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[War on terror and no forgiveness](#)



Today, for the 12th time in his rule, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, [addressed](#) the Federal Assembly as well as the entire Russian nation. The annual symbolic Address in December serves the purpose of outlining the nation's priorities, commenting on the challenges facing Russia, and generally painting the picture of how the higher power in Kremlin sees itself and the world around it. Hardly anyone expected Putin to do or say anything fresh or reveal something unexpected today. Today's speech was relatively short and rather boring, but an analysis of President Putin's speech reveals what we can expect from Moscow in 2016.

Ukraine

The biggest surprise of the speech is that Putin did not mention Ukraine at all. The topic which dominated Russian foreign policy and completely monopolized TV air time just a few months ago, is seemingly completely now gone from the agenda. Indeed, since the beginning of the Syrian campaign, Ukraine had fewer and fewer slots on Russian TV and suddenly was transformed into an uninteresting issue for the Russian public. Mostly because of the Donbas deadlock, exhaustion of all military options to move events further without risking greater sanctions, Kremlin has consciously cut Ukraine out from the publically acknowledged agenda, and made all efforts to switch Russians to the "war against terror".

But, rather unintentionally, Putin did in fact say a great deal about what to expect with respect to the war in Donbas. When commenting on the economic crisis (a.k.a. "difficulties") in Russia, he said that "external constraints may run over and last a long time". May I remind the reader that the most severe sanctions against Russia were introduced because of Russia's aggression in east Ukraine? Although not specifically state, these 'external constraints' are very clearly Western sanctions. Western leaders have explicitly [stated](#) that sanctions can be lifted if and when Russia complies with the Minsk accords. It is very simple - as long as there is Russian involvement in Ukraine, Russian support for separatists, and the Ukrainian-Russian border is controlled by someone other than Ukraine, sanctions will remain in place. Since Putin recognizes that sanctions may last a long time, one can only conclude that the war Donbas is officially frozen, and there are no hopes in sight for any political will in Russia to end this conflict.

Turkey

Newly found "enemy №1" received a great deal of very emotional and harsh statements from President Putin. Putin clearly outlined that in the Kremlin's eyes, Turkey is *de-facto* an ISIS supporter, financing terrorist attacks all around the world by buying ISIS's oil. Moreover, Turkey is, and has been, harboring dangerous terrorists since the 1990's and does not seem to be willing to fight "terrorism". Putin emphasized that the downing of the SU-24 bomber will not be forgotten and that he views it as the greatest sin of all - Treason. He went even further, saying that, "[a]pparently Allah has decided to punish the ruling clique in Turkey, depriving it of mind and reason". Putin clearly stated that Russia's response so far - the embargo on several Turkish goods, a ban for tourist travel to Turkey, a ban of Turkish labor force in Russia, etc.- is just the beginning and that "they [Turkey] will regret [downing SU-24] more than once". Considering that there has been a great influx of [articles](#) in Russia and beyond on the possible support from Kremlin to Turkish Kurds, chances are that the Russian - Turkish conflict in the upcoming months will not "deconflictize" as many in the West hope for, but manifest aggressively both in Turkey and Syria.

Syria

The most important message of Putin's speech was on Syria. Putin, very similarly to [George W. Bush](#), has *post-factum* proclaimed Russia's war on terror, stating that dangers coming out of Syria in particular threaten Russia the most, and that if not destroyed, due to a large number of terrorists of Russian or CIS origin, it will come to Russia. Putin outlined that, "[i]n Syria, our armed forces are primarily fighting for Russia, defending the safety of our citizens" (This is not about Assad anymore!). Clearly, there is no backing out of Syria now. Options that were open a few months ago - "bomb and get out" - are now officially closed. "War on terror" has officially become Russia's number one agenda today, and thus the Syrian crisis is no longer an anti-terrorist operation, but *de-facto* a Russian war. Putin has cornered himself into making Syria a long-lasting and very costly operation. This is hardly a victory over "terror" that can be won by air strikes alone, no matter how many planes Russia has in Syria. Putin will become increasingly inclined to send ground troops, although today this is still viewed as something almost impossible.

The West

When it comes to now former "enemy№1", Putin had two polar comments. At first he traditionally blamed the West for the chaos in Middle East and North Africa, for "staging" revolutions all around the region that opened up opportunity for ISIS to emerge. But then Russian leader once again invited every "civilized country" to join Russia in organizing a "united front" against ISIS under the auspice of UN.

Although it appears that coalition building has not gone as the Kremlin hoped after the terrorist attacks in Paris, Putin is still trying to make a joint fight against ISIS the primary objective, which, along with the official "war on terror", will change the domestic rhetoric, downsizing anti-western sentiments, and highlighting the importance of cooperation.

Russia

The least surprising part of Putin's speech, composing two thirds of his address, was designed to calm down the Russian population. Putin officially recognized "economic difficulties", announced that oil prices and sanctions may stay for a long period of time, and instead of proposing sound solutions for escalation crisis, said nothing new. Calling for a tougher fight on corruption, smarter work of the prosecutor's office, some humanization of the criminal code and abstract support for Russian business was Putin's excuse to take 40 minutes of air time. Not a word was said about the ongoing [mass truck driver protest](#) or biggest [corruption/crime investigation](#) linked to higher officials of the attorney general's office. Putin's message to the public was copied from his last year's address and could be summarized as such: "We shall persevere, we are strong only as one, and we shall endure all difficulties".

The bottom line is that Putin has no intention of changing any of the ongoing trends in Russia, the war in Ukraine will be militarily frozen, with a high chance of political & economic escalation, Syria and Turkey will continue to heat up, and the economy will continue to deteriorate without any proper response by the state. Putin is still confident that Russians will support him no matter what, even when he fights what seems to look more and more like a real bloody battle with an undoubtedly unhappy end for Russia.

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