



## 2016 IN REVIEW, LOOKING FORWARD TO 2017

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## Gambles That May Actually Pay Off?—Russian Foreign Policy

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### Abstract

2016 has definitely been a notable year for Russian foreign policy and one in which many of its gambles appear to have paid off. The Putin regime continued to make bold use of force, both conventional as in the case of Syria and Ukraine and non-conventional or non-linear measures as in the case of the cyber-attacks on the US. As well as making active foreign policy choices, it was also a year in which Russia seemed to profit from many other international trends. In particular, the apparent rise of populism in the West, symbolized by Donald Trump's election to the US presidency in November. Whilst we will have to wait until 2017 to see how these events are translated into policy-making in practice, the Putin regime does seem to be ending this year on a high.

2016 was a particularly eventful year for Russian foreign policy, in which it has once again catapulted itself into the role of the pre-eminent villain in international affairs. At the same time, some of the gambles taken by the Kremlin seem like they could actually have paid off (at least in terms of the goals set for them by the regime), if the apparent 'successes' in its push in Syria, the election of Donald Trump in the US, and the proclaimed wave of populism sweeping Europe are anything to go by.

Moving from crisis to crisis across the year, the Putin regime continued to make bold use of force, both conventional as in the case of Syria and Ukraine and non-conventional or non-linear measures as in the case of the cyber-attacks on the US. In this respect, the Kremlin's domestic and foreign agendas remain tightly intertwined, whereby the assertion of Russia's international role persists as a major priority in the name of securing the regime at home. With this aim in mind, Russia's foreign policy in 2016 solidified the impression that it should now be considered a power that not only talks tough, but also acts forcefully to defend its interest both in what it regards as its region and beyond.

As well as making active foreign policy choices, 2016 was also a year in which Russia seemed to profit from many international trends. In particular, the apparent rise of populism in the West, symbolized by Donald Trump's election to the US presidency in November and the Brexit vote in the UK in July. Whilst we will have to wait until 2017 to see how these events are translated into policy-making in practice, the Putin regime does seem to be ending this year on a high.

### Syria: Doubling Down on Military Operations

In many respects, 2016 saw the continuation of trends already witnessed during the last few years. Notably, in terms of the Putin regime's willingness to use force to further what it sees as its national interests. The most illustrative example of this has, of course, been Rus-

sia's ongoing support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Indeed, Russian military operations in support of Assad's regime, launched in September 2015, have continued apace. Against a background of sustained criticism from different quarters and multiple failed attempts at negotiating a ceasefire (most prominently, at the Geneva peace talks in February and US–Russian talks in September), the Russian regime, as part of a wider coalition with Syrian and Iranian counterparts (together with support from Hezbollah), have clearly positioned themselves as determined to continue with the military campaign. Across the year, a substantial push has been made towards key military targets, such as Aleppo, Palmyra, Homs, Hama and Idlib.

Operationally, the ongoing restructuring of Russian military capabilities and increased defense expenditures seem to have borne fruit in terms of military effectiveness. Russian military support for the Assad regime does appear to have turned the war around in the Syrian regime's favor. In so doing, the Russian regime and military hope that they have put to rest the ghost of the military weaknesses exhibited during the 2008 campaign in Georgia.

Critically from a domestic perspective, the Putin regime has proven very adept in managing domestic perceptions about the campaign. Through the careful use of official reporting and propaganda, there seems to have been little negative fallout from this campaign at home. This is in spite of a wave of international condemnation, accusations about the extremely high civilian casualties as part of the operations (estimates run in the high thousands, although the exact number of casualties since the start of the Russian campaign in 2015 vary greatly between sources) and the apparent targeting of key infrastructure and soft targets, such as hospitals, that could amount to war crimes. Yet, as Sergei Davidis rightly points out, Russia saw few, if any, protests against its campaign in Syria at home. Indeed, the majority of the Russian population seem either happy

to align themselves to the official stance or are mostly just disinterested in a military campaign taking place very far away from their immediate borders.

Nonetheless, while it has taken on an active military role in Syria, it remains highly unlikely that Russia will emerge as a new security provider on the global stage, in the wake of the growing reluctance of Western powers to play this role. In other words, it remains improbable that, in the years ahead, Russia's campaign in Syria will come to function as a blueprint for Russian external security policy in regions far away from its borders.

### **Eastern Europe: the On-Going Impasse in Europe's 'Forgotten War' and Growing Tensions Beyond It**

Closer to home, tensions over Ukraine continued, in particular concerning the ongoing fighting along the line of contact in Donbass. Regular flashpoints and casualties remain on-going and open-ended, with many analysts now characterizing it as Europe's 'forgotten war'. With the peace process stalling, entrenched diplomatic friction persists between Russia, Ukraine and the West over the lack of progress towards the fulfilment of one another's obligations under the Minsk II protocols. Indeed, in November 2016, the International Criminal Court (ICC) found that Russia's actions in Ukraine amounted to an 'international armed conflict' between Russia and Ukraine, rather than an internal matter. The year ended with the Western economic sanctions regime against Russia still in place, and the Kremlin, in turn, extending its own counter-sanction measures until 2017.

Simultaneously, concerns about Russia's use of 'hybrid' tactics in Eastern Europe have grown. Russia's air force continued to carry out frequent incursions into the NATO airspace, the Baltic fleet and the base in Kaliningrad have been equipped with nuclear capable missiles and several military exercises were held in close proximity to NATO member states, further ratcheting up tensions. As announced at its summit in Warsaw in July, NATO's has responded in kind, with plans to increase its support for Eastern Europe, with four new battalions set to be stationed in this region. In addition, individual member states are set to provide more active military support to their East European allies, with for example the US sending more military support to Poland, the UK planning to send fighter jets to Romania and 800 personnel to Estonia, Italy sending increased support to Latvia, and additional German troops to be deployed in Lithuania. In spite of ad hoc meetings between the two sides within the format of the NATO–Russia council, the overarching dynamic remains one of distrust, frequent sabre rattling and an ongoing military buildup in Eastern Europe.

### **Russia and the Rise of Populism and the West: Enemies Within?**

Aside from ongoing military frictions in Eastern and Northern Europe, major concerns have also been raised regarding Russia's apparent attempts to meddle in the West's wider affairs. Most notably, the Putin regime's use of covert political, social and economic ties with different "anti-establishment" and often "far right" European political groups, as a means to undermine a united front between Western allies. Indeed, the apparent wave of populism sweeping across Europe, seen in the Brexit vote in July and the apparent rising support for populist forces in France (National Front) and Germany (Alternative for Germany), would seem to be of benefit for Russia's current position towards Europe. Following on from its much discussed and controversial role in the US Presidential elections, concerns have been voiced regarding Russia's possible influence on the upcoming elections in France in April and in Germany in September. As well as debate over the implications of a victory for the more pro-Russian presidential candidates in France, either Marine Le Pen or François Fillon, for the European stance vis-à-vis Russia.

According to many, however, the main positive outcome of the year for Russia is the election of Donald Trump as US president. Given the way the US Presidential election campaign played out, the specter of Russia is set to reverberate in the US for some time to come. Most significantly, in relation to the apparent Russian-executed cyber security hack of the Democratic National Committee, with the emails hacked then published by WikiLeaks. Thomas Rid notes that this was in effect the use of *kompromat* against Hilary Clinton. Whilst the US intelligence community, particularly the CIA and FBI, continue to dispute the exact nature and provenance of this cyber security breach, and analysts continue to argue over the extent to which these hacks were more pro-Trump or rather anti-Clinton, the 2016 elections have become the moment when 'the Russian factor' returned to the top of agenda in the US, even if this is not sustained in the years ahead. Indeed, if the Kremlin's involvement in the cyber hack is proven beyond doubt, this action would not only signal a particularly audacious move on the part of the Putin regime, but will escalate fear about the Russian cyber security threat to foreign political institutions to a much higher level. The expulsion of thirty-five Russian diplomats by the Obama administration in December was said to be in retaliation against the cyber security hack allegedly orchestrated by Russia.

The election of Trump itself could also potentially signal a shift in the US policy towards Russia, if his advisers or appointments are anything to go by. For

example, the selection of General Michael Flynn to be the next National Security Advisor or Rex Tillerson's, the chief executive of ExxonMobil with known connections to Russia, appointment to the post of the Secretary of State seem to point towards a more pro-Russia stance than the Obama administration. Whilst Putin appears to have many supporters amongst US conservatives and the alt-right movement, at this stage, it is difficult to say whether the unexpected, but perhaps from the Russian-point of view rather fortuitous, election of Trump will result in a blossoming new relationship between Moscow and Washington. Withholding a verdict seems prudent given that previous US Presidents have begun their terms by promising a reset in relations with Russia, only for these resets and temporary upturns in relations to crumble soon after.

The election of Trump, the Brexit vote and the rise of populist parties and movements across Europe has meant that the most prominent discussion in political and analytical circles during 2016 has been about the apparent rise of populism in the West. Within this context, some have discussed the notion that the Putin regime with its focus on populist and patriotic politics could represent the new norm, rather than an exception, in global power politics. Indeed, a shadow appears to have been cast over the West, with concern that well-established notions, such as globalization, liberalism and the current configuration of the global order, are not as well supported by many of their own citizens as had been previously thought. However, caution is needed when comparing populism in the West and Russia.

Firstly, whilst populism, nationalism and anti-globalization fervor in the West seems to be largely a bottom-up phenomenon that has apparently taken the establishment by surprise, this dynamic is obviously not evident in Russia. In Russia, the pernicious mixture of patriotism, revanchism and anti-Westernism is the product of a very top-down and regime-led process, which seems, in turn, to have resonated with the Russian population, if Putin's high popularity ratings are anything to go by.

Secondly, within official Russian discourse, the place of populist anti-establishment sentiments is filled by anti-Westernism. In spite of the prominent role of such anti-Westernism in the Kremlin's discourse over recent years, it remains quite an unstable and potentially temporary (at least in terms of the most extreme threads to this discourse) narrative, because the regime continues to suggest that relations with the West could be regularized if and when the West starts to take Russia seriously and treats it as an equal once more. In this way, the anti-Westernism of the Putin regime does not exhibit the same level of negation of the 'other' (i.e. the establishment) as demonstrated by the populist movements in the West.

Thirdly, in spite of all the talk of counter-sanctions, production substitution and the need to revamp its domestic economy, the Putin regime's position is neither in essence an anti-globalization one, nor as in favor of economic nationalism, as some of the populist hardliners in Europe or the US. Hence, whilst as noted above, the Russian regime is obviously keen to build relations with populist groupings in the West, this does not mean that their ideologies or political programs are completely aligned. Indeed, for Russia, these relations are much more about finding cooperative partners, in order to undermine what they see as the anti-Russian establishment in the West, rather than facilitating the spread of a particular Russian-brand of populism.

Where similarity can be found between populism in the West and the Putin regime is that both are predominantly a domestic phenomenon, arisen out of local circumstances. Due to this trajectory, whilst similarities maybe found between the two, the respective push and pull factors driving their domestic development are substantially different from one another. It is therefore unlikely that a single populist coalition could ever be formed that includes both Russia and Western populist forces.

### **The Continued Push to the East**

In counterpoint to the tension with the West, 2016 also saw the continuation of another trend within Russian foreign policy over recent years, the attempt to expand its international partnerships, particularly with regards to the so-called push to the East. The year saw an ongoing strengthening and deepening of relations with China, despite the negative and lingering legacy of Russia's intervention in Ukraine and active involvement in Syria. For Russia, China remains a key ally, although the economic asymmetry between the two is becoming ever more prominent, with Russia increasingly a junior-partner in a relationship that is more and more centered on Russia's supply of energy to China.

Elsewhere, the twist and turns in the Russian-Turkish relationship again grabbed headlines. Over the course of the year, the animosity between Ankara and Moscow, following the shooting down of the Russian Sukhoi Su-24 plane by the Turkish Airforce in November 2015, thawed. The breakthrough in relations came following the anti-regime coup attempt in Turkey in July, after which Putin came out strongly in support of Erdogan. Although both sides are seemingly determined to get their relationship back on track, they remain sensitive to shocks, not only because they find themselves supporting different sides in the Syria conflict, but also as a result of one-off events, such as the recent fatal shooting of Andrei Karlov, the Russian ambassador to Tur-

key. And this event did not seem to derail Russia and Turkey brokering a ceasefire deal for Syria at the end of December.

### The 2016 Russian Foreign Policy Concept

At the close of the year (30 November), a new Foreign Policy Concept was approved by President Putin. As others have noted, this new document does not represent a radical change from the previous 2008 or 2013 document, with only a few themes cast differently. A key theme that continues to permeate the concept is the promotion of Russia's 'position as a center of influence in today's world', with a particular emphasis on Russia's historic role in the world. Rather than stressing that Russia is part of a wider European civilization, the new concept draws distinctions between Europe and Eurasia, with Russia now presented as an independent pole within the international system. In so doing, it places the blame for global instability squarely on western governments for seeking to contain others and imposing their own perspectives on the international system. Also noteworthy is that the new concept highlights the role and use of force and military might in international affairs. Whilst concerns about the ongoing global terrorist threat, WMDs, cyber security and information security are reiterated. The usual emphasis is also placed on the role of the UN and international law, with apprehension expressed about the use of the principles of human rights and responsibility-to-protect to 'exert political pressure and interfere in the internal affairs of states, including by destabilizing them and overthrowing legitimate governments'. Indeed, according to the doctrine, the changing situation in the world continues to preoccupy Russian policy makers, with the impact of globalization, uneven development and disparity identified as key causes of global tensions, alongside civilizational struggles.

In regional affairs, relations with Belarus are allocated a special place, whilst Ukraine is mentioned only twice. Even then, the concept talks about the 'Ukrainian internal conflict' or Russia's interest in 'developing political, economic, cultural and spiritual ties with Ukraine in all areas based on mutual respect and commitment to building partnership relations with due regard for Russia's national interests.' More widely, the usual importance is accorded to the Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization, somewhat less so for the Commonwealth of Independent States, as the key institutional mechanisms of the region.

When it comes to relations with the West, the West is blamed for the ongoing crisis in Russian–Western relations, with Russia apparently averse to the creation of 'dividing lines' in Europe. Whilst little mention is

made of sanctions, the EU continues to be described as an important economic and foreign policy partner for Russia, and a particular emphasis is given to bilateral ties with Germany, France, Italy and Spain. Less mention is made of its relations with the US, since the document was drafted prior to Donald Trump's election, at a time when Clinton's victory seemed most likely and therefore previous trends in relations were to be expected. Nonetheless, it is noted that Russia 'is interested in building mutually beneficial relations with the United States of America', but only if it gives up 'its restraining course'.

A lot of emphasis is also placed on Russia's push to the East, both within the frameworks of the SCO, East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum and economic cooperation in Asia-Pacific, but also crucially in terms of its relations with China. Cooperation with China is noted as covering multiple issue-areas, whereby 'Russia views the convergence of principled approaches adopted by the two countries to addressing the key issues on the global agenda as one of the core elements of regional and global stability'. Regarding Syria, the document emphasizes Russia's ongoing support of the status quo, noting that it 'supports the unity, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a secular, democratic, pluralistic state with all ethnic and religious groups living in peace and security and enjoying equal rights and opportunities.'

All in all, the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept does not represent a radical change in course for the Russian foreign policy. Furthermore, considering the increased regularity with which new concepts have been produced in recent years, and the potential for changes in Russian relations with the US and its European partners in the near future, the 2016 concept may quickly become obsolete.

### Looking Ahead

In sum, 2016 has definitely been a notable one for Russian foreign policy. Some of the gambles taken look like they could potentially pay off. However, only time will tell whether if this is indeed the case. At this point, it remains unknown whether the election of Trump to the US presidency will result in a real thaw in relations. It is also too early to discern whether a political reconfiguration in Europe will, one, further develop and, two, push Europe in a more pro-Russian direction, or at least mean an end or loosening of the ongoing sanctions regime. In other words, it still remains to be seen whether, in the near term, Russia will once again be brought in from the cold.

However, it does seem that the Putin regime's populist and patriotic rhetoric no longer looks quite as at odds with wider trends in the West. Crucially, 2016

has also become a year in which the West's attention has increasingly turned inward, with the EU's ongoing attempts to manage the fallout from Brexit, the rise of populism and the potential, though unlikely, derailing of the European project, and the US establishment's attempts to make sense of the election of Donald Trump as president. And, in these circumstances, a key ques-

tion is whether the West has the time, energy or space to adequately deal with or manage the Russian question, amidst this wider reconfiguration of political forces and domestic constellations. Equally, the key concerns for Russia are also domestic—the faltering economy, the looming presidential elections in 2018 and the ongoing security and survival of the Putin regime.

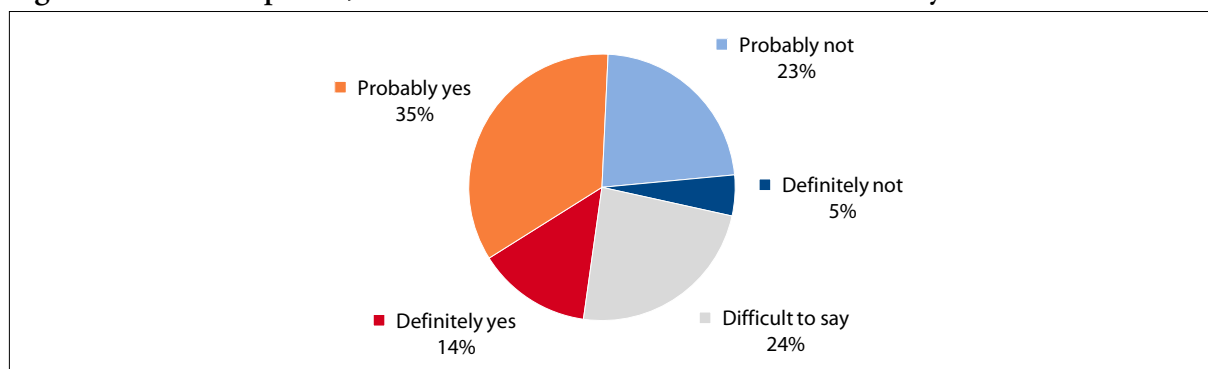
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## OPINION POLL

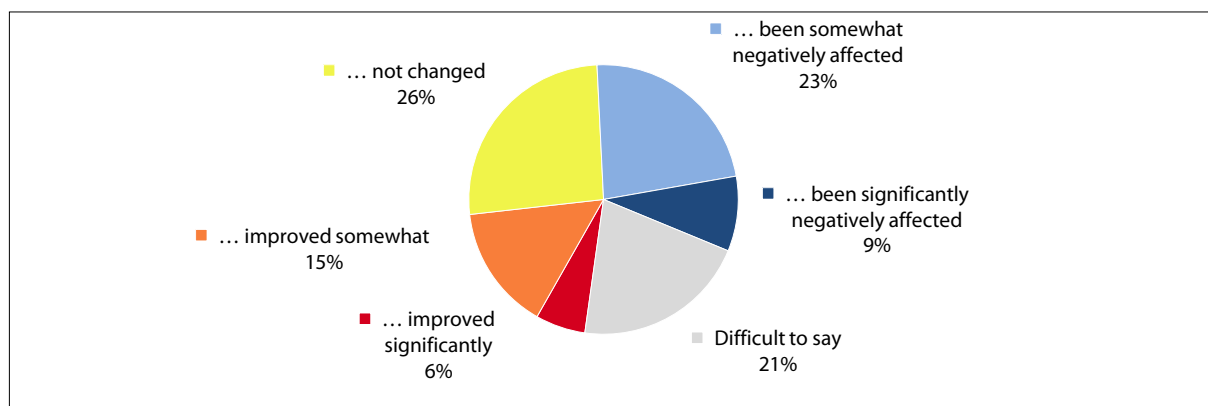
### Russian Attitudes Towards the Syrian Conflict

Figure 1: In Your Opinion, Should Russia Continue the Intervention in Syria?



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center, 21–24 October 2016 <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/31/sirijskij-konflikt/print/>, 31 October 2016>

Figure 2: How Have the Russian Air Attacks in Syria Influenced Attitudes Towards Russia in the International Arena? Attitudes Towards Russia Have ...



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center, 21–24 October 2016 <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/31/sirijskij-konflikt/print/>, 31 October 2016>

**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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