

• Author: [Anton Barbashin](#)

## [Why do we still believe in Putin's "strategy"?](#)



Two years after the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia is involved into two major regional conflicts: the [hybrid war against Ukraine](#), waged by military means on the ground in Donbas, as well as by political and economic measures, and the Syrian civil war that, until March 15th, saw full engagement of Russian forces. The Russian campaign against Ukraine has resulted in the biggest fallout with Western nations, not seen since the 1980s. It has already cost Russia several rounds of sanctions that have damaged its already dysfunctional economy, considerably weakened by low oil prices. Moreover, it has brought back Cold War rhetoric and the logic of deterrence, eliminating significant rapprochement progress made with Russia since the demise of the Soviet Union. Moscow has granted NATO "new life" in Europe, as NATO members grow more and more concerned with their security in the face of a new found "Russian threat". By attacking Ukraine, President Putin made any new attempt to reconcile Russia and the West virtually impossible as long as he remains president.

Russia's Syrian campaign started as an attempt to secure Moscow's sphere of influence by saving President Assad as well as by [rebooting Russia – West relations](#). Putin called the campaign a "victory", although only fragments of the initial objectives were reached. Even though the Kremlin has announced a withdrawal of a major portion of the Russian military – Moscow's engagement in the conflict will not end with two military bases remaining, Assad's future undecided, and ISIS running freely. Moreover, taking into consideration Foreign Minister Lavrov's [recent proclamation](#) that Turkey has already invaded Syria, the risks of a larger conflict with Russian being involved is not fully excluded.

In addition to most intense geopolitical circumstances Russia has been involved in since the most heated years of the Soviet Empire, the Russian economy has been in decline since 2013 when "[Putinomics](#)" exhausted its potential for growth. Now with low oil prices, sanctions, and structural deficiencies, Moscow's [only hope](#) is a full scale reforms program that requires a considerable shift in both foreign policy and domestic political constitution. Despite being in the most dangerous economic crisis of the past 25 years, the Russian government shows no sign of the desire to either change its foreign agenda, or implement any sound economic measures at home. With no hope for any significant change in policy in sight, Russia is bound to a slow, but painful decline which may stretch to at least 2024 when it would be highly unlikely that Putin again runs for office.

Since annexing Crimea, Russia has embarked on a downhill journey, both domestically and internationally which is clearly threatening its sustainability, capacity for economic growth, and peaceful development. Remarkably, there are still those who believe in and support Putin's 'strategic' thinking and a wholesome and rosy vision of the direction Russia is headed.

There are several groups that view Kremlin's policy as logical and coherent, although their reasoning and motivation may vary:

1. Naturally, the first, biggest and most obvious group consists of the Putin supporters in Russia and those who identify themselves as part of the so-called "Russian World". Apart from falling victims to [tremendously effective propaganda](#) which claims that Russia is defending itself from a multitude of enemies, they tend to view foreign military adventures as a symbol of Russia's might, and confirmation of Moscow's reclaimed

status as world super-power that still compensates their economic hardship and losses at home. The economic crisis is undeniable: the number of people living below the poverty line has doubled since 2014, as a result of counter-sanctions, most consumer goods have spiked in price from 15% to 70%. Despite the abundance of evidence that the economy is in serious decline, the majority of Russians continue to support for Putin's policies at home and abroad. Except for rare niche manifestations, such as the [truck-driver protests](#) and the minority of so-called pro-European and other marginalized groups, no one questions the logic of Putin's actions.

2. The second group is mostly comprised of the marginalized leftist and far-right groups, politicians and movements within Europe and the United States. They are either sponsored directly by the Kremlin, like [Marie Le Pen](#), [numerous far right groups](#) and [think tanks](#); seek direct political support from the Kremlin for their agenda like [Milorad Dodik, president of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) and nationalist [anti-EU parties](#); or are simply ignorant about the state of affairs in Russia, having fallen prey to [contradictory right or left wing myths](#) about Russia and Putin's policy at home. Usually most of these groups hold anti-American and anti-EU sentiments, and admire Putin as a strong and decisive leader.
3. The third group - mostly the so-called "realists" view Putin's action's in Ukraine and Syria [strictly in geopolitical terms](#), separate from domestic developments and reasoning. Some even argue that Russia's actions in Ukraine [were provoked by the West](#) and ergo Russia was right to invade its neighbor. Like their [Russian counterparts](#) who view the past couple of years as Russia's struggle for a multipolar world, rebalance of power in the region, or assertion of a version of an upcoming new installment of Vienna Congress of great powers, they belittle the importance of domestic factors in the Kremlin's actions. They exclude the practical motivations behind the Kremlin's actions, and diminish the importance of the role of Russia's ongoing economic crisis and its effects on Putin's popularity at home if there were no military campaigns abroad.
4. The fourth group is made up of those who view the Kremlin's actions as part of a mastermind plan to rebuild the lost Soviet Empire, or even conquer NATO member states in the Baltics and Poland. Embedded with the idea that Putin seeks to create a new empire, they interpret Kremlin's actions and honest provocations as proof for Russia's strategy to conquer what could be conquered. Lacking in understanding of the domestic motives behind the Kremlin's actions, they fall in the same trap as the realists do, mistaking Putin's tools for preserving his position at home for parts of a "bigger plan".

These 4 groups do not exhaust the list of those who believe Putin has a coherent vision, despite the facts at hand. It seems that it is easier for many to believe that the Kremlin fully knows what it is doing. Believing in the existence of a grand strategy implies that there is a logic which can be understood, and thus, the Kremlin's actions are calculated. In fact, recognizing Russia's actions since Crimea as reactionary, driven by a domestic agenda, and only temporarily successful thus calling for new foreign adventures and provocations, is much scarier than it is to believe in the existence of a grand plan. In fact, what is considered to be a "mastermind strategy" is a series of some times irrational and not well considered or thought through responses that make today's Russia a considerable challenge for European stability. The lack of economic revival policy and a strong desire for current Kremlin inhabitants to remain in power endangers not only regional security as a whole, but is putting the Russian state and its people under such tremendous stress that it may lead to unpredictable results, which would not be beneficial to regional and global stability. In order to properly respond and meet Moscow's challenge, one must understand the Kremlin's motives. This requires a greater focus on Russia's domestic agenda and developments, not the so-called Putin's strategy that many tend to accept as a given truth.

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