

Tactics and Instruments in Putin's Grand Strategy

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Over the past decade, if not since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian government has deployed a wide array of tactics and instruments in its efforts to restore a sphere of influence over the former Soviet space. But the Western response to Russia suggests that American and European policy-makers have largely failed to grasp the systematic way that Russia's various instruments link together to achieve its goals—and thus have failed to come up with a strategy to counter Putinism.

Earlier chapters in this volume have set forth the scope and ambition Putin's grand idea, and make clear how Putin, in adopting this agenda, committed himself to its success. The following chapters, which form the bulk of this study, are devoted to a review of the fate of his efforts so far in the eleven countries of the former Soviet Union outside the Baltic States, as well as the responses of China, Europe, and the United States to this process. In perusing these chapters, readers will encounter a bewildering array of tactical steps and instruments deployed by the Kremlin, both in the former Soviet space and in the West. At first sight, these may appear *ad hoc*; but a core argument of this book is that they form a coherent strategy.

Before turning to this country-by country review, it may be useful to enumerate the various tactical arrows that Putin has in his quiver, and which he has been actively utilizing. It goes without saying that these instruments are not all deployed together, and that clusters of these which may be useful in one setting are not deemed beneficial in others. What works in the Caucasus may not work in Ukraine, and vice versa. Moreover, Putin's ambition requires that he deftly employ a shifting array of instruments in order to confuse and render ineffective any foreign opposition, especially from the West.

This cocktail of instruments, which could be termed Putin's toolbox, is part new and part old. Indeed, antecedents to the instruments used by the Russian leadership today are apparent in Soviet and even Czarist history; especially notable in this regard are the active subversion of target governments by discrediting their leaders and applying economic pressures. Others, such as the use of energy warfare and the modern media for propaganda, are novel. A combination of some of these instruments has been used in every former Soviet state; indeed, some are being used against Western countries as well. The manipulation of ethnic animosities and creation of "frozen conflicts" were both tried and tested in the Caucasus and Moldova before being deployed in Ukraine; however, Moscow first tested the instrument of cyber-warfare against EU and NATO member Estonia. Only then did Moscow deploy it with considerable effect against Georgia, along with a full military invasion in 2008.

What is striking about the various instruments used by the Russian leadership is their tactical sophistication and the level of coordination among them. The management of tactical instruments in so many different areas, across so many governmental institutions, and over such extended periods of time, all make it clear that they arose from the classical methods of statecraft as defined and practiced by the old Soviet KGB. That they all operate together shows that they are all parts of a single process, integrated and coordinated at the highest levels of the Russian government. The secretive nature of the process for selecting tactics obscures the organizations and groups who carry it out. Nonetheless, the unavoidable conclusion is that the process is not outsourced: it is run from the President's office itself, under Putin's hands-on leadership. Central to the entire effort are the FSB, successor to the KGB, and GRU, the military intelligence service.

The direct and apparently constant attention that Mr. Putin devotes to selecting and applying the various instruments at his disposal confirms that the restoration of Russia's status as a major power is his highest priority, higher even than domestic development. Indeed, Putin appears to have staked his presidency and legacy on the outcome of this effort.

Because many of the tactics and instruments under discussion are covert, one must be tentative in speaking of them. That Moscow often uses disinformation to cover its tracks makes the task all the more challenging. Nonetheless, it is

possible to set forth a list of actions on the part of Moscow that reveal in quite concrete terms what tactics it considers relevant to the task of restoring what Putin considers the substance and honor of the Russian state.

Diplomacy and Business

It would be wrong to claim that Russia's sole tactical tools are coercive in nature. While these exist, the Kremlin has also shown itself adept at the use of traditional diplomatic tools, and in combining these with trade and investments.

Like all states, Russia uses diplomacy to attain its goals; indeed, Russia possesses a significant advantage over every other post-Soviet state in this regard. The Soviet foreign ministry was staffed mainly by Russians. Whereas other post-Soviet states had to build their diplomatic institutions and foreign embassies from scratch, Russia inherited the bulk of the staff and the totality of the institutions of the Soviet foreign ministry. Russia (which counted 51 percent of the population of the USSR) did not allow the division of these properties among the successor states. Thus, while Russia has had well-staffed and functioning embassies around the world, most of the other post-Soviet states have had to work hard to deploy competent diplomats in even a limited number of countries.

Moscow is also acutely aware of the importance of personal relations—and pressure—at the top level of politics. President Putin and his long-time foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, regularly visit most post-Soviet states, bringing large delegations and bringing Russian pressure to bear directly on the leaders of these countries. This is in sharp contrast to the relatively low level of Western direct engagement with these countries: diplomatic dialogue with the U.S., for example, takes place at best at the level of an Assistant or Deputy Assistant Secretary of State. Aside from George W. Bush's 2005 visit to Georgia, no American president has ever visited any of the non-EU former Soviet states. The Secretary of State does so rarely, and since Donald Rumsfeld left the Pentagon, the Secretary of Defense has been largely an unknown figure in the region. The EU is somewhat more visible, but only a small selection of EU member states regularly conduct high-level diplomacy in the region. This reality has

contributed significantly to the feeling of vulnerability to Putin's ambitions felt by many leaders in the region.

A key element of Russian diplomacy has been to undermine the cohesiveness and purpose of international institutions. This has been particularly pronounced in the OSCE and Council of Europe. In the OSCE, Russia has worked successfully to undermine the organization's activities in democratic development and election monitoring. In the Council of Europe, it has followed a multi-pronged strategy.¹ It has opposed the organization's efforts to support democratic principles, but it has also worked to co-opt members of the Council's Parliamentary Assembly. Simultaneously, it has sought to incapacitate the European Court of Human Rights by blocking procedural reforms and thus slowing down the operation of the overloaded Court.² Similarly, Russian diplomacy has been adept at identifying and exploiting divisions between European states in order to delay or block EU common action against Russia.

Furthermore, one of the chief differences between the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia lie in the economic realm: Russia today is full of western investors, ranging from some of the world's largest multinationals to small independent adventurers. The Kremlin has astutely used the interest of foreign investors in Russia to forge an effective lobby for its interests abroad. Thus, the large scale of German-Russian trade has meant that German foreign policy has often been hostage to Russian interests. The same is true across Europe; and even in the United States, in spite of the relatively small role Russia plays in U.S. foreign trade, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce mobilized with extraordinary speed to take out full-page newspaper ads opposing any sanctions on Russia over Ukraine.

Information and Propaganda

The control and manipulation of information flows is a cornerstone of Putin's domestic and foreign policy. In fact, one of the very first steps Putin took upon coming to power in 1999 was to assert control over the Russian media. Putin

¹ Peter Pomerantsev, "Yes, Russia Matters: Putin's Guerrilla Strategy," *World Affairs*, September/October 2014, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/yes-russia-matters-putin%E2%80%99s-guerrilla-strategy>.

² Courtney Hillebrecht, "The Rocky Relationship between Russia and the European Court of Human Rights," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2014.

saw this as a *sine qua non* for the restoration of the “power vertical,” and an essential step in the restoration of Russian control over the North Caucasus. His predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, lost the first Chechen war largely because of the immense unpopularity of the war effort, an unpopularity that was fanned by the free Russian media at the time. By contrast, the role of the oligarchs’ media campaign in bringing about Yeltsin’s re-election seems to have alerted Putin to the critical role of media in politics.

Restoring state control over domestic media had immediate foreign policy implications, given the popularity of Russian television across the former Soviet space. Henceforth, the Russian media beamed to audiences across the former USSR a carefully tailored image of Putin as a modern, strong, and principled leader. This has caused many societies to accept what is essentially a Russian perspective on world events. For example, many across the Eurasian space believe the CIA was behind the 2003-05 color revolutions and the 2014 Ukrainian revolution; that Georgia started the 2008 war; and that Russia’s annexation of Crimea was correct and just.

The power of Russian media is weakest in countries like Azerbaijan and Georgia where native-language television dominates, and strongest in those countries (including all of Central Asia) where local language programming is weak or of poor quality. The political implications of this are best illustrated by the Russian media’s role in the overthrow of the Bakiev government in Kyrgyzstan. When Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev reneged on a promise to oust the U.S. from the Manas air base outside Bishkek in 2010, Putin’s government embarked on a punitive campaign against him that included two weeks of highly confrontational and aggressive rhetoric aired on Russian television that was re-broadcast in Kyrgyzstan. This campaign played a considerable role in Bakiev’s ouster in April 2010.³

Outside the post-Soviet space, the reach of Russian television was very limited. To correct this, the Kremlin has poured millions of dollars into the Russia To-

³ Stephen Blank, “Russia’s Fingerprints in Kyrgyzstan’s Storm,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 14, 2010, <http://caciaanalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12033>; Simon Tisdall, “Kyrgyzstan: A Russian Revolution,” *Guardian*, April 8, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/apr/08/kyrgyzstan-vladimir-putin-barack-obama>.

day television channel, now known simply as RT. RT features sophisticated programming and well-spoken western journalists and news anchors. Its news reporting offers a clear Russian perspective of events, and provides an outlet for fringe, often discredited western conspiracy theorists, presented as authoritative in their respective fields. RT has come under increasing scrutiny recently over its reporting during the Ukraine crisis,⁴ but as of this writing it is on a course of expansion into new languages and markets, chiefly in Germany.

Subversion through Co-Optation

Subversion is a key element of Putin's strategy to weaken independent statehood and boost pro-Russian forces across the former Soviet territories. This subversion ranges from the support of opposition politicians and the penetration of government institutions to violent campaigns involving bombings and assassinations.

The Soviet security services possessed a large infrastructure in each union republic, the remnants of which formed the cornerstone for Russian subversive activities after 1991. The newly independent states built their security sector largely on the basis of legacy personnel from the Soviet period, which were deeply penetrated by the central Soviet security services. Thus, as a rule of thumb, the less reformed a post-Soviet country's security sector is, the more it is penetrated by Russian interests. Some countries, chiefly Estonia and Georgia, concluded that the only solution was to completely dismantle these structures and build them from scratch with younger personnel without a Soviet background. But most countries did not follow this path.

The case of Georgia provides striking insights into this problem. When President Mikheil Saakashvili first met Vladimir Putin in 2004, Putin explicitly told Saakashvili to take particular care of Georgia's Minister of State Security, Valeri Khaburdzania—already known to western governments for his relationship with the Russian secret services. Saakashvili fired him immediately.⁵ Few

⁴ Stephen Heyman, "A Voice of Mother Russia," in English, *The New York Times*, May 18, 2008; "Putin Fights War of Images and Propaganda with Russia Today Channel," *Spiegel Online*, August 13, 2013; Julia Ioffe, "What Is Russia Today?," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 2010.

⁵ Author's conversation with Mikheil Saakashvili, Tbilisi, August 2013. In official testimony to the parliamentary inquiry held by the Georgian Parliament into the August 2008

leaders have been willing or able to take the risk of following Saakashvili's example and purging their power ministries. In Kyrgyzstan, following the ouster of President Bakiev in 2010, Russia seconded over twenty intelligence officials to Bishkek, where they exert direct control of the Kyrgyz security services.⁶ In some countries, such as Armenia, representatives of the security sector with such backgrounds have reached the very top of the political system.

This list could be extended, but the point is that in most post-Soviet states the Kremlin has maintained in key positions a network of senior officials whose loyalty is at best questionable and who, at worst, take orders from the Kremlin rather than the government they ostensibly serve. The West vastly underestimates the gravity of this challenge to the construction of independent statehood in formerly Soviet countries.

In addition to infiltrating government institutions, the Kremlin has also successfully maintained its network in another sector closely monitored by the KGB in Soviet times: religious institutions. This is particularly pronounced in Orthodox Christian countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, where the Orthodox Churches maintain close ties with Russia. It is no coincidence, therefore, that leading Church representatives have spoken out against the corrupting influence of the European Union at precisely the same time when Putin was making such anti-European propaganda a staple of his state ideology.

The Kremlin applies a variant of similar strategies in the West as well, all to advance its main goal. Its methods range from co-opting top politicians and other influential persons directly or through PR firms, to outright bribes to individual journalists and researchers.

The practice of co-opting political leaders in Europe is best known through the case of Germany's former Prime Minister, Gerhard Schröder. As Prime Minister, Schröder strongly advocated the Nord Stream pipeline, a Russian project to

war, Saakashvili testified as follows: "He told us that our security minister – Valery Khaburdzania – was his friend and asked us to take care of him and not to touch him. I have nothing against Valery Khaburdzania, but the fact is that Putin, the leader of the state, which was bombing us, told me that our security minister was their friend." "Abkhazia Resigns with Politics in Mind," *Civil Georgia*, December 6, 2008, www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20086

⁶ Ryskeldy Satke, "Russia Navigates Uncertain Kyrgyz Waters," *Asia Times Online*, July 17, 2013, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/CEN-01-170713.html.

deliver gas directly to Germany through the Baltic Sea instead of supplying gas across Eastern European countries. Shortly before the end of his term in 2005, Schröder's government provided guarantees for 1 billion Euros for the project; three months after leaving office he accepted a post as Chairman of the Nord Stream company.⁷ Ever since, Schröder has been a reliable spokesman for the Kremlin. In 2008, Gazprom recruited former Finnish Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen as an advisor to Nord Stream.⁸ With respect to the Eurasian Union, Putin's diligent courting of presidents Lukashenko, Nazarbayev, and others follows the same pattern, even if he has not yet succeeded in recruiting a former national president to lead his cause.

The Kremlin has invested dozens of millions of dollars in public relations firms in the West. Washington-based Ketchum Inc. has reported in federal filings income of \$55 million from the Russian government and Gazprom.⁹ Ketchum, in turn, subcontracts firms affiliated with influential individuals, including former members of Congress, in its work to improve Russia's image and influence American policy.¹⁰ Ketchum subsidiary GPlus manages the Kremlin's interests in Brussels, and several other European countries, in a similar way. GPlus has specialized in recruiting former high-level European diplomats, enabling it to provide Moscow with an advantage in negotiating European politics and exploiting differences among member states.¹¹ During the Ukrainian crisis, such western firms busied themselves with explaining and justifying Moscow's position, and arguing against the adoption of sanctions by the West.

Considerable evidence suggests that Moscow systematically enrolls think tanks, experts and journalists supportive of its cause—or to oppose its rivals. In addition to gaining support for its campaign to reestablish the power and dignity of

⁷ Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. 211-244.

⁸ "Gazprom found and Underwater Lobbyist," *Kommersant*, August 18, 2008, http://www.kommersant.com/p1012843/r_529/Gazprom_invited_Paavo_Lipponen_to_its_project/.

⁹ Andy Sullivan, "Russia's U.S. PR Firm Distances Itself from Ukraine Dispute," *Reuters*, March 6, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/ukraine-crisis-ketchum-idUKL1NoM22BB20140306>.

¹⁰ Eamon Javers, "Who's on Putin's American Payroll?," *CNBC*, March 5, 2014, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/101465564#>.

¹¹ "Gazprom Lobbyists in Europe," *FreePl.info*, citing *Gazeta Polska*, June 1, 2011, <http://freepl.info/156-gazprom-lobbyists-europe>.

the Russian state, Moscow uses these connections to gain support for its positions on other international and environmental issues. In Bulgaria, for example, a sudden wave of Russian-supported environmental protests against fracking led to the banning of the practice in 2012.¹²

Both overtly and covertly, Moscow is working to co-opt think tanks and individual researchers. One of the most successful vehicles has been the Valdai discussion club, which for over a decade has brought western international affairs experts to Russia—including sharp critics of the Kremlin—for discussions featuring Putin himself. Such direct access to policy-makers is a scarce commodity for the think tank community, and returnees from the Valdai forums regularly organize events to share their impressions. The purpose is to moderate criticism of Putin and the Kremlin among these participants. This tactic has had mixed success, however, as a number of participants have refused to tone down their criticism of the Russian government. Journalist Joshua Kucera has provided a window into how Moscow systematically seeks to recruit individual experts. In a 2008 article in the *Atlantic*, Kucera details how a Russian embassy official offered to pay him for publishing articles supporting the Russian government position.¹³

Since the reestablishment of Moscow's geopolitical power and prestige is Putin's highest priority, these tools are effective in advancing this objective as well, blunting the development of a powerful response to Russian policies.

Support for Opposition Forces, Civil Society, and Extremists

When governments refuse to toe the Kremlin's line, a favorite tactic has been to harbor opposition politicians. Thus, Moscow is a favorite place of exile for Azerbaijani, Georgian, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen politicians who fell out of favor with their governments. In Georgia after the 2008 invasion, the Kremlin built ties with the political party of former Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze (who continues to be a recipient of considerable Russian financial support) in order to undermine the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation. As discussed in the

¹² Aviezer Tucker, "The New Power Map," *Foreign Affairs*, December 19, 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138597/aviezer-tucker/the-new-power-map?page=show>.

¹³ Joshua Kucera, "Spooked," *Atlantic*, December 1, 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/12/spooked/307143/>.

chapter on Azerbaijan in this volume, a similar tactic was used to put pressure on Azerbaijan ahead of its 2013 presidential election. In Latvia, with a large ethnic Russian population, Moscow has obtained influence over several political parties, which can play crucial roles as kingmakers. As discussed in the next section, Moscow is now using similar strategies in Western Europe, where it supports extreme-right political parties that have shown themselves sympathetic to the cultural and political aspects of his campaign to reassert Russia's prominence.

An intriguing and more recent technique employed by the Kremlin in advancing its national program is to support the creation of civil society organizations. This tactic, which emulates western support for such entities, is most effective in the more liberal societies such as Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan. In Georgia, a senior defense official told an author of this chapter in June 2014 that Georgian officials had identified at least seventeen civil society organizations created and/or funded by Russia, most of which were working to undermine support for European integration among the Georgian public and, by implication, support for Georgia's eventual reunion with Russia. Moscow's growing resort to this tactic helps explain the increased restrictions on NGOs imposed by the less liberal states of the region.

One of the newest tactics adopted by the Kremlin in pursuit of its national program is to finance of extreme-right parties in Western Europe deemed sympathetic to the Russian cause. Moscow cranked up this tactic in 2014, when it observed that extreme-right parties across Europe were siding with Putin against America and the EU on the Ukraine crisis. That there are solid ideological bases for such links cannot be doubted. But in a number of cases, such as Hungary's anti-Semitic Jobbik party, a direct financial connection has been identified, and allegedly investigated by the country's authorities.¹⁴ Tellingly, a number of these parties sent members to serve as election "observers" of the Russian-sponsored referendum on independence in the Crimea, a move which Russia

¹⁴ Gabriel Ronay, "Hungary's Far-Right Backed by 'Rolling Russian Roubles'" *The Herald*, June 13, 2010, <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/world-news/hungary-s-far-right-backed-by-rolling-moscow-roubles-1.1034539>.

could claim to legitimize what was in reality a deeply corrupted process.¹⁵ Potentially the most destructive manifestation of this Russian link with extreme nationalists in Europe is the outright pro-Putin *Front National* in France, which won the European elections in May 2014, and whose leader, Marine Le Pen, currently leads French presidential polls.¹⁶ The implication of a pro-Putin candidate taking office in any NATO and EU member state, let alone one the size of France, are alarming indeed. In this case Russia may succeed in its efforts even without paying its French allies.

Sabotage and Terrorism

On a darker note, Russian state institutions, in their effort to promote Putin's national cause, have been linked to the use of violence, sabotage, bombing campaigns and the sponsoring of civic unrest across the former Soviet space. In this connection, one recalls the mysterious 1999 bombing of apartment houses in Volgodonsk and Moscow and the failed bombing in Ryazan, which played a key role in Vladimir Putin's rise to power. As John Dunlop has detailed in a meticulously researched account, the evidence of Russian secret service involvement in these events is overwhelming.¹⁷

Russia's withholding of energy has been an important tactical tool in the Ukrainian conflict. But this was no innovation in 2014. Back in January 2006, explosions destroyed the electricity and natural gas transportation network through which Russian energy reached Georgia. Russian leaders blamed unidentified North Caucasian terrorists, who were neither apprehended nor even much searched for, and Russian authorities dragged their feet in repairing the

¹⁵ Mitchell A. Orenstein, "Putin's Western Allies," *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141067/mitchell-a-orenstein/putins-western-allies>; Carol Matlack, "Why Europe's Far Right is Getting Cozy with Russia," *BusinessWeek*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-04-24/why-europes-far-right-is-getting-cozy-with-russia>.

¹⁶ Hugh Carnegy, "Marine Le Pen Takes Poll Lead in Race for Next French Presidential Election," *Financial Times*, July 31, 2014.

¹⁷ John B. Dunlop, *The Moscow Bombings of September 1999: Examinations of Russian Terrorist Attacks at the Onset of Vladimir Putin's Rule*, Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2014; Amy Knight, "Finally, We Know about the Moscow Bombings," *The New York Review of Books*, November 22, 2012; Scott Anderson, "Vladimir Putin's Dar Rise to Power," *GQ*, September 2009.

damaged infrastructure.¹⁸ Between 2009 and 2011, moreover, Russia was implicated in a series of further bombings which rocked Georgia, including one targeting the perimeter of the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi.¹⁹ In Turkmenistan in 2009, Gazprom abruptly closed off the flow of gas in the pipeline carrying Turkmen gas to Russia, causing the pipeline to explode.²⁰ All these instances were connected directly with Russia's quest for control over a former Soviet republic.

A number of mysterious incidents require further investigation. For example, on August 5, 2008, a terrorist act in eastern Turkey attributed to the Kurdish separatist PKK blew up the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline carrying Azerbaijani oil to the Mediterranean, and led to a several-week long halt to shipments. This constitutes the *only* attack by the PKK on major energy infrastructure on record. Further arousing suspicions is the fact that it occurred three days before Russia launched its invasion of Georgia.²¹ Similarly, during the violent unrest in the western Kazakh city of Zhanaozen in 2010, local sources report that the violence was started by groups of non-local men having arrived from the neighboring North Caucasus.²² In these and other instances, all connected with Putin's grand strategy, there is widespread suspicion of Russian involvement, but by the nature of the events, an absence of hard confirming evidence.

¹⁸ Andrei Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War," in Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, eds., *The Guns of August 2008*, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2009, p. 60.

¹⁹ Johanna Popjanevski and Svante E. Cornell, *The 2009-2011 Bombing Campaign in Georgia: Who Did It, and Why?*, Washington/Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Joint Center, Silk Road Paper, March 2012, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/1203Georgia.pdf>.

²⁰ Pavel K. Baev, "China Trumps Gazprom," *Moscow Times*, December 17, 2009, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/china-trumps-gazprom/396292.html>. Gazprom had agreed to pay European prices for its purchases of Central Asian gas in July 2008, and the rapid decline in energy prices and European demand in 2009 led Russia to import Central Asian gas at a loss; tellingly, Gazprom used the explosion as a pretext to stop purchases, and did not honor the take-or-pay provision in the contract.

²¹ Svante E. Cornell, "Pipeline Power: The War in Georgia and the Future of the Caucasian Energy Corridor," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 1, Winter 2009.

²² Personal communication by Kazakh researchers. The logic would have been to shake up Kazakhstan and undermine President Nazarbayev's hold on power with a view to the inevitable succession of power; and make Kazakhstan more pliant in negotiations over the Eurasian Union.

Finally, Russia has engaged in outright assassinations of several opponents who appeared to threaten Russia's hegemonic project. This began in 1995 and 1998, long before Putin's rise to power, with two attempts on the life of Georgia's then president. The 1995 attempt's chief suspect—former Georgian security chief Igor Giorgadze—fled to Moscow on a Russian military transport plane from the Vaziani air base outside Tbilisi only hours after the assassination attempt failed. In 2006, Putin officially granted Giorgadze political asylum and helped him set up a political party in Georgia.²³ Similarly, Russian secret services have been credibly implicated in two attempts on the life of Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine's third president, immediately before his election.²⁴ More widely known was the 2006 murder with polonium of Russian dissident Aleksandr Litvinenko in London, which British investigators have concluded was "undeniably state-sponsored terrorism on Moscow's part."²⁵ In 2004, Russian agents killed exiled Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in Qatar, but were apprehended. The Qatari indictment claims the order was issued by Russian defense minister Sergey Ivanov personally.²⁶ These cases must be seen in the context of a growing number of assassinations of such domestic dissidents as independent editor Yuri Shchekochikhin and journalist-activist Anna Politkovskaya. Taken together, these many instances attest to the spreading use

²³ Vladimir Socor, "Moscow Grooms Accused Terrorist Giorgadze for Role in Georgia," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 30, 2006.

²⁴ Tom Mangold, "The Man Who Survived Russia's Poison Chalice," *The Age*, January 23, 2005, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/World/The-man-who-survived-Russias-poison-chalice/2005/01/22/1106334263427.html>; Taras Kuzio, "Details Emerge of Second Russian Plot to Assassinate Yushchenko," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 4, 2005. The dioxin poison used on Yushchenko, known as TCDD, is produced in only three laboratories worldwide; two provided samples, while the Russian laboratory refused Ukrainian requests to provide samples. "Russia Blamed over Poison Probe," *BBC News*, September 11, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6988860.stm>.

²⁵ David Leppard and Mark Franchetti, "Litvinenko: Clues Point to the Kremlin," *Sunday Times*, July 22, 2007,

http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/world_news/article68531.ece; Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russian Political Intrigue Means Putin Could Not Have Been in the Dark about Litvinenko Attack," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 29, 2006; Felgenhauer, "The Polonium Trail Leads to Moscow," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, December 6, 2006; See also John B. Dunlop, "Post-Communist Political Violence: The Poisoning of Aleksandr Litvinenko," in Paul Hollander, ed., *Political Violence: Belief, Behavior and Legitimation*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 93-108.

²⁶ "Sergei Ivanov tied to the Case of the Russian in Qatar," *Kommersant*, April 14, 2004. http://www.kommersant.com/p466080/r_1/Sergei_Ivanov_Tied_to_the_Case/.

of state-ordered political assassinations of both foreign and domestic opponents since Putin came to power—a powerful tool if any to suppress opposition to Russian policy goals in the former Soviet states and beyond.

Economic and Energy Warfare

A further well-honed Russian tactic, and one that has been the subject of considerable analysis, is the use of economic warfare against neighboring countries that evince centrifugal aspirations with respect to Russian control. This includes the disruption of energy supplies to neighbors; import restrictions on neighbors' products; and debt-for-asset swaps designed to assert control over their economies.

In the West, at least until 2006, Russia had been known since Soviet times as a reliable and stable supplier of energy. This contrasts starkly with the experience of post-Soviet states, i.e., states that Putin seeks to include in his Eurasian Union, virtually all of whom have been exposed to politically motivated manipulations of supply, or the threat thereof, a tactic Moscow can use as a result of the old Moscow-centric energy infrastructure inherited from Soviet times. Indeed, as early as 2006 a report by the Swedish Defense Research Institute's Robert Larsson identified over fifty instances of Russian manipulation of energy supplies for political purposes.²⁷ The tactic is relatively sophisticated, involving carrots as well as sticks. Thus, Moscow may offer preferential prices to loyal allies (Armenia, Belarus), punitive price hikes for countries, including allies, that seek to diverge from Russia's preferred policies (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Ukraine), and outright supply cuts to whomever Moscow judges to be disloyal (Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Baltic States, and even otherwise loyal Belarus).

A further tactic, employed increasingly since the mid-2000s, is the manipulation of access to the Russian market. Thus, products ranging from Georgian and Moldovan mineral water and wine to Ukrainian chocolates and Polish meat have been suddenly banned as a result of decisions by Russia's Federal Service

²⁷ Robert Larsson, *Russia's Energy Policy: Security Dimensions and Russia's Reliability as an Energy Supplier*, Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Institute, March 2006, http://www.foi.se/ReportFiles/foir_1934.pdf.

for Supervision of Consumer Rights, *Rospotrebnadzor*, and its leader, Gennady Onishchenko. These decisions have been patently political in nature, with the imposition of bans coinciding with efforts by the offending countries to distance themselves from Russian control. In Georgia, the imposition of such measures was a prelude to the outright closure of trade and communications between the two countries in 2006.

Finally, Moscow has used debts accrued by neighboring states to secure strategic state-owned assets in these countries. Never mind that many of these debts arose from the newly independent state's continuing dependence on Russian supply lines; in the end they strengthen Russian influence in, and control over, the economies of target countries. In Armenia, for example, Russia in 2002-2003 acquired several power plants, including Armenia's only nuclear reactor; this left Russia control of almost 90 percent of Armenia's energy market.²⁸ Following these moves, the decision by Armenia's president to join the Eurasian Union was almost a foregone conclusion. Similar schemes have been implemented in Kyrgyzstan. In Ukraine, meanwhile, Moscow for years has used the same methods to gain control over the country's natural gas grid, but in this case without success.

Creation and Manipulation of Protracted Conflicts and Ethnic Tensions

Moscow's role in the unresolved conflicts of Eurasia is as old as these conflicts themselves. To be sure, Moscow did not directly create the conflicts that broke out during the transition from Soviet rule, though the Soviet Union's ethno-federal structure provided the institutions that made later meddling in these inter-ethnic tensions possible. The main cause of these conflicts was the real animosities that emerged as a result of competing nationalist territorial ambitions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, between Georgians and Abkhazians and South Ossetians, and between Moldova and Transnistria. In all three of these cases, as well as others, Moscow intervened at an early stage. Rather than

²⁸ Emil Danielyan, "Russia Tightens Grip on Armenia with Debt Agreements," *Eurasianet*, May 6, 2003, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eavo50703.shtml>.

seeking to calm tensions, Moscow poured fuel on the fire in a classic policy of divide and rule.²⁹

Over several years Moscow actively supported the *de facto* secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh's secession from Azerbaijan, and Transnistria's from Moldova. Then when a fragile peace was achieved, Russia moved aggressively to gain a central position in the peacekeeping and negotiation mechanisms for all these conflicts. It then proceeded to use that position as a mediator to consolidate its influence over the states in question rather than to facilitate a solution between the protagonists.

The states that lost territory in this process—Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova—have all identified Russia as the key obstacle to the actual resolution of the conflict, which naturally led them to gravitate toward the West in search of a counterbalancing force, as well as alternative security arrangements, and a fairer and truly international reformulation of the mechanisms for conflict resolution. This, in turn, led Moscow to assert an increasing degree of control over these territories—in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, more correctly over Armenia—in an attempt to neutralize the “defection” of these states from Russia-led security structures.

Putin's ascent to power occurred immediately following the decision by Azerbaijan and Georgia to leave the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In spite of the profoundly alienating effect of such actions on these states, Putin doubled down on the strategy of strengthening its hand by manipulating the international process for resolving them. At this point, if not earlier, the geopolitical dimension of these conflicts began to take precedence over the original animosities between the protagonists: Russia began to distribute Russian passports in the conflict zones, establishing the conditions that later allowed it to claim a ‘right’ to defend its citizens as a pretext to invade Georgia in 2008. It also began interfering directly in the politics and governmental life of the unrecognized “states:” in South Ossetia in 2002, for example, it replaced an incumbent leader, Lyudvig Chibirov, who was working to achieve peace with

²⁹ Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001, pp. 323-356.

Georgia with a hard-line candidate from Moscow, Eduard Kokoity.³⁰ Gradually, Moscow began posting serving officers of the Russian defense ministry and security services to leading positions in the security sectors of the unrecognized states. This was most blatant in South Ossetia and Transnistria, but it occurred in Abkhazia as well. By 2005, all these separatist enclaves were thoroughly under the Kremlin's control. While officially a neutral mediator between the conflicting parties, Russia had in effect become a party to the conflicts—a fact that the West either failed to understand or failed to act upon.

Following the Russian invasion of Georgia many in the West finally began to acknowledge and act upon this state of affairs. In spite of vigorous Russian efforts to undermine this perception, the international "Geneva discussions" on the conflict in Georgia bluntly identify Russia and Georgia as the parties to the conflict.³¹ Yet there was no change to the international mechanisms over Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh; and in the latter case, Russia even proceeded to take the lead, with the blessing of the Western powers, of an attempt to achieve a negotiated solution in 2009-2010. This attempt was illustrative of Russia's motives: to ensure that Moscow is the key arbiter of peace and war throughout the former Soviet space, and that barring a resolution on Moscow's terms, the conflicts will remain unresolved, thereby greatly impeding the political, economic and social development of the countries involved.

What, then, would a resolution on Moscow's terms imply? In all cases, the answer lies in two key provisions. The first is the "neutrality" of the states in question, i.e., their forfeiting all forms of Euro-Atlantic integration. Since the Moscow-controlled satellites accept integration with the CSTO and Eurasian Union rather than with NATO and the EU, Moscow seeks to make neutrality between these blocs—with the separatist entity given a veto right over the mother state's foreign and security policy—appear as a reasonable compromise. The second component of a Moscow-based "resolution" lies in the imposition of Russian peacekeeping forces to monitor the solution. This assures that Moscow will have troops on the ground that can further cement its influence over the

³⁰ Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War," in Cornell and Starr, eds., *The Guns of August 2008*.

³¹ Svante E. Cornell, "No Reset in the Post-Soviet Space," *Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 20, Summer 2011.

affected states. The several conflicts in question differ in their details. Thus, Moscow stated its demands directly in the case of the Transnistria conflict, but more subtly so in the cases of Georgia (before 2008) and Nagorno-Karabakh. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that the conflicts remain unresolved. In all three instances Moscow's "target states" are posed with a choice between, on the one hand, maintained sovereignty without the restoration of territorial integrity; and on the other, a nominal restoration of territorial integrity at the cost of the loss of sovereignty and independence.

Viewed against this background, the events of 2014 must be judged as a considerable escalation of Moscow's by now familiar tactic. In the conflicts dating back to the Soviet breakup, Moscow manipulated and exacerbated existing conflicts; in Ukraine, the Kremlin created them. In Crimea, the stated rationale for the annexation of the territory—a threat to the safety of Russian-speakers there by a purportedly fascist regime in Kiev—lacked any basis in reality. And while western and eastern Ukraine have long been drawn in different directions culturally and geopolitically, there was in fact no authentic rebellion in the Donbass region that Russia could exacerbate. Instead, it created the "rebellions," as is evident from the fact that their leadership and manpower come overwhelmingly from Russia itself (and Transnistria) rather than being local. By July 2014, this had become such a problem that Moscow was actively working to increase the position of locals in the administrative structures in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk republics.³²

Before 2014, all independent-minded former Soviet states on Russia's western front save Ukraine had unresolved conflicts on their territory, while the two of these states that had allied themselves with Russia (Armenia and Belarus) had not resolved them. Russia's invasion of Ukraine completes the picture, and proves the rule: if Russia is unable to alter the foreign policy orientation of a county in its European neighborhood, it will settle for a piece of its territory.

In addition to the unresolved conflicts, Moscow has on occasion used ethnic minorities as pressure points on a number of post-Soviet states. The most obvious example is the ethnic Russian population in the Baltic States; but other ex-

³² Harriet Salem, "The Other Side of the Same Coin: Meet Moscow's Parachute Politicians in Eastern Ukraine," *Vice News*, August 2, 2014, <https://news.vice.com/article/the-other-side-of-the-same-coin-meet-moscows-parachute-politicians-in-eastern-ukraine>.

amples include the Armenian community in southern Georgia, and the Talysh and Lezgin minorities in Azerbaijan, which are discussed in the relevant chapters in this volume. More recently, forces agitating for the separation of the impoverished autonomous region of Karakalpakstan from Uzbekistan began appearing soon after Tashkent left the CSTO.³³

Regular and Irregular Warfare: From Cyber and Little Green Men to Outright Invasions

No clear distinction can be drawn between Russia's manipulation of unresolved conflicts in its neighboring states and outright military intervention. Indeed, in the early 1990s, a combination of Russian military and Russian-trained irregulars were involved in fighting in several of the unresolved conflicts. In Georgia, North Ossetian paramilitaries were deployed to the conflict in South Ossetia, and a mysterious (and probably nonexistent) group called the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus emerged. Trained and coordinated by the GRU, this band of irregulars was deployed in Abkhazia.³⁴ Russian involvement also included the direct use of naval and air power in support of Abkhaz rebels. In a precursor to events in Ukraine eighteen years later, the planes and vessels employed by Moscow carried no insignia—but their origin was plain to see, and proven among other things by the orders found in the pocket of a Russian air force major shot down by Georgian forces in 1993.³⁵ While only isolated Russian units took part in fighting in Karabakh in 1992-94, the involvement of the Russian 14th army in Transnistria was decisive to the conflict's outcome.

The combination of irregulars and regular forces was notable in the invasion of Georgia in 2008. Vladimir Putin famously admitted in 2012 that the invasion had been fully planned as early as in 2006, and explicitly mentioned the training of Ossetian irregular forces for that purpose. Still unconvinced that it had done enough to assure victory, the Kremlin also mobilized irregular Chechen forces

³³ Igor Rotar, "Krimskoye Ekho Karakalpakstana," Rosbalt.ru, March 15, 2014; <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2014/03/15/1244363.html>; Slavomír Horák, "Separatism in Uzbekistan? Karakalpakstan after Crimea," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 21, 2014, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12979>.

³⁴ Robert W. Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010, p. 119; Ilyas Akhmadov and Miriam Lanskoj, *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p. 4.

³⁵ Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, p. 340.

under GRU control, the so-called *Yamadayeuttsy*, for service in Georgia—and these played important auxiliary roles to the regular Russian military in the conflict.³⁶

The 2008 war was also the first known instance of a military strike coinciding with a cyber-attack. Indeed, coinciding with the onset of the war, a massive denial-of-service-attack took place on Georgian official websites and major news outlets.

The attack successfully disrupted the informational capabilities of the Georgian government and prevented it from disseminating its version of events domestically, as well as internationally. A study by the U.S. Cyber Consequences Unit concluded that while the perpetrators were ostensibly civilians, many of the attacks were so tightly coordinated with the Russian military operations that its organizers that there would have to have **been** close institutional links between them. This enabled the Russian military to receive detailed information on the timing of operations on the ground. Significant preparations, such as reconnaissance for Internet vulnerabilities, production of software, and the writing of attack scripts would all have to have been carried out beforehand. There is solid evidence that some material specifically designed for use against Georgia had been produced as early as two years beforehand. The episode stands as a textbook case of cyber-warfare.³⁷

The Kremlin has also employed isolated military strikes in order to gauge the level of international reaction to its actions. Thus, in 2007, Russia attacked Georgia on two separate occasions: first in March, in a helicopter attack targeting the Georgian administrative center in the Kodori gorge of Abkhazia, at the time the only area of Abkhazia under Georgian control. In August of that same

³⁶ Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications*, Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, p. 27, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA545578>.

³⁷ Niklas Nilsson, “New Study Provides Evidence of Russian Planning of Wartime Cyber-Attack on Georgia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 16, 2009, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/11911-field-reports-caci-analyst-2009-9-17-art-11911.html>. “Overview by the US-CCU of the Cyber Campaign Against Georgia in August of 2008,” US-CCU Special Report, August 2009, <http://www.registan.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/US-CCU-Georgia-Cyber-Campaign-Overview.pdf>; Paulo Shakarian et. al., *Introduction to Cyber-Warfare*, Waltham: Syngress, pp. 23-31.

year, a Russian air-to-ground missile failed to detonate at the Georgian radar station at Tsitelubani, just outside the South Ossetian conflict zone.³⁸ In both instances, international investigations were launched but, typical of such initiatives, only indirectly identified Russia as the culprit. No major international reactions ensued, a fact that played a role a year later in Moscow's decision to proceed with a full-scale invasion.

As is now well known, Russia repeated this combination of irregular and regular warfare in Ukraine in 2014, providing an (albeit declining, and then vanishing) level of deniability. This has led Vladimir Putin to continue, as this book went to press in September 2014, to claim that Russia is not involved in direct conflict with Ukraine—just as Putin had earlier claimed that no Russian forces had been in Crimea. Only later did he acknowledge—boast would be more accurate—that Russian forces had indeed been active there prior to the annexation. It is important to stress that the inability of western powers and institutions to devise a response to Moscow's use of irregular warfare encouraged Putin to adopt this as a tactic of choice in Russia's efforts to subjugate Ukraine in 2014. Only when this tactic stood the risk of failure at the time of the Ukrainian counter-offensive during July and August 2014, was Putin forced to deploy Russian regular forces inside Ukraine, which he did in late August.

As Mark Galeotti and Nadia Schadlow have both observed, Russia's behavior in Ukraine shows its adeptness at using the space between peace and war³⁹—a sophistication in the use of instruments of power that the western alliance is unprepared by its history and experience, to counter. Thus, far from being stuck in nineteenth century thinking, the Kremlin in fact, in the words of Peter Pomerantsev, “is solidly in the geopolitical *avant-garde*, informed by a subversive and dark reading of globalization.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Svante E. Cornell, David J. Smith, and S. Frederick Starr, *The August 6 Bombing Incident in Georgia: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Region*, Washington/Stockholm: CACI & SRSP Silk Road Paper, October 2007.

³⁹ Nadia Schadlow, “Peace and War: The Space Between,” *War on the Rocks*, August 2014, http://warontherocks.com/2014/08/peace-and-war-the-space-between/#_.

⁴⁰ Peter Pomerantsev, “How Putin is Reinventing Warfare,” *Foreign Policy*, May 5, 2014.

Conclusions

This overview, while far from exhaustive, provides powerful evidence of the complexity, sophistication, and coordination of the tactics and instruments involved in the implementation of Russia's Grand Strategy. It suggests that in order to devise appropriate counter-measures, the West must develop an equally sophisticated understanding of this reality.

While the task may appear daunting, it is also important to keep the big picture in mind. Reviewing this list of Russia's tactical instruments, it is striking that Russia has so far failed to achieve its goals. Indeed, the record suggests that Moscow's choice of instruments is generating as much opposition as it is producing results. Moscow's toolbox does not lack positive incentives; but it is heavily skewed toward the manipulative, the coercive, and the subversive. While producing short-term and sometimes immediate results, it also has in the longer term a powerful counter-productive impact on all of Eurasia, as well as on the West. Twenty-five years ago few would have predicted that Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan would be doing everything in their power to stay outside Russia's sphere of influence and control. Five years ago, few would have predicted that Ukraine would be coming together as a nation, decisively orienting itself away from Russia. Yet this is exactly what Russian policy has achieved. Even in Russian partners like Armenia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, Moscow's coercive and heavy-handed approach produces deep frustration and fears that are bound to have profound long-term implications.

It is important to view Russia's military adventures in its neighborhood in this context. In fact, the overview above helps show the extent to which Moscow has sought to bring about a change in the behavior of post-Soviet states through measures short of outright military intervention. Thus, one could plausibly argue that Russia did not invade Georgia until it had failed in all other options to bring about its intended outcome. When Russia "lost" Georgia, it kept Abkhazia and South Ossetia as spoils to complicate Georgia's future development. Similarly, Yanukovich was driven from power simply for *failing* to follow through on a pledge to ally more closely with Europe, showing that Ukraine was for all practical purposes lost to Russia. Only then, again as spoils, did Russia occupy Crimea and intervene directly in the Donbass.

This suggests that time is not on Moscow's side. The hurried implementation of the Eurasian Union project in fact suggests Moscow is well aware that if it does not move fast, it stands to lose influence to Europe in the West and China in the East. Putin's task is complicated enormously by the power of the centrifugal forces in the former Soviet Union, and the fact that twenty-five years have passed since the USSR was a single entity. In the meantime, unlike the situation following the Bolshevik revolution, all former Soviet states have obtained diplomatic recognition and developed both governmental, private, and cultural ties with myriad foreign partners. They have sent thousands of students to study abroad, and have built considerable transportation and communication infrastructures that reduces their dependence on Russia. Only in the sphere of information, which Russia still solidly dominates, have their efforts fallen short.

Meanwhile, the same forces of history, culture, ethnicity, religion, and aspirations for an autonomous life that doomed the USSR are actively tearing at Russia itself. Simply put, for all the sophistication of the tactics outlined in this chapter, Putin's dream appears fated in the long term to be a mere pipe dream, or worse.

This is no excuse for inaction on the part of the West. Western leaders often stress that Putin's ambition is unrealizable—with the unstated implication that no powerful policy response is therefore needed. But this is likely to prove a fatal error. Putin's dream may never be realized, but in the process between now and the time it finally implodes, Putin's regime can inflict lasting and in some cases irrevocable damage to worthy states and culturally rich societies—his own, as well as those of others.