



# Russia's Response to Terrorism

*History and Implications for U.S. Policy*



American Security Project



Perspective

—  
Nicole Mazurova

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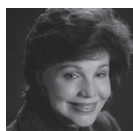
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## In this Report:

The U.S. and Russia are tasked with reaching a Syrian peace agreement. Russian intervention in Syria was initially a surprise; while the stated goal was the defeat and destruction of terrorism it became evident that the Kremlin was lending support to Assad in direct contrast to U.S. goals. However, there are likely ulterior motives for Russia's, *Putin's*, intervention. This paper offers an overview of Russia's response to terror, specifically emanating from Chechnya, and argues that certain policies – covert and overt – were aimed at securing Putin's electoral position and intentionally prolonging the Syrian crisis as a way to express dissatisfaction with the global status quo.

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## IN BRIEF

- The North Caucasus is a terrorism and insurgent hotspot in Russia and is considered a top national security risk.
- Putin is a proponent of hard-line policies on terror; the Syrian war is justified as an extension of the mission to eradicate ISIS. Indeed, Chechen militants are highly represented among rebel fighters in Syria.
- However, allegations that Russia is covertly “exporting jihad” from Chechnya to Turkey, among other military and diplomatic moves, throw Russian intentions into suspicion.
- The paper considers: on one hand, that the phenomenon is a form of Russian aggression, and on the other, that it is a negative spillover-effect of a policy, the purpose of which is quick results to give off the appearance of an effectively functioning government.
- If the Russian administration is in fact manipulating Islamic terrorism, the U.S. needs to establish not just the Kremlin's intent, but capabilities, which will prove useful in structuring cooperation efforts with Russia in Syria and elsewhere.
- Currently, the U.S. can afford a hard-line against Russia if necessary, exercising strategic patience and demanding that Russia acts in accordance with international law. The U.S. must be conscious of the fact that Russia is a revisionist state with hybrid warfare capabilities and boost security measures accordingly.

## About the Author

*Nicole Mazurova specializes in Russia and its transition, media, propaganda, and interventions in Ukraine, Syria and post-Soviet states. Nicole is also a staff writer for The Justice and a research assistant at the Schuster Institute of Investigative Journalism at Brandeis University.*

## Introduction

Counterterrorism and the need to pacify and stabilize Russian borders have become integral to Russian political rhetoric. The North Caucasus, including the Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia republics, is viewed as a problem region within Russia. The majority of Russia's Muslim population is concentrated in the Caucasus; Islamic radicalism has grown to be a serious issue here—its reach spreading across Russia and the globe.

- Terrorists originating from the Caucasus include the 2013 Boston marathon bombers (the Tsarnaev brothers) and Akhmed Chatayev, who coordinated the June 28 Istanbul airport attacks.
- Some jihadist groups participating in the Syrian Conflict, such as Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, were formed by Chechen guerillas.<sup>1</sup>
- ISIS recruitment from the North Caucasus is a top concern; the highlighted case of Varvara Karaulova, an ethnic Russian in Moscow who attempted to join ISIS, has shown that Islamic radicalism is no longer an issue contained to its southern republics.<sup>2</sup>

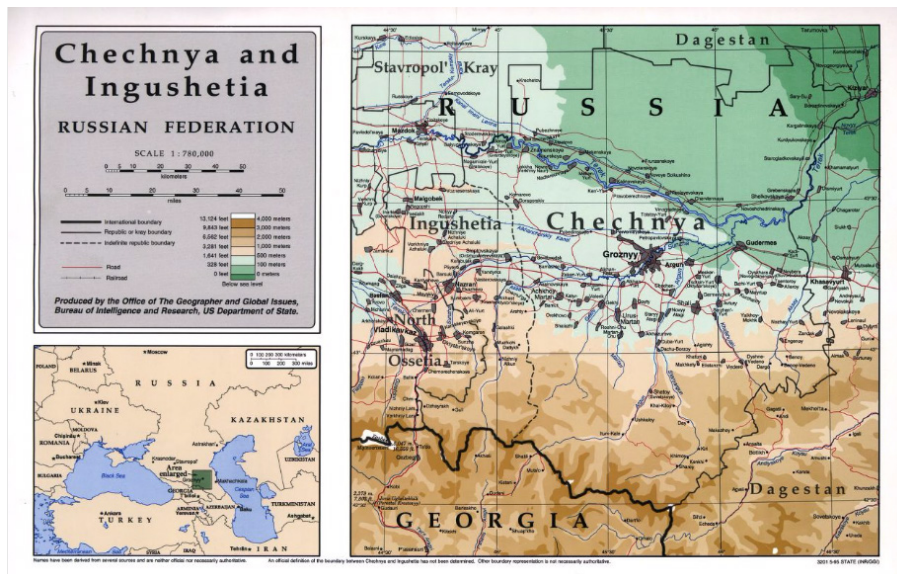
Islamic terrorism is considered a major threat to the security of Russia and the Syrian intervention has been justified by the need to destroy ISIS. However, the stated motive of Putin's war is questionable. There is growing concern that Russia is part of the problem rather than the solution. The accusations are harsh, that Russian policy and military operations serve the purpose of escalating the global terrorist threat emanating from Chechnya, intentionally and systematically. To evaluate the truth behind such speculations, this paper focuses on the claim that Russia is "exporting jihad" by pushing radicalized militants beyond its borders to the Middle East.

The paper begins with a brief history of the Russian-North Caucasus relationship to show how centuries of marginalization led to radicalization, contributing to the present state of affairs. It proceeds to argue that the Russian administration's hard-line policies, as well as covert action, have continued this cycle to strengthen Vladimir Putin's electoral position. Taking into account this agenda, suggestions are made as to how the U.S. could structure cooperation with Russia in Syria and broader anti-terrorism efforts. With the implications for future U.S.-Russian relations being significant, the conclusion presents recommendations on how the U.S. should proceed to minimize risk while furthering American policy objectives.

## Historical Context

The Russian-North Caucasus relationship is built on violence. First contact spans back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but Catherine the Great's reign marks a turning point.<sup>3</sup> Catherine conquered the region, realizing Peter the Great's goals and building upon his expansionist policies that, can be argued, still drive Russia today.

The Russian Empire and later, the Soviet Union, used deportation to fragment the resistance. In response to the Sheikh Mansur rebellion, Catherine II ordered the expulsion of 700,000 Chechen and Ingush people from their homes.<sup>4</sup> Stalin would later echo this move: over 60% of all inhabitants within Chechnya were deported to Siberia and Central Asia as punishment for collaborating with Nazi Germany.<sup>5</sup>



**Chechnya and Ingushetia, Russian Federation, 1995**

Resettlement began under Khrushchev in the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Although allowed to return, a lack of reparation and integration deepened resentment on all sides. In some cases, lands previously held by certain groups were now inhabited by Russians. Furthermore, many were not permitted to return to their mountain villages, and were instead relocated to settlements in the lowlands. Not only could this exploit labor – Chechnya is rich with oil – but prevent fortification in case of future revolt.<sup>7</sup>

Flare-ups of violence were common, creating an atmosphere of tension. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Chechen separatists used this as an opportunity to launch a brutal campaign for independence. During this time, missionaries from Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Libya began arriving to the North Caucasus, many sanctioned by organizations such as Al Qaeda.<sup>8</sup> Middle Eastern militants also travelled to Chechnya to contribute to the foreign holy war.<sup>9</sup> The First Chechen War raged from 1994-1996, resulting in a Grozny leveled by bombs and tens of thousands of casualties.<sup>10</sup> It ended in a stalemate.

Internal confrontation marks the years leading to the Second Chechen War. It is important to note that over 50 ethnic groups are represented in the Caucasus, many still following tribal tradition. Affiliation to different Islamic sects (Sufism, Salafi-Jihadism) created further divisions. In an attempt to neutralize opposition, President Maskhadov (Sufi), introduced aspects of Sharia Law to Chechnya. However, from 1996-1999, the Chechen economy plunged and internal pressures within Maskhadov's administration soared. In 1998, Chechen Prime Minister, Shamil Basayev, resigned and established a network of rival warlords to challenge Maskhadov's power, create an Islamic state, and drive out the Russian presence.



**Russian Mil Mi-8 helicopter brought down by Chechen fighters near the capital Grozny in 1994. Credit: Mikhail Evstafiev**

Meanwhile in Moscow, a power struggle was underway in the Kremlin.



## Rally ‘Round The Flag: The Second Chechen War and Putin’s Rise

In order to understand Vladimir Putin’s ascent to the presidency, one needs to register the Russian military’s influence in politics. Though used as a tool by the federal government, there is little civilian control of the Russian Armed Forces. This has resulted in deep systemic problems within the military. Investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya – a specialist on the Chechen region found shot in the elevator of her own building in 2006 on Putin’s birthday – details in her work, *Putin’s Russia*. According to Politkovskaya, there is no value given human life in this highly hierarchized system: soldiers are expendable, evidenced through sloppy, high-risk military operations, terrible living conditions on bases, and abuse at the hands of superiors. Some cases of hazing and punishment are so severe, they result in death.<sup>11</sup> However, high rank often gives perpetrators immunity in Russian courts. Boris Yeltsin attempted to reform the carried-over Soviet military doctrine, but an insufficient budget, spread even thinner by a humiliating war in Chechnya, led to failure. Yeltsin lost respect among the general staff, as his ineffectual policies were interpreted as meddling.<sup>12</sup> When Putin became Prime Minister in August 1999, he vowed to raise the armed forces “off its knees.” A perfect opportunity presented itself to do just that.



**Volgodonsk bombing of 1999 that partially destroyed an apartment block.**

On August 7, 1999, under the command of Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab, the Islamic International Brigade invaded Dagestan to aid the separatist movement. Federal response was slow, with decisive military action spiking a month later after the Russian apartment bombings, a series of attacks on residential buildings in Buynaksk, Moscow, and Volgodonsk in September 1999. Both are cited as *casus belli* for the Second Chechen War, but it is theorized that elements of the Russian political sphere were looking for a way to showcase Putin’s capability to lead in times of crisis, priming the Russian people for the post-Yeltsin election. The 90s saw a domestic struggle over power and money. There were two main camps: pro-U.S. (oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky who would benefit from strong, economic ties with the West), and Russia-centric (KGB, Soviet-oriented Yevgeny Primakov).<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Putin was a dark horse candidate who had bounded up the political food-chain; his appeal at the top perhaps due to his more centrist position, a mix of capitalist and nationalist values. The missing factor in Putin’s bid for presidency was a guaranteed popular vote.

The apartment bombings in September 1999, which killed 243 people and injured 1,742, are marked by controversy.<sup>14</sup> The official report is that the attacks were contracted by Islamist

warlords in Chechnya, including al-Khattab who has denied the accusation. There is an alternate version of events which maintains that the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) carried out a false-flag attack to justify another war in Chechnya.<sup>15</sup> By September 23, the day after news broke, Prime Minister Putin ordered air strikes over Grozny, which many consider the start of the Second Chechen War.

After Yeltsin's sudden resignation on December 31, Putin became Acting President of the Russian Federation. Hours after his appointment, Putin visited troops in Chechnya.<sup>16</sup> Six days before the Presidential election, Putin again flew into Grozny to discuss upcoming challenges in the region. Putin courted the military by offering a new war in Chechnya, an opportunity for redemption. Commanders were given free rein in their mission: "once and for all to wipe out bandit formations".<sup>17</sup> Apart from strengthening morale, procurements were increased and salaries paid on time. This lent to Putin's image of a leader who supported military values, came through on promises and could return the army's prestige in the international arena. Thus, the United Party (Vladimir Putin) won a significant electorate in the 2000 election: reports indicate that military support was 48%.<sup>18</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin ended Chechnya's de facto independence in May 2000 and installed Akhmad Kadyrov as the pro-Moscow Chechen President. After Kadyrov's assassination, his son, Ramzan Kadyrov succeeded as Putin's strongman in the North Caucasus. The new Chechen leader has branded himself as Putin's most loyal follower, ostentatiously displayed in ways ranging from official statements to t-shirts and Instagram posts. Kadyrov has been accused of human rights violations, corruption, embezzlement of public funds, and protection of his inner circle from criminal charges. Putin chooses to overlook these allegations because Kadyrov's brutal rhetoric and vow to eradicate ISIS in Chechnya align with Russia's hard-line campaign against terror. However, Kadyrov's allegiance is very much dependent on the money flowing in from Russia; if Kadyrov ceases to see the benefit in his arrangement with Putin, future conflict between the Chechen government and Russia is likely.



**Kadyrov (right) with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2008. Kremlin photo**

A number of terror attacks targeting ethnic Russians occurred during Putin's first term. Two prominent cases were the Moscow theater hostage crisis and Beslan School siege, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Large-scale attacks have since subsided, but guerilla warfare continues to this day. On April 15, 2009, the government operation in Chechnya was declared officially over. Suppressing insurgency and counterterrorism is now mostly Kadyrov's responsibility, in cooperation with the FSB.

## **From Chechnya to Syria**

Putin has taken an aggressive, hard-line stance on terrorism, and the rise of ISIS has conveniently justified increased preventative measures that most would consider violations of basic human rights. Through various methods, including collecting DNA, using racial categories for high-risk police registries, surveilling mosques, and conducting raids, the FSB claims to have prevented 30 crimes and detained 770 criminals in 2015 alone.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Russian anti-terrorism legislation has gotten increasingly more severe.<sup>20</sup> The most recent example is the passage of the 2016 "Yarovaya Law" which includes increased FSB data surveillance, criminal liability for failure to report the planning of a crime, and prison sentences for those as young as 14 for extremism, terrorism, and participation in mass riots.<sup>21</sup> Definitions are vague enough to leave much of the law up to interpretation. On one hand, this facilitates arrest; on the other, the law can be abused in reverse, finding ways to alleviate or suspend charges. Thus, security services gain more leverage over suspects.

On paper, the heavy-handed approach works. According to the Federal Security Service (FSB), since 2014, the number of terrorist attacks in the North Caucasus has halved year-on-year.<sup>22</sup> Alexander Bortnikov, Director of the FSB, also warned that though attacks on Russian territory have decreased, recruitment by international terrorist organizations is continuous.<sup>23</sup> According to The Soufan Group, a security intelligence organization, militants from Russia and Central Asia who have joined ISIS has soared by as much as 300 percent since June 2014.<sup>24</sup> Though the Russian government denies responsibility, increased rates would appear to be an unintended consequence of Russia's aggressive campaign on terrorism.<sup>25</sup> An investigation carried out by Elena Milashina of *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the few remaining independent newspapers in Russia, complicates the issue, calling into question if the consequence was, actually, unintended.<sup>26</sup>



**The Dagestan region of Russia, and Aleppo, the largest city in Syria.**  
Google Maps.

Milashina conducted extensive fieldwork in a Dagestan village, Novosasitili, from which 1% of the total population has gone to Syria since 2011.<sup>27</sup> Through interviews with the head of the village, a lawyer representing those returning from Syria back to Russia, and a liaison between the FSB and Chechen guerillas, Milashina began to establish the motive for running away to Syria to join radical Islamic militant groups. Most guerillas function in circles that lean towards extremism, but jihad is often not the principle motivator.<sup>28</sup> Some erroneously believe that the war in Syria could be lucrative, while others do not want to

leave at all, but are compelled to. The FSB wanted hard results and high-value targets and were willing to broker 'deals.' Guerillas would come forward to avoid questioning in counter-extremism centers and long prison sentences, and join amnesty programs. In exchange, the FSB would provide passports and allow easy exit to Turkey. Milashina termed the passage the "green corridor" from the Caucasus to the Middle East.<sup>29</sup>

In official records, those who had left would often be declared deceased.<sup>30</sup> Confidants had also told Milashina that the FSB encouraged 'green corridor deals,' not just as a way to push radicals out of Russia, but to gain informants on the ground.<sup>31</sup> Those entering such a contract were promised lighter sentences when they came back to Russia through a legal loophole.<sup>32</sup>

The 'green corridor' phenomenon played a crucial role before the Sochi Olympics. After two suicide bombers released a video promising a "surprise" during the games, Sochi was put under high-security.<sup>33</sup> A security force of 100,000 oversaw the event, a 'ring of steel' was enacted around the town, and everyone coming in was thoroughly examined.<sup>34</sup> Behind the scenes, there is evidence that another measure was enacted leading up to the games. Facing pressure from federal authorities, borders were opened allowing free passage out of Sochi, with select individuals recounting how officials provided them with passports and plane tickets to Istanbul.<sup>35</sup>



## Analysis

The U.S. has expressed suspicion of Russian intentions in Syria from the beginning, when Russia announced military buildup in Latakia and began flying equipment into Syria. Air strikes carried out by Russian warplanes often use disproportionate force, lack precision, and target counter-ISIS US-backed forces. Russian pilots have ignored agreed upon measures when flying into shared airspace, going so far as to position for simulated attacks against U.S. aircraft.<sup>36</sup> The Russian Defense Ministry has rejected many accusations, contributing to a general feeling of mistrust uncondusive to cooperation on conflict resolution.<sup>37 38 39</sup>

U.S.-Russian relations have deteriorated, but it is unclear to what end. Assessments on Russia have been varied: some view Russia as an aggressive state with an imperialist expansionist agenda, others view Russia as a failing regional power desperately trying to prevent internal collapse. If Russia 'exporting jihad' is interpreted as aggression, part of a long-term operation to sabotage U.S.-led coalition efforts, it is crucial to assess what Russia is actually capable of doing. Putin has reiterated over and over that his country has made great gains in modernizing its military technology, including its arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Television broadcasts about how long it would take a missile to hit the U.S., grand military parades, and foreign interventions, serve to impress both domestic and international audiences with Russia's military might. Considering the disparity in assessing Russian intentions, how much of this is for deterrence purposes as opposed to actual military mobilization has been contested.

If anything, Russia's real strength is hybrid warfare. It has successfully used propaganda, electronic and information operations, military deception, and non-state proxy fighters to confuse and cause political fragmentation inside the U.S. and EU on an array of global challenges, not just Syria.<sup>40</sup> If Russia is indeed mobilizing for war, "manipulating Islamic terrorism" appears part of such an aggressive strategy: Escalating the ISIS threat increases Western vulnerability.

Such a plan is only as successful as the West perceives it to be. Without a believable narrative of "Russian evil", a result of residual Cold War biases that have been exploited by Russian state-media, Putin's anti-terror policy is revealed for what it is: a series of poor quick-fixes that result in negative spillover effects. With this veneer gone, one is left with a government that values keeping up appearances more than actual solutions, a major purpose of which is retaining domestic control and resisting foreign intrusion. The core issues exacerbating the problem – corruption, a flawed legal system, a failure to carry out reparations, and integrate populations in the Caucasus that have been marginalized for centuries– remain unresolved. Such reform is at present impossible because Putin relies on these methods to keep those in his inner circle compliant, preventing Russia from evolving past a kleptocratic mafia state.

In this context, Russia "exporting jihad" is just another symptom of a system rotting from the inside out; a trickle-down from federal higher-ups to local police officers who need impressive results, in the case of the Olympics, feeling the added pressure to make Russia look good internationally. Of course, an additional incentive is the bribery that comes with making passports and facilitating travel to Turkey, as public servants have low wages which encourages corruption to maintain the standard of living they are accustomed to.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

The Russia problem is one of cooperation with a state that lacks the economic strength or reputation needed to vie for equal influence in the international arena, yet has the potential to be a significant security threat, especially if it is successful in forming alliances with other revisionist states outside the Western-derived order.

The U.S. must evaluate: Should it ignore violations and revert back to spheres of influence, or demand that Russia adhere to standards of international conduct and reform? At present, U.S.-Russian relations reflect a precarious balance. After Russian actions in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, the West imposed sanctions and relations cooled significantly. Syria has not only allowed Putin to return to the fold, but gave him diplomatic leverage on crises of more immediate importance to Russia: Ukraine and Crimea. The concessions that Russia is demanding in Europe set dangerous precedents – the Minsk Accord and sanctions must remain in place. With its annexation of Crimea, Russia deliberately violated three treaties: the Budapest Memorandum (1994), The Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership Between the Russian Federation and Ukraine (1997) and The Treaty Between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Russian-Ukrainian State Border (2003).<sup>41</sup> If NATO and its allies give into pressures to lift sanctions and scale down fortification efforts without serious concessions from Russia, the West does more than condone land grabbing—it demonstrates the ineffectiveness of international law and lends credence to military extortion.

Putin has turned Syria into a bargaining chip. Russian intervention changed the trajectory of the Syrian war, allowing Assad to regain a foothold in the region. In a situation with too many cooks in the kitchen already, Russian participation introduced new friction between key players and prolonged fighting. The spillover effects of the crisis, such as refugee flows and terrorism, have made Europe vulnerable.

Some may be more than willing to pass the buck and let Russia take more of an active role, in return alleviating economic pressures on Russia and even conceding to its control on Crimea. However, there is no guarantee that Russia would be able to constructively regulate the crisis, especially in a way that conforms to Western projections. Furthermore, it is not certain that Russia would be satisfied with returning to the status quo. Ignoring Russian violations of international law will likely be viewed as a weakness, and the Kremlin will further test Western limits and push for more dominance on the continent.

At present, Russia has reduced U.S. options in Syria and it is true that full Russian cooperation would certainly expedite stabilization. Furthermore, if U.S. goals are to find a long-term solution, not just perpetuate a frozen conflict, a military partnership is just the first step. Russia and the U.S. would need to establish a credible ceasefire in Syria and increase humanitarian aid. They would also need to commit to negotiations on Syrian transition and reparation which can build off of elements of a rejected eight-point peace plan that advocates for constitutional reform and nationwide elections overseen by key players in the Syrian crisis, submitted by Russia to the UN.<sup>42</sup>



**Painting by Eduardo Relero depicting Syrian refugees looking over Presidents Putin and Obama sitting at a table over a map of Syria. Oxfam photo.**

To achieve such ambitious goals, the US would still have to make some concessions, which includes working with unsavory partners for the purpose of inclusivity, beginning with elements of the Assad government.<sup>43</sup> If the U.S accepts compromise in the Middle East, it should be stressed that cooperation is contingent on Russian adherence to international law and agreed-upon terms. The U.S. should make clear that if these terms are violated, it will begin exploring the option of a solution that excludes Russia.

Such an outcome is not optimal, as it pits Russia against the U.S. With the added external pressure and loss of credibility, the chances of Russian economic and political collapse increase. The resentment that will result from such an approach could jeopardize the chance at a pro-West government replacing Putin's (best case scenario) or result in armed conflict (worst case scenario). Optimally, the U.S. will not be pushed to such measures, but it is in a position to draw the line because much of Putin's foreign policy follows a strategy of bluff, and the U.S. has the influence to do so.

In order to avoid open conflict with Russia while furthering American policy objectives, the United States needs to:

1. Maintain diplomatic relationships with Russia to avoid misunderstandings that come with a lack of communication
2. Strengthen U.S. homeland security, focusing more on hybrid warfare defense (expanding intelligence sectors, especially cyber capabilities)
3. Fulfill NATO obligations, especially Article 5, and help fortify Eastern Europe in response to rising security concerns
4. Pursue mutually beneficial economic relationships in the Asia-Pacific, Middle East and Latin America to balance Russian revisionist goals
5. Invest in and do business with Russia's private sector, but punish companies and individuals involved in corruption
6. Lead by example, not only in international matters (putting more faith in world institutions, legitimizing brokered accords, being selective about military interventions, but once involved staying committed through all stages), but also domestically (fighting corruption, tackling inequality, promoting honest reporting and fact checking)
7. Realize that political change in Russia must come from the inside and that this will take time

The last recommendation is the most crucial. Currently Putin's presidency hangs in the balance between two forces: psychosocial and economic. Be a country democratic or autocratic, the ability to carry out a successful war is dependent on popular support. The government has to be convincing enough that armed conflict is worth the monetary and human costs. For Russia, the payoff of involvement in Syria is in moral satisfaction that it is again leading in the world arena. However, a degrading economy might force the people's priorities to change. Looking back at Yeltsin's First Chechen War, military morale was low because it did not provide financial security or respected status.<sup>44</sup> The war was an added humiliation to losing the Cold War to the U.S.



Putin has been more successful in tapping into social moods: among the general public, his approval rating shows spikes not just after Chechnya 1999, but Georgia 2008, Crimea 2014 and Syria 2015.<sup>45</sup> It is important to remember that in the years preceding the annexation of Crimea, Putin had lost about a third of his supporters.<sup>46</sup> After the 2011 legislative and 2012 presidential elections hundreds of Russians united to protest against fraud and fearing a coup, the demonstrations were violently put down. Oppositionist Boris Nemtsov claimed in his report on Ukraine that the Russian administration had planned the seizure of Crimea for a year before it happened, making the move a political objective and not a spontaneous response to the proceedings in Maidan as was claimed.<sup>47</sup> The strategy boosted Putin's rating nearly 30 points to 89%.<sup>48</sup> After Syria, there was also an increase, since then leveling out at 80%.<sup>49</sup> In parallel, there have been a number of laws written into state legislature, such as the 2016 "Yarovaya law," which is written ambiguously enough to extend from terrorism to suppressing civilian dissent.

It is a misconception that the Russian public is unaware of human rights violations and that institutional corruption, business inefficiency, underdevelopment are the core reasons for the gap between the rich and poor. It is so integral to the Russian system that many have just adapted to this framework—some actually thrive in this system, others are wary of the chaos that comes with political turnover—because they lived through the collapse of the Soviet Union and there is no real alternative to Putin. External threats help to ignore this vicious cycle. However, if the standard of living will continue to degrade the convenient excuses for why the economy is plummeting—falling oil prices and sanctions—are more likely to be challenged. This extends from the masses to the elite, military to civilians.

## Conclusion

The U.S. can afford to exercise strategic patience toward Russia, while building up defenses to hybrid warfare, committing to allies and upholding basic liberal democratic values. An important check-in point will be the upcoming 2018 presidential election in Russia. Most anticipate that the process will not be fair or free, but it will be interesting to see who the opposition puts forward and to what extent they are capable of mobilizing.<sup>50</sup> In the meantime, the U.S. would do well to devote more energy into researching Russia's connection to Islamic terrorism. If conclusive links between the Kremlin and ISIS can be made, the U.S. gains much in diplomatic leverage, especially among European states wary of hard-lining.

## Endnotes

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We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

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