

***Putin running out of options in global pressure campaign***  
***Ellen Mitchell - The Hill***

*As the Russia-Ukraine war nears the end of its first year, Moscow is struggling to find leverage to wear down Western resolve to aid Kyiv.*



*Putin running out of options in global pressure campaign© Provided by The Hill*

*With its battlefield wins now few and far between, an economy crippled by harsh sanctions, and increasing international isolation, Russian President Vladimir Putin is running out of options to expand its provocations beyond Ukraine to chip away at international support for Ukraine's resistance, experts say.*

*The Kremlin has "basically lost on all fronts in terms of trying to exhaust and create fractures in the coalition between Ukraine and its Western allies," according to Joseph Dresen, a Russia expert at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Kennan Institute.*

*"I think Russia is in a bad situation. It's been bad for a while. It's only getting worse."*

*When Moscow rolled its forces into Ukraine on Feb. 24, Russia expected the country to quickly surrender, failing to anticipate a mountain of resistance. Among the roadblocks for Moscow was the resolve of the Ukrainian people, the leadership of the then-untested Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the ill-prepared Kremlin troops.*

*What's more, the former Soviet nation quickly galvanized Western support, with the U.S. and Europe funneling tens of billions of dollars' worth of weapons and humanitarian aid to the embattled country.*

*"You've heard us say over and over again that we're going to support Ukraine for as long as it takes. And from everything that I can see from our allies and partners, they feel the same way," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters Wednesday.*

*“We remain united in our efforts.”*

*Moscow has tried to weaken global resolve to aid Kyiv, using cyber-attacks, shipping blockades to prevent crucial grain exports, freezing gas supplies for Europe and threatening to halt all energy imports, a move Putin said would cause the continent to “freeze.”*

*But a warm winter combined with an international community that has collectively responded to each Russian threat with its own push back — either through bolstered cyber defenses, energy replacements or economic sanctions — has kept Putin on his back foot.*

*Now, after more than 320 days of a conflict the Russian leader initially claimed would last less than a week, Moscow is all but out of ways to wreak havoc outside of Ukraine.*

*“I just don’t think they have the bandwidth to project power anyplace else right now,” Brian Whitmore, a Russian expert with the Atlantic Council, told The Hill.*

*“I think their play was effectively freezing out Europe and making them suffer through the winter. That’s clearly not going to work right now,” Whitmore said.*

*“They’re counting on the West’s resolve being diminished, and that’s not happened yet. ... I don’t think we’re gonna get there, quite frankly.”*

*Further limiting Putin’s options was Russia’s swift loss of economic relations with the West, a forfeiture of decades of painstakingly cultivated ties and an ousting from an information network Moscow can no longer use to its advantage.*

*“Their ability to project non-kinetic power was based on the fact that they were integrated into our financial system,” Whitmore said.*

*“They were deep inside of our information space. Sanctions has really changed that, and their capacity to make trouble has been diminished as a result.”*

*Case in point: The European Union’s (EU) ban on crude oil imports from Russia and its price cap on the country’s oil are costing Moscow about \$172 million per day, a figure that is only expected to rise higher when the EU implements further restrictions next month, according to a new report published by the Helsinki-based Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air.*

*“The EU ban on Russian oil was an extraordinary step taken to axe the funds from Europe financing Putin’s war,” the independent research organization said in [a statement](#) released Wednesday.*

*Russia has move to replace lost ties by growing closer with other mega-powers including China and India. But those relationships are likely to fray over time as the war continues, Whitmore added.*

*While China and India continue to import Russian oil — with Moscow's fossil fuel exports earning the country \$688 million per day and helping to offset its losses — small cracks are beginning to appear in the relationships.*

*When Putin spoke with Chinese President Xi Jinping over video conference in late December, Beijing's leader pointed to the "complicated and quite controversial international situation."*

*Russia has long been seen as a menacing cyber actor. However, even that threat has diminished, as experts say the West now knows what to look for after multiple attempts out of Moscow.*

*"With cyber, once you use it, you sort of tip your hand as to what your tactics are, what your strengths are, and your targets are better prepared to encounter and defend against future attacks," Dresen said.*

*"I think cyber-attacks are less of a weapon for Russia than it otherwise might have been."*

*For now, Russia appears focused on its brutal military campaign in Ukraine heading into 2023, attempting to take back small patches of land in the east following humiliating losses this past fall.*

*Fighting in particular is raging in and around Bakhmut, a major battleground since the summer. Should the eastern city fall to Russian forces, it would allow for further advances in the Donetsk region but would be unlikely to turn the tide of the wider war.*

*The difficult slog in Ukraine has experts confident that Russia won't seek to try its military power elsewhere, even as it may continue with nuclear saber-rattling.*

*"I'm really not that worried. I think we have to keep our eyes open and be vigilant, but I think it's highly unlikely that they will try to make trouble or someplace else, whether it be in the former Soviet space or elsewhere," Whitmore said.*

*"People think if Ukraine wins, then [Putin is] going to do something horrible. And he certainly would like us to think that to deter us. But history shows there's this myth out there that Putin never backs down. And he does when faced with superior force over and over and over."*

*Steven Pifer, an expert with Brookings, told The Hill that the Kremlin is likely being careful to not make sure its saber-rattling doesn't turn into something they're not prepared to take on.*

*"In terms of bellicose actions on the conventional level, it's really hard for me to see what the Russians could do," Pifer said.*

*"They really can't poke in the Baltics. The last thing the Russian general staff wants now would be to have to take on NATO in a conventional fight. So I just think that their options are pretty limited."*

*All three experts The Hill spoke to predicted Putin would play the waiting game rather than take new, potentially disastrous, risks.*

*“I think Putin has now begun to try to prepare the Russian public for a longer war, and he’s prepared to see if he can stick it out and just hope that with time Europeans begin to sort of get tired of this,” Pifer said.*