and moral values" as among key threats.[107] Russian military scholars note that the "information war of the US and its allies aims to force the Russian population to hate its own state, and … bring to power pro-Western politicians who would break up the country and subordinate it to the West."[108]

The Kremlin views ethnic tensions within Russia as a threat in themselves and a vector the West would exploit to undermine Russia.[109]

The Kremlin states that the West is eroding Russia's place in the world: Russian culture, language, demographics, values, religion, and history are under threat domestically and globally. The threat in the Kremlin's assessment comes from natural causes, such as Russia's demographic crisis, as well as from deliberate efforts by foreign actors trying to squeeze Russia off the great power stage.[110]

Putin stated in 2019 that Russia is "facing attempts to artificially, crudely and absolutely unceremoniously reduce the space of the Russian language in the world and to oust it to the periphery."[111] Russian military scholars claim that "Russia's growing might is viewed by the West, first and foremost, by the U.S. as a national security threat. This [thinking] forces our geopolitical adversaries to attempt to weaken Russia."[112] Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev also stated that the West wants to "destroy the common humanitarian space of the CIS."[113]

The Kremlin states that the West is rewriting historical narratives to erode Russia's greatness. Putin likely assesses that Russia risks losing control over historic narratives, in particular about WWII, as the Kremlin perceives Western efforts to downplay the USSR's contribution to defeating Nazism. The Russian Foreign Ministry states that the West has launched an attack against Russia's history.[114] Numerous Russian doctrinal documents identify ''deliberate distortion of history" as a national security threat.[115] "Preserving historical memory without 'alterations' is becoming a serious challenge

and a major of element of geopolitical struggle," says Russian Foreign Intelligence Chief Sergey Naryshkin.[116] He added that "the West is trying to rewrite the history, and undermine the world order that was keeping stability for generations."[117] Russian military scholars write that "a number of foreign and domestic researchers are trying to discredit unshakable values of [Russia's] public consciousness, including [Russia's] victory in the Great Patriotic War [WWII]."[118] Putin said the following in 2020:

"Many of our partners … increase the number and the scope of information attacks against our country, trying to make us provide excuses and feel guilty, and adopt thoroughly hypocritical and politically motivated declarations. The resolution on the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe approved by the European Parliament on 19 September 2019 directly accused the USSR together with the Nazi Germany of unleashing the Second World War."[119]

The narrative of Soviet victory in the WWII is personally and genuinely important to Putin, the Kremlin and the Russian people. The narrative is also likely coming to the forefront of the Kremlin's agenda as other "greatness" narratives, such as Putin returning Crimea to Russia, have exhausted themselves.

The Kremlin states that the West is deliberately destroying the post WWII order. Putin talks extensively about the West's "deliberate policy aimed at destroying the post-war world order" in his speeches and his hallmark 2020 op-ed on the lessons from WWII. Russia's veto power in the UN is one of the key bases of its real global power, and Putin is inherently concerned with preserving the legitimacy of the G5 mechanism. All Russian doctrinal documents highlight the dangers of eroding the UN's role in the international system, as the Kremlin seeks to preserve the value of Russia's UN Security Council veto power.[120]

The Kremlin states that the West is blocking Russia's point of view. Russia's Information Security Doctrine identifies "growing bias towards Russia in the foreign media and international efforts to block the activity of Russian media and unequal distribution of resources between countries that prevents Russia from participating in joint fair management of information systems" as threats.

Some Russian experts assess that Russia is losing in the information confrontation with the West. Igor Panarin, a Russian information warfare theorist, talks about Russian defeats and setbacks in the information space in the Kremlin's various campaigns.[121] "Russia is losing in ability to strategically influence the information space," says Dmitry Evstafiev of Russia's Higher School of Economics.[122]

The Kremlin states that the West is using information technology as a control tool. Patrushev said in 2019 that the West is using efforts to improve the technological capabilities of developing countries as a veil to undermine the sovereign right of other countries to develop their own information-technology infrastructure. Patrushev termed this effort "informational neocolonialism," which he defines as "certain countries [the US] using information technologies to undermine the sovereignty of other states" and lists it among Russia's key national security threats.[123] Russian national security scholars reinforce this narrative.[124]

Understanding the Kremlin's perceptions of the threats Russia faces is important in understanding Putin's decisions and actions. The conviction that a host of enemies is encircling Russia and the idea that Russia's contributions to civilization are under attack are all concepts familiar to Soviet and Russian historians. These ideas are alive and growing in strength in Putin's Russia today. Whether Putin himself believes these narratives matters little. He is creating an ideological framework of antipathy that permeates his government and is likely penetrating the psyches of many Russians. The West must understand that Putin will act or pretend to act in response to reality distorted through the lens of this hyperbolic language—and that his successors are also likely to believe it.

Chapter 2:

Putin's Efforts and Adaptations post-2014: Shaping the International Environment to Offset the Limits of Russia's Power

Putin's core objectives have remained the same since his illegal occupation of Crimea, namely: preserving his regime and Russia's sovereignty, regaining dominant influence over the former Soviet states, and reestablishing Russia as a great power. Putin seeks to establish a multipolar international system that grants Russia decisive influence and reduces the influence of the US and NATO.[125]

Putin recalibrated the methods he uses to achieve his objectives when the world became more wary of the Kremlin's intent and efforts following his 2014 military intervention in Ukraine. The Kremlin has not fundamentally altered the nature of its methods, but it changed their prioritization and intensity.

Putin has grown increasingly focused on **shaping an international environment that will foster Russian interests and provide the Kremlin with resources and legitimacy.** This chapter will examine **Putin's core lines of effort** that support this aim:

1. Creating a Russia-favorable global information space and expanding the Kremlin's information capabilities
2. Expanding the security space around Russia — a core base of Putin's power projection — without engaging in a costly arms race
3. Cocooning Russia in a web of coalitions
4. Reinforcing the primacy of the UNSC — the core pillar of the post-WWII order and a base of Russia's power
5. Diversifying foreign policy tools and means of building coalitions
6. Evolving his approach toward the "Russian World"
7. Investing in new anchoring bilateral relationships while expanding Russia's influence in peripheral theaters
8. Consolidating power inside Russia and pushing for the "sovereignization" of Russia[ii]

Putin's focus on shaping the international environment and the narrative surrounding Russia's actions reflects his constraints, past failures and threat assessments.

Putin has likely assessed that the long-term solution to deflect international pressure is to create an environment that will accept Russian principles and narratives and, as a result, limit the need for the West to use coercive measures against Russia. For example, if the Kremlin manages to manipulate the Ukrainian government into recognizing Russian proxies, and by extension Russia's intervention in Ukraine, some Western countries could more easily argue for lifting sanctions on Russia. Similarly, reinforcing Russia's great power status through mechanisms like the G5 upholds Russia's claims to its sphere of influence.

Putin also likely saw an opportunity to pull countries toward Russia's cooperation frameworks as the US pulled back from many global issues and Europe is increasingly fractured by internal fissures.

ii. **Putin's framing of his policies increasingly focuses on making Russia independent from Western influence, including creation of Russia's "sovereign internet," decreasing the use of the dollar, solidifying the priority of Russian laws over international laws in the constitution. These efforts isolate Russia from international community.**

Putin has suffered failures resulting from insufficient informational influence. The Kremlin stopped its offensive in eastern Ukraine at the limit of its "information frontier"—the point at which Russia ran out of information cover to advance its hybrid offensive. Years of Kremlin information operations failed to produce support for the "Russian World" idea beyond limited portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. As a result, the Kremlin lacked the information cover it needed to advance its military campaign in a hybrid manner beyond those areas—without openly committing to a full-fledged offensive on Ukraine.

The Kremlin also assesses the information space to be among the main vectors of Western efforts to undermine Russia's sovereignty *(see the section on the Kremlin's threat perceptions on page 28)*. Putin thus seeks to build immunity against foreign information influence in Russia. Putin has also had a growing need to control the information space to justify to the Russian people why they should suffer from the negative consequences of his foreign policy, such as sanctions.

Finally, Putin likely seeks to set conditions to ensure that his gains are irreversible. His efforts are focused on creating redundancy and resilience in Russia's domestic and external structures and engagements.[126] Putin characterized his state-building goals as creating a system "invulnerable and resilient from the outside" and "flexible on the inside."[127]

1. Putin's Key Fight is about Shaping Perceptions

Putin is investing heavily in the Kremlin's ability to shape narratives and perceptions—both in Russia and globally. Information operations have always been an important part of Kremlin's geopolitical toolkits, both before and after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, the ability to control the narrative is an increasingly existential requirement for Putin.

Russia's national security paradigm shifted toward the information space after the beginning of its military campaign in Ukraine in 2014. The Kremlin launched an overhaul of Russia's information policy likely in response to the informational successes and failures of its hybrid offensive on Ukraine as well as recognition of the increasingly vital requirement to shape the narrative internationally in order to advance Russia's foreign policy. Russia's 2016 Information Security Doctrine refocused Russia's information policy onto external threats. The 2016 doctrine is a contrast to its 2000 version, which focused inward and reflected the Kremlin's perception that most threats emanated from Russia's domestic weakness in the aftermath of the USSR's collapse.[128]

The 2016 doctrine called for an independent Russian information policy, the segmented management of the Russian internet, Russia's active participation in shaping international cyber security norms, and the elimination of Russian dependency on foreign information technologies.[129] Russia has since advanced most of these goals, demonstrating its prioritization of the policy.[130]

The Kremlin updated other key doctrinal documents to reflect its assessment of information threats.[131] The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, for example, elevated "strengthening Russian media's positions in the global information space" to its priority objectives.[132]

Russia's military and civilian officials have also been increasingly using the term "information confrontation."[133] Russian military scholars wrote in *Military Thought* in 2015 that, "information capabilities play an increasingly important role in a country's ability to influence global events: capabilities to exploit the intellectual potential of other countries; to disseminate and insert its own spiritual ideological values, culture, language; to stall spiritual and cultural expansion of other countries, transform and even undermine their spiritual and moral foundations."[134] This idea is discussed widely throughout the Russian military—ISW explores this idea in greater detail in its upcoming report on Russian hybrid warfare.

The US should not restrict the definition of the Kremlin's information space to include only information operations.

- **The Kremlin's means of creating perceptions go beyond information.** The Kremlin uses physical tools to reinforce certain narratives. Russia's cyber-attacks on Ukraine's electric grid and other critical infrastructure are likely intended to undermine trust the Ukrainian government's ability to provide basic services.[135] Russia's deployments of its S-400 air defense system globally aim to reinforce the perception that Russia's opponents lack freedom of movement. Lengthy prison sentencing for participants in even minor protests in Russia reinforce the perception that an alternative to Putin is too costly to fight for.[136]

- **The Kremlin's information space goes beyond traditional press and media.** The Kremlin's information space encompasses all layers of the international environment. The Kremlin circulates its narratives through its entire network of alliances, international organizations, media, and individuals.

- **The Kremlin's purpose is strategic.** The Kremlin's information space supports all Kremlin campaigns and objectives. Creating perceptions and winning certain narratives are often the main effort. Russian military scholars state that one of the key characteristics of a hybrid war is subordination of all other efforts to the information campaign.[137] The Kremlin's undertakings, including military and economic ones, aim to achieve information effects. ISW's upcoming report on Russian hybrid warfare explores these arguments in detail.

The information space in this case is thus more-accurately described as a **"perception space."** The perception space describes the target and the output of the Kremlin's efforts to promote specific narratives and create specific perceptions in support of its objectives or as an end in themselves.

The Kremlin has been expanding both its information capabilities and the areas they impact.

The Kremlin expanded its capabilities to match its evolved information policy. Putin incorporated information confrontation and information security into the mandate of Russia's security services, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Federal Protective Service (FSO), and Russia's National Guard.[138]

The Kremlin created "the Forces of Information Operations" within the Russian Defense Ministry in 2014. This unit is likely primarily focused on cyber operations but also has information operations capabilities, which Russian Defense Minister Shoigu mentioned in one of his speeches.[139] The Kremlin added a mandatory information policy focused curriculum for Russian military officers in 2017.[140]

Chief of the Russian Armed Forces General Staff Valery Gerasimov stated the Russian Armed Forces practiced "information confrontation" for the first time during the Caucuses-2016 military drills. The military created a so-called "group for information confrontation" during the drills, engaging the General Staff, Forces of Information Operations, and Means and Forces Electronic Warfare, according to Gerasimov. He stated that this group operated similarly to a Russian military entity called a "planning group for fire destruction"—essentially a military headquarters responsible for coordinating and executing artillery fire and air support. The information confrontation group likely focused on cyberwarfare and information operations instead of conventional military operations.[141]

The Kremlin has subordinated broader government policies to its informational goals. Russia's International Development Assistance concept, revised in 2014, aims to shift Russia's passive participation in "someone else's assistance framework where Russian contributions are diluted" to bilateral support where Russian aid is more visible.[142] The concept's goal is to improve the image of Russia and tie Russia's aid to its strategic goals and theaters, specifically the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).[143]

Panarin, a Russian information warfare theorist, suggested the creation of the following entities to enable Russia's information confrontation system:

- Government Council on Information Confrontation
- A presidential advisor on the Information Operations to coordinate across agencies
- Foreign policy oriented state-owned media (the Kremlin has been increasingly orienting Russian media on foreign policy as discussed below)
- Information Operation Forces (created)
- Centers of information operations at FSB, President's Security Service, and Foreign Intelligence Service (likely partially implemented).[144]

Panarin has also been promoting the creation of an "analytical-informational SPETZNAZ" and creating advanced strategic intelligence capabilities that should be similar, according to Panarin, to the National Intelligence Council in the US.[145] These proposals reflect the broader focus among Russian military thinkers on strategic forecasting and coordination across Kremlin agencies.[146]

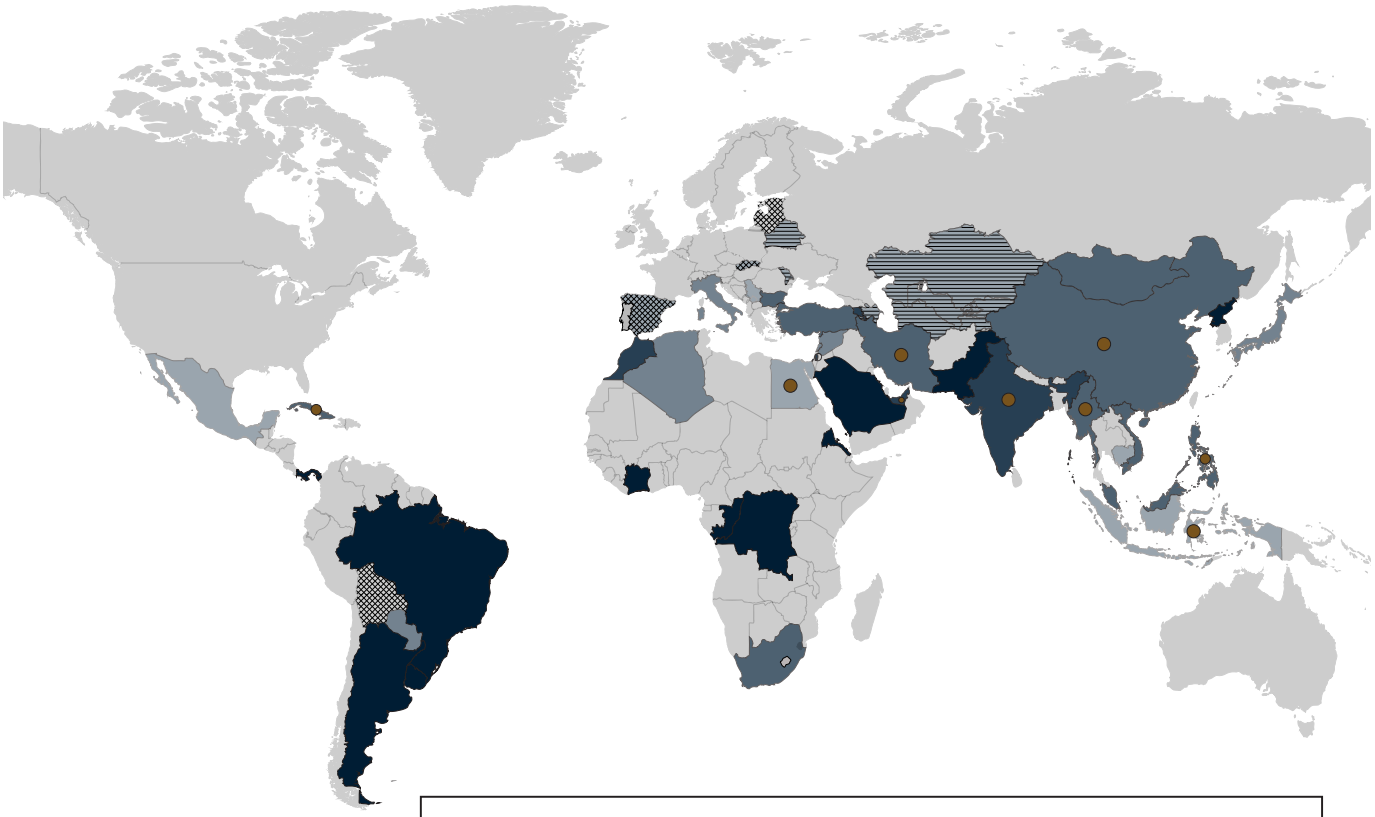
The Kremlin is increasing the resilience and scale of its global information presence. The Kremlin is building a global media conglomerate with several layers of depth. Kremlin-controlled media organizations, such as RT, TASS, and Sputnik, signed at least 50 content-sharing agreements with local media outlets globally in the past five years.[147] The graphic on the next page illustrates these agreements in detail. The Kremlin is attempting to make its information web more resilient by embedding its media with foreign outlets. On June 1, 2020, TASS joined Reuters' digital content marketplace, Reuters Connect.[148] The Kremlin might use this access to spread its false narratives among Western audiences under the veneer of objective reporting. The Kremlin continues to open new bureaus for its media outlets and grow its social media capabilities, such as online troll factories.[149]

The US should not restrict the definition of the Kremlin's information space to include only information operations.

The Kremlin is expanding influence over the global information space through its cyber security and information security partnerships and initiatives. The Kremlin is making information security a focus for Russia-linked organizations, including the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the BRICS association, the UN, and others.[150] The Kremlin has signed over 30 deals in the field of international information and communications technologies bilaterally and with multinational regional organizations since 2014.[151] For example, Kaspersky Lab will help Vietnam develop anti-virus software and systems for government structures and critical infrastructure and train specialists in the area of information security despite concerns about the Kremlin using Kaspersky programs to surveil users.[152] The Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media is playing a major role in the Kremlin's effort to develop information security partnerships around the world.[153]

The Kremlin is exporting its methods. The Kremlin seeks to shape not just the content, but also the approaches to journalism in the global media environment. The Kremlin likely seeks to develop a generation of journalists who view global affairs and Russia's role in them the way the Kremlin does so that the Kremlin's narratives continue to live even if host governments expel Kremlin-affiliated outlets. Sputnik launched a special "Sputnik School of Young Journalists" to train emerging reporters globally.[154] Representatives from RT and Sputnik offered to host African journalists for training, and RT hosted training for foreign journalists in Moscow.[155]

Russia's Cooperation Agreements with Local Media Outlets, 2014–2019



The Kremlin is expanding its global information presence. Kremlin-controlled media, such as RT, TASS, and Sputnik, have signed content sharing, journalist training, and joint project agreements with local media outlets and news agencies in numerous countries:

2015: Serbia, Egypt, Mexico, Cambodia, and Indonesia

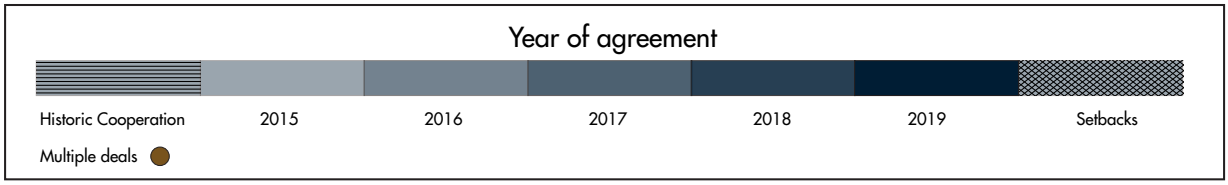
2016: Algeria, Japan, Syria, Lebanon, Paraguay, and Italy

2017: Myanmar, South Africa, Turkey, Cuba, China, Iran, Bulgaria, Vietnam, Mongolia, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

2018: The UAE, Palestine, Armenia, India, and Morocco.

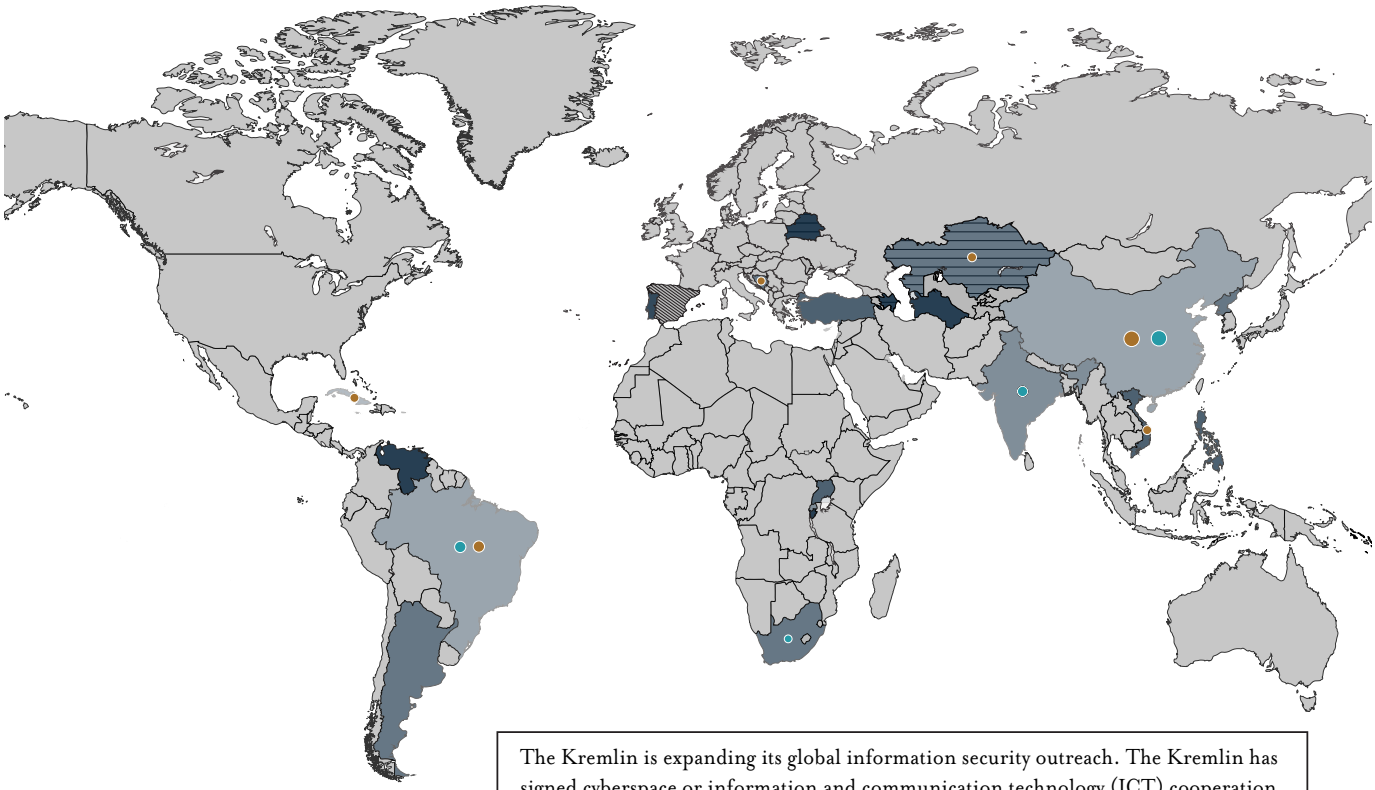
2019: Pakistan, Uruguay, Argentina, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Cote d'Ivoire, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Panama, and Brazil.

The Kremlin, however, faces setbacks in a number of countries as local authorities curb Russia's media presence.



Originally published in "The Kremlin's Expanding Media Conglomerate," by Nataliya Bugayova and George Barros, ISW, January 15, 2020

The Kremlin's International Information Security Cooperation Agreements, 2014–2019



The Kremlin is expanding its global information security outreach. The Kremlin has signed cyberspace or information and communication technology (ICT) cooperation deals in the following countries:

2014: Cuba

2015: China and Brazil

2016: India and Rwanda

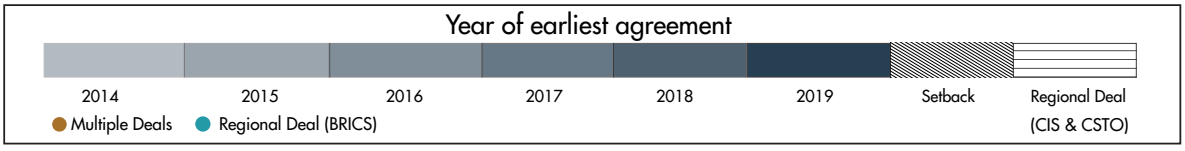
2017: Kazakhstan, Argentina, Serbia, and South Africa

2018: Kazakhstan, Phillippines, Vietnam, Portugal, Turkey, Uganda, and Spain (Failed)

2019: Singapore, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, Venezuela, Cuba, Belarus, Serbia, Burundi, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Brazil Russia India China and South Africa Association (BRICS), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)

2020: Brazil and Vietnam

Map by Zachary Greenhouse.
Basemap courtesy of Wikipedia commons.



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Narratives

The Kremlin seeks to establish specific narratives that support the Kremlin's long-standing objectives and specific campaigns.

Putin's overarching narratives elevate Russia's status and diminish the importance of the US. Putin has promoted the narrative about the need to counter US global hegemony for 20 years.[156] The Kremlin has been portraying the US as an ineffective and counterproductive global player while casting Russia a reliable partner on global issues, such as counterterrorism. Putin and his circle have been promoting the narrative that liberalism and globalism are becoming obsolete.[157] Putin is trying to establish that Russia, as a sovereign power, is entitled to its sphere of influence and can do what it wants to its population at home without being criticized, much less diplomatically punished for its actions.

The Kremlin is promoting certain narratives in support of specific goals. In 2020, the Kremlin prioritized narratives that could convince the West to lift sanctions on Russia, such as:

- ***Russophobia is artificial and based on a misrepresentation of the threat landscape. Companies and countries can partner with Russia.*** The Kremlin argues that Russia is a pragmatic actor, and that other countries should stop needlessly blaming Russia for its malign activities and lift sanctions on Russia. Core to this narrative is the argument that Russia is not a threat, merely a convenient scapegoat for the West to justify its failures. Putin stated that the Russian military threat is an "imaginary and mythical threat" that NATO has invented.[158]
- ***Companies and countries can do business with Russia without fear of the Kremlin using its economic levers against them.*** For example, the Kremlin emphasizes that the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is purely an economic project and not a problem for Europe or Ukraine.[159] The Kremlin needs to win this narrative to curb the opposition to Nord Stream 2 from the US, Ukraine, and several other European states, which regard the pipeline primarily as Putin's geopolitical tool.[160]
- ***Sanctions are ineffective and immoral.*** Putin often states that sanctions only make Russia stronger by forcing economic self-reliance.[161] That said, maintaining sanctions is inhumane in the context of a global pandemic, according to the Kremlin.[162]
- ***The West should move on from the conflict in Ukraine.*** The Kremlin argues that the conflict in Ukraine is an internal conflict, that the DNR and LNR are legitimate entities, that Russia is trying to protect its compatriots abroad, that Ukraine is a failed state overrun by radical nationalists, and that the divide between Russia and Ukraine is artificial and driven by Western efforts to pull Russia and Ukraine apart "because the West is afraid of a major competition if Russia and Ukraine unite."[163]
- ***Russia is a great mediator and peacemaker.*** The Kremlin casts Russia as a willing and an effective mediator in numerous conflicts in Ukraine, in Syria,[164] across Africa,[165] between Israel and Palestine, and even on the Korean peninsula.[166]

These Kremlin narratives are conflicting or false. Business is not just business for the Kremlin. The Kremlin has used energy policy to pressure other countries in the past.[167] Russia is a belligerent in several conflicts, including in Ukraine and Syria. Conflict in Ukraine would not have started if Russia had not intervened militarily. Putin can stop Russia's war in Ukraine at will; Zelensky has made numerous concessions to the Kremlin to advance peace talks. The Kremlin frames any opposition to Russia's demands in Ukraine as being motivated by radical nationalists or "Nazis." Russia often behaves as a malign actor on the issues it seeks to be a partner on, such as cybersecurity. Sanctions are effectively dampening Putin's ambitions. One of the first bills proposed by Russian parliamentarians during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was to lift self-imposed sanctions on the import of Western goods to Russia.[168] Furthermore, the Kremlin is spending a lot of effort trying to lift the sanctions on Russia; effort that would not be worth it if those sanctions were not harmful. Russia often does not intend or is simply unable to be an effective mediator in many conflicts. Russia is responsible for stalling the peace process in Ukraine. Russia's diplomacy in Syria is failing.[169] Putin is the one trying to build vast multiregional structures, like the Great Eurasian Partnership *(see the section on Putin's efforts to cocoon Russia in a web of coalitions on page 41.)* despite promoting a narrative about the end of globalism.

Many of Putin's principles and narratives are incompatible with the rules-based order and worldview of the West. Putin's concept of sovereignty comes with costs for the Russian people and Russia's neighboring countries. It means truncated sovereignty for Russia's neighbors and de-facto rejection of the settlements that marked the end of the Cold War. Putin also justifies crackdowns on his population with the need to have strong government to keep Russia stable.[170]

There is sometimes substance to Putin's narratives, of course. For example, Russia does have counterterrorism concerns that overlap with those held by the US; the Kremlin could play a constructive role if it chose to.

2. The Kremlin is Expanding Russia's Military Footprint and Security Coalitions—Bases of Russia's Power Projection

The Kremlin's focus on the information space does not imply less prioritization of Russia's hard power. Russia's Armed Forces and strategic deterrence capabilities remain a paramount priority for Putin. He has repeatedly stated that hard power preserved Russia's sovereignty during Russia's weak point in the wake of the USSR's collapse.[171] Putin has been modernizing and improving Russia's military power, including through a deliberate learning campaign in Syria. An upcoming ISW paper on the Russian military's lessons-learned in Syria explores this trend in detail.

One of Putin's priorities post-2014 has been the expansion of Russia's security space through its military footprint and security coalitions. Putin has militarized Crimea and expanded his military hold over the Arctic.[172] He reinforced Russia's bases in the former Soviet Union.[173] The Kremlin deployed advanced air defense systems on Russia's borders and at its overseas bases.[174] It expanded S-400 sales globally, including to US allies Turkey and India.[175] The Kremlin launched a push to expand its strategic basing, which Russia secured and continues to expand in Syria and aspires to obtain in North Africa.[176] Russia has made a maritime expansion push and been increasingly assertive over the Northern Sea Route and in the Black and Azov seas, where Russia regularly harasses Ukrainian vessels.[177] Russia has deployed its security services under the umbrella of training in several African countries.[178]

Putin is integrating the militaries and security services of the former Soviet states into Russia's frameworks.

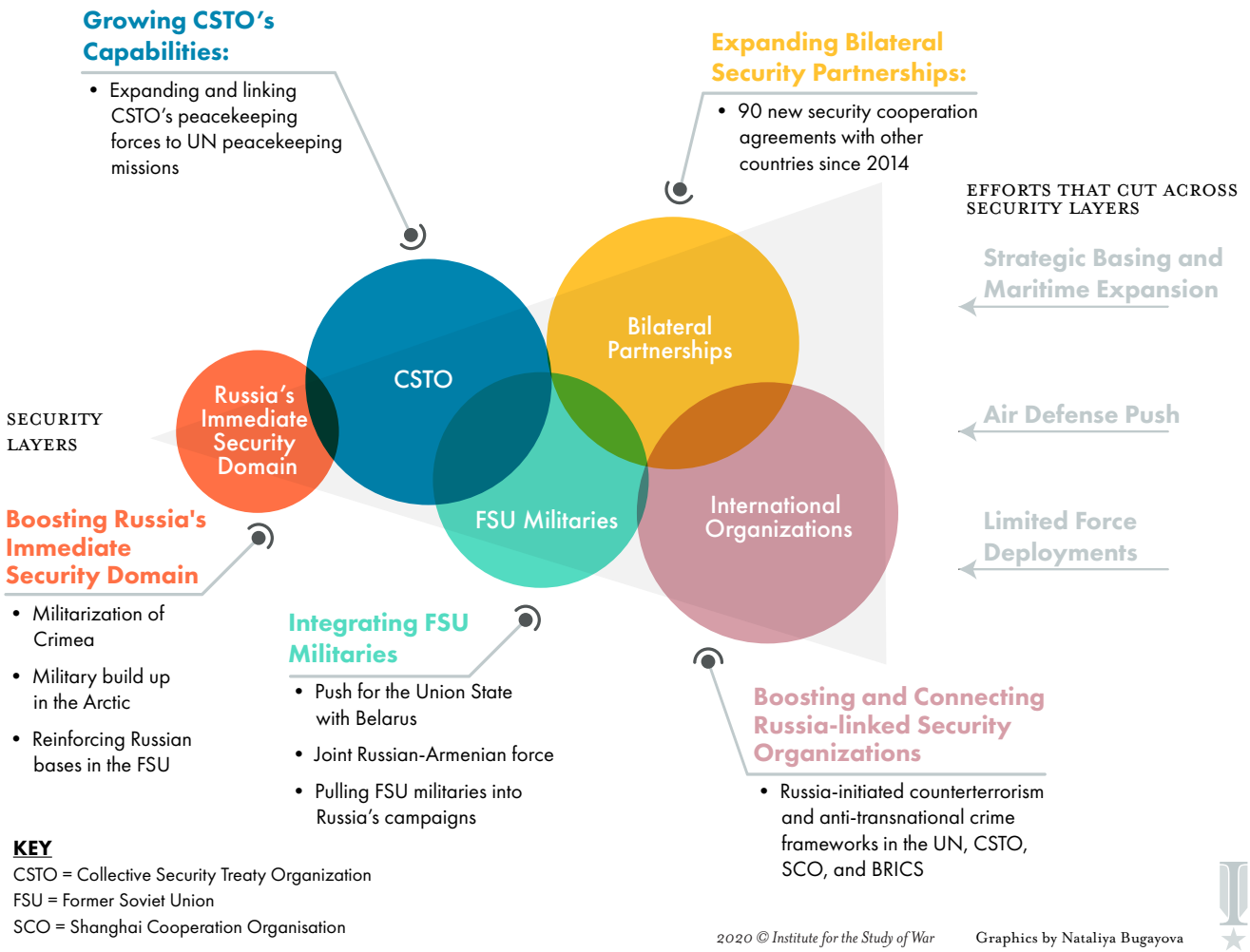
A global military footprint, no matter how limited, is the core of Putin's power projection; Putin will continue expanding it. It also will likely be the last layer to go if Putin scales down his global influence campaigns. Russia's military footprint anchors the international space Putin is trying to shape and generates important perceptional effects. Russia's basing in Syria, for example, is not just the base of Putin's power in the Middle East, but also of Russia's global power projection. Putin adds new basing in Syria every opportunity he gets.[179]

Putin is expanding Russia's military footprint in a targeted fashion. The expansion of military bases and force deployments reflects Putin's and the Russian military's assessment that Russia should rebuild its power without falling into an arms race trap that it will not win.[180]

The Kremlin has thus prioritized building security coalitions to offset the limits of Russia's growing but still limited military footprint. The Kremlin is attempting to use security partnerships with other countries to source forces, shape global

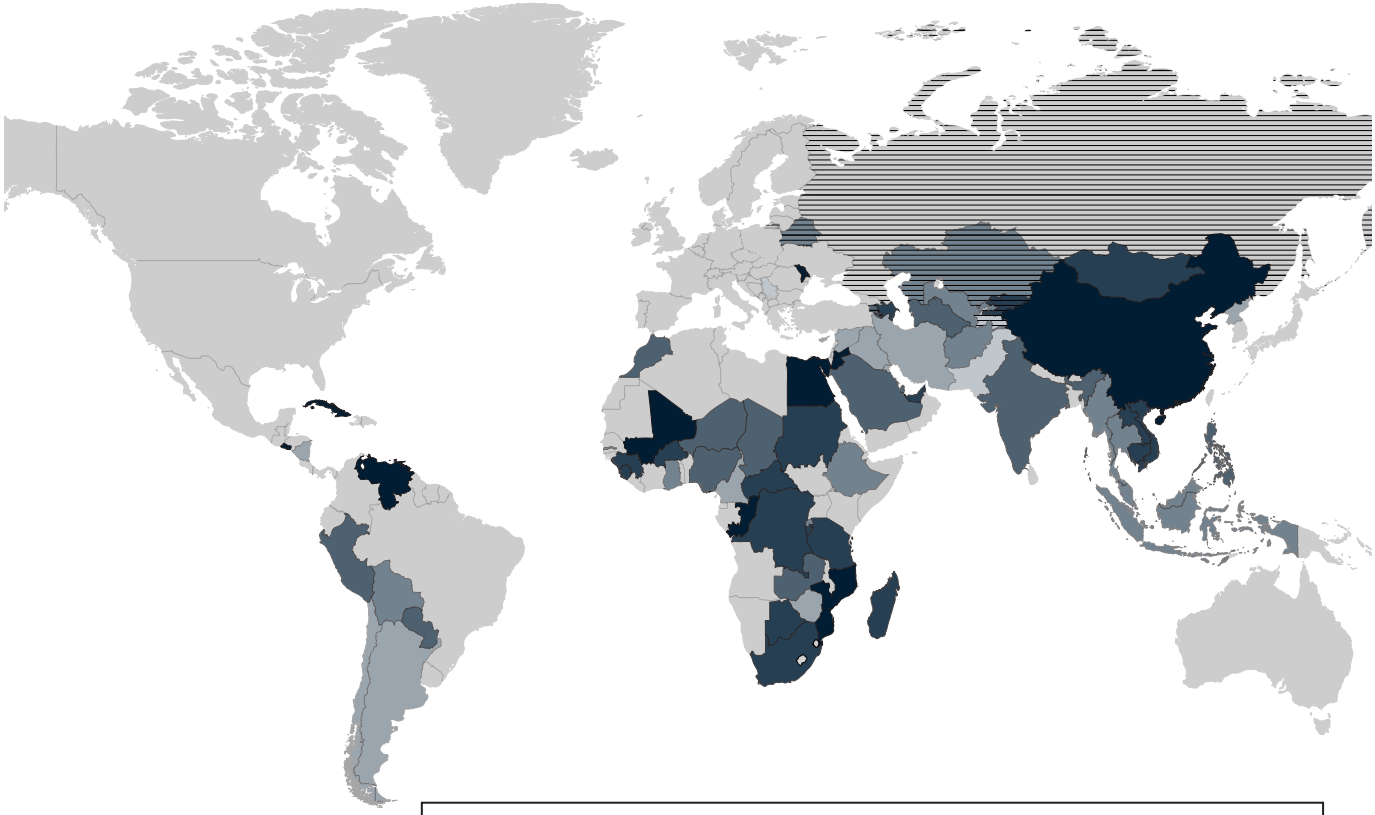
ISW Russia's Expanding Security Space

One of Putin's priorities post-2014 has been the expansion of Russia's security space through security coalitions and its military footprint. Russia's limited but growing military footprint remains a core base of the Kremlin's power projection. The Kremlin's security coalitions amplify that power.



 Graphics by Nataliya Bugayova

Russia's Security Cooperation Agreements, 2014–2019



The Kremlin is expanding its security space cooperation globally. The Kremlin has signed security cooperation agreements with numerous countries and international organizations since 2014. These agreements range from basic memorandums of understanding to comprehensive strategic partnerships.

2014: Pakistan, Serbia, Tajikistan

2015: Argentina, Cameroon, Cyprus, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Nicaragua, North Korea, Syria, Zimbabwe

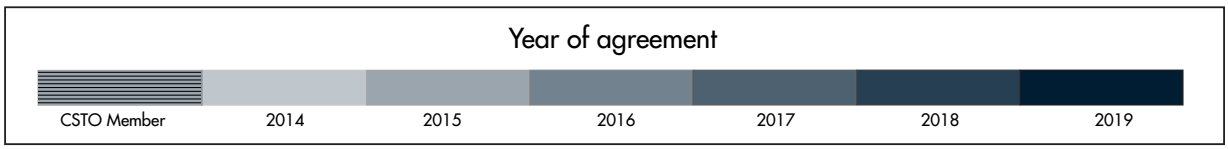
2016: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Belarus, Bolivia, Brunei, Eswatini, Gambia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Myanmar, Rwanda, Thailand, Uzbekistan

2017: Armenia, Chad, India, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, Zambia

2018: Azerbaijan, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Madagascar, Mongolia, Sierra one, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, UAE, Vietnam

2019: China, Cuba, Egypt, El Salvador, Jordan, Mali, Moldova, Mozambique, Republic of the Congo, Singapore, Venezuela

Map by George Barros
Basemap courtesy of Wikipedia commons.



Originally published in "Russia in Review: Russian Security Cooperation Agreements Post-2014" by Nataliya Bugayova, Mason Clark, and George Barros with Aleksei Zimnitca, Aiden Therrien, and Kayla Grose, ISW, May 15, 2020

security architecture through Russia-initiated security frameworks, legitimize Russia's interventions under the umbrella of international cooperation, advance the Kremlin's broader goals—such as regaining influence over the former Soviet states, expand its human networks, and create perceptions of Russia's ability to engage other countries.

- Putin is growing the Russia-led CSTO's peacekeeping force and aims to formalize it under the auspices of UN peacekeeping operations.[181] Putin likely seeks to use the UN umbrella to grow the CSTO, and thus Russia's forces and secure long-term legitimacy for Russia's "peacekeeping" missions, which it often uses as cover for its military campaigns. Russian military analysts argue that other states often deploy conventional forces under the cover of legal frameworks such as peacekeeping.[182]

- Putin is integrating the militaries and security services of the former Soviet states into Russia's frameworks.[183] Russia secured a new agreement on joint forces with Armenia in 2017 and pulled Armenian forces into Russia's campaign in Syria in 2019.[184] The Kremlin has also been trying to expand control over the Belarussian forces through the Union State integration mechanism.[185]

- Russia has signed over 90 security cooperation agreements with other countries and international organizations since 2014. These agreements range from basic cooperation frameworks to substantive agreements such as arms sales, joint forces training and reciprocal maritime access.[186] The magnitude of this effort indicates the Kremlin's prioritization of creating an umbrella of security partnerships.

- Putin is boosting the security capabilities of Russia-linked international organizations, in particular CSTO, SCO, and BRICS, via numerous initiatives on counterterrorism, countering transnational crime, and humanitarian efforts.[187] The Kremlin is also increasingly including troops from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in its military exercises.

3. The Kremlin is Cocooning Russia in a Web of Coalitions to Amplify Russia's Limited Real Power

Building a web of overlapping coalitions and partnerships has been a growing part of the Kremlin's efforts to offset the limits of its power as international pressure has mounted on Russia since 2014. Putin is creating a network of coalitions to make Russia's geopolitical clout more resilient and to expand the space in which Russia can spread narratives and create perceptions.

The Kremlin is engaged in a dual effort: boosting Russia-linked international structures and connecting them. It is an explicit priority in the Kremlin's revised doctrinal documents.[188]

Putin's key focus is on reinforcing the post-WWII order and Russia's status as one of the G5 countries —a key base of Russia's real and perceived power in the world. Putin has been increasingly calling for G5 cooperation on matters of international security in 2020. Specifically, the Kremlin has been trying to cohere a G5 summit to discuss nuclear arms control and conflicts, such as Libya.[189] The Kremlin also aims to reinforce the primacy of the UN, where Russia holds veto power on the Security Council, as a key international arbiter. Russia has been trying to link as many efforts to the UN as possible, such as CSTO's peacekeeping missions, to reinforce the legitimacy of the UN and Russian initiatives.[190]

The Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the CSTO are key economic and security nodes, respectively, in the Kremlin's web of coalitions. Other priority organizations for Russia's outreach include the CIS, ASEAN, BRICS, SCO, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the African Union. [191]

The EEU has not grown into an association that delivers significant value to its members. No new members have joined the EEU since it came into force in 2015 despite Putin's goal to include all former Soviet states.[192] Putin has shifted to a more

Select International Organizations and Platforms that the Kremlin Participates in or Cooperates with

Acronym	Full Name	Participants/Purpose
AU	African Union	A diplomatic union of 55 African states that prioritizes unity, sovereignty, political cooperation, and economic integration
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	A regional intergovernmental organization that aims to promote development, economic growth, and regional stability for Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia
	The Astana Process	A framework for the Syrian peace process between Russia, Turkey, and Iran formed in parallel to the Geneva-based UN Syrian peace process in 2016; the Kremlin intends to use the Astana process to draw the UN into a Russia-shaped peace process in Syria
BSEC	Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization	A regional intergovernmental organization that aims to promote cooperation in the Black Sea region; members include Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Serbia
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa	An association that promotes economic, political, and regional cooperation between Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CARICOM	Caribbean Community	A regional organization that aims to promote economic integration and cooperation and coordinate foreign policy among 20 Caribbean countries
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative	A Chinese global development strategy focused on infrastructure development and expanding global trade ties adopted by the Chinese government in 2013
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States	An organization that aims to promote cooperation among post-Soviet republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization	A mutual defense military alliance between Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan prioritizing shared basing and training in the former Soviet Union
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union	A Russia-led economic union between Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia; former Soviet states Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan have not become EEU members, with Georgia and Ukraine being particularly resistant
FSU	Former Soviet Union	A term, not a formal organization, for the former Soviet states
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization	A Eurasian political, economic, and security alliance among China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan
	Union State	A framework for the political, economic, and security integration of Russia and Belarus created in 1999 and promoted by the Kremlin to exert influence over Belarus

 Credit: Kayla Gross

flexible model of expanding the EEU via free trade agreements (FTA) in the recent years. This approach allowed the Kremlin to generate a perception of momentum around the EEU and sign FTAs with Vietnam, Iran, Singapore, and Serbia since 2016, as the Kremlin seeks to mitigate the effects of sanctions through trade diversification and expand Russia's influence in Asia and the Balkans.[193] The EEU is working on additional FTAs with India, Israel, Egypt, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia. [194]

Putin is also adapting the EEU to be a tool of Russia's influence over the former Soviet space. The EEU made Moldova an observer in 2017, which allowed Putin to retain contact with Moldovan President Igor Dodon and keep this institutional link going even during setbacks in Russian-Moldovan partnership.[195] Putin is also trying to tie the EEU members to Russia via joint financial and energy markets within the EEU states.[196]

The Kremlin is boosting other Russia-linked organizations. The CIS remains a priority for the Kremlin, and the Kremlin is using causes like digital cooperation to further integrate the CIS states with Russia.[197] Putin is trying to enlarge the CSTO by adding partners or observers.[198]

The Kremlin's parallel priority is connecting Russia-linked organizations.[199] In 2019, the EEU secured a cooperation agreement with the African Union and an agreement on customs cooperation between the EEU's and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[200]

The Kremlin is leveraging its chairmanship of the CSTO, SCO, and BRICS in 2020 to build links among these platforms. The Kremlin is developing the SCO's foreign policy organization, primarily on the UN platform, and strengthening BRICS member coordination on counterterrorism and combating transnational crime.[201] Russia initiated a major event on counterterrorism cooperation between the CSTO, UN, and SCO in 2019.[202]

Putin's idea of a Greater Eurasian Partnership is another umbrella concept the Kremlin has used to cohere its networks since 2016. Putin stated that the partnership should include the EEU, CIS, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and later added China's BRI, SCO, and ASEAN.[203] The Kremlin is prioritizing engaging China and India in its "Great Eurasia" efforts.[204] Facilitating the Greater Eurasian Partnership is one of the EEU's stated 2020 priorities.[205]

The Kremlin often accuses the US of promoting globalism at the expense of countries' sovereignty and integrating other countries into its "global super-society."[206] However, the Greater Eurasian Partnership, if fully realized, would encompass a large portion of the world. The Kremlin's issue is thus not with globalization per se but with globalization that it does not control.

Russia is developing interlocking ties among the rogue regimes and actors it supports to enhance their collective legitimacy.

Cross-legitimization of Kremlin-linked rogue regimes is a distinct effort. Russia is developing interlocking ties among the rogue regimes and actors it supports to enhance their collective legitimacy. The Kremlin is organizing diplomatic cross-recognition between its various clients, including the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Russian-controlled self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in Ukraine, President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and President Nicholas Maduro's administration in Venezuela.[207] Putin is not improving the fundamental strength of its illegal entities and clients, which are marked by dire economic and humanitarian circumstances, but rather trying to create a perception of legitimacy.

4. The Kremlin is Evolving Russia's Foreign Policy Tools and Means to Build Coalitions

The Kremlin has evolved its set of "nodes"—legitimate causes such as counterterrorism efforts—that it uses to pull countries into Russian initiatives. Putin said that many countries, especially in Asia, "don't want to enter into any blocs against anyone; they want to create 'a network of cooperation on different issues.'"[208] Such an issue-based approach is also likely a more realistic avenue for Russia to build partnerships given the limits of the value it offers compared to other global players.

The US should recognize that these causes are often not the primary goals of the Kremlin's outreach, even when the Kremlin has reasons to care about these causes, but rather ways to build influence. The Kremlin is posturing for collaboration, but is often a malign actor on the issues it lassos others in to solve. The West reinforces and legitimizes Putin by joining his initiatives.

The Kremlin has consolidated and diversified its foreign policy tools. Putin's foreign policy "action officers" come from a wide network of individuals and organizations. Putin has been increasingly pulling quasi-government and non-government entities, including Russia's state-owned enterprises, media, non-profit organizations, and affluent individuals, into foreign policy and national security efforts. This network operates in an official and unofficial capacity to advance the Kremlin's objectives around the world. The activities of Putin's foreign policy action officers are not always coordinated and there is a degree of freelancing, but they are guided by Putin's overarching intent. Western governments and companies should take this into account when they interact with Russian entities.

The Kremlin's campaign in Africa is an example of how Putin used this network to comprehensively cultivate influence.[209] The full spectrum of this network—Russian state-owned enterprises, such as the Russian atomic state agency Rosatom; media organizations, like Rossiya Segodnya; "deniable" assets, including select Russian businessmen and private military companies; Kremlin officials; and academia and non-profit organizations, such as the Foundation of National Values Protection and the International Agency of Sovereign Development, have participated in Putin's influence cultivation in Africa — a campaign ISW has analyzed.[210]

Cohering Causes

Putin's narratives about **sovereignty and the multipolar international order** are central to his efforts to shape the international environment.[211]

The Kremlin has expanded on the umbrella notion of sovereignty post-2014 and has been engaging countries via an expanded set of sovereignty-related offerings:

- **Information sovereignty.** The Kremlin officials accuse the West of using information technology to undermine sovereignty of other states, framing it as "US digital neocolonialism" and "digital hegemony."[212] The Kremlin is building influence over the global digital space through cybersecurity and information security partnerships with other countries and Russia-sponsored information security initiatives in the UN, CSTO, CIS, BRICS, and ASEAN.[213]
- **Financial sovereignty.** The Kremlin accuses the United States of carrying out a "weaponization of its financial system."[214] The Kremlin is pulling states into Russia-led frameworks that are supposed to reduce dependency on Western financial systems. These frameworks include the Russian "alternative" to the SWIFT interbank financial telecommunication system, called SPFS, and a Russian payment system called MIR. The Kremlin is pushing for reducing the use of the US dollar in its economy and

international transactions and toward increasing use of the local currencies.[215]

- **Fair and flexible collective security.** The Kremlin promotes Russian frameworks as alternatives to the "confrontational schemes offered by Anglo-Saxons."[216] The Kremlin pitches these frameworks, which include the Gulf Security Framework, [217] as flexible, issue-based approaches to cohering networks to combat threats, such as terrorism.[218]
- **Counterterrorism.** The Kremlin is coopting countries around the world into diplomatic alignments focused on counterterrorism. The Kremlin is focused on securing bilateral counterterrorism agreements, shaping an international legal basis for counterterrorism and pushing Russian counterterrorism frameworks in international organizations.[219] The Kremlin's particular emphasis is on counterterrorism cooperation in the digital space, which is Putin's stated priority.[220] For example, the Kremlin offered in 2019 to coordinate information operations with Muslim-majority countries to counter terrorism.[221] As with other cohering nodes, counterterrorism cooperation is often not the primary goal of the Kremlin's outreach, even when the Kremlin has legitimate counterterrorism concerns, but rather ways to build influence. In Syria, the West learned that supporting the Assad regime in Damascus and gaining military basing, not counterterrorism, were Putin's primary goals.
- **Aid in the fight against transnational crime.** Russia is posturing as a bulwark against drug trafficking while "the so-called narcoliberals led by Canada are trying to undermine the global drug enforcement regime in the UN," according to the Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service Chief Sergei Naryshkin.[222]
- **Posturing on climate change.** Russia joined the Paris Climate Accords in 2019.[223] Putin and the Kremlin officials often talk about climate change at international forums.[224] Putin likely sees an opportunity to court European leaders, such as French President Emmanuel Macron, and cast Russia as a responsible global actor as the US stepped back from the Paris agreements.[225]
- **Peacekeeping and peacemaking.** The Kremlin seeks to formalize the CSTO's peacekeepers under the UN umbrella and shape UN peacekeeping reforms to be more in line with Putin's concept of sovereignty. [226] Putin also inserts Russia into peace processes around the world.
- **Humanitarian support.** The Kremlin supported its limited efforts to fight issues like Ebola and COVID-19 with information campaigns to cast Russia as a great humanitarian.[227] It is also posturing as a leader on international biosecurity efforts.[228]

Foreign Policy Tools

The Kremlin continues to use its well-known tools of influence and subversion globally. These tools include Russia's media; the Russian Orthodox Church; cultural organizations such as Rossotrudnichestvo,[iii] Russkiy Mir Foundation, and the Roscongress Foundation events agency.

The Kremlin has increasingly utilized a number of additional tools since 2014.

- ***Parliamentary Outreach***
  - The Russian Parliament has signed numerous new legislative agreements with its foreign counterparts.[229]
  - Russian MPs and Putin's United Russia Party have increasingly acted as Putin's foreign policy officers.[230]

iii. **Rossotrudnichestvo stands for Russia's Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation.**

- The Kremlin has launched a Russia-led annual parliamentarism forum to engage foreign legislators.[231]
- The Kremlin has integrated parliamentary outreach into its campaigns.[232]

- ***Subnational Outreach***
  - The Kremlin has pushed to build links and formal agreements at the regional level between Russian regions and provinces in countries of strategic interest for the Kremlin, including in the FSU, in Syria, in China, and across Africa.[233]

- ***An Expanding Pool of Flexible and Deniable Tools***
  - The Kremlin has deployed private military companies (PMCs), such as Wagner, to advance various campaigns from Ukraine to Syria to Africa.
  - The Kremlin has created additional proxy layers in the Kremlin influence infrastructure—e.g. a layer of partnerships with local media outlets in the Kremlin's global media conglomerate.[234]
  - Russian businessmen with vast resources outside the Kremlin's official structures have served as foreign policy outreach toolkits, such as Evgeny Prigozhin or Konstantin Malofeev.
    - Evgeny Prigozhin, also known as "Putin's chef," supports the Kremlin's operations from the US to Africa through private military contractors, political influence campaigns and the media.[235] Konstantin Malofeev has a similarly diversified toolkit that includes a TV channel, a private equity firm, and a religious nonprofit. He has likely participated in the Kremlin's campaigns in Ukraine, Italy, the Balkans, and Africa.[236]

- ***Expanding Economic Tools***
  - The Kremlin has increasingly integrated Russia's large state-owned enterprises, such as Russian Railways, Rosatom, and Rosneft, as well as the Russian Direct Investment Fund into its outreach and influence campaigns from Africa to Europe.[237]
  - The Kremlin has developed new international investment and trade vehicles that it uses to build influence, such as the Russian Industrial Zones, that Russia is building in Egypt and mulling in Mozambique and Namibia.[238] The International Agency of Sovereign Development, created in 2019 and chaired by Malofeev is a likely vehicle for generating influence through targeted economic support under the framing of 'sovereignty.'

- ***Growing Diplomatic Role of Military and Security Services***
  - Russia's National Guard, created in 2016 and which Putin commands, has helped Russia deepen relationships with authoritarian regimes through joint exercises and exchanges, particularly with China.[239]
  - The Russian Ministry of Defense has increasingly engaged in diplomacy; it was the key institution that delivered limited aid to Italy, the US and the Balkans during the COVID-19 pandemic.[240]
  - Russia's intelligence chief praised Russian and the US intelligence services' "uninterrupted cooperation" in counterterrorism and other areas despite politics.[241]
  - The Kremlin has developed a diplomatic capability within Russia's Military Police through their deployments in Syria.[242]
  - Russia has used arms sales as a geopolitical tool as well as a source of revenue; selling S-400 systems to Turkey helped the Kremlin drive friction within NATO.
  - Major Russian military exercises increasingly seek to demonstrate the Kremlin's ability to engage global actors, such as China and India, support geopolitical objectives, such as integrating militaries of the former Soviet states, to market Russian arms, including its air defense systems.[243]
  - The Kremlin uses export of military education and training to expand its influence. The Russian General Staff Academy has met with counterparts around the world, including in India, China, and Angola, to discuss Russian support in military education.[244]

The Kremlin's evolving influence toolkit indicates its intent to reduce reliance on specific human networks and individuals. The Kremlin seeks to diversify the access points of its influence and build institutional connections. It also reflects the Kremlin's growing need to utilize all tools at its disposal to offset the limitations of its real power.

5. The Kremlin has Evolved the Kremlin's Approach to the "Russian World"—One of His Key Cohering Efforts

The "Russian World" and integration of the former Soviet space remain grand-strategic priorities for Putin. This effort is a core pillar of Putin's efforts to rebuild Russia's power globally. Putin has been trying to cohere Russian compatriots around the world and in the former Soviet space, a goal different from rebuilding the USSR, since he came to power. Putin defined the goal of the "Russian World" as "uniting all those spiritually connected to Russia and who consider themselves carriers of Russian language, culture and history," and argued that the "Russian World" was never built exclusively on "ethnic, national, and religious characteristics."[245] The Kremlin's actions, resource allocation, and doctrinal documents reflect that the integration of the FSU and the Russian World concept's importance only grew for the Kremlin post-2014.[246]

Putin has adjusted his rhetoric and tactics after Russia's war in Ukraine resulted in the formation of antibodies against the Russian World concept. Putin justified his illegal occupation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine on the premise of protecting Russian compatriots abroad. Six years of military conflict in Ukraine and the derelict state of Russia-created illegal republics in Ukraine made the international community wary of the Russian World and resulted in policies designed to counter Russia.[247]

The Kremlin seeks to diversify the access points of its influence and build institutional connections.

Putin called on Kremlin officials to stop referring to the Russian language as a weapon. Putin said, "if it is a weapon, they'll [the world] start fighting it as a weapon."[248] Promoting the Russian language remains an increasing priority for Putin, who launched a number of state programs to promote the language globally.[249] The promotion of the Russian language is also an explicit priority in all of Russia's revised doctrinal documents.[250]

Putin has made it easier to claim one's "Russianness." The Kremlin has been rolling out an entire set of policies simplifying ways to obtain Russian citizenship or residency for people with Russian heritage.[251]

Putin continues to expand the role and reach of the Rossotrudnichestvo and Russkiy Mir Foundation—foreign policy tools aimed at expanding Russia's global influence.[252]

Putin has also adapted how he uses armed forces in the FSU; they are not his first resort, nor his last resort. In Moldova, Putin choose a "cooperation model," as described in the section "How Does Putin Gain." In Belarus, Putin has chosen a path of slow integration versus an overt absorption. Putin likely aims to avoid creating of antibodies to Russia in Belarus—which would most likely emerge if Putin uses Russian force openly in Belarus and which would be a strategic loss for Putin in the long-term. Secondly, Putin likely realizes he can simply leverage the implied threat of Russia's military intervention to shape actions of Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, as well as the West, to Russia's advantage.[253]

Putin and top Russian officials are increasingly pushing for a common humanitarian space between Russia and Belarus, within the EEU, and within the CIS member states.[254] Kremlin officials use the term "common humanitarian space" to describe an educational, scientific,

cultural, and information space shared between Russia and other countries, mostly referring to the FSU.[255]

The "Russian World" concept is increasingly at the nexus of offense and defense for the Kremlin. Putin is using the Russian World as a tool to address Russia's demographics crisis. Putin said demographic change is among his key priorities in his address to the Federal Assembly in January 2020.[256] He seeks to partially solve the demographic crisis through migration. Putin elevated Russia's migration policy to the jurisdictional authority of his presidential administration and has made a priority of liberalizing the procedures for obtaining Russian citizenship.[257] This prioritization is reflected in Russia's updated 2019–2025 Migration Concept.[258] The Kremlin is also attempting to pull in skilled labor from abroad, in part through the EEU.[259] Finally, the Kremlin might seek to expand its internal security forces through recruitment from the neighboring states. The Russian Parliament is considering a bill that would allow Ukrainian citizens who became Russian citizens to work in the Russian government, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs and special services.[260]

The Kremlin is also using the same policies on simplifying ways to get Russian citizenship as offensive tools. The Kremlin uses Russia's citizenships to expand control over occupied Donbas and other areas in the former Soviet space.

6. Putin is Investing in Anchor Relationships while Expanding Russia's Influence in Peripheral Theaters

The Kremlin launched outreach campaigns beyond its core theater into the Middle East, Africa, Asia, South America in search of influence, legitimacy, and resources to offset Western-imposed losses after 2014. Putin also made strategic bets on relationships with specific countries.

Putin invested his own limited time and attention in anchor relationships with several countries and leaders post-2014. Putin has been prioritizing developing strategic partnerships with China and India to create new revenue streams for Russia amid a worsening economic relationship with the West. [261] China is also a support pillar of Putin's anti-US and sovereignty narratives,[262] while India is a regional anchor for Putin's coalition building and a potential backdoor to the US. The Russian relationship with Iran has evolved into a strategic partnership, given the importance of Iran for Russia's campaign in Syria and beyond.[263] Putin has been increasingly courting US partners Turkey and Egypt.[264] Turkey is a part of the Kremlin's efforts to undermine NATO, while Egypt is critical for Putin's effort to expand strategic basing and influence in the Middle East and Africa.

In Europe, Putin's relationship with French President Macron, who is at least rhetorically willing to cooperate with Russia, has been a critical part of Putin's effort to shift perceptions from Russia as an aggressor to a false narrative of Russia being a pragmatic partner with its sphere of influence. Putin has held over a dozen calls with Macron since August 2019 to discuss peace efforts in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya.[265] Putin has also prioritized his relationship with Hungary—a part of Russia's efforts to undermine NATO and isolate Ukraine internationally.[266] Italy is another of Putin's strategic bets in Europe, being a major part of the Russia's efforts to lift sanctions and a piece of Russia's efforts in Mediterranean. [267] Putin said in 2019 that Italy and Russia have a "single civilizational code," stressing that Russia and Italy are natural partners on many issues.[268] Germany remains the key priority in Europe for Putin, as Russia's top economic partner in Europe and a major influencer on Europe's Russia policy.

The Kremlin's rhetoric regarding Europe has softened as Putin's need to lift sanctions has grown and opportunities to pull European states away from the US emerged. The Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, for example, defined developing ties with the European states among its 2020 priorities.[269]

Originally published in "The Kremlin's Inroads After the Africa Summit" by Nataliya Bugayova, George Barros, Andre Briere, Mason Clark, Michaela Walker, and Anthony Yanchuk, ISW, November 8, 2019

Serbia is another of Putin's strategic priorities.[270] The Balkans and Serbia in particular are a nexus point of Putin's objectives: preventing expansion of Western structures, undermining NATO, and ending "US hegemony." For Putin, the NATO's 1999 campaign in former Yugoslavia is a major manifestation of US hegemony and disregard for Russia's interests after the USSR's collapse—an event that influenced Putin's worldview.[271] Putin's interest in the Balkans also relates to the survival of the "Russian World" beyond the FSU borders, including preserving the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church.[272]

One of the Kremlin's most coordinated campaigns post-2014 was the expansion of Russia's influence in Africa.[273] The Kremlin was setting conditions as early as 2016, but the major expansion in outreach followed Putin's reelection as Russia's president in March 2018. Putin dedicated his time and some of his most senior executive officers to this campaign. Putin's investments in Africa are strategic despite their limited scope and aim to generate long-term effects. The Kremlin has been prioritizing boosting military sales, entering Africa's emerging nuclear energy market, and expanding Russia's access to mineral resources and sites for additional military basing. The Kremlin also expanded its media and information footprint on the continent, while pulling African nations and leaders into Russia's geopolitical orbit to boost Russia's image as a great power.[274]

The Kremlin made a deliberate outreach to other key regions. Putin made a major push in the Middle East with Russia's Syrian campaign, then focused on North Africa, specifically Egypt, Libya, and Sudan. Putin expanded his outreach to Gulf States and eventually to most of the African continent. The Kremlin has simultaneously launched outreach to Asian countries with a particular focus on South East Asia,[275] as well as cultivating a Russia-friendly block in South America with emphasis on Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela.[276]

7. Putin's Domestic Consolidation

Putin has been offsetting his declining value proposition to the Russian population by tightening his grip on Russia. He is also increasingly trying to center the Russian way of life on the narrative of patriotism. Putin's core circle remains the same and consists of a small group of close associates who have been working with him for over 20 years.[277]

Putin has further expanded and empowered the security services as he likely perceives growing risks to his rule.[278] Putin has created new services, such as the Russian National Guard in 2016 that he directly commands. He built a system of increasingly powerful intelligence services, but he also made them compete to ensure that none get too powerful.[279] One of Mikhail Mishustin's first moves as prime minister in 2020 was to introduce bonuses for members of the security services who work to "keep order" at public events.[280]

Putin allowed Russian security services to increasingly control the business climate—likely in an effort to reward them. A telling case is the arrest of American investor Michael Calvey,[281] who was a model Western investor in Russia since 1994 until his business interests came into conflict with the "siloviki," a common term for the security services in Russia.[282] Calvey was arrested in February 2019 and still remains under the house arrest in Russia as of the publication of this report.

Putin is using the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to refine his societal control toolkit.[283] He increased the budgets and powers of the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard, and other security services. The Kremlin also implemented mass digital surveillance, facial recognition, geolocation on smart devices, and comprehensive digital databases for all Russian citizens. The Kremlin may repurpose these tools to suppress political opposition and protests in the future.

Putin is sanitizing Russia's information space. Controlling the narrative is an increasing requirement for Putin as his value propositions to the Russian people decline and as he tries to prevent "Western destabilization" of Russia. Putin is expanding the Kremlin's influence over the domestic information space, which will help him silence and marginalize those he deems to be a threat to his regime and Russia's sovereignty.

The Kremlin has developed and launched, so far with limited success, the Russian "sovereign internet"—a concept the Kremlin came up with. The Kremlin marketed it as a way to ensure that the functions of the Russian internet continue in the event that Russia is disconnected from the global internet.[284] In practice, it allows the Kremlin to be the chief monitor and regulator of the internet in Russia. Putin empowered Roskomnadzor, Russia's federal agency responsible for media censorship, to hunt down and silence his critics online.[285] Putin forced internet giant Yandex to change its governance structure to prevent foreign influence.[286]

The Kremlin is insulating Russia from outside information spaces. The Kremlin has banned several Western media outlets and research institutions.[287]

Putin is self-isolating Russia under an umbrella of "sovereignization" despite his repeated statements that he is not planning to close Russia. In addition to restricting information, Putin is limiting international legal frameworks and goods. Putin has formalized the primacy of the Russian Constitution over international law. Putin likely seeks the freedom to disregard decisions by international organizations, such the European Court of Human Rights. Putin also self-sanctioned Russia by restricting imported goods from Europe after 2014.

Putin is attempting to center Russia's identity and way of life on the idea of Russia's core values. Putin is increasingly emphasizing patriotism and "love for the homeland as a foundation of the Russian life."[288] He is instituting patriotic education among both civilians and military members, particularly youth.[289] The new 2020 bill on "Patriotic Education of the Russian Citizens" states the need to cultivate "feelings of patriotism and citizenship, respect for the law and order."[290]

Putin is increasingly merging education and information policy. The Kremlin established the Ministry of Enlightenment after the Ministry of Education and Science split into two parts in 2018. The Ministry of Enlightenment is increasingly focused on the moral education and patriotic upbringing of Russians in schools.[291] Russia's Defense Ministry built a major cathedral in 2020 dedicated to the Russian armed forces.[292] The cathedral is emblematic of the Kremlin's efforts to center Russia's identity in part at the nexus of militarized patriotism and religion. These efforts reflect Putin's assessment that Russia's future depends on "what kind of values" Russians will have, as well as the Russian military's focus on ensuring that the Russian servicemen do not get corrupted by ideas from outside.[293]

Military Learning vs. Geopolitical Adaptation: Points of Overlap

- The battle for minds is the key battle. In modern and future war, all undertakings should aim to achieve information effects. From the Kremlin's perspective, it is key to be able to shape the narrative for offensive purposes at the grand strategic level internationally and domestically, at the operational level on the battlefield, and defensively—to protect Russia from erosive ideas that can undermine Russia's sovereignty (within the broader population and the armed forces).
- The Kremlin treats its varied efforts as synthetic efforts, and the West needs to confront them the same way. The Kremlin is attempting to consolidate and better synchronize its structures and tools, both militarily and within its geopolitical efforts.
- The Kremlin assesses that Western destabilization of Russia will come from within Russia and primarily through the information space—whether at the country level or on the battlefield. The Kremlin believes that the West is currently conducting hybrid war against Russia.
- The Kremlin's efforts are aimed to shape conditions, not simply disrupt them. Putin is shaping the international environment deliberately and openly to support his grand strategic and strategic objectives. Russian military thinkers also talk about hybrid wars having defined targets beyond disruption and subversion.
- International partnerships and coalitions are key. The Kremlin is linking and reinforcing Russia's frameworks militarily and geopolitically.

ISW examines the military learning side of this dynamic in a forthcoming report.

Chapter 3: Effects

Putin's offset efforts and evolving approach enables him to play a bad hand well by boosting both the real bases of his power and how others perceive his power. His hand remains fundamentally weak, however.

Advances

Putin continues to advance his objectives despite growing pressures. Putin is still in power and has secured an option to run for president again in 2024.

Putin has not been made to give up on his goals. He did not have to give up gains secured through aggression in Ukraine and beyond. He faces constraints, such as sanctions, but has yet to face accountability for his atrocities in Ukraine and Syria.

Putin assesses he expanded international perceptions of Russia as a global power. Putin in January of 2020: "Russia has returned to international politics as a country whose opinion cannot be ignored."[294] Putin also claimed that multipolarity has been achieved. "A unipolar world no longer exists," said Putin in 2019.[295] Prominent American experts, like Graham Allison at Harvard University, echo this thought and suggest the US should acknowledge Russia's sphere of influence.[296]

Putin preserved and expanded gains in Russia's core theater, the former Soviet space, after 2014. The Kremlin managed to gain several concessions from Ukraine in 2019, including the disengagement of Ukrainian forces from several areas on the frontlines without changing the reality of Russia's military activity on the ground. The Kremlin also facilitated the return of numerous Kremlin-linked actors and the under-the-radar growth of Russia's influence in Ukraine.[297] Putin's campaign to advance the Kremlin-preferred peace process in Ukraine has stalled in 2020, but the Kremlin continues its attempts to pressure Kyiv. In 2019, the Kremlin started to reverse its influence setbacks in Moldova, including restarting key bilateral mechanisms with Moldova and securing new deals. Kremlin-backed Moldovan President Igor Dodon controls key levers of power in Moldova as of 2020—a change from 2018 when Moldova's Constitutional Court suspended Dodon's powers five times. The Kremlin is also on a trajectory to regain control over Belarus. Putin is exploiting the weak position of Belarussian President Lukashenko, who has been facing major anti-government protests since August 2020, to reassert Russian dominance over Belarus. ISW has been watching this campaign closely.

Putin has grown Russia's power and engagement globally:

- *The Kremlin accessed new revenue streams amid Western sanctions.* Partnerships with China and India produced new investment for Russia along with deals in the areas of energy, weapons, and infrastructure.[298] The Kremlin's gains resulting from its recent push for Africa include multi-billion-dollar arms deals, and at least twenty energy, mineral, and geological exploration projects.[299] The Kremlin has also cultivated nuclear energy markets. Rosatom secured additional contracts in Hungary, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Bangladesh, India, China since 2014. Russia boosted its global weapons sales, particularly in advanced air defense systems.
- *Putin expanded Russia's freedom of maneuver and navigation.* Putin gained three bases in Syria since 2014 and pushed for additional basing access in June 2020. Putin increased Russia's maritime presence in the Black Sea and in the Arctic, expanding Russia's claims over the Northern Sea Route.
- *Putin has advanced Russia's anchor infrastructure projects.* Russia and Turkey launched the first pipeline of the Turkstream project in 2020.[300] Russia launched a "Power of Siberia" pipeline to China in 2019.[301] The Kremlin continues to slowly advance Nord Stream 2 amid setbacks.

That gas pipeline will provide Russia with leverage over Europe and help isolate Ukraine. Russia is building an Industrial Zone in Egypt.

- *The Kremlin has expanded its global information network.* The Kremlin has expanded the reach and depth of Russia's media organizations and secured nearly 50 agreements with local media organizations globally.

- *The Kremlin secured new partnerships through its coalition building efforts.* Putin's investments of his personal time in anchor relationships in Asia have produced stronger ties with those countries. The EEU is securing additional free trade agreements. Russian SWIFT alternatives and payment systems yield little practical value, but they do expand Russia's partnership network.[302] Russia was able to engage additional countries, including major players in Asia, into its major military exercises.[303]

The Kremlin is exacerbating fissures within the West:

- The Kremlin cultivated Hungary, a NATO member, into a foreign policy partner. Putin has likely leveraged its relationship with Hungarian President Viktor Orban to block meetings and resolutions related to Ukraine's NATO integration.[304] Hungary also called for European reconstruction funds to Syria, which reinforces Russia's efforts to try to boost its client, Assad.[305]

- Russia has—at least until recently—successfully leveraged its efforts to cultivate Turkey as a partner to drive fissures between Turkey and the NATO, including on issues such as Turkey's purchase of S-400.[306]

- Putin is utilizing the Nord Stream 2 project to drive a wedge between the EU and US, both of which have divergent policies on the issue.[307]

The Kremlin is securing legitimacy gains and shifting rhetoric in its favor:

- Putin is outlasting the West in the information space. Several Western leaders, including Macron and Trump, expressed openness to welcoming Russia back into the international organizations.[308] Select European officials are softening rhetoric on sanctions.[309] Russia reinstated its voting rights in Parliamentary Assembly in the Council of Europe in 2019 despite not having addressed the problem that prompted revocation of Russia's rights.[310]

- Putin continues to secure a seat at the table despite Russia's continued malign behavior. European endorsement of Russia-driven peace talks in Ukraine reinforce the Kremlin's effort to posture as a mediator in the conflict where it is belligerent. Putin cohered a Libya conference with Libya powerbrokers and Turkey in Moscow in January 2020.[311] Russia leverages its limited PMC deployment to Libya to strengthen Russia's hand in this diplomatic process.

- The global information space often falls for Russian false narratives about Ukraine. In October 2019, the Kremlin blamed Ukrainian nationalists for Ukraine's failure to advance the peace process. Some Western media, including the AP and the Guardian, used the Russian framing when reporting on October 14 protests in Kyiv against Russia-favorable peace deal for Ukraine's east. Both outlets had to either edit their articles or issue clarifications to reflect the fact that protests included broad civil society support and not just far right elements.[312]

Setbacks

Many of Putin's efforts have limited effects. The West has mechanisms that continue to support the international rules-based order despite some backsliding. The Western sanctions on Russia are still in place despite Putin's campaign to remove them. The Kremlin's rogue regimes have not gained legitimacy. Putin's pursuit of strategic basing in Africa

has stalled, at least for now. The Kremlin's coalitions and partnerships are often weak, and Putin's frameworks often fail to draw sustained interest. For example, the Kremlin's Gulf Security Concept is not gaining traction despite a promotion campaign by the Kremlin.[313] A lot of Putin's strategic bets have not yielded the results he likely expected. Serbia continues to pursue its EU aspirations, Egypt has not yet allowed Russian basing, Turkey is increasingly challenging Putin's interests in multiple theaters.

Putin's gains are neither solidified nor irreversible. Putin has so far failed to regain control over Ukraine's decision-making. Ukraine—in particular its civil society—regularly disrupts the Kremlin's subversion. In March 2020, Ukraine's civil society managed to stall the implementation of the Kremlin-initiated Advisory Council that aimed to facilitate direct talks between the Ukrainian government and Russian proxies. Those talks would have launched an irreversible process of legitimizing Russia's illegal military intervention in Ukraine.

The Kremlin's targets in the former Soviet Union often have internal resistance and resilience mechanisms. The Kremlin-preferred actor in Moldova, President Igor Dodon, has regained a lot of power in 2019 but his own power is still tenuous, as his party lost its parliamentary majority as of July 2020.[314] Some countries are discovering their sources of leverage versus Russia, such as Kyrgyzstan raising the fee for a Russian military base in 2020, while others are securing energy discounts.[315] Russia is failing to prevent the expansion of the Western structures into the Balkans despite its best efforts to do so.[316]

Some of Russia's key foreign policy tools, including energy and the Russian Orthodox Church, are losing their influence across the theaters.[317]

The Kremlin's efforts often fail due to human capital constraints. In Fall 2019 alone, Germany, Bulgaria, and even Russia's strategic partner Serbia exposed or expelled Russian diplomats and intelligence officials on accusations ranging from ordering assassinations on European soil to bribing local military officials.[318] Various countries around the world continue to expel Russian diplomats accused of subversive actions.[319]

Several countries reversed Russia's efforts to expand its global media conglomerate.[320] Multiple Baltic states shut down Kremlin-linked media outlets and deported Russian journalists with increasing frequency over the last two years. A Slovakian media outlet revoked a partnership agreement with Sputnik after pushback from the public in 2016. The backlash goes beyond the West. A Bolivian television operator terminated RT broadcasting in 2019. The CEO of a major online news website in the Philippines publicly warned the Philippine government against sending its employees to get journalism training in Russia.

Some of Putin's efforts are counterproductive. Several of Putin's decisions caused major damage to his "Russian World" mission. Putin's invasion of Ukraine generated antibodies to Russia even among people in Ukraine who were initially unopposed to cooperation with Russia. Ukraine likely would not have developed one of the strongest militaries in Europe without Russia's intervention. Russia's aggression in Ukraine triggered policies across the former Soviet states to limit the influence of Russian language, culture, and the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian media to prevent Putin's using these tools against them.[321] The Russian Orthodox Church's tactics—including its open violation of COVID-19 quarantine—will continue to undermine the Church's influence. The Kremlin's forceful efforts to integrate Belarus are also likely starting to create antibodies within the Belarusian society.[322]

Putin still has a chance to succeed in regaining significant influence in the former Soviet space because he can manipulate or outlast most of the FSU governments. But he has nevertheless set himself back. Putin's efforts to prevent what he perceives as Western efforts to diminish Russia's contribution to WWII can also backfire. Putin is choosing confrontational methods to push his narrative and, as a result, might harm the memory of the contribution of the Russian people to the defeat of Nazi Germany in the WWII.

Chapter 4:

Prospects and Recommendations

Prospects

Putin will become increasingly dependent on asymmetries. *The gap between Putin's goals and his resources will likely grow, as will the requirement for him to pursue offset strategies to compensate for these limitations. This gap will not automatically threaten Putin's regime or make Putin less dangerous; on the contrary, it may make him more assertive in certain scenarios. These gaps will, however, open opportunities to counter the Kremlin if the West manages to anticipate and seize upon them.*

Putin will not give up on his goals and will likely remain in power as Russia's president or in another role after 2024. His thinking and narratives will shape Russia's foreign policy beyond his tenure.

Putin's fundamentals will deteriorate but will not necessarily prevent him from effectively competing with the US and advancing his objectives. The value that Putin can offer to the Russian people will decline. Putin is unlikely to succeed in his efforts to significantly expand Russia's resources and capabilities. His regime is antithetical to reform, investment, and entrepreneurship required to meaningfully grow Russia's economy. Russia will continue to develop niche advanced military technological capabilities but is unlikely to overcome its overall technological lag relative to the West. Putin's growing authoritarianism will further drive talent out of Russia, depleting its human capital. Costly mistakes, including breakdowns of Russia's critical infrastructure, will likely grow.[323] The West will continue to slow many of Putin's international efforts, such as Nord Stream 2, and expose the Kremlin's malign activities.

Putin will likely manage to partially offset the gap between his resources and goals through several efforts:

Domestically:

- Putin will become increasingly **authoritarian**. He will further consolidate his power and use pretexts like the pandemic and the amended constitution to expand his societal control toolkit.[324] Putin's policies will drive out those who do not subscribe to his overall narrative.
- Putin will **increasingly use ideology** to preserve his regime. He will attempt to push Russian identity toward militaristic patriotism and cohere his base around the siege mentality and the narrative of necessary sacrifice to preserve Russia's sovereignty. He has been increasingly emphasizing that selfless dedication to the homeland is the core of Russia's identity.[325] Putin will use these narratives to justify why the Russian people should endure hardships that result from his foreign policy. He also likely calculates that rallying Russians around the idea of sovereignty instead of development might help reduce the risk of political instability and vulnerabilities to foreign influence as Russia's resources diminish and external pressures grow.

At the nexus of domestic and international policies,

- Putin will pursue "sovereignization" of Russia that will result in further **isolation** while he tries to **gradually erode policies aimed at countering Russia** around the world.
- Putin will increasingly use the institution of **Russian citizenship** to advance domestic and foreign policy aims.[326] He will try to give Russian passports to as many citizens from FSU nations as possible. This expansion will allow the Kremlin to use Russian passport holders as a tool of influence over the domestic politics

in the FSU states. This approach will likely generate less aversion and pushback than an overt expansion of the Kremlin's influence—a reason why Putin will likely double down on this effort. It will also expand Putin's voting and narrative support base and help close some of Russia's human capital gaps in its armed forces, security services, and overall labor market.[327]

- Expanding influence in **the FSU** will be one of the Kremlin's increasing priorities, especially as many FSU countries are diversifying away from Russia. The FSU is a source of legitimacy, security, and human capital that Putin cannot afford to lose. Russia will cultivate local powerbrokers among both ruling and opposition factions throughout the FSU to hedge its bets and prevent or at least control "color revolutions." Putin might be also trying to set a precedent in Belarus that would allow him to export Russian law enforcement and security services to the FSU under the pretense of supporting a brotherly nation against 'foreign interference'. Finally, the Kremlin will prioritize linking the influence gains in the FSU. If Putin is able to regain control over Belarus, he would be able to exert additional pressure on Ukraine, for example.

Putin will increasingly use the institution of Russian citizenship to advance domestic and foreign policy aims.

Internationally,

- Putin will invest in additional limited military footprints in places where they provide asymmetric opportunities to influence decision-making. These limited expansions may include strategic basing in Libya or an expanded maritime presence in the Black Sea or the Arctic. Russia will likely continue to lack long-distance force projection, but will be competitive with the US in the near shore Russian anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems. This targeted hard power coupled with investments in human networks and diplomatic influence will enable the Kremlin to shape political outcomes.
- The Kremlin's information operations will become more sophisticated and will be carried out in the layers of the perception space that are hard to track. The combination of the growing use of the internet and social-economic divides around the world—both intensified by the pandemic—create fertile ground for the Kremlin's narratives that target the values of Western democracies. These narratives individually might have trivial effects, but could fuel divides in the West if they accumulate over time.
- Putin will double down on the idea of upholding the post-WWII international order and reviving G5 cooperation. Putin seeks legitimacy in the eyes of other powers, specifically members of G5. Using the US to reinforce the concept of Russia as a great power while simultaneously trying to diminish US influence is not a contradictory goal for Putin; it reflects Putin's power limitations and dependence on legitimacy and perceptions to achieve his goals. Putin stated that the UNSC is the key mechanism to prevent a major global conflict in his 2020 WWII op-ed.[328] He may genuinely hold this assessment, but another important takeaway is that the UN is the most important international organization to Russia due to its veto power on the UNSC. Preserving that power is vital to Putin.

Accelerators of Putin's ambitions:

- *Removal or weakening of dampeners on Russia's ambition.* The Kremlin's way of doing business will be legitimized and the Kremlin's capacity to pursue its objectives elsewhere will be increased if sanctions are lifted without Russia stopping and reversing its malign behavior.
- *Regaining influence in Ukraine.* The Ukraine campaign consumes a large amount of the limited, high-quality assets Russia has for such interventions, drains Putin's bandwidth, and expends Russia's resources. Success in Ukraine—for

example, via manipulating Ukraine's government into Russia's version of peace—would free up Putin's resources, even more so if it leads to sanctions removal, and enable him to press his advantage elsewhere.

- *External forces that shrink the gap between Putin's goals and capabilities.* Growing friction between the US and Europe and within NATO and other Western structures would weaken Western measures against the Kremlin's malign behavior and provide additional opportunities for Putin to boost Russia's web of coalitions by pulling individual states away from Western structures. The US further pulling back from the international stage militarily and diplomatically would lower the bar for Putin's influence gains. Western inaction or reengaging of Putin, such as bringing Russia back into G7, will empower Putin by legitimizing his actions.
- *Entropy.* The Kremlin will benefit from opportunities to shape chaotic situations and fill the power gaps that will likely emerge in the former Soviet states and Europe broadly in the coming years.

Factors that could challenge Putin and force further adaptation:

- *Increasing requirement to compete with other powers.* Putin has relied on relationships with non-Western powers to offset legitimacy and resources gaps that resulted from his deteriorating relationship with the West. The Kremlin will be challenged if it has to compete with the growing ambitions of these players, especially Turkey and China. Additionally, elevation of conflict to significant conventional levels by the US or NATO would challenge Putin's approach of limited military investments.
- *Converging pressures across theaters.* The Kremlin might not be able to maintain all of its foreign influence positions if challenged at once.
- *Growing need to pick a side.* The Kremlin currently benefits from its ability to balance its relationships with conflicting and competing countries. Escalation between the Kremlin's partners, such as India and China or Iran and Israel, could force Putin to make choices and curb his engagements.
- *Protracted low energy prices.* This will challenge Putin's ability to fulfill his domestic promises of major social spending and further erode the efficacy of Russia's energy exports as foreign policy tools.
- *Perception losses within Russia and internationally.* Falling popular support does not immediately threaten Putin's regime, but it increases the cost of his efforts to maintain the appearance of popular support for his leadership. Similarly, the façade of legitimacy, which Putin has generally seen as important to the effectiveness of his approach, is also a limit on the Kremlin's actions globally.
- *Sanctions.* Additional coercive economic measures are unlikely to alter fundamentally the trajectory of Putin's domestic and global efforts, but they will dampen his ambitions and impose increasing requirements to offset the losses.

Putin's actions have unleashed changes that will affect the US regardless of Putin's future efforts. First, other actors are learning from Russia. China has started to adopt the Kremlin's disinformation tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic and to use the tactics against the US.[329] Russia and other authoritarian regimes are exchanging governing practices through a variety of mechanisms, such as joint National Guard exercises.

Secondly, Putin set several precedents in using armed forces for conquest. The Kremlin's hybrid invasion of Ukraine expands the risk and likelihood of similar interventions by other countries elsewhere.

Finally, the Kremlin's policy may empower China's expansion in Eurasia. Putin has turned to China to cushion economic blows over the past six years,

which opened additional doors for Chinese economic influence in Russia. China has also expanded its influence in Central Asia and is showing interest in Eastern Europe.[330] This influence will likely persist regardless of the Kremlin's future policies. The expansion of China's influence through Russia and its neighbors will have implications for the US national security.

Putin's narratives and principles will impact Russia's foreign policy for years to come.

Putin's narratives and principles will impact Russia's foreign policy for years to come. The US should not anticipate that Russia's foreign policy will automatically change when Putin's tenure ends, whenever that might be. Putin's approach will most likely outlast him—by design.

Russia's future foreign policy might be even more aggressive. Putin is strengthening Russia's nationalism and military-patriotic sentiments, including via narratives and changes to Russia's doctrines and laws, including the Constitution. While Putin is unlikely to cohere the majority of the Russians around this sentiment, Putin's policies will expand the pool of hardliners within the population and the regime. This ideological growth could lead to even more aggressive foreign policy, especially if Putin's successor is less pragmatic than Putin is—a scenario the US must consider.

Conditions under which Putin might escalate militarily:

- *The right timing and narrative.* The Kremlin has unachieved operational objectives in Ukraine, including gaining access to the fresh water supply in Crimea and blocking Ukraine's maritime access, that could require a military solution. Such escalation is currently prohibitively costly for Putin and would hurt his strategic objectives in Ukraine, making it unlikely. However, the right confluence of events could increase the likelihood of escalation. These events include the West becoming preoccupied, gaps in Ukraine's defenses emerging, Kyiv's government weakening, and humanitarian conditions worsening in Crimea. There is also the important but unlikely scenario of Putin being pushed too far through sanctions and countermeasures, to the point where the benefits of an offensive to seize additional territory in Ukraine, for example, come to outweigh the costs.
- *Defensive requirements.* Putin might assess that he needs, for example, to expand his military presence in Libya if Turkey escalates further militarily to preserve balance of power with Turkey across theaters.
- *Domestic reasons.* Putin's push for militaristic patriotism in Russia might require him, in the long term, to engage Russia in additional conflicts to keep his base and the regime energized.

The global crises of 2020, including low energy prices and the pandemic, weakened Putin, but not enough to threaten his power or constrain his foreign policy ambitions. Putin's sources of resilience will allow him to maintain his regime and his international campaigns on the current trajectory—especially if resistance does not increase. The West should also expect that further pressures will not automatically make Putin scale back his campaigns—especially in Ukraine and in Syria, which serve as bases to his entire global power projection.

Putin's offsetting efforts do not fundamentally change Russia's strengths, but they help Putin buy time while he attempts to erode anti-Russia efforts globally and gradually build influence in multiple theaters. Putin may gain just enough momentum to win enough narratives to start removing dampeners on his ambitions, such as sanctions.

Putin's future gains are not a given. Putin's progress in his various efforts are not yet solidified. The US has an opportunity to curb Putin's malign behavior. The cost of maintaining Putin's power circles and his base will only grow, as will the cost

of his foreign adventures. Putin pulled off the constitutional changes, but the crises revealed his declining value to the Russian people— reflected in Putin's record low approval ratings in 2020 and the need to rig the vote on the constitutional amendments at a reportedly unprecedented level.[331] Putin's promise of large-scale social spending will also be difficult to maintain due to Russian economic challenges. Putin might eventually have to reassess what he chooses to invest in and on what timeline.

Recommendations

Long-term solutions for confronting the Russian challenge will have to be surgical and nuanced. The US can take several steps now, however, to halt the Kremlin's malign activities and gains.

1. Build immunity against the Kremlin's malign activity

- Develop strategic intelligence capabilities in the US and within US partners to recognize the Kremlin's campaigns and perception manipulations early—before they amount to strategic gains. Establish a constant stare on the Kremlin's activities—including the ones that seem trivial— to understand the status and trajectory of the Kremlin's campaigns at all times and, in doing so, avoid strategic surprise and identify opportunities to counter the Kremlin. Focus on objectives rather than tools.
- Monitor, prevent, and counter the Kremlin's efforts to destroy antibodies to its influence. Specifically develop capabilities to detect and stop Russia's malign activity, such as the Kremlin's efforts to undermine civil society in the former Soviet states and disrupt reform of national security institutions in these countries. For example, Ukraine's civil society consistently identifies Russian subversion efforts and often halts them. This capability is nascent, however, and is targeted by the Kremlin.

2. Keep the dampeners in place

- Keep sanctions and legitimacy restrictions, such as access to international organizations, on Russia unless the Kremlin stops and reverses its malign behavior. Work with European partners towards unity on this issue.
- Prevent Putin from offloading his problems on someone else's balance sheet, such as transferring financial responsibility for the DNR/LNR to Ukraine without restoring Ukraine's sovereignty or offloading the financial struggles of Assad onto the balance sheet of the international community.

3. Do not let Putin's false narratives and perceptions solidify.

- Recognize that one of the biggest dangers from Russia's actions to the US and the international order comes from normalization of Putin's illegal activity. Solidified narratives will be hard to reverse.
- Constantly debunk the Kremlin's false narratives and perception-altering activities that are malign (we are not implying that all of them are malign). In particular, counter the Kremlin's efforts to draw false equivalencies between democracies and dictatorships— part of the broader effort to undermine trust in the American model. For example, the Kremlin attempted to compare clashes between reporters and police in the US during the 2020 protests with the Tiananmen Square massacre of hundreds of students in China.[332]
- Enhance international mechanisms to keep the 'truth' in place. Lack of discussion is a Kremlin win. Deny Putin easy wins as a result of the natural memory loss.
- Cut oxygen to Russian disinformation without compromising Western values through education and constantly calling disinformation out.

4. **Build a broad international coalition** to investigate Russia's violations of international law and the law of armed conflict. Make it a long-term priority.

5. **Recognize the vital importance of the UNSC and the Kremlin's web of partnerships** to Putin's ability to amplify Russia's power. Contest Putin through these international platforms, especially at the UN.

6. **Help Ukraine win its fight against Russia's efforts to regain dominant influence** over Ukraine's decision-making. Empower Ukraine's reformers and reform efforts and boost its military capabilities. Work with European partners to prevent Putin from manipulating Ukraine into a peace deal on Russia's terms, in particular, Putin's efforts to federalize Ukraine. Counter the Kremlin's narrative that any pushback to normalization of relationship with Russia comes from radical nationalism to halt the Kremlin's efforts to marginalize Ukraine's civil society.

7. **Do not voluntarily empower Putin by legitimizing his actions.** Do not fall for the Kremlin's cooperation frameworks or continue to imagine that there are issues on which the US can partner with Russia under the current circumstances—without Russia stopping its malign behavior. Watch for and when possible disrupt early Russia's emerging cooperation frameworks, such as peacekeeping and cyber/information security partnerships.

8. **Do not mistake changes in the Kremlin's posture for changes in Kremlin's goals;** do not mistake the Kremlin's adaptability for opportunism.

9. **Test Putin's commitment to his aggressive foreign policy** by challenging him across multiple theaters. Putin's limited resources and willingness to tolerate certain losses mean the West could far more assertively counter his transgressions. The West should attempt to simultaneously reinforce support in the FSU, double down on integration of the Balkans into Western structures and contest Putin's strategic efforts in non-core theaters, for example in Libya, where Putin is increasingly vulnerable to Turkey, as well as throughout Africa broadly, while simultaneously exposing the Kremlin's networks around the world and countering the Kremlin in the information space.

10. **Build coalitions to achieve all of the above.**

    - Prioritize Europe. Europe is vulnerable to Russian influence given its interconnectedness with Russia and lack of unity on its Russia policies. Europe is also resilient given its inherent and growing knowledge of how to counter the Kremlin's malign influence, and it also significantly affects the international balance and momentum on Russia's issue.
    - Learn from the FSU's increasing knowledge of the Russian methods of warfare and political subversion.
    - Broaden the coalition. Russia derives a lot of legitimacy from the non-Western world. There are indicators, however, of civil society members and governments in Asian, African and South American countries exposing and resisting Russian influence and malign activities.[333] Reinforce them.

11. **Keep the information exchange with Russia open.** While it might seem counter to the points above, the US should intensify its efforts to understand Russia. Understanding why Putin exists as a phenomenon is equally important to understanding the threat he poses to the US and its allies.

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