

Is Putin's Trolling 'Making Russia Great Again?' (Op-ed)

Russia's role in the Syrian conflict was never about the well-being of civilians or saving Bashar Assad

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

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In many ways, Russia is the geopolitical equivalent of the internet troll, deliberately sowing discord. There is an obvious and severe critique to be made about this style of foreign policy. But it is also worth considering why the Kremlin has adopted it and why it appears to feel it is working.

On Jan. 15 Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov held a two-and-a-half hour press conference to reflect on the achievements of 2017 and prospects for 2018. As one would expect, he harped on Western perfidies and “deplorable” U.S. practices. On the whole, though, he appeared relatively satisfied with Russia’s situation.

Is this just the necessary face of the consummate diplomat? Probably not. While there are

numerous concerns and frustrations, the Kremlin appears to be going into 2018 relatively happy with its geopolitical situation.

For example, consider the Syrian war. Although Putin has been glad to make “mission accomplished” noises – not least to reassure a public uncomfortable about the thought of their boys dying in a conflict about which they care little – the war is not over.

Islamic State, the terrorist group banned in Russia, is very much in decline, and the regime controls almost all the cities. The days when it looked as if Bashar Assad might be forced to flee or the regime could fragment seem past.

Pacifying Syria, however, is going to be a great deal harder and recent mortar and drone attacks on the Russian airbase at Khmeimim demonstrate that the Russians are caught in an open-ended war.

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There are serious costs, present and future. Given the aspirations of both Turkey and Iran to be the regional hegemons, in due course – essentially, when America has opted or been pushed out of the conflict – future rivalry is inevitable.

Moscow has placed itself at the top of the jihadist hate list jointly with Washington, and as foreign fighters return to Russia and the online and word-of-mouth preaching of terror escalates, more attacks at home are inevitable.

But this was never about the well-being of the Syrian people or, indeed, even Assad's. This conflict was always much more about geopolitics, about asserting that Russia is a serious player, one the United States could not afford to neglect, isolate or ignore.

In those ruthlessly utilitarian terms, the uncomfortable truth is that it has proven distinctly effective.

Russia has proven that it can be an intervention power, able and willing to deploy military forces and sustain such an operation. It has proven that it is willing to further its interests and support its allies with scant concern for humanitarian values or international condemnation.

It has proven, in short, that it can act.

However unpalatable, the fact is that this does make a country a serious geopolitical player. Of course, the costs are not inconsiderable. Russia's defense budget for 2018 will be equivalent to \$46 billion, or 2.8 percent of GDP. But this seriously understates the real expenditure on being a military power.

There are considerable defense-related expenses buried within other budget lines, from contingency to education. There are large and often overlapping intelligence and security services to pay and the parallel internal security army that is the National Guard.

Beyond that, there is the substantial drain of supporting the economic and social infrastructure of the Donbass.

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Meanwhile, Russia spends below OECD average shares of its GDP on healthcare and education, has neglected diversification of its economy, and while not facing a demographic crisis, certainly faces challenges there. Standards of living have fallen and the low-level but visible signs of public discontent are real.

But these are the signs of a country stuck in the “middle-income trap,” where life could be better, rather than a looming crisis.

Measures by yardsticks of egalitarianism and democracy, of freedom of expression and security from illness and an impoverished old age, “Putinomics” is failing. But those are simply not what primarily motivates the Kremlin.

What does? Essentially, the components of Putin’s notion of a “great Russia” would seem to be a strong government, sovereignty from the laws, values and fads of the international community, secure borders, and a serious voice in world affairs.

Strong government seems to mean a government that can do what it wants, even if that means conniving at the corruption of its favorites.

Certainly, there are few meaningful constraints on the Kremlin – legal, institutional, practical or political – and the presidential election campaign may perhaps not run quite as Putin may once have wanted, but it is clear not just that he will win but also that he will draw some re-legitimizing energy from it.

If a country is willing to shoulder the costs, sovereignty from international constraints also seems possible.

From blasting Aleppo into rubble to poisoning Alexander Litvinenko in London, from annexing Crimea to manufacturing criminal charges against Alexei Navalny, the Kremlin has demonstrated that it will, whatever the long-term implications.

Whatever the overheated rhetoric of some Russian commentators, who see a NATO invasion or a shadowy hybrid warfare campaign of destabilisation as just around the corner, there is no serious external security threat to their country. Even the challenge of terrorism is relatively manageable, at least at present.

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And a result of all this is that, like it or not, Moscow does still matter.

It is a nuclear power still, with a permanent seat at the United Nations. It may not have managed to tame Ukraine, but it has shown that it can and will punish those who balk at being part of its self-declared sphere of influence.

What it lacks in real soft power, it is trying to make up for in “negative power,” as the flag-

waver and cheerleader for all manner of other disgruntled, anti-establishment and trollish actors around the world.

At the risk of trivialising the situation, it is hard not to see an echo of Brexit here. A post-imperial power still grappling with the slide from superpower status, balancing a desire to “punch above its weight” while bloody-mindedly opting out of wider communities of nations.

A debate driven not so much about rational calculations of economic and social well-being so much as emotional responses to an increasingly complex world in which the country seems to matter less and less.

Yet for all that, a country that has staked much of its global standing on its willingness to act when and where others would not, with both intervention forces and a nuclear capacity, even if one could question why it needs either.

Emotions matter in politics. Outsiders may look at the unsustainable costs of empire, of the absence of soft power, of the undermining of international norms. But that doesn’t appear to be the Kremlin’s calculus.

In emotional terms, while it may worry about its economy, feel frustrated over Ukraine, be bemused by Washington, and be irked by sanctions, it seems relatively content with its place in the world.

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