

HYBRID CONFLICT 20 TARGETING THE WEST

Russian information operations seek strategic realignment in Europe

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Activists block the entrance to the Ukrainian TV Channel "Inter" in Kyiv in February 2016, accusing the channel of distributing pro-Russian propaganda. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

“All the revolutions in history of humanity, beginning with Lucifer’s rebellion against God, have been designed by the United States in order to detract from the glory of Russia.”

~ Leon Aron,
remarks at the American
Enterprise Institute,
Washington, D.C.,
December 17, 2014.

An Emergencies Ministry member walks at the crash site of a Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine in July 2014. The plane was brought down by a Russian-made missile, killing all 295 passengers. REUTERS

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he Russian state-owned Rossiya-1 television channel premiered the film *Miroportadok (World Order)* during prime time on Sunday, December 20, 2015.

It included extensive clips from interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin and powerfully expressed, as Ivan Krastev said in *The New York Times* at the time, “the Kremlin’s present state of mind. It views the world as a place on the edge of collapse, chaotic and dangerous, where international institutions are ineffective, held hostage to the West’s ambitions and delusions. Nuclear weapons represent the sole guarantee of a country’s sovereignty, and sovereignty is demonstrated by a willingness and capacity to resist Washington’s hegemonic agenda.”

Since February 2014, Russia has annexed Crimea, destabilized eastern Ukraine, aggressively penetrated NATO airspace in the Baltics, undertaken submarine operations near vital undersea Internet communications cables in the Atlantic, launched Kalibr cruise missiles from the Caspian naval flotilla and a submarine in the eastern Mediterranean

against targets in Syria and almost come to blows with Turkey. And Putin reportedly boasted privately to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko: “If I wanted, Russian troops could not only be in Kyiv in two days, but Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw or Bucharest, too.”

The strategic agenda of the next 20 years will be dominated by defense, deterrence and dialogue with a recalcitrant, revanchist and chauvinist Russia. While analysts are able to map a disparity between Russia’s actions and words, the breadth and depth of Euro-Atlantic ignorance as to Putin’s motivations and intent are staggering. Kremlinologist Edward Lucas wrote in *European Voice*: “We do not know how Putin thinks. We do not know what information he gets. We do not know whose advice he takes, if anyone’s. We do not know what he really fears, or what he really wants.” And Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Putin advisor and architect of “Putinism,” noted: “The fact that the NATO countries do not understand how Putin will react is not an advantage for us, but an additional risk. When you do not know what threats to expect from your former partner who has suddenly decided to become your adversary, the normal reflex that arises is to play it safe.”



This article highlights the new ways and means by which Russia seeks to achieve its strategic goal of establishing a sphere of influence in its neighborhood and projecting its status as a “global player.” To that end, it identifies the tools and instruments Russia has at hand, including information operations, and suggests the propaganda effects of such a strategy on the domestic Russian population. It concludes by touching on the very real risks of miscalculation, escalation and a further deterioration in relations between Russia and the West.

EXPANDING HYBRID CONFLICT

Facilitating and enabling factors for an effective hybrid conflict were present in Crimea, but less so in the Donbass. First, Russia constantly asserted that the collapse of “legitimate executive authority” had taken place in Ukraine — with President Victor Yanukovich fleeing the country — and that the interim authorities in Kyiv were a far-right, neo-Nazi junta supported by the West. Second, Crimea boasted a majority ethnic Russian population with a common language, heritage and identity linked to Russian economic and information space, as well as supportive local elites. Lastly, there were pre-existing Russian military bases in Crimea, as well as proximate military forces based on Russian territory.

The tools and capabilities needed to act are threefold: Russian state-controlled media propaganda provided compelling, one-sided claims of Western hypocrisy, double standards and interference in the domestic affairs of Ukraine, which was said to have resulted in chaos and had the potential to spill over into Russia. Putin had the political will to act and was supported by compliant state institutions such as the Duma, or Russian parliament, the Constitutional Court, the Russian Orthodox Church and the media. Strategic directives from the Kremlin were translated into action by Russian military intelligence exercising operational control through local paramilitaries, the *samoobrona* (separatist self-defense force), on the ground supported covertly by Russian special forces (the so-called “polite little green men”).

In 2014, the means to establish this regional sphere of influence included exploiting gaps between government and society, hard and soft power, political and military commands, and war and peace in the states on Russia’s periphery. Hybrid war in Crimea moved from preparation to attack and then to consolidation phases, whereas in Donbass, we have witnessed preparation and attack phases, and in the Baltic states, Moldova and Georgia, the preparation phase only. This we could call Hybrid Conflict 1.0.

By 2016 we can argue that Russia’s hybrid toolbox and the scope and purpose of its goals is being expanded from seeking a regional sphere of influence in the former Soviet space to a much more ambitious and longer term project — the re-establishment of Russia as a key international player. The means to this end are becoming clearer: create and exploit rifts in the West, delegitimize NATO, weaken the European Union and divide the West. This constitutes Hybrid Conflict 2.0 and operates alongside Hybrid Conflict 1.0, but its scope, scale and objectives differ.

The wholesale, deliberate, targeted destabilization of the EU and NATO is designed to break European and trans-Atlantic solidarity by exploiting pre-existing vulnerabilities and seams

between state and society, as well as inter- and intra-societal fissures, and has the ultimate goal of severing relations among the states themselves. Unexpectedly for Russia, Hybrid Conflict 1.0 only served to unify the West; arguably Hybrid Conflict 2.0 would break that unity.

INSIDE RUSSIAN POLITICS

Why does Russia adopt this strategy? As political authority in Russia is now legitimized through charismatic-historical means, Putin needs to secure continuous “victories.” Charismatic leaders do not preside over defeats, and in the Russian media, Putin will never suffer such a fate. “Neoprop” is the contemporary equivalent of Soviet Agitprop. As Pavlovsky said, “In Russia there is neoprop — the machinery of stultifying television propaganda. It pumps up the population’s loyalty by keeping the mass consciousness in a state of hysteria. Russia’s people are being moved to the world of a sinister political serial, and that is where they live.” In his book, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, Peter Pomerantsev said he was told by a Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Network executive: “The news is the incense by which we bless Putin’s actions, make him the President.”

However, Putin is self-handicapped in that he is a highly popular charismatic-historical leader who oversees a failing economy. He is trapped by opinion polls and the need for popular support; instability increases if support falls because no *bezalternativnost*, or political alternative, to Putin exists. The notion of “No Putin, no Russia” highlights how elections are delegitimized as a means of transferring power and that Russia lacks autonomous, accountable and transparent institutions (media, law, political parties) to manage a post-Putin transition. Putin projects the notion that Russia is a restored “great power” and ties this strength to his own unique and indispensable ability as an effective manager to stand between order and chaos. However, inflation is running at 10-15 percent, real earnings have fallen 10 percent, the middle class is shrinking, and corruption is endemic. The state budget is dependent on high hydrocarbon prices, and Russia is unable to affect the price. The same clear strategic vulnerability that accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union is present in Putin’s Russia. Putin has chosen not to address the root causes of this strategic vulnerability because the network of his very wealthy, close associates who run Russia also manage and own Russian strategic economic sectors, the large state conglomerates that thrive in a rent extraction economy. To undertake structural economic reform, under the mantra of import substitution, would entail rebalancing the economy away from raw material extraction to manufacturing, agriculture, light industries and the service sector. It would mean regime leadership and political system change.

In the context of steadily deteriorating socio-economic trends and given not just the absence but the impossibility of genuine economic reform, how else can the ideology of great-power restoration and Putin’s indispensability be maintained and the Russian population mobilized in support of the regime? Putin could stoke the fires of Russian nationalism, but

this would open Pandora's Box. Russian nationalism in the service of a Russian national state would entail the dismemberment of the Russian Federation. Putin's regime is already aware of the destabilizing dangers of nationalism and has had to constantly constrain nationalist actors in Novorossiia, the separatist-controlled region of eastern Ukraine. Given that 27 Russian regions have autonomous non-Russian ethnic political status — 32 percent of all constituencies covering 40 percent of Russian Federation territory — inciting unrestrained Russian nationalism would be inherently destabilizing and could spin out of control as pressures to secede from non-Russian ethnic entities would grow, both at the center and the periphery. Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus that depend on massive federal budgetary subsidies would revert to a low-intensity conflict zone.

Alternatively, Putin could eschew Russian ethnic nationalism for a broader more inclusive populist project. Further demonization of “fifth columnists,” “national traitors” and “foreign agents” to mobilize society in support of the regime is an option, but how effective will the self-declared “effective managers” that run the regime appear when such subversive activists still pose a threat after a 10-year crackdown? In reality, following the assassination of opposition activist Boris Nemtsov on February 27, 2015, the extra-parliamentary opposition is cowed, while the so-called parliamentary opposition supports the government and does not qualify as a suitable target to mobilize against. Rather, a variant populist project could target a part of the elite — false income declarations are a noose around everyone's neck — and accuse it of corruption, lack of patriotism and even sabotage. The benefits of 1930s-style kangaroo-court show trials are apparent: Society would understand that “we all suffer together,”

scapegoats can be identified and publicly punished, and the populace would be entertained by the circus, which distracts from the lack of bread.

However, destabilization of Russia's elite could lead to the regime unraveling. First, balance between clans could be lost if “warriors” turn on “traders,” or a second “Chekist war” breaks out. Putin would lose his ability to balance factions, the source of his autonomy and power, and could be held hostage by one clan. This is not in his interest. Second, where would the process end? How would it be calibrated and spillovers contained? The entire elite could be contaminated in the process. This approach is as toxic as the “Russia for the Russians” nationalism project.

ACTING BADLY ABROAD

Not only is Russia's domestic policy infected by a corrosive sense of drift, but it is also helpful to realize that after 16 years in power, Putin's foreign policy strategy cupboard is bare. A destabilization strategy can act as a placeholder and fill the foreign policy vacuum. When Putin came into office in 2000, he attempted to integrate Russia into a “Greater West,” but could not do so on his own terms so he abandoned the strategy. “Sovereign globalization” was successful between 2000 and 2012, but it, too, reached the end of its shelf life. By 2008, Putin switched to a strategy centered on building a “Greater Eurasia,” but his own economic and foreign policies sabotaged this effort. The notion that a non-western Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) bloc can be translated into an anti-Western bloc is a nonstarter — China determines its own major state relations and is at best a situational and transactional partner for Russia. Under the pressure of sanctions and countersanctions, EU solidarity has held. In 1939, Stalin



Lyudmila Savchuk worked as part of the Kremlin's information troops, or “trolls,” filling Internet pages with praise for Russian President Vladimir Putin while mocking his critics. Such trolling is central to Russia's media disinformation campaign.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

was able to find a Western partner and divide the West (as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact attests), but there is no clear weakest link to be peeled away in 2016.

At the end of 2015 and following the Syrian intervention, Putin appeared to be signaling to the West that the lessons of Yalta should be relearned. A great-power conference would bestow respect and allow Russia to be seen as leading, with its voice and veto in evidence, as global strategic issues are discussed. A “grand bargain” with the West would involve recognition of Russia’s sphere of influence, allow the buffer zone to be formalized and minimize direct borders with the West.

Rather than gaining respect, however, from his perspective, Putin has had insults and humiliation heaped upon him and his leadership. Personal, public and persistent criticisms of Putin have emanated from Western leaders and institutions in an unprecedented fashion. In January 2016, the presiding judge in a United Kingdom judicial investigation concluded that Putin himself “probably” had direct involvement in the murder of former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006 through polonium-210 poisoning. Then, a United States Treasury official, backed by the White House press spokesperson, confirmed it was the position of the U.S. government that Putin is a criminal who runs a corrupt regime. It is clear that a negotiated grand bargain will not be forthcoming.

What are the means — the tools and instruments — Russia can use to achieve its strategic goals? Nontraditional international actors are available to destabilize Russia’s neighbors and the region. Command and control is organized through the presidential administration (Kremlin) *kurators*, or political advisors, and through them onto Russia’s security services, the FSB, GRU and SVR. Vladislav Surkov is considered to be one such kurator, responsible for Donbass, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian media, particularly television and mainstream newspapers, give the appearance of variety, but according to Aleksei Venediktov, chief editor of the independent Russian radio station Ekho Moskvy, the unity of pro-Kremlin messaging betrays the government’s tight control. Government-controlled media outlets such as Russia Today and Sputnik, supported by “troll factories,” work alongside pro-Russian nongovernmental organizations, public intellectuals and personalities in Europe itself to provide and then amplify a narrative of Western dysfunctionality, and so influence policymakers, political elites and European youth. Andrew Wilson, professor in Ukrainian studies at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at University College London, writes that Russian propaganda can serve four functions: aim to distract and confuse Western audiences; in a “nudge propaganda” manner, “affect and strengthen opinions which already exist”; mobilize the Putin majority; and create a parallel alternative reality. And according to a 2016 paper by the Institute of Modern Russia, money is the most influential tool for obtaining local influence and shaping the attitudes of opinion makers.

Russia can mobilize a number of actors and resources for this effort. In its immediate neighborhood, protracted conflicts proliferate. These include Transnistria, Crimea, Donbass, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and North Cyprus. Proxy forces can be found in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus. Russian compatriots and the influence of the Russian

Orthodox Church can support the concept of a *Russkiy Mir* (Russian world), as can Russian funded nongovernmental organizations. Within the post-Soviet *Russkiy Mir*, history, ethnicity, language and religion can all be politicized, and the rights and interests of 30 million ethnic Russians, 300 million Russian speakers — and even those who feel culturally close to Russia — can be defended from so-called external “aggression” and “provocation.” Iconic and symbolic Russian and Soviet historical sites such as graveyards, war memorials and monuments can all be leveraged for effect.

In Europe, Russia is able to fund and otherwise support anti-EU, anti-U.S. and anti-migrant parties by spotlighting issues that mobilize their members. These parties include: Jobbik and Fidesz (Hungary), UKIP and BNP (U.K.); Golden Dawn and Syriza (Greece); AfD and PEGIDA (Germany); ATAKA (Bulgaria); National Front (France); and in the European Parliament, the Europe of Nations and Freedom group, which has 25 percent of the vote and consists of 35 far right and anti-EU parties, 32 of which are pro-Russian.

With regard to Ukraine, the chief of staff of Ukraine’s intelligence service, Oleksandr Tkachuk, outlined for VICE News in February 2016 the characteristics of Russia’s 10-year destabilization plan in Ukraine. The plan involves “creating political instability, causing gradual disintegration of government structures, emphasizing grievances among the population, and disrupting all aspects of political, economic and social life.”

That same month, Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä accused Russia of channeling migrants into Finland to destabilize it, echoing Norwegian protests from late 2015. Hans-Georg Maassen, the chief of Germany’s domestic security agency, was quoted in *Der Spiegel* saying that Russia was using KGB-style “old measures” of misinformation and destabilization against Germany, including increased intelligence activity, hacking of Bundestag computers and helping organize demonstrations by Russian-Germans over the Lisa case — a fabricated story of the rape of an ethnic Russian migrant in Berlin. The U.S. and European allies have accused Russia of breaching international humanitarian law in Syria by killing civilians through indiscriminate bombings with nonprecision weapons to “weaponize refugees,” an accusation leveled by then-French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius at the February 2016 Munich Security Conference.

The role of Russia’s media is to demonstrate that the Western liberal democratic model is dysfunctional by implying things such as Jews are fleeing Europe and ethnic Russian migrants are being raped in Berlin. European stock exchanges in London, Frankfurt and Warsaw are under cyber attack and can collapse, or critical national infrastructure such as nuclear power plants, energy and transport infrastructure can malfunction. The U.K. “Brexit” referendum in June 2016, the expected large-scale arrival of migrants and refugees through the spring and summer of 2016 and the stress this places on the Schengen and eurozones, and increasing anti-German and anti-EU feelings in Poland or anti-Polish feelings in Lithuania all demonstrate real difficulties that can be exploited. Russia can simply amplify existing tensions rather than instigating and fabricating new ones.

TARGETING THE WEST

Although a destabilization strategy might be a last resort, it meets Russian domestic and foreign policy legitimacy needs in that it helps maintain Putin's popularity at a time when economic reform is not on the table and all viable alternatives are exhausted. How is this so? For Russian domestic politics, destabilization of the West has benefits. It allows for a semi-mobilization of the Russian people against the West, while at the same time undercutting calls for reform, liberalization and democratization of politics in Russia. Essentially, Putin's state-controlled media can argue: "Things may be bad in Russia but they are worse in Europe;" "you may be poor but you are poor in a great country — greatness has a price, people must sacrifice."

In addition, managed chaos has its attractions as conflicts are a business. As Gleb Pavlovsky wrote in an October 2015 article for *The Moscow Times*, "We help to create crises that spin out of control and then escalate them further — all so that Russia's leaders can be the saviors who protect everyone from the worst outcome." Vested interests, not least Putin's own professional security service and inner circle, will increasingly exaggerate threats to optimize their share of resource allocation and access to extra-budgetary sources of money. Indeed, money laundering and other sources of illicit revenue will fund the destabilization effort, as this maintains the fiction that it would not be state directed.

In foreign policy terms, there is a logic at work: If Russia cannot strengthen itself, it can weaken the West — power is relative after all — and this very ability to destabilize demonstrates that there can be no security in Europe with Russia. Power is power and it should be respected. In addition, according to leading opposition politician and former Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, the Putin leadership "believes that everything in the world can be bought and sold. This is their main credo, this is why they believe that, sooner or later, they will be able to exert even stronger pressure on the West, which they think must agree with their understanding of life, must cancel the sanctions, and so on." "A bit more pressure and all will be well" is the governing logic. We can also assume that Russia believes it can calibrate the destabilization and maintain plausible deniability, as it has attempted to do in the Donbass. The "controlled instability" paradigm is well-practiced and is a well-developed lever of influence. Putin will calculate that after the presidential election in 2018 with a divided West on his doorstep, rapprochement with some Western countries will be possible and Russia will be able to secure finances and investments again.

RISK OF MISCALCULATION

The risks of escalation, crisis, and then conflict are much higher because miscalculation is inherent in the DNA of Hybrid Conflict 2.0. There are at least three potential sources of miscalculation: first, Russia's implementation; second, Western responses; and third, how this cycle combines to further destabilize the Russian elite, raising the ultimate prospect of regime implosion and federal disintegration.

In terms of Russia's implementation, the more command and control is exercised over autonomous actors (e.g., organized

crime groups), the greater the ability of Russia to direct and calibrate destabilizing attacks, but the less its ability to claim plausible deniability. The use of a Russian-supplied BUK anti-aircraft weapons system to down Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 over Donbass in July 2014 demonstrates that momentum and inertia are factors, because they degrade command and control over time. In addition, as many conflicts have demonstrated, when state services employ irregular proxy forces, these forces have their own priorities, agendas, mentalities and views of a preferred outcome. The interests of Russian security services and those of organized criminal groups or local warlords and corrupted businessmen may be compatible, but they are not necessarily shared and can diverge.

The Russian national security decision-makers who initiate and supervise implementation of such a strategy are well-versed in brinkmanship and scorn the notion of abdication. Russia's national security decision-making community is wedded to an end-of-the-world, "no surrender" mentality and has a vested interest in not finding accommodation — understood as capitulation and treason — with the West. This group is increasingly volatile, weakened and exhausted, with no alternative strategy to offer, and determined to strike out and throw the first punch to gain respect.

In terms of Western responses, the first challenge is analytical. "Implausible culpability" complements the notion of plausible deniability. It's in Russia's interest to exaggerate its influence and hint at its ability to organize or trigger crises and exacerbate and antagonize pre-existing tensions. This further confuses analysis and, therefore, undercuts a unified and calibrated response from the West.

At heart, there is a fundamental perception and misperception problem: The West thinks Russia lashes out from a position of weakness; Russia thinks it is strong and that failure to act defensively to prevent encroachments would itself constitute weakness, and that the West is poised to exploit vulnerabilities. What is the optimal balance among defense, deterrence and dialogue in such a context? When does research into Russian-backed organized-crime cyber attacks escalate into an offensive against these groups?

Russia's own elite is becoming more destabilized as it becomes increasingly apparent that, not only does Putin not have a clear strategy for addressing fundamental structural and systemic weaknesses within Russia, but that his policies, or lack of them, actually accelerate the malaise. When the perception of suicidal statecraft confronts the elite's well-developed instinct for self-preservation, what gives first? How many of the current elite lose and how much tension is acceptable? What follows afterward?

In 2017, the stabilization fund will be spent and siloviki clan competition for control over corrupt rents will be the only arbiter of power. How will it end? Nearly 100 years ago, conservative noble elites withdrew support for Czar Nicholas II. He fell, and the caretaker Kerensky government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks. Then, 25 years ago, the elite fought a war of "all against all," as the events of August 1991 and the October 1993 illustrated. A strategy to destabilize the West may well destabilize Russia's elites, initiate a mismanaged regime change and cause the disintegration of the Russian Federation. □