

RUSSIA WATCH

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NOVEMBER 2015

- A Russian passenger jet crashed over Sinai, Putin announced it was a terrorist attack;
- G20 Summit: Putin no longer a pariah;
- Turkey shot down Russian fighter jet over its border, Russia responded with sanctions;
- Russia stopped gas transfer to Ukraine, confirmed the food embargo;
- Domestic support for Putin remains at record high.

A Russian passenger jet crashed over Sinai: On 31 October, a Russian passenger plane crashed over the Sinai Peninsula killing all 224 on board, the majority of whom were Russian citizens. The initial findings of the investigation revealed that the plane disintegrated in the air. On 2 November, the carrier (Kogalymavia) that owned the plane released a public statement specifying that the cause of the crash was likely '[mechanical impact](#)'. Russian authorities, though, called the claim '[premature](#) and not based on real facts'. A group affiliated with Islamic State, meanwhile, claimed responsibility for the downing of the plane, proclaiming the act a response to Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict. [US](#) and [UK](#) officials said that the plane was [most likely](#) brought down by a bomb. Russian authorities, responding evasively, asserted that the British intelligence services did not provide them with any facts that would substantiate the claim. The Spokesman for the President of Russia, Dmitry Peskov, called it 'inappropriate' to make any speculations regarding the connection between Russia's operation in Syria and the crash of the passenger plane, as 'these are two completely [different dimensions](#) and issues'. [Grani.ru](#) points out that Putin simply was not prepared for such a turn of events; his dismay was comparable to that experienced immediately after a Malaysian flight was shot down over Ukraine. The media widely [republished](#) information suggesting that the black boxes did not record any signs of technical failure but rather only an [explosion-like noise](#) a second before the end of the records. The possibility of a [time-bomb on board](#) the plane was also discussed. Despite profusely refusing to admit that the plane crashed as a result of a terrorist attack, even in light of overwhelming evidence, on 6 November, Putin ordered the [suspension](#) of passenger flights to Egypt. On 13 November, [EgyptAir](#) was banned from flying to Russia and four days later the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Alexander Bortnikov, finally [announced](#) that the tragedy was caused by a deliberate terrorist attack. The FSB also promised \$ 50 million for information pertaining to the perpetrators of the attack, [symbolically](#) matching the reward, which was the largest to date, promised by the US for information regarding the whereabouts of [Osama bin Laden](#).

Domestic impact of the attack: [Slon.ru](#) points out that if the plane was indeed brought down by terrorists, it would be difficult to explain to the public why decisions, including the intervention in Syria, which have led to the deaths of hundreds, have been made without any public deliberations. Alexander Golts [explains](#) for Svoboda.org that it will be challenging for the Russian government to persuade citizens that there is no

connection between operations in Syria and the attack. [Gazeta.ru](#) adds that the attacks transform the Syrian conflict from a remote battlefield to a war that directly concerns the everyday life of Russians. Furthermore, preventing additional attacks will be crucial for Putin in persuading Russians that war in Syria has been a success. Tatiana Stanovaya explains that following the Paris attacks, Putin was able to argue that Russia is also a [victim](#) of terrorists who atrociously kill innocent civilians, thereby gaining Russia sympathy rather than blame.

Putin no longer a pariah: The G20 summit in Antalya (15-17 November 2015) provided Putin a 'window of opportunity' to at least gain back lukewarm acceptance from the international community. If last year in Brisbane world leaders tried to avoid Putin, this year Putin was [on high demand](#). The Paris attacks and the crash of A321 over Sinai pushed the official topic – energy – into the background and let Putin [regain](#) the status of an important international player whose opinion is valued. Russia signaled it wishes to [change its image](#) from that of a troublemaker and peace breaker to one that emphasizes its role as an anti-ISIL coalition member. As a demonstration of its good will to cooperate on a range of issues, Putin, in a move that [surprised](#) even the Russian Ministry of Finance, agreed to restructure [Ukraine's debt](#) on conditions more favorable than the IMF asked for under the guarantees of the US, EU, or an international financial institution. Although the general broad consensus in the Western and Russian media is that 'terrorists made Russia and the West [partners](#) again', skepticism has been voiced regarding the sustainability and extent of this partnership. Most countries still [condemn](#) Russia's operations in Syria.

Turkey shot down Russian fighter jet over Turkish-Syrian border: On 24 November, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet that apparently violated its airspace. One of the ejected pilots was fatally shot by Syrian Turkmen, the other was rescued. A marine was further killed during the rescue mission. The Russian government denied violating Turkish airspace and rejected the assertion that Turkey had issued advance warnings. Putin called the attack "a stab in the back committed by accomplices of terrorists". Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan attempted to contact Putin, who was informed about the calls but decided not to respond. Putin also declined a private meeting with Erdogan during the Paris climate summit. The non-governmental media dwelled on the atypical characteristics of the current conflict. Whereas in previous confrontations, Putin mostly encountered liberal Western countries, now he finds himself facing his own doppelgänger. The current conflict is seen as the one '[between two Putins](#)', both seeking the [restoration](#) of the past glory of their countries, both engaged in murky ethnic wars, and both involved in the suppression of opposition and political freedom. Russian experts on the Middle East and Turkey similarly add that Erdogan sees himself as a '[mesiah](#)' of Turkey and the region and would be unwilling to capitulate to Russia's demands for an apology for shooting down the plane. The incident didn't necessarily threaten the vital interests of the countries, but rather the [image](#) of the two 'strong leaders'. Therefore, Putin and Erdogan are likely to continue trading threats and playing the game of chicken as neither can afford to be perceived as weak. The relationship between the two countries is expected to remain [tense, yet still fall](#) short of military confrontation.

Russia responded by introducing sanctions against Turkey: On 28 November Vladimir Putin [introduced sanctions](#) against Turkey. Beginning 1 January 2016, Russian companies will not be permitted to employ Turkish citizens and the visa free regime with Turkey will be suspended. The government is further developing a list of Turkish products that will be banned for import to Russia. Furthermore, tourist agencies are now forbidden from marketing tours to Turkey to Russian citizens 'due to the circumstances that hinder the provision of security for Russian citizens in Turkey'. On 26 November, Russia announced the reinforcement of Russian troops in Syria. [S-400](#) defence missile systems were deployed in Latakia and military ship with

missiles on board was moved to the coast of Latakia. Aiming to intensify political pressure on Turkey, members of the 'Spravedlivaya Rossiya' Party in the Duma (Russian Parliament) proposed a [law](#) that stipulates [up to 5 years](#) in prison for the denial of the Armenian genocide in Turkey in 1915-1922. The non-governmental media in Russia began referring to a history of conflict between Turkey and Russia and also devoted space to the analysis of the economic consequences of the ripening conflict, dubbed the '[Citrus Turkish war](#)', 'Russian Turkish [Economic War](#)', or 'Turkish cooling'. Slon.ru analysed economic cooperation between Turkey and Russia, warning that the '[bill for Syria](#)' is becoming ever more expensive. Vedomosti.ru notes that while indeed harming Turkey, the sanctions will also accelerate [inflation](#) and economic decline in Russia. A widespread [concern](#) is the potential rise in housing costs and the extension of construction deadlines following the ban on the hiring of Turkish citizens, who currently comprise a significant portion of workers in the construction sector. The Ministry of Construction Industry [denies](#) that there will be any negative consequences, in noting that Turkish workers will be able to [finish](#) some of the ongoing projects. The government also claims that substitutes for the sanctioned Turkish food products will be easily secured within days among the 'line of the [willing to export](#) to Russia' – Iran, Azerbaijan, South Africa, and Morocco. The ability of the government to substitute Turkish food, textile, automotive products is [doubted](#) in the media though, given the ongoing 'food sanctions' against the EU.

Russia stopped gas transfer to Ukraine, confirmed food embargo: Russia and Ukraine exchanged another round of sanctions and embargoes. On 24 November, Gazprom [stopped the transfer of gas](#) to Ukraine as the country had not pre-paid for any further deliveries. Prime Minister of Ukraine Arsenij Jatseniuk announced later that day that Ukraine [decided](#) not to buy gas from Russia as European supplies offer lower prices. Furthermore, Ukraine announced the closure of its airspace to all Russian planes, both military and civilian. Earlier in November, Ukraine had already [stopped electricity](#) imports from Russia with the aim of relying on its own capacity. Ukrainians, meanwhile, [lost their right to favorable employment](#) and visa conditions in Russia. Those who wish to stay in Russia for more than 90 days now must acquire extensive documentation. The favorable conditions remained available for refugees from Eastern Ukraine though. Russia also announced that beginning on 1 January 2016, the food embargo against Ukraine will enter into force. This decision was explained as justified given that Ukraine participates in the sanctions against Russia and that the economic part of the association agreement between the EU and Ukraine will enter into force in January. Russia [clarified](#) that there is a need to protect the Russian market against the uncontrolled flow of sanctioned food products from the EU. The [EU attempted](#) to persuade Russia not to introduce the embargo. The tense economic relations with Russia are, nevertheless, sometimes portrayed as [beneficial for Ukraine](#) in the long run as they create an incentive for Kyiv to reform its economy.

Domestic support for Putin remains at record high: According to Russia Public Opinion Research Center, [VCIOM](#), public support for Putin remains at a record level of 87-88%. The ratings started to grow following the events in Crimea in spring 2014. The aggravating factors of social and economic problems in society have so far inflicted [no negative effect](#) on the level of approval for Putin. The survey published by the Levada Center on 30 November indicates that [65% of Russians](#) consider Russia a 'great (powerful) state'. This number has increased by 11% since 2011. Furthermore, 87% of Russians believe that Crimea should be [part of Russia](#). Experts not affiliated with the government cite the [operation in Syria](#) and its depiction in the Russian state media as the current source of Putin's popularity and the main factor contributing to the generation of the image of Russia as a 'great power'. The war is helping to demonstrate the perception that Russia is governed by competent and [brave leaders](#) who project Russia's [greatness](#) internationally.

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