Five Major Challenges Putin’s Russia Will Have to Face in 2017

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**By Maia Otarashvili\***

Throughout 2016 Russia made frequent headlines on most global news sites. This infamy was a result of Russia’s aggressive foreign policies. In addition to its belligerent actions in Ukraine which started in 2014, Russia’s image as an aggressor was further enhanced by its increasing involvement in Syria, and partly by its involvement in European and later American politics.

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To an untrained eye Russia appears to have become a global superpower, a force to be reckoned with. The country is led by a strongman with domestic approval ratings consistently over 80%. Mr. Putin’s government can annex other countries’ territories despite the rest of the world’s disapproval (Crimea), stage covert or not so covert cyber-attacks on other states (Estonia in 2007, the US during the 2016 presidential campaign), fight hybrid wars in Europe’s backyard (Ukraine’s Donbas region), violate NATO airspace (the Baltic States throughout 2016), wage information wars with the outside world (media propaganda in the EU and beyond), or engage in more traditional warfare on behalf of belligerent leaders in places far away from home (Syria). But even such “superpowers” have to deal with large scale challenges abroad and at home, as aggressive foreign policies don’t come without serious consequences. The Western democracies have experienced major setbacks over the 2016, practically guaranteeing that 2017 will be a turbulent one for the US and the EU, but it doesn’t mean that life will be any easier for Putin’s Russia in the coming year.

**UKRAINE**

Russia’s foreign adventures gained a new momentum when President Putin’s government annexed Ukraine’s Crimea peninsula in 2014. Months later a war broke out in Ukraine’s Donbas region. The separatists, backed by Russian forces, engaged in an unending war with Ukrainian forces. This conflict remains [remains unresolved](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/12/20/2900-explosions-in-a-day-heavy-artillery-and-tank-fire-returns-to-the-front-lines-in-ukraine/?postshare=4371482237311678&tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.0abfaa37f8c0). [Crimea](https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-08-01/a-bottomless-pit-costs-crimeas-annexation-russia) and Donbas turned out to be more [expensive](http://euromaidanpress.com/2015/10/11/putins-wars-already-costing-russia-100-billion-us-dollars-a-year-illarionov-says/) for Russia than Mr. Putin may have imagined. The international community Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The US and the EU placed heavy [economic sanctions](http://eng.majalla.com/2016/08/article55250676/russia-sanctions-working) on Russia, which conveniently coupled with plummeting energy prices and drove the Russian economy into a [recession](http://eng.majalla.com/2016/11/article55252496/crumbling-staying-afloat-russias-economy-headed).

The price of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine went well beyond just dollars and rubles; it also came in form of Russia’s complete isolation from the West. During its summit in summer 2016 NATO declared Russia as a major threat next to ISIS. On December 19, 2016, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/12/20/un-officially-recognized-russia-as-an-occupying-power-in-crimea/#arvlbdata) which recognized Russia as an occupying power, and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol – as occupied territories.

Thus Russia has spent over two years funding Crimea (as its own territory), paying for a war in Donbas, and surviving under Western economic sanctions. Despite Russia’s participation in [Minsk I and II](http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/09/economist-explains-7) ceasefire talks, no actual ceasefire has been achieved in Donbas, and the situation in eastern Ukraine remains dire. As the Western and international organizations continue to condemn Russia’s actions in Ukraine with no resolution in sight, it seems that while Ukraine is tremendously affected by Russian aggression, Russia, in return, is going to have to continue to pay the consequences of its actions there too. Thus for 2017 getting the Ukraine-related Western sanctions lifted will be one of the top priorities for Mr. Putin’s government.

**TURBULENT ECONOMY**

Naturally, the sanctions have had many negative effects on Russia. But as many experts have argued, the sanctions wouldn’t have been as devastating had the energy prices not plummeted and stayed low. As of 2017 Russia has experienced two years of economic [recession](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2015&name_desc=false&start=2000&view=chart) (with -3.7% GDP growth in 2015, and -.05% (approximately) in 2016). While economists in the West are still divided about Russia’s prospects of recovery in 2017, it seems likely that the country may manage to just barely get out of recession next year. But the economic crisis has led to increased poverty levels in Russia. According to World Bank data 11.2% of the population lived in poverty in 2014. That number increased to 13.3% in 2015.

In 2016 the Minister of Economy, Aleksey Ulyukayev, was accused of accepting a $2 million bribe, and was detained. While Mr. Ulyukayev has pled innocent, such a corruption scandal can be damaging to the image of any government. Mr. Putin understands the importance of this challenge very well and has already begun to take steps to stabilize the Russian economy, and more importantly, to improve the domestic image of the economy. In [November](https://www.rt.com/politics/368704-putin-appoints-former-deputy-finance/) he appointed a new minister of economy, and in his live address to the nation [announced](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/12/01/russian-economy-is-on-way-to-recovery-putin-says.html) that the Russia is on its way to recovery. Mr. Putin also set some ambitious goals for the coming years. In his [address](https://sputniknews.com/russia/201612151048596306-russia-eocnomy-changes/) to the Federal Assembly he charged the government with achieving “national economy growth rates outrunning world rates no later than 2019-2020.” What kind of growth rates would be acceptable? According to Prime Minister Medvedev, even 1.5% growth wouldn’t be good enough. “In order to fulfill the assignment of the President’s address, we need to move forward changing the structure of economy. And we can see such movement now,” [stated](https://sputniknews.com/russia/201612151048596306-russia-eocnomy-changes/) Mr. Medvedev.

Thus getting the Western sanctions lifted will not be enough. Mr. Putin is already making efforts to fund his ambitious economic growth plan. In December 2016 he [announced](http://www.wsj.com/articles/japan-russia-unveil-2-5-billion-in-economic-deals-1481884845) that he was launching bilateral economic deals with Japan, worth $2.5 billion. Reportedly Mr. Putin used the Russia-Japan territorial disputes over the Kuril Islands as leverage to achieve this deal. But this is only the beginning of the intense bargaining and negotiations Mr. Putin will have to do over 2017 in order to attract further investments and grow the Russian economy in accordance with his ambitious plans.

**SYRIA**

Just when the international community thought the situation in Syria couldn’t get worse, the [news](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/aleppo-is-falling/510473/) of a retreating and falling Aleppo, illustrated with images of injured and dead children, flooded the media headlines in the West. To the minds of most viewers, these particularly horrifying images are now associated with Russia. America’s UN ambassador Samantha Power’s bold address to the Syrian, Iranian, and Russian counterparts went viral on Western social media channels. To the minds of the millions of viewers, Ms. Power’s [words](http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/14/middleeast/aleppo-samantha-power-speech/): “are you truly incapable of shame?” permanently connected Russia to the atrocities in Syria. The long reach of the consequences of the Syrian war is felt well beyond the war-shattered state. On December 19th, 2016, Russia’s ambassador to Turkey was [assassinated](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/world/europe/andrey-karlov-wiki.html) at an art exhibit in Ankara. Before he was killed by Turkish policemen, the gunman shouted “don’t forget Aleppo, don’t forget Syria!” This incident did not and [will not start a world war](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/world/europe/what-happened-turkey-russia-assassination-analysis.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&_r=0), it isn’t even likely to cause any immediate tensions between Russia and Turkey, but once again, it does, very directly place blame on Russia in the eyes of the world.

According to most expert predictions, with Mr. Trump’s presidency Russian involvement in Syria is [unlikely](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/11/15/after-trump-chat-putins-airstrikes-pound-syria/93876876/) to be challenged, but even with the United States possibly out of the way, what will Russia do to resolve the long number of problems in this chaotic situation? Will it continue to fight the rebels until all opposition is annihilated? Will Russia pay to rebuild the war-shattered Syria once the civil war is over? And once that is accomplished, how will it deal with ISIS in Syria? Russia’s [end-game](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Opinion/2016/12/12/Islamic-State-and-Vladimir-Putins-Machiavellian-endgame-in-Syria/8321481550710/) in this ordeal is unclear. Some experts believe that Mr. Putin is warring for the sake of warring, for projecting an image of strength and power at home and abroad by “taming” a situation in the Middle East where the American [failures](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-legacy-of-us-military-failure-in-the-middle-east-over-the-past-three-decades/2016/04/08/fd9812e6-f822-11e5-9804-537defcc3cf6_story.html?utm_term=.7fa575f182a5) have been infamous. But for Russia’s stagnating economy this is one very expensive PR campaign. Moreover, even without the American government’s resolve, the international pressure on Russia to end the Syrian conflict has recently begun to build up, and is likely to grow stronger in the coming months. How will Mr. Putin deal with this international pressure? This too will unfold in 2017.

**NATO AND EU EXPANSION**

NATO and the EU represent two symbols of Mr. Putin’s distaste for the Western world; these are alliances that are composed of countries small and large, united under the values of equality, democracy, and human rights, and, at least in theory, rejecting the idea of great power politics. Russia has opposed the expansion of both institutions practically from the time of their inception. Russia’s opposition, however, has not stopped either. Between 2004 and 2013 the EU [absorbed](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries_en) 13 Central and Eastern European countries, and currently counts five states among its membership candidate countries (this includes Turkey). In the same period NATO was [joined](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/nato_countries.htm) by nine countries from the same region.

Historically, the Russian governments have viewed the former USSR member states as Russia’s “sphere of influence,” and its “buffer zone” from Europe. But to these countries, through its foreign policies, and promises of possible membership, the EU offers direct access to Central and Western Europe, a process of “westernization” that includes social, cultural, economic, and political “togetherness.” NATO on the other hand offers physical safety under its [article V](http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/03/economist-explains-6), safety that is of utmost importance for countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, or the 11 post-communist NATO-member states. All of these countries, on one or more occasion in their modern history, have experienced direct Russian threats to their physical safety.

In 2016 Russia made serious advances towards making sure that the perceived legitimacy of both of these institutions diminishes significantly. A long debate has been taking place about the viability of NATO’s article V (will NATO member states like the US and Germany be willing to war with Russia over tiny Estonia?), and Russia’s funding and backing of far-right nationalistic party movements throughout Europe has helped fuel Euro skepticism and xenophobia within the EU. Moreover, the UK’s 2016 vote to exit the EU further fueled the Russia-backed narrative about the EU as a [failed project](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/19/the-eu-empire-is-going-to-fail-on-thursday-we-can-protect-britai/).

Yet both, NATO and the EU have bounced back. At the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw its constituent [members](http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/08/strategic-implications-baltic-states-nato-warsaw-summit/) agreed to provide and deploy four multinational battalions to the three Baltic states and to Poland.  The US has taken the lead in the battalion to be deployed in Poland, Germany in Lithuania, Canada in Latvia, and the United Kingdom in Estonia. This has deterred the speculation around the degree of NATO’s commitment to its Article V, at least for now. It is true that America’s incoming president has publically questioned the importance of NATO, but even if Mr. Trump’s presidency were meant to destabilize NATO, that is unlikely to happen overnight, or even over a year. As of now NATO is showing resolve to protect its borders and its allies in Russia’s backyard.

Moreover, the EU is currently in the midst of offering a visa-free regime to Georgia and Ukraine, this move is widely seen as an important step towards achieving complete EU membership one day. This news comes as a major game-changer for these countries where Russia has recently made strong advances in creating anti-western sentiments through its effective media propaganda. Yet according to recent surveys Georgians and Ukrainians remain committed to their pro-EU orientation. Thus despite all the setbacks NATO and the EU experienced in 2016, these two institutions are likely to continue to challenge Mr. Putin’s aspirations for reestablishing Russian hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe.

**MR. PUTIN’S REELECTION**

Finally, a major focus for Mr. Putin will be to maintain the high approval ratings he currently enjoys in Russia. This will be crucial in ensuring his reelection as President in March 2018. Essentially, successfully dealing with the above four challenges will make sure that 1) Russians will continue to believe in Mr. Putin’s greatness and Russia’s superiority on international level and 2) the Russian government will have enough funds to continue to pay for those expensive adventures abroad and still pay salaries and pensions in order to avoid overly deep austerity measures (as those tend to create public dissatisfaction and even lead to popular uprisings). Mr. Putin’s reelection will also require that no other viable candidates participate in the election. At the moment there aren’t any serious competitors, but a lot rests on Mr. Putin’s government’s successes in 2017 if he wants to maintain the status quo at home.

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**Choose one of the five major challenges of Putin’s Russia in 2017, research that topic and give an explanation in a paragraph of what happened with the challenge for Putin in 2017? Due Monday at the beginning of class.**