

The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money

by Peter Pomerantsev
and Michael Weiss

A Special Report
presented by The Interpreter,
a project of the Institute of
Modern Russia



imrussia.org
interpretermag.com

IMR INSTITUTE OF MODERN RUSSIA

The Institute of Modern Russia (IMR) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy organization—a think tank based in New York. IMR’s mission is to foster democratic and economic development in Russia through research, advocacy, public events, and grant-making. We are committed to strengthening respect for human rights, the rule of law, and civil society in Russia. Our goal is to promote a principles-based approach to US-Russia relations and Russia’s integration into the community of democracies.

THE **INTERPRETER**

The Interpreter is a daily online journal dedicated primarily to translating media from the Russian press and blogosphere into English and reporting on events inside Russia and in countries directly impacted by Russia’s foreign policy.

Conceived as a kind of “*Inopressa* in reverse,” *The Interpreter* aspires to dismantle the language barrier that separates journalists, Russia analysts, policymakers, diplomats and interested laymen in the English-speaking world from the debates, scandals, intrigues and political developments taking place in the Russian Federation.

CONTENTS

Introductions	4
Executive Summary	6
Background	8
The Kremlin Tool Kit	14
The Weaponization of Information	14
The Weaponization of Culture and Ideas	18
The Weaponization of Money	22
The New, Non-Linear Internationale	24
Ukraine and the Advent of Non-Linear War	29
Responses to 21st-Century Challenges	34
Defining Western Weak Spots.....	34
Best Practices	38
Recommendations	40
For Weaponization of Information	40
For Weaponization of Money	42
For Weaponization of Ideas	42

Introductions

I am a journalist. Like most people in my profession, and indeed most who value liberal democracy, I consider freedom of speech and freedom of information to be sacred. More debate, more polyphony, will eventually lead to new ideas and generate progress. The story of the 20th century was also the story of the battle against censorship. But what happens when a powerful actor systematically abuses freedom of information to spread disinformation? Uses freedom of speech in such a way as to subvert the very possibility of a debate? And does so not merely inside a country, as part of vicious election campaigns, but as part of a transnational military campaign? Since at least 2008, Kremlin military and intelligence thinkers have been talking about information not in the familiar terms of “persuasion,” “public diplomacy” or even “propaganda,” but in weaponized terms, as a tool to confuse, blackmail, demoralize, subvert and paralyze.

Like freedom of information, free dialogue between cultures is key to the liberal vision of globalization. The more cultural exchange we have, the more harmony we will have. But what should we do when the Kremlin begins to use the Rus-

One of the stranger aspects of 21st-century geopolitics has been the West’s denial that it has an adversary or enemy in Vladimir Putin. Whether out of wishful thinking, naiveté, or cynicism, a useful myth was cultivated over the last fourteen years: namely, that the United States and Europe had an honest partner or ally in the Kremlin, no matter how often the latter behaved as if the opposite were true. This myth blanketed everything, from counterterrorism to nuclear de-proliferation to energy security to global finance. And in spite of rather naked periods of disruption—the pro-democracy “color revolutions” in Europe and the Caucasus in 2004–2005, the gas wars with Ukraine in 2005–2006, the Russian-Georgian War in 2008—the myth endured and was actually expanded upon with the advent

sian Orthodox Church and compatriot organizations abroad as elements of a belligerent foreign policy that aims to subvert other countries? And things get even more complex when we come to the idea of financial interdependence. The globalization of markets, the theory goes, will lead to the sublimation of conflict into peaceful commerce. But rather than seeing globalization as a chance for all to rise together, the Kremlin sees it as a mechanism for enabling aggression and an opportunity to divide and rule.

The challenges the Kremlin is posing are distinctly 21st-century ones. Feeling itself relatively weak, the Kremlin has systematically learnt to use the principles of liberal democracies against them in what we call here “the weaponization of information, culture and money,” vital parts of the Kremlin’s concept of “non-linear” war. The danger is that these methods will be copied by other countries or strong, malevolent non-state actors. New ideas and tools are needed to deal with this. Such is the purpose of this paper.

Peter Pomerantsev

of the US-Russian “reset” in 2009. “Let me tell you that no one wishes the re-election of Barack Obama as US president as I do,” the placeholder president Dmitry Medvedev told the *Financial Times* as recently as 2011; today, Prime Minister Medvedev wonders if Obama suffers from an “aberration in the brain.”

If the ongoing catastrophe in Syria and the Edward Snowden affair weakened the myth that Russia desired true partnership or alliance with the West, then Putin’s annexation of Crimea and his invasion of eastern Ukraine destroyed it. Now the United States and Europe have been forced to face the reality of a revanchist and militarily revitalized Russia with imperial ambitions. International treaties that were meant to govern

the post–Cold War order have been torn up. Land that was not so long ago the cynosure of the worst atrocities of modernity has once again become an active war zone, above which commercial airliners filled with hundreds of foreign-born innocents are blown out of the sky with impunity. A former KGB lieutenant-colonel, rumored to be the wealthiest man in Europe, stands an excellent chance of outstripping Josef Stalin’s tenure in power and now speaks openly of invading five separate NATO countries. As if to demonstrate the seriousness of his threat, he dispatches fighter jets and long-range nuclear bombers into their airspaces on a near weekly basis.

Putin is many things, but he is no fool. The inviolability of NATO’s Article V is now being debated or questioned in major NATO capitals with the underlying assumption being that one day, this supposedly sacred covenant might be torn up at the pleasure of an unpredictable and inscrutable authoritarian leader. Meanwhile, those same capitals, having queasily acceded to sanctions against Russian state institutions and officials over Crimea and the Donbas are now signaling their desire to help the Russian president save himself from further misadventures so as to return to business as usual, as quickly as possible. Where Lenin once spoke of capitalists selling him the rope by which he’d hang them, Putin sees them happily fastening the noose around their own necks.

This paper has one aim: to help those in government, civil society and journalism assess the nature of a powerful adversary in anticipation of future conflicts with him. There is no better place to start than in understanding how Putin seeks to win friends and influence people worldwide, but most especially in the West.

Russia has hybridized not only its actual warfare but also its informational warfare. Much of the epistemology democratic nations thought they had permanently retired after the Cold War needs to be re-learned and adapted to even cleverer forms of propaganda and disinformation.

The wisdom of Orwell must be combined with the savvy of Don Draper.

Russia combines Soviet-era “whataboutism” and Chekist “active measures” with a wisened-up, post-modern smirk that says that everything is a sham. Where the Soviets once co-opted and repurposed concepts such as “democracy,” “human rights” and “sovereignty” to mask their opposites, the Putinists use them playfully to suggest that not even the West *really* believes in them. Gitmo, Iraq, Ferguson, BP, Jobbik, Schröder—all liberalism is cant, and anyone can be bought.

A mafia state as conceived by an advertising executive is arguably more dangerous than a communist superpower because ideology is no longer the wardrobe of politics but rather an interchangeable and contradictory set of accessories. “Let your words speak not through their meanings,” wrote Czeslaw Milosz in his poem “Child of Europe”, “But through them against whom they are used.”

How does one fight a system that embraces Tupac and Instagram but compares Obama to a monkey and deems the Internet a CIA invention? That censors online information but provides a happy platform to the founder of WikiLeaks, a self-styled purveyor of total “transparency”? That purports to disdain corporate greed and celebrates Occupy Wall Street while presiding over an economy as corrupt as Nigeria’s? That casts an *Anschluss* of a neighboring country using the grammar of both blood-and-soil nationalism and anti-fascism? This is why American social reactionaries, Australian anarchists, British anti-imperialists and Hungarian neo-Nazis all find so much to favor in the application of Putinism, at home and abroad. Putinism is whatever they want it to be.

What follows is an overview of the challenges this system presents to the West, and a set of modest recommendations for how best to confront them.

Michael Weiss

Executive Summary

The Kremlin Tool Kit

- The Kremlin exploits the idea of freedom of information to inject disinformation into society. The effect is not to persuade (as in classic public diplomacy) or earn credibility but to sow confusion via conspiracy theories and proliferate falsehoods.
- The Kremlin is increasing its “information war” budget. RT, which includes multilingual rolling news, a wire service and radio channels, has an estimated budget of over \$300 million, set to increase by 41% to include German- and French-language channels. There is increasing use of social media to spread disinformation and trolls to attack publications and personalities.
- Unlike in the Cold War, when Soviets largely supported leftist groups, a fluid approach to ideology now allows the Kremlin to simultaneously back far-left and far-right movements, greens, anti-globalists and financial elites. The aim is to exacerbate divides and create an echo chamber of Kremlin support.
- The Kremlin exploits the openness of liberal democracies to use the Orthodox Church and expatriate NGOs to further aggressive foreign policy goals.
- There is an attempt to co-opt parts of the expert community in the West via such bodies as the Valdai Forum, which critics accuse of swapping access for acquiescence. Other senior Western experts are given positions in Russian companies and become de facto communications representatives of the Kremlin.
- Financial PR firms and hired influencers help the Kremlin’s cause by arguing that “finance and politics should be kept separate.” But whereas the liberal idea of globalization sees money as politically neutral, with global commerce leading to peace and interdependence, the Kremlin uses the openness of global markets as an opportunity to employ money, commerce and energy as foreign policy weapons.
- The West’s acquiescence to sheltering corrupt Russian money demoralizes the Russian opposition while making the West more dependent on the Kremlin.
- The Kremlin is helping foster an anti-Western, authoritarian Internationale that is becoming ever more popular in Central Europe and throughout the world.
- The weaponization of information, culture and money is a vital part of the Kremlin’s hybrid, or non-linear, war, which combines the above elements with covert and small-scale military operations. The conflict in Ukraine saw non-linear war in action. Other rising authoritarian states will look to copy Moscow’s model of hybrid war—and the West has no institutional or analytical tools to deal with it.

Defining Western Weak Spots

- The Kremlin applies different approaches to different regions across the world, using local rivalries and resentments to divide and conquer.
- The Kremlin exploits systemic weak spots in the Western system, providing a sort of X-ray of the underbelly of liberal democracy.
- The Kremlin successfully erodes the integrity of investigative and political journalism, producing a lack of faith in traditional media.
- Offshore zones and opaque shell companies help sustain Kremlin corruption and aid its influence. For journalists, the threat of libel means few publications are ready to take on Kremlin-connected figures.
- Lack of transparency in funding and the blurring of distinctions between think tanks and lobbying helps the Kremlin push its agendas forward without due scrutiny.

Recommendations

For the Weaponization of Information

- **A Transparency International for Disinformation:** The creation of an NGO that would create an internationally recognized ratings system for disinformation and provide analytical tools with which to define forms of communication.
- **A “Disinformation Charter” for Media and Bloggers:** Top-down censorship should be avoided. But rival media, from Al-Jazeera to the BBC, Fox and beyond, need to get together to create a charter of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Vigorous debate and disagreement is of course to be encouraged—but media organizations that practice conscious deception should be excluded from the community. A similar code can be accepted by bloggers and other online influencers.
- **Counter-Disinformation Editors:** Many newspapers now employ “public editors,” or ombudsmen, who question their outlet’s reporting or op-ed selections and address matters of public controversy that these might entail. “Counter-propaganda editors” would pick apart what might be called all the news unfit to print.
- **Tracking Kremlin Networks:** We must ensure that Kremlin-supported spokesmen, officials and intellectuals are held to account. Employees of think tanks, pundits or policy consultants with vested financial interests in the countries they cover need to disclose their affiliations in public statements.
- **Public Information Campaigns:** Stopping all disinformation at all times is impossible. Public information campaigns are needed to show how disinformation works and shift the public’s behavior towards being more critical of messages that are being “buzzed” at them.
- **Targeted Online Work:** Audiences exposed to systemic and intensive disinformation campaigns, such as the Russian-speaking communities in the Baltic states, need to be worked with through targeted online campaigns that include the equivalent of person-to-person online social work.

For the Weaponization of Money

- **Strategic Corruption Research and a Journalists’ Libel Fund:** Financial and institutional support needs to be made available so that deep research can be carried out in the sensitive area where

politics, security and corruption meet; this needs to be backed up by a fund for journalists who face potential libel litigation for the offense of doing their jobs. A non-profit organization, based in Western capitals, modeled on Lawyers Without Borders but dedicated exclusively to defending journalists, is long overdue.

- **Target: Offshore:** A network of stringers in off-shore jurisdictions is needed to carry out deep research into the financial holdings of Russian oligarchs and officials.
- **Crowd-sourced Investigations:** It is in the interest of NGOs to enlist experienced bloggers, citizen journalists or adept social media users to collaborate on specific events or news stories that adhere to the same standards of empirical rigor used by traditional journalists. A handful of analysts armed with YouTube, Google Maps, Instagram, or foreign company registration websites can generate headlines.

For the Weaponization of Culture and Ideas

- **Re-establishing Transparency and Integrity in the Expert Community:** Self-disclosure of funding by think tanks and a charter identifying clear lines between funders and research would be a first step in helping the sector regulate itself and re-establish faith in its output.
 - **The Valdai Alternative:** A broad gathering should be convened to bring together think tanks, experts and policymakers to focus on:
 - addressing fears around the erosion of tradition, religion and national sovereignty;
 - mainstreaming Russia’s neighbors such as Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia in the debate about Russian policy; and
 - engaging with “swing states” such as the BRICs and others in the Middle East, Asia and South America that are being courted by the Kremlin to join its anti-Western Internationale.
- Overall,** the struggle against disinformation, strategic corruption and the need to reinvigorate the global case for liberal democracy are not merely Russia-specific issues: today’s Kremlin might perhaps be best viewed as an avant-garde of malevolent globalization. The methods it pursues will be taken up by others, and these counter-measures could and should be adopted worldwide.

Background

Lessons from Lenin

In Andrey Bely's novel *Petersburg*, set in 1905, one of the main protagonists is an idealistic revolutionary terrorist who becomes so caught up in webs of intrigue and deceptions—webs where he can never tell who he is really working for and where any instruction could be disinformation—that he is unable to tell truth from fiction and eventually goes mad. The novel operates in the murky world manipulated by the Okhrana, the tsarist secret police that specialized in covert operations, infiltration and dirty deeds perpetrated by others. Perhaps the most famous piece of disinformation produced in the period was the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the 1903 fabrication that purported to detail the minutes of a secret meeting of Jewish leaders plotting global domination. The *Protocols* became part of the school curriculum in Nazi Germany and are still republished and taken as truth in parts of the world. We can see some of the thinking that informed the creation of the *Protocols* in the methods of today's Kremlin propagandists: projecting conspiracy theories that show Russia to be under threat, creating excuses for Russian military defeat (in 1905, Jews were blamed for Russia's routing by Japan) and defining the "secret hand" behind domestic revolutionary movements. The *Protocols* also echo another contemporary obsession: Russia is under global information attack, with the Elders of Zion controlling the world's media: "These newspapers, like the Indian god Vishnu, will be possessed of hundreds of hands, each of which will be feeling the pulse of varying public opinion."

When they came to power the Bolsheviks were deeply convinced, perhaps like no previous regime, of the uses of information and propaganda to re-create reality: "The Communists, who do not believe in human nature but only in the human condition, believe that propaganda is all-powerful, legitimate, and instrumental in creating a new type of man," wrote Jacques Ellul in his classic study of propaganda.¹

But while one line of early Soviet international propaganda trumpeted the ideals of communist revolution, Lenin soon became convinced that more counterintuitive methods would be necessary for the Soviet Union to survive. "As early as 1920," writes scholar James Sherr in *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad*,² "Lenin was convinced that 'muddled thinking' would bring about the downfall of the bourgeoisie.... Outside the Communist fraternity influence was derived from deception, and the art of mimicking the slogans and pieties of those the regime wished to cajole or destroy." Lenin believed in spinning the West against itself, "building Communism with non-Communist hands," or the help of useful idiots and fellow travelers, while "using bourgeois institutions for the purpose of destroying them."

Western business was perhaps the easiest to manipulate. Informed by British prime minister David Lloyd George's maxim, delivered to the House of Commons in 1920, that "we have failed to restore sanity to Russia by force, perhaps we can do so by trade,"³ and comforted by Lenin's seeming turn to a more liberal economic policy between 1917 and 1922, "no group," writes Richard Pipes in *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, "promoted collaboration with Soviet Russia more assuredly and effectively than European and American Business communities."⁴ This approach, concludes Sherr, allowed "the regime to consolidate its power and built the foundations for what would later be called Stalinism." Lenin's strategy, headed up by the secret police, which took on functions far beyond mere espionage, created enough division in the West to give the USSR breathing space, while managing to destroy anti-Soviet émigré movements abroad and convincing the world there was no alternative to Soviet rule inside of Russia.

Building on Leninist foundations, "Active Measures" was the name given to the KGB-run information and psychological warfare designed to win the battle for men's minds, employing an estimated 15,000 agents.⁵

¹ The quote continues: "American sociologists play down the effectiveness of propaganda because they cannot accept the idea that the individual—the cornerstone of democracy—can be so fragile; and because they retain their ultimate trust in man." Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda. The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. Vintage, 1965.

² James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion*. 657–709. Chatham House, 2013.

³ Sherr, 686.

⁴ Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*. 215. Harvill, 1994.

⁵ Richard Star cites Shultz and Godson that the total Soviet active measures bureaucracy included some 15,000 personnel. See Shultz and Godson, 57, cited in Richard F. Star, *Foreign Policies of the Soviet Union*. 132. Hoover Institution Press, 1991.

“[T]he Soviet Union did not engage in this battle primarily via simple (or sophisticated) advocacy or positive propaganda,” writes Max Holland in the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, but used “[a]n impressive...array of overt and covert psychological activities...[ranging from] ostensibly independent international peace congresses, youth festivals,...the deployment of agents of influence, and, of course, all manner of informational activities carried out on a worldwide scale.”⁶ “Not intelligence collection,” adds former KGB general Oleg Kalugin, “but subversion: active measures to weaken the West, to drive wedges in the Western community alliances of all sorts, particularly NATO, to sow discord among allies, to weaken the United States in the eyes of the people in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and thus to prepare ground in case the war really occurs.”⁷ The high point of active measures, says Russian broadcaster Yevgeny Kiselyov, who as a young man worked inside the Soviet Union’s international information agency, was when government employees were instructed to make friends with a Western journalist or public figure and drip him “the right” information over a period of many years so that, without noticing, he would start to say things that were beneficial to the USSR.⁸

Dezinformatsiya was one of the many active measures. Defined by Lothar Metzler, who was for a long time the CIA’s leading expert on the subject, as “operations aiming at pollution of the opinion-making process in the West,”⁹ *dezinformatsiya* operations placed fakes and forgeries in international media and other sources to defame an adversary and “[u]ltimately...to cause the adversary to reach decisions beneficial to Soviet interests.”¹⁰ Stories included “President Carter’s Secret Plan to Put Black Africans and Black Americans at Odds”; claiming that AIDS was a weapon created by the CIA; claiming that the US used chemical weapons in the Korean War; attempting to smear presidential candidate Barry Goldwater as a racist conspiring with the John Birch Society to stage a coup d’état in Washington; blaming the US for the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II; blaming the US for a coup attempt

against French president Charles de Gaulle by hardline generals; and forging letters from the Ku Klux Klan that threatened athletes from African countries. One of the most successful *dezinformatsiya* campaigns was spreading the theory that the CIA was behind the murder of President John F. Kennedy. The KGB sponsored studies and popular books that fired up conspiracy theories about the assassination. According to research conducted by Max Holland, they planted a fake letter in a friendly Italian newspaper, *Paese Sera*, that intimated that a New Orleans businessman called Clay Shaw, already under suspicion for being involved in the assassination, was a senior CIA operative. A New Orleans district attorney by the name of Jim Garrison picked up this misinformation, and, thinking it real, became ever more convinced that Shaw had worked with the CIA to organize the Kennedy murder. Garrison never quoted the letter in court himself, but when Oliver Stone made his Hollywood blockbuster of the trial, *JFK*, Kevin Costner, playing Garrison, quotes *Paese Sera* during his court indictment of Clay Shaw, played by Tommy Lee Jones. The lines of fact, fiction and *dezinformatsiya* have become utterly blurred, and few of the millions who have watched the movie are aware of the KGB’s influence on the plot.¹¹ The defector and former Soviet archivist Vasili Mitrokhin pointed out that the “KGB could fairly claim that far more Americans believed some version of its own conspiracy theory of the Kennedy assassination, involving a right-wing plot and the US intelligence community, than still accept the main findings of the Warren Commission.”¹²

Enter the Political Technologists

“The main difference between propaganda in the USSR and the new Russia,” says Gleb Pavlovsky, a political consultant who worked on Putin’s election campaign and was a long-time Kremlin insider, “is that in Soviet times the concept of truth was important. Even if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was ‘the truth.’ Now no one even tries proving the ‘truth.’ You can just say anything. Create realities.”

⁶ Max Holland, *The Propagation and Power of Communist Security Services Dezinformatsiya*. 2. *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, volume 19, issue 1, 2006.

⁷ *Cold War*, episode 21. CNN, 1998.

⁸ All un-referenced quotations in this paper are from the authors’ own interviews.

⁹ Holland 3.

¹⁰ Holland 4.

¹¹ Stone responded to the Holland article, claiming the *Paese Sera* piece was only one piece of evidence among many that suggested Clay was working for the CIA to hire Oswald. Oliver Stone & Zachary Sklar, *Garrison’s Demon*. 5. *The Wilson Quarterly*, volume 25, issue 3, 2001.

¹² Holland 18.

Pavlovsky speaks from personal experience. One of the “political technologists” who became the viziers of the post-Soviet system, he helped create a new type of authoritarianism that blended traditions of Kremlin subterfuge with the latest in PR and media manipulation. “The same PR men who worked on the corporate wars of the Russian 1990s, where newspapers would be paid to run material accusing business rivals with everything from cannibalism through pedophilia—they then went on to use the same techniques on a state-wide scale with the full weight of the Kremlin,” remembers Vasily Gatov, a Russian media analyst and Board Member of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

Beginning in 1996, with Boris Yeltsin set to lose the Russian presidential election, the political technologists fabricated stories about a fascist-Stalinist threat from Yeltsin’s opposition. Afterwards they transformed Putin from an unknown “grey agent” to a Russian superhero via the power of television: “I first created the idea of the Putin majority—then it became real. Same with the concept of there being ‘no alternative’ to Putin,” explains Pavlovsky.

The underlying mindset behind this system is deeply informed by both the classical Soviet belief in the power of propaganda to remake reality and a late Soviet cynicism and double-think. As *New Yorker* editor and Russianist David Remnick¹³ points out, the current generation of the Russian elite were raised in a culture where they would simulate loyalty to communist values while reading dissident literature at home. “Perestroika came much too late,” remembered Alexander Yakovlev, one of Gorbachev’s mentors. “The years of social stagnation almost killed social idealism...sowing cynicism, disbelief and social lassitude.”¹⁴ After the fall of the Soviet Union there was no longer any need to even pay superficial homage to a belief in any notion of Marxist-Leninist truth, with political elites transforming from communists to democrats to nationalist autocrats as the Kremlin decreed. In this shape-shifting context, which endures today, all political philosophy becomes political technology, and the point of ideas and language are not what they rep-

resent, but what function they fulfill. The point of any statement is its effect rather than any notion of truth.

This mindset was already evident in the mid-1990s, but after 2000 it became integral to the Kremlin system. While elites were secured through a “power vertical,” which traded corruption for loyalty, the political technologists helped create a simulacrum of political discourse to keep the nation pliant. Fake “opposition” political parties were set up to make Putin look more reasonable by contrast; pseudo-independent civil society organizations such as the Civic Forum created an imitation of civil society; fake courts gave fake verdicts, fake journalists delivered fake news. Up until 2012 the Kremlin adopted a fluid approach to ideology, climbing inside movements and social groups to manipulate them at will, taking on the language of whichever group the Kremlin needed to spin and rendering them absurd through mimicry.¹⁵ As Ivan Krastev, chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, and Stephen Holmes of New York University have pointed out,¹⁶ many Russians are perfectly aware that the news is faked: the Kremlin’s power is entrenched not by trying to persuade people that it is telling the truth, but by making it clear that it can dictate the terms of the “truth” and thus enhancing its aura of power. Information, and television in particular, is key in this society of pure spectacle, which has been labeled everything from the “TV-ocracy” to a “postmodern dictatorship.”

“If previous authoritarian regimes were three parts violence and one part propaganda,” argues Igor Yakovenko, who teaches journalism at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, “this one is virtually all propaganda and relatively little violence. Putin only needs to make a few arrests—and then amplify the message through his total control of television.”

The border between “fact” and “fiction” has become utterly blurred in Russian media and public discourse. During the Ukraine crisis, Russian news has featured brazenly fake “interviews” with Rus-

¹³ David Remnick, *Watching the Eclipse*, *The New Yorker* (Aug. 11, 2014), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/watching-eclipse>

¹⁴ Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics*. 18. Yale, 2006.

¹⁵ Since 2012 ideology inside the country has become more “hard” and nationalistic. However it is worth keeping this domestic experience in mind when looking at the Kremlin’s international ideological messaging, which, as we shall see below, is dizzyingly supple.

¹⁶ Stephen Holmes & Ivan Krastev, *The Weakest Strongman*, *New Republic* (Jan. 11, 2012), <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/world/magazine/99527/strongman-putin-march-kremlin>

¹⁷ Paul Gregory, *Russian TV Propagandists Caught Red-Handed: Same Guy, Three Different People (Spy, Bystander, Heroic Surgeon)*, *Forbes* (Apr. 12, 2014), available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/paulroderickgregory/2014/04/12/russian-tv-caught-red-handed-same-guy->

sian “victims” of alleged atrocities by Ukrainian “fascists,”¹⁷ such as the lurid story of a child being crucified by Ukrainian forces.¹⁸ This story, like many others, was a complete fabrication. When asked about the incident Deputy Minister for Communication Alexei Volin showed no embarrassment and indicated that all that mattered were ratings, arguing that the public likes how the main TV channels present material, as well as the tone of the programs, and noting that viewers of the leading Russian TV channels had increased by almost 50% over the last two months.¹⁹ The Kremlin tells its stories well, having mastered the perfect mix of authoritarianism and entertainment culture, but the notion of “journalism,” in the sense of reporting “facts” or “truth,” has been virtually wiped out. In a lecture to journalism students of Moscow State University, Volin stated that students should forget about making the world better: “We should give students a clear understanding: they are going to work for The Man, and The Man will tell them what to write, how to write, and what not to write about certain things. And The Man has the right to do it because he pays them.”²⁰

The aim of this new propaganda is not to convince or persuade, but to keep the viewer hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid, rather than agitated to action. Conspiracy theories are the perfect tool for this aim. They are all over Russian TV. For over a decade political commentary programs such as *Odnako* on state-controlled Channel 1 have talked about current affairs in a way that avoids clear analysis but nudges the viewer towards a paranoid worldview with endless hints about “them” and “outside enemies” who want to “bite off a piece of Russia.” Even science programs are not immune: the

most high-budget documentary on Russian TV was a surreal scare story about “killer mold” threatening the population.²¹ During five years working inside Russian television, one of the authors of this paper witnessed the cultivation of several other forms of linguistic practices aimed at breaking down critical thinking. False assurances are common, especially in the shows of Dmitry Kiselyov, whose current affairs programs are “redefining” propaganda²² with a scintillating mash-up of truths that are put together and interpreted in such a way as to re-write reality: a Swedish children’s show about sex education is taken as a sign that Europe is mired in sexual perversion²³; the fact that Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny attended Yale “shows” he is working for the Americans. As the writer Dmitry Bykov wryly notes, “the language of today’s propaganda has become full of artificial connections.... If you’re against Russia’s covert war in Ukraine then you must be for gluttony, against the motherland, and for soulless American fast food, only protesting against war because you want foie gras.”²⁴

But while the Kremlin’s mix of TV-ocracy, fluid ideology and near-institutionalized corruption had already secured a successful model for the Putin regime by the end of his first presidential term, early attempts to negotiate the international arena were less successful. In 2004, during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Pavlovsky and other political technologists were enlisted to help secure victory for the more pro-Moscow candidate Viktor Yanukovich. In this period we saw similar tricks employed that had worked previously inside Russia, with a campaign to slander the “pro-European” candidate Viktor Yushchenko as a crypto-fascist by creating puppet

same-demonstration-but-three-different-people-spy-bystander-heroic-surgeon; Lucy Crossley, *The ‘aggrieved housewife’, the ‘soldier’s mother’ and the ‘Kiev resident’: Did Russian television ‘use actress to portray FIVE different women’ as it reported normal Ukrainians backed Kremlin*, Daily Mail (Mar. 5, 2014), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2574131/How-Russian-television-used-actress-pretend-five-different-people-opposed-revolution-reported-normal-Ukrainians-backed-Kremlin.html>

¹⁸ *Беженка из Славянска вспоминает, как при ней казнили маленького сына и жену ополченца*, Channel 1 (July 12, 2014), <http://www.1tv.ru/news/other/262978>

¹⁹ *Interview with Alexey Volin*, TV Rain: Hard Day’s Night (July 16, 2014), http://tvrain.ru/articles/zamministra_svjazi_aleksej_volin_o_raspjatom_malchike_nepatriotichnyh_smi_i_samom_vlijatelnom_cheloveke_v_rossijskih_media-372463/. The TV Rain material is behind a paywall. The transcript can be found here: *Российский замминистра оправдал ложь в СМИ*, NikLife (July 19, 2014), <http://niklife.com.ua/world/44177>

²⁰ Anastasia Ivanova, «Сейчас хочется верить, что я буду писать только правду», *Bolshoi Gorod Magazine* (Feb. 11, 2013), http://bg.ru/education/otvet_mgu_volinu-17070/

²¹ *Плесень*, Channel 1 (Feb. 1, 2009), <http://www.1tv.ru/documentary/fi5790/fd200902011920>

²² Joshua Yaffa, *Dmitry Kiselev is Redefining the Art of Russian Propaganda*. *New Republic* (July 1, 2014), <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118438/dmitry-kiselev-putins-favorite-tv-host-russias-top-propogandist>

²³ *Russia: Children’s toilet TV show drawn into Ukraine-EU row*. *BBC News* (Dec. 4, 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-25198264>

²⁴ Dmitry Bykov, *Дмитрий Быков: Слава Крыма и позор России*. *Sobesednik.ru* (Aug. 12, 2014), <http://sobesednik.ru/dmitriy-bykov/20140812-dmitriy-bykov-slava-kryma-i-pozor-rossii>

neo-Nazi groups that claimed, falsely, to be allied with him.²⁵ But the political technologists' collection of media tricks, electoral fraud and corruption failed as Yanukovich's rigged election victory was canceled out by the Orange Revolution. Pavlovsky was declared a *persona non grata* in Ukraine and had to flee the country in disguise. In 2004, the Kremlin found it could not amplify its message and techniques to the world.

It was time to create a truly international influence and propaganda machine. The Kremlin was going to re-learn soft power and international propaganda—and would end up redefining it.

The Kremlin Goes Global: From Soft Power to the Weaponization of Information

Vladimir Putin's first public reference to soft power came in a 2012 article called "Russia and the Changing World," in which he described it as "a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence. Regrettably, these methods are being used all too frequently to develop and provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes, to manipulate the public and to conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries." While Putin accepted that "[t]he civilized work of non-governmental humanitarian and charity organizations deserves every support," he spoke darkly of "the activities of 'pseudo-NGOs' and argued that "other agencies that try to destabilize other countries with outside support are unacceptable."²⁶ This vision is somewhat different from the Western conceptualization of soft power as described by Joseph Nye and others. "If the Western vision is based on building attractiveness," argues Alexander Dolinsky, a partner at Capstone Connections consultancy specializing in public policy and public diplomacy, "the Kremlin believes soft power to be a set of tools for manipulation. A sort of weapon."

Initially, after 2004, the Kremlin did appear to make at least a show of attempting a fairly classic soft power approach with the setting up of the Valdai Forum to woo international experts, the hiring of PR companies to help with the Kremlin's image,²⁷ investment by Russian oligarchs into culturally popular projects in the West, and the first attempts to set up a 24-hour news channel, Russia Today, which would project a positive image of Russia. But during the 2008 conflict over Georgia many in the Russian establishment again felt the country had lost out in the information game.

As recorded by Timothy L. Thomas of the Foreign Military Studies Office, several ideas were tabled to reboot the Russian information and influence strategy. Igor Panarin, who teaches at the Russian Foreign Ministry's Academy for Future Diplomats, sketched out a new management system for Russia's "information war" that would include a presidential special advisor for information and propaganda activities who would oversee an international network of NGOs, information agencies and training institutions for personnel conducting information warfare. Other proposals called for creating "information troops made up of state and military news media" who would be dedicated to "operational concealment measures and counterintelligence work."²⁸

Increasingly, a more aggressive tone was struck. In 2010, Rear Admiral (now retired) Vadimir Pirumov, former head of the Directorate for Electronic Warfare of the Main Naval Staff, wrote in *Information Confrontation* that "[i]nformation war consists in securing national policy objectives both in war time and in peace time through means and techniques of influencing the information resources of the opposing side... and includes influences on an enemy's information system and psychic condition." Pirumov's information influence techniques include "disinformation (deception), manipulation (situational or societal), propaganda (conversion, separation, demoralization, desertion, captivity), lobbying, crisis control and blackmail."²⁹ This line of thinking in the Russian military and intelligence establishment is vindicated by arguing that Russia is itself under mass information and influence attack from the West, which is using everything from

²⁵ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Pro-Russian network behind the anti-Ukrainian defamation campaign*, Anton Shekhovtsov's Blog (Feb. 3, 2014), <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.co.at/2014/02/pro-russian-network-behind-anti.html>

²⁶ Vladimir Putin, *Vladimir Putin on foreign policy: Russia and the changing world*, Valdai (Feb. 27, 2012), <http://valdaiclub.com/politics/39300.html>

²⁷ Ravi Somaiya, *P.R. Firm for Putin's Russia Now Walking a Fine Line*, The New York Times (Aug. 31, 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/01/business/media/pr-firm-for-putins-russia-now-walking-a-fine-line.html?_r=0

²⁸ Timothy L. Thomas, *Recasting the Red Star*. 310. Foreign Military Studies Office, 2011.

²⁹ V.S. Pirumov, *Informatsionnoe Protivoborstvo*. 3. Moscow, 2010; Thomas 148.

CNN to human rights NGOs to wage covert war against Russia. The rhetoric escalated during the Arab Spring: “In North Africa the main aim (of the West) was to inspire a civil war and sow chaos,” writes Major-General and Professor Vasily Burenok, president of the Russian Academy of Missile and Artillery Sciences, “while in Libya it was to destroy the government. Gaddafi had simply been too brave in his attempts to destabilize the dollar as the global currency.”³⁰

It is often difficult to know how “genuine” these beliefs are. They might reflect a deep-seated worldview in the Russian intelligence and military community, a Hobbesian vision of a war of all against all where all talk of “values” is simply a bluff for covert action. But it could just as easily be a piece of disinformation aimed at a domestic Russian audience to convince them they are under attack and thus justify greater censorship in media and clampdowns on civil society. “However ‘genuine’ the position, this has increasingly become a basis for policy-making and allocating budgets: it creates its own political realities,” says Mark Galeotti, a professor of global affairs at New York University and an expert on Russian security issues. And it is now part of the mainstream political discourse in Moscow, not just among security and intelligence cadres. “Information wars,” Dmitry Kiselyov told an interviewer, have become “the main type of warfare.”³¹

Regarding the relationship between the West’s use of covert information and influence operations and Russia’s, Aida Hozic, an associate professor of international relations at the University of Florida, argues:

The US has, of course, been using the same techniques for years: USAID planting tweets in Cuba and the Middle East to stir anti-government movements; looking the other way to illicit (and illegal) trade when needed. But since the US had other forms of power in its toolkit (military in particular)—these alternative channels of power were not driving US foreign policy. In Russia, they probably do. Russia, as a state unable to attain its “rightful” place of power after the debacle decade of the 1990s, has mostly relied on alternative channels of influence in international affairs. Blackmail, wiretapping and leaks, assassinations, subordinating organized crime to state interests, hacking, planting of misinformation in state media. This is not just a difference in scale: it is a qualitative difference in how power is exercised.

“Because the Kremlin is so paranoid,” says Mark Galeotti, “it ends up being ahead of the game in forming what we can now call the weaponization of information.”³²

³⁰ Vasily Burenok, *Знание массового поражения*, VPK-News (July 2, 2014), <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/20871>

³¹ Yaffa.

³² The author of this paper first became familiar with the term “weaponisation of information” in the course of an interview with Professor Galeotti (the term has also previously been employed by Michael Weiss, Robert Ortung and Chris Walker). I would like to express my thanks to Professor Galeotti in the research for this paper and for alerting me to a phrase that became a cornerstone for the ideas here.

The Kremlin Tool Kit

The Kremlin’s tools and techniques for the international “weaponization of information, culture and money” draw on a rich vein of tradition: tsarist forgeries, the Bolsheviks’ “useful idiots” and the use of corruption as a method of control, all directed at muddling minds and turning the West against itself, informed by a philosophy that sees language and ideas as tools and driven by a dark vision of globalization where all are at war with all. Likewise, the Kremlin has adopted the most unsavory PR tricks from the West. Russian political technologists quote with admiration the 1990 fake story about the murder of Kuwaiti children by Iraqi soldiers, a story planted by the PR firm Hill and Knowlton at the request of the Kuwaiti government that helped make the case for war against Saddam Hussein.³³ We can now speak of tools stretching across media, elite influencers, party politics, finance, NGOs, the expert community, and cultural activities. Galeotti proposes putting the Kremlin’s toolkit into the following categories:

Kremlin Aim	Kremlin Action
Shatter Communications	Buy up Western media DDoS attacks Paralyze journalism with threat of libel
Demoralize Enemy	Confuse the West with mixed messaging Seduce experts through high-level fora Disinformation campaigns
Take out Command Structure	Divide West though divide-and-conquer ruses Buy up political influence

In our overview we take a glance at the different tools, how they are applied in various regions, and how all these came together in Russia’s war with Ukraine.

The Weaponization of Information

Freedom of information and expression are sacrosanct in Western culture. They are key to any idea of globalization based on liberal democracy. The more freedom of information we have, the thinking goes, the greater the debate, and the greater the common good. But what if a player uses the freedom of information to subvert its principles? To make debate and critical thinking impossible? Not to inform or persuade, but as a weapon? In the words of Russian media analyst Vasily Gatov, “if the 20th century was defined by the battle for freedom of information and against censorship, the 21st century will be defined by malevolent actors, states or corporations, abusing the right to freedom of information.”

Russia Today

“RT is darkly, nastily brilliant, so much more sophisticated than Soviet propaganda. It reflects Putinism’s resentment of Western superiority, resentment of Western moralism, and indulges in what-aboutism. RT urges in the audience the sense: the Russians have a point!” —*David Remnick, Editor, New Yorker*

“Russia Today’s propaganda machine is no less destructive than military marching in Crimea.” —*Lithuanian Minister for Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevicius, on Twitter, March 9, 2014*

Perhaps no organization better traces the transformation of Kremlin thinking from soft power to weaponization than the Kremlin’s international rolling news channel, RT, financed with an annual budget of at least \$300 million,³⁴ set to increase by 41% in fall 2014, and broadcasting in English, Arabic and Span-

³³ Stephen Banks, *Dissent and the Failure of Leadership*. 108. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008.

³⁴ *American broadcasters see RT as major challenge, want to try to compete*, RT (Aug. 13, 2014), <http://rt.com/news/180184-us-channel-russian-speakers/>

ish, with plans to launch in German and French.³⁵ The channel can now reach 600 million people globally and 3 million hotel rooms across the world. Launched in 2005 to help create a more positive picture of Russia and to give “Russia’s side of the story,” the network first tried to cover a similar news agenda as that used by the BBC and CNN, while mixing in puff stories about the country. The channel was largely ignored—and Russia’s image didn’t improve. During the 2008 war with Georgia the channel found a sense of mission, labeling Georgia’s war in Ossetia a “genocide” and portraying Russia as the peace-keeper. But no one had been attracted to the channel in the first place to hear the Kremlin line. The network’s editorial policy shifted. News about Russia was minimized. The channel rebranded itself from Russia Today to the more neutral RT: anyone tuning in would not immediately know it is Kremlin-run or even associate it with Russia. Instead of trying to promote Russia, RT now focuses on making the West, and especially the US, look bad. To do so it relies on Western voices: whether far-left anti-globalists, far-right nationalist party leaders or Julian Assange. Some RT “experts” have backgrounds in extremist or fringe groups that would make them ineligible for other channels: RT has presented Holocaust denier “Ryan Dawson” as a human rights activist,³⁶ and neo-Nazi Manuel Ochsенreiter as a “Middle East analyst.”³⁷ Validating this approach is the idea, frequently articulated by senior management at RT, that there is no such thing as “objective truth.” This concept is quickly stretched to mean that any opinion, however bizarre, has the same weight as others.

The channel is especially popular online, where it claims to have received over a billion hits, which would make it the most-watched news channel on the net. It has also been nominated for an Emmy for its coverage of the Occupy movement in New York. Thus RT manages to attract an audience by focusing on existing anti-US and anti-Western themes and then splices in interviews with Putin or Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov when necessary.

One of RT’s specializations is screening conspiracy theories—from the views of 9/11 “truthers” to beliefs about the “hidden hand” behind the Syrian conflict. In his overview of RT’s Syria coverage, the journalist Michael Moynihan observed:

Conspiracy theorist Webster Tarpley, author of the book *9/11 Synthetic Terror: Made in USA*, told viewers that the current spasm of violence is a “joint production of the CIA, MI6, and Mossad.” British conspiracy theorist Peter Eyre predictably saw the hidden hand of international Zionism at work in Damascus, explaining that the current crisis “was planned back in 1997 by Paul Wolfowitz.” These deeply noxious claims are presented unopposed, and RT anchors repeat and amplify them.³⁸

Easy to sneer at, conspiracy thinking might be on the rise in Europe. In a recent paper entitled “The Conspiratorial Mindset in an Age of Transition,” which looked at the rise of conspiracy theories in France, Hungary and Slovakia, a team of researchers from leading European think tanks show how supporters of far-right parties (the same parties the Kremlin supports in Europe) are also the ones most prone to believing in conspiracies.³⁹ Support for these parties, and belief in conspiracy theories, is on the rise as trust in the power of national governments is eroded and people turn to outlandish theories to explain crises. “Is there more interest in conspiracy theories because far right parties are growing, or are far right parties growing because more conspiracy thinking is being pumped into the information space?” asks Pavlovsky, a little deviously. Perhaps RT’s focus on promoting conspiracy theories should not be taken too lightly: within Russia we have seen how television promotes forms of thinking that make critical, reality-based discourse impossible, while helping cultivate an information space into which the Kremlin can then push out its own *dezinformatsiya* to confuse situations at critical junctures.

³⁵ Robert Ortlung & Christopher Walker, *Russia’s International Media Poisons Minds*, The Moscow Times (Oct. 8, 2014), <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/russia-s-international-media-poisons-minds/508653.html>

³⁶ Adam Holland, *Ryan Dawson, RT’s “Human Rights Activist,” A Holocaust Denier Who’s Friends With Hate Criminals*. The Interpreter (June 10, 2014), <http://www.interpretermag.com/ryan-dawson-rt-s-human-rights-activist-a-holocaust-denier-whos-friends-with-hate-criminals>

³⁷ Adam Holland, *RT’s Manuel Ochsенreiter*. The Interpreter (Mar. 21, 2014), <http://www.interpretermag.com/rt-s-manuel-ochsenreiter>

³⁸ Michael Moynihan, *Disinformation: ‘Pravda’ May Be Gone, but Now There’s ‘Russia Today’*, Tablet (Feb. 13, 2012), <http://tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/90971/disinformation/2>

³⁹ Oľga Gyárfášová, Péter Krekó, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Csaba Molnár & Marley Morris, Counterpoint, Political Capital & Institute of Public Affairs, *The Conspiratorial Mind-Set in the Age of Transition* (Dec. 2013), available at http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/publikacie/subory/The_Conspiratorial_Mindset_in_an_Age_of_Transition.pdf

In a study on the perception habits of consumers of “alternative news sites,” researchers at Northeastern University conclude that “[s]urprisingly, consumers of alternative news, which are the users trying to avoid the mainstream media ‘mass-manipulation,’ are the most responsive to the injection of false claims.”⁴⁰ While viewers are initially attracted to RT by a popular anti-Western message and conspiracy theories, they are then fed other forms of material that stray beyond even the wildest “opinion TV” and smack more of 21st-century active measures. Recently, Spanish-language RT featured a report that considered whether the US was behind the Ebola outbreak⁴¹—a modern echo of Soviet *dezinformatsiya* about the CIA being behind the AIDS virus. During the Syrian conflict, when Russia backed Syrian president Bashar al-Assad during the country’s civil war, RT broadcast programs about an alleged massacre by rebel forces at Adra—a massacre that appears never to have taken place. As *The Interpreter*’s James Miller has argued, RT did put some disclaimers on its reports that explained it had no access to Adra itself, but it made no attempt to do any due diligence on the evidence given by “witnesses” and consistently repeated Syrian state news items about “atrocities.” Even as it became clear no massacre had been committed at Adra, RT newscasters continued to assert the opposite, while RT experts discussed the Adra massacre as reality.⁴²

RT and Voice of Russia⁴³ also republished dubious “proof” that Syrian rebels were behind sarin attacks in East Ghouta, Damascus. Quoting Russian government sources, RT reported that the date stamps of YouTube

videos with sarin victims showed that they were uploaded before the attacks took place, thus “proving” the videos were the work of rebels. As was quickly pointed out on fora such as Storify, YouTube videos are date-stamped with California time; thus, they had an date stamp prior to the events in Syria.⁴⁴ Reporting on the same chemical attacks, RT took research by influential blogger Brown Moses (Eliot Higgins) and presented it in such a way as to show him arguing that rebel forces were responsible. In fact Higgins had argued the opposite: “Russia Today has clearly decided to use the credibility of my own blog to prop up highly dubious videos,” said Higgins in an interview.⁴⁵ Rather than inform or persuade the audience of “Russia’s point of view,” a perfectly respectable public diplomacy aim, RT’s purpose appears to be to confuse, spreading forms of discourse that kill the possibility of debate and a reality-based politics, and abusing the ideal of freedom of information for the purpose of spreading disinformation.

One talk show on the network has reproduced the formula nicely. Entitled *Who Pays the Price for InfoWars*,⁴⁶ the show discusses the need to break through the West’s “hegemony over information.” In itself this might be a perfectly laudable aim. But RT’s guests on the show have included John Laughland, who helps run a think tank in Paris funded by Kremlin-connected figures⁴⁷; Sebastian Sass, a representative of a Swiss PR company who has represented Russia’s South Stream gas pipeline project⁴⁸; Alexander Mercouris, a British lawyer who has been disbarred for lying and forging a Supreme Court judge’s signature⁴⁹; and Pepe Escobar, who works for

⁴⁰ *Data Mining Reveals How Conspiracy Theories Emerge on Facebook*, MIT Technology Review (Mar. 18, 2014), <http://www.technologyreview.com/view/525616/data-mining-reveals-how-conspiracy-theories-emerge-on-facebook/>

⁴¹ *Centro de investigación biológica de EE.UU. Fort Detrick, ¿detrás del brote de ébola?*, RT (Aug. 7, 2014), <http://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/view/136298-centro-investigacion-biologica-eeuu-fort-detrick-brote-ebola>

⁴² James Miller, *The Massacre in Syria that Wasn’t*, *The Interpreter* (Jan. 10, 2014), <http://www.interpretermag.com/the-massacre-in-syria-that-wasnt/>

⁴³ *News of chemical weapons attack in Syria published one day before massacre happened — Islamic Invitation Turkey*, Voice of Russia (Aug. 22, 2013), http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2013_08_22/News-of-massacre-in-Syria-published-one-day-before-the-massacre-happened-5549/; *Materials implicating Syrian govt in chemical attack prepared before incident — Russia*, RT (Aug. 23, 2013), <http://rt.com/news/syria-chemical-prepared-advance-901/>; James Miller, *Russia Doubles Down On Its Support for Assad*, *The Interpreter* (Aug. 23, 2013), <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-doubles-down-on-its-support-for-assad/>

⁴⁴ Malachy Browne, *Open Newsroom* (Aug. 23, 2013), <https://plus.google.com/u/0/107958408666053375075/posts/B8523Pi5B6M>

⁴⁵ James Miller, *Russian Media: Conspiracy Theories and Reading Comprehension Issues*, *The Interpreter* (Sept. 18, 2013), <http://www.interpretermag.com/russian-media-conspiracy-theories-and-reading-comprehension-issues/>

⁴⁶ *On the Money: Who pays the price for InfoWars?*, YouTube (May 28, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35uEP2vAvAc>

⁴⁷ See *Institute of Democracy and Cooperation*, IDC-Europe, <http://www.idc-europe.org/en/The-Institute-of-Democracy-and-Cooperation> (last visited Oct. 16, 2014).

⁴⁸ For a biography of Sebastian Sass see *Sebastian Sass*, Communication Director, <http://www.communication-director.com/author/sebastian-sass> (last visited Oct. 16, 2014).

⁴⁹ Murray Wardrop, *Barrister struck off over claim that senior law lord had him kidnapped*, *Daily Telegraph* (Mar. 16, 2012), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/9146307/Barrister-struck-off-over-claim-that-senior-law-lord-had-him-kidnapped.html>

an Internet publication, *Asia Times*,⁵⁰ and, as we shall see below, has helped to disseminate *dezinformatsiya* profitable to the Kremlin. None of the guests' Kremlin connections were revealed on the show, which instead complained of distortions in Western media.

The RT approach will only be ramped up in the coming months as it increases its foreign-language offerings. Since 2013 RT has also taken control of the Voice of Russia radio station and swallowed up the respected RIA Novosti news agency, creating one international broadcasting network called Russia Segodnya. As a symbolic act of intent, Dmitry Kiselyov is now the official head of Russia Segodnya.

Social Media

The Internet and social media are seen by Russian theorists as key game-changers in the weaponization of information, while the Kremlin's granting of asylum to NSA "whistleblower" Edward Snowden has offered plenty of opportunities to undermine the credibility of the "free" Internet. Similar to their views on traditional media, Kremlin thinkers see Russia as under social media attack. The Internet, according to President Putin, is a "CIA project."⁵¹ General Burenok argues that the Internet and mobile communication allow for a qualitatively more intense and powerful "non-material" warfare, and that Western "colonels" tried to "reformat" Ukrainian thinking during the Maidan.⁵² Again, it is difficult to judge how "genuine" these statements are—stating that Russia is under Internet attack gives the Kremlin license to increase Internet censorship at home, and to increase its own weaponization of the Internet.

Internationally, social media has allowed the Kremlin's traditional media to make their way into the mainstream. RT claims to have a billion hits on YouTube, where its clips can be even less associated with their original Kremlin source. RUPTLY, the Kremlin's new video news agency, posts material online, which might well turn out to be as important a target for it as regular commercial sales. The Russian Foreign Ministry and missions abroad now use Twitter and

Facebook actively, adopting a laconic tone. The Internet is also a boon for 21st-century active measures: if in Soviet times the KGB would have to work hard at getting its "reports" in the Western press, the Internet now provides an opportunity for spreading limitless fake photos and reports and then reporting them as "fact" in traditional media (see the following breakdown of the Ukrainian crisis).⁵³

As Max Seddon's investigative reports for BuzzFeed have detailed, the Kremlin employs an army of "trolls" to wage its online war in the comment sections and Twitter feeds of the West. Seddon writes of one agency:

On an average working day, the Russians are to post on news articles 50 times. Each blogger is to maintain six Facebook accounts publishing at least three posts a day and discussing the news in groups at least twice a day. By the end of the first month, they are expected to have won 500 subscribers and get at least five posts on each item a day. On Twitter, the bloggers are expected to manage 10 accounts with up to 2,000 followers and tweet 50 times a day.⁵⁴

"The main effect of these comments is not necessarily to persuade anyone," says Luke Harding, "but to delay and frustrate our journalistic work by having to clear Twitter feeds of trolls [and] spend money on IT people to clear up the mess." The Kremlin's use of trolls is described by Joel Harding, a US military analyst, as the information equivalent of "suppressive fire."

If at the advent of the Internet age, online activity was seen as essentially politically liberating, a censorship-busting tool that would undermine authoritarian regimes, it is quickly turning into a weapon for postmodern dictatorships like the Kremlin's, which rely more on manipulating societies from inside than on direct oppression. The underlying mindset of the Kremlin's political technologists exploits the idea that "truth" is a lost cause and that reality is essentially malleable, and the instant, easy proliferation of fakes and copies on the Internet makes it the ideal forum to spread such ideas.

⁵⁰ For Escobar's columns, see *The Best of Pepe Escobar*, Asia Times Online, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Others/Escobar.html> (last visited Oct. 16, 2014).

⁵¹ Ewan MacAskill, *Putin calls internet a 'CIA project' renewing fears of web breakup*, The Guardian (Apr. 24, 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/24/vladimir-putin-web-breakup-internet-cia>

⁵² Burenok.

⁵³ Julia Davis, *Russia's top 100 lies about Ukraine*, Examiner.com (Aug. 11, 2014), <http://www.examiner.com/list/russia-s-top-100-lies-about-ukraine>

⁵⁴ Max Seddon, *Documents Show How Russia's Troll Army Hit America*, BuzzFeed (June 2, 2014), <http://www.buzzfeed.com/maxseddon/documents-show-how-russias-troll-army-hit-america#2w346ct>

Spinning Western Media

In his book *Mafia State*, *Guardian* correspondent Luke Harding relates the psychological warfare waged against him and his family after he wrote articles that discussed, among other issues, corruption among President Putin's closest allies.⁵⁵ In 2014 veteran reporter David Satter, who has investigated ties between the Russian secret services and terrorism, was expelled from Russia, having been told his "presence was no longer desirable." Other Kremlin approaches to negotiating with Western media are more subtle.

Russia Beyond the Headlines⁵⁶ is a Russian government-sponsored insert about Russia featured in major newspapers and websites across 23 countries and in 16 languages, including the *Telegraph* in the UK and the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *International New York Times* in the US. It is co-edited with subeditors at the host papers. Keen to distance itself from Russia Today, RBTH denies it is propaganda and argues that it exists to provide a side of Russia missed by Western journalists, stressing common ties and battling stereotypes. Redressing the perceived lack of balance was the subject of a 2014 conference organized by RBTH, where it brought together foreign and Russian journalists to discuss how both sides misrepresent each other.⁵⁷

The stress on balance is a virtue but can also be misused, allowing the Kremlin to inject *dezinformatsiya* or slurs into any debate. For example, Sergey Markov, a Kremlin political technologist, is given space on BBC Radio 4 for "balance," where he is presented as an academic and uses the opportunity to claim that Syrian "rebels would use chemical weapons to create the context for international action."⁵⁸

The Kremlin is also aided in its attempts to influence Western media by Western PR firms such as Ketchum, which places pro-Russian op-eds in the *Huffington Post* and NBC without making the writers' bias or self-interest clear.⁵⁹ Ketchum's most famous coup was publishing Vladimir Putin's *New York Times* op-ed,

which was published online on September 11, 2013 (no doubt to amplify its anti-interventionist message on the anniversary of 9/11), and skillfully teased Obama's failure to find a solution in Syria before using a very American reference to the Declaration of Independence: "There are big countries and small countries.... Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal." The passage captured the Kremlin's delight in using the West's own language against it.⁶⁰

The Weaponization of Culture and Ideas

For a country that President Obama claims "has no global ideology," Putin's Russia cares very much about ideas—funding and engaging with intellectual influencers, think tanks, political parties, and religious and social movements across the world. However, its aim is less to further cultural understanding across borders, one of the pillars of liberal democracy, and more to use culture and ideas as tools to divide and rule, incite, corrupt and co-opt.

Holy Russia and Euro-Sodom

Speaking in 2004, the then chairman of the Duma Committee on International Affairs, Konstantin Kosachyov, stated: "[Russia] cannot explain the purpose of its presence in the post-Soviet Union.... The West is doing this under the banner of democratization, and one gets the impression we are doing it only for the sake of ourselves.... Our activity is pursuing too openly Russian interests. This is patriotic but not competitive."⁶¹ The remark is noteworthy in how it defines Western "democratization" NGOs as covert instruments of foreign policy rather than as groups interested in pursuing their declared values.

After 2004 the Kremlin began to develop its own "banners" through which to exert pressure abroad,

⁵⁵ Luke Harding, *Mafia State*, Guardian Books, 2011.

⁵⁶ Russia Beyond the Headlines, <http://rbth.co.uk> (last visited Oct. 16, 2014).

⁵⁷ Nikolai Litovkin, *Rhetoric in Russian and Western media over Ukraine worse than during Cold War*, RBTH (June 30, 2014), http://rbth.co.uk/international/2014/06/30/experts_rhetoric_in_russian_and_western_media_over_ukraine_wors_37819.html

⁵⁸ See BBC Radio 4 Today, Twitter (Aug. 23, 2013, 12:25 AM), <https://twitter.com/BBCr4today/status/370809115636813824>

⁵⁹ *From Russia with PR*, Pro Publica (Sept. 12, 2013), <http://www.propublica.org/article/from-russia-with-pr-ketchum-cnbc>

⁶⁰ Vladimir Putin, *A Plea for Caution from Russia*, *The New York Times* (Sept. 11, 2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html?hp&_r=1&

⁶¹ Konstantin Kosachev, *Нефтегазовая дипломатия как угроза маргинализации*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Dec. 28, 2004), http://www.ng.ru/world/2004-12-28/5_uspeh.html

and especially among diaspora populations in the former USSR. In the words of Alexander Chepurin, then head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department for Compatriots Abroad, "the Russian diaspora abroad provides social and humanitarian support for the implementation of the interests of the Russian Federation in post-Soviet countries."⁶² Among the most high-profile of the NGOs looking to engage with the Russian diaspora is Russky Mir, predicated on the idea that Russian speakers across the world make up one unified civilization. "Domestically," says Anton Shekhovtsov of University College London, "the Kremlin needs the concept of 'russkiy mir' as a justification for its failure to deliver good governance despite the favorable economic conditions.... Second, as a geopolitical concept, 'russkiy mir' refers to East European countries that Russia wants to keep in its orbit and where it can intervene in case they prefer a different foreign policy."⁶³ President Putin has pledged to increase the budget of Rossotrudnichestvo, a group equivalent to the culture-promoting British Council, from \$60 million to \$300 million by 2020. In the future the body will shift from supporting culture to acting more along the lines of USAID, promoting Russian influence through development programs abroad. Its head is the aforementioned former chairman of the Duma Committee on International Affairs, Konstantin Kosachyov.

In countries with a strong, Moscow-allied Orthodox Church there is a wariness about religious leaders taking on political roles. In Georgia, where the patriarch has a 94% approval rating, the Church's opposition to some EU principles puts it on a de facto collision course with EU-integration policy. In 2011 the Church opposed legislation that would give equal legal and tax status to other religious groups and has been outspoken in saying Georgians should not study abroad.⁶⁴ In May 2013 tens of thousands of demonstrators, led by priests and Orthodox activists, threw rocks at a small pro-LGBT rally.⁶⁵ The Patriarch and senior Church figures have regularly called for

warmer ties with Russia, especially if they result in the return of breakaway regions.⁶⁶ In a 2013 speech to the Georgian diaspora in Moscow, the Patriarch described Putin as a "wise person, who will improve the situation in Georgia."⁶⁷

Russia makes for an odd beacon of religious conservatism: according to the Levada Center, only 4 percent of those who call themselves Orthodox attend church weekly, while rates of abortion, divorce, prostitution and corruption are high. But the Kremlin has managed to provoke parts of Western media into describing it as "conservative" and "traditional," helping change the debate about Russia from one about bad governance and corruption to a convenient argument about civilization. If soft power is about making oneself attractive to foreigners, this is a reversal: the Kremlin makes itself into the West's cultural bogeyman to augment its position at home and abroad casts itself as a crusader battling the forces of "Euro-Sodom."

Allies Left and Right

During the Cold War the Kremlin cultivated ideological links largely with leftist groups that preached a similar socialist message. Now the Kremlin has adopted a different approach, creating alliances and funding groups both on the left *and* on the right: European right-nationalists are seduced by the anti-EU message; members of the far-left are brought in by tales of fighting US hegemony; US religious conservatives are convinced by the Kremlin's stance against homosexuality. It doesn't matter that the Kremlin oppresses leftists and limits some religious freedoms inside Russia—the point is that its fluid approach to ideology allows it to promote an array of voices, all helping the Kremlin feed divisions within the West.

Throughout Eastern Europe the Kremlin retains deep institutional links with former and present communist parties, with Ukraine's justice ministry going so

⁶² Alexander Chepurin, *Ориентир: конгресс соотечественников*. Russkie.org (June 24, 2009), <http://www.russkie.org/index.php?module=fullitem&id=15889>; see also Dmitry Kondrashov, *Мифы о соотечественниках и сеансы их разоблачения. Сеанс второй: золото соотечественников*. Baltija.eu (Oct. 4, 2009), <http://www.baltija.eu/news/read/73>

⁶³ Anton Shekhovtsov, *The "Russian World" Will Destroy Russia*, Anton Shekhovtsov's Blog (Aug. 28, 2014), <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.co.uk/2014/08/the-russian-world-will-destroy-russia.html>

⁶⁴ Ellen Barry, *Church's Muscle Helped Propel President's Rivals to Victory in Georgia*. The New York Times (Oct. 13, 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/world/europe/churchs-muscle-aided-win-of-presidents-rivals-in-georgia.html>

⁶⁵ Andrew Roth & Olesya Vartanyan, *Slow Response by Georgians to Mob Attack on Gay Rally*. The New York Times (May 19, 2013), <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/world/europe/georgian-officials-react-slowly-to-anti-gay-attack.html>

⁶⁶ Barry.

⁶⁷ *Patriarch Ilia II: Putin's enemy, warm, caring and wise*. Facebook (Feb. 25, 2013), <https://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=437600249648526>

far as to request a ban on their national Communist Party,⁶⁸ as it was believed to be acting as a proxy for the Kremlin. In Germany Die Linke Party has also been outspoken in its defense of the Kremlin's positions. In the media RT courts the anti-Western left zealously, with long-running shows by Abby Martin, who campaigns against US "capitalist-imperialism"; George Galloway, the British politician who supported Saddam Hussein; and, perhaps most spectacularly, Julian Assange. The Kremlin has proven adept at manipulating green movements, with NATO accusing Russia of funding European ecological groups whose anti-fracking agenda coincides with the Kremlin's desire to keep Europe dependent on Russian gas.⁶⁹ Domestically the Kremlin is clamping down on anti-capitalist, leftist groups and arresting ecological activists, but its fluid approach to ideology means it can happily promote these causes abroad when they suit its interests.

On the right the Kremlin has built alliances with radical social conservatives and anti-EU nationalists. Everyone from Patrick Buchanan to French right-nationalist leader Marine Le Pen, Britain's anti-EU politician Nigel Farage, Hungary's anti-Semitic Jobbik Party and anti-LGBT groups like the World Congress for Families has been touting their admiration for Putin,⁷⁰ and in return has received plenty of airtime on Kremlin media. Far-right activists, white supremacists, neo-Nazis and anti-Semites from across Europe and the US appear with Kremlin-connected ideologues at conferences⁷¹ in Europe, while Kremlin advisors lecture European far-right parties in Yalta.⁷²

In recent elections to the European Parliament, pro-Russian far-right parties won 52 seats,⁷³ while

Farage's UK Independence Party won 24, leading to fears of a "pro-Russia" bloc in Strasbourg. In France and Hungary the pro-Putin rightist parties are gaining strength: Front National is growing in the polls and has won two seats in the French senate; Jobbik is now Hungary's second-largest party (one of Jobbik's leaders, Béla Kovacs, has been accused of being a Russian spy; his nickname in Hungary is KGBéla).⁷⁴ In his essay "Putin's Strategic Conservatism," Melik Kalyan writes:

Putin is onto something big... He has discovered a significant weapon with which to beat the West and divide its potential allies around the world. It's a weapon we have given him gratis. He has sensed our confusion, our inability to define and preserve our traditions, to conserve our historical sense of nationhood accrued over centuries, our conservatorship of a coherent civilization that after all begins with family, loyalty to the land and the larger ethnos.... In short, Vladimir Putin knows what he's doing.⁷⁵

But apart from the ideological games, a financial incentive is also involved. University College London's Anton Shekhovtsov, who specializes in the European far right, cites the example of how Jörg Haider, the now-deceased leader of Austria's far-right Freedom Party, accepted 900,000 euros worth of bribes to help Russian businessmen with their residency permits. "Putin's Russia cooperates with European far-right parties partly because the latter help Russian political and business elites worm into the West economically, politically and socially," argues Shekhovtsov, and "the far-right's racism and ultra-conservatism are less important than the far-right's corruptibility."⁷⁶

⁶⁸ *Ukrainian government moves to ban Communist Party*. Associated Press (Jul. 24, 2014), <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ukrainian-government-moves-ban-communist-party>

⁶⁹ Sam Jones & Guy Chazan, *Nato claims Moscow funding anti-fracking groups*. Financial Times (June 19, 2014), <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/20201c36-f7db-11e3-baf5-00144feabd0.html#axzz3GKb3LFAo>

⁷⁰ Dalibor Rohac, *Europe's Neoreaction is Scarier Than You Think*, The Ümlaut (Aug. 6, 2014), <http://theumlaut.com/2014/08/06/europe-neoreaction-is-scarier-than-you-think/>

⁷¹ Tom Porter, *Putin Nationalist to Appear With US White Supremacists At Far-Right Conference*, International Business Times (Aug. 31, 2014), <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/putin-follower-appear-us-white-supremacists-far-right-conference-1463350>

⁷² Robert Beckhusen, *As Russia Invades Ukraine, the Kremlin's Far Right Allies Meet in Yalta*, Medium (Aug. 31, 2014), <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/as-russia-invades-ukraine-the-kremlins-far-right-allies-meet-in-yalta-94a30929c35>

⁷³ Human Rights First, *Far-right Parties in European Elections* (May 2014), <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Far-right-Parties-Euro-Elections.pdf>; see also <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/seats-member-state-absolut.html>

⁷⁴ Mitchell A. Orenstein & Péitc Krekó, *A Russian Spy in Brussels?*, Foreign Affairs (May 29, 2014), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141492/mitchell-a-orenstein-and-peter-kreko/a-russian-spy-in-brussels>

⁷⁵ Melik Kalyan, *Kremlin Values: Putin's Strategic Conservatism*, World Affairs (May/June 2014), <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/articles/kremlin-values-putin%E2%80%99s-strategic-conservatism>

⁷⁶ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Freedom Party of Austria: pro-Russian far right lobbyists and merchants of deception*, Anton Shekhovtsov's Blog (June 20, 2014), <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.co.uk/2014/06/freedom-party-of-austria-far-right.html>

The financial transactions do not necessarily need to be direct “bungs,” says Shekhovtsov. Business-people close to far-right movements can be given preferential treatment when dealing in Russia as a return favor for political support. For example, one of the first European businessmen to become involved in Crimea after its annexation by Russia was Philippe de Villiers, a sponsor of the French euroskeptic Movement for France Party. He plans to build Russian historical theme parks in Moscow and Crimea.⁷⁷

“The Kremlin’s cooperation with the European extreme right,” continues Shekhovtsov, “is a marriage of convenience for Putin who would be ready to dump his partners when he no longer needs them to implement his political and economic agenda. The Kremlin’s ‘ideal version’ of the EU is not a homogeneously white, pious, socially conservative union, but more of a corrupt, ‘Berlusconized’ Europe or, even better, a corrupt, ‘Bulgarianized’ Europe.”⁷⁸

Le Trahison des Experts?

Set up in 2004 to, in the words of Executive Director Pavel Andreev, “showcase Russia and explain to the West in what direction Russia was heading,” the Valdai Forum is an annual gathering that brings experts from across the world for a unique opportunity to meet face-to-face with Vladimir Putin and other top Russian officials. The initial focus was on Anglo-Saxon experts, though currently Valdai is refocusing on experts from BRIC economies and on discussion of foreign rather than domestic Russian issues.

Critics of Valdai see a different game being played behind the soft power façade. “The experts who go to Valdai pull their punches when writing about Putin,” says Lilia Shevtsova, until recently of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Moscow Center and now at the Brookings Institution. “Experts who go want to be close to power and are afraid of losing their access. Some might believe

that they can use Valdai as a platform for criticism, but in reality their mere presence at the event means they are already helping legitimize the Kremlin.” “You end up being a puppet in the Kremlin’s theater,” agrees Luke Harding of the *Guardian*, “there to make Putin look good.” This makes it less of a soft power tool to communicate Russia’s message and more of a decoy to foster an illusion.

Kremlin-connected figures have opened think tanks to deliver pro-Russia positions abroad. The Institute for Democracy and Cooperation in New York, for example, looks at American human rights abuses.⁷⁹ Other Western experts are given positions on the boards of Russian companies. In Germany, for example, Putin hagiographer Alexander Rahr is one of the most prominent Russia analysts and frequently takes a pro-Kremlin position, with no acknowledgement of his relationship with the Valdai Club or his work as a paid communications consultant for Russian-owned energy companies.⁸⁰

But financial lures are the simplest type of mechanism the Kremlin uses. Slower, more patient work is employed to co-opt experts over many years. “From a very early stage in your work in Russia you are surrounded by people, experts and media executives you think are giving you objective insight—and only realize much later they have an agenda and are spinning you a line,” says Ben Judah, author of *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin*. Judah spent a year studying at Moscow State University and the elite Moscow State Institute of International Relations, and worked for the European Council on Foreign Relations, focusing on Russia, before committing to journalism. “The idea that there ‘is no alternative to Putin,’ that Putin is some sort of staunch moral conservative, that dissidents like Pussy Riot are ‘projects’ or extreme fascists, or that Putin is ‘going mad’ and therefore the West needs to placate him—these have all been convenient myths spread by the Kremlin and readily taken up by Western experts and media.”

⁷⁷ French Politician to Build Historic Amusement Park in Crimea, *The Moscow Times* (Aug. 15, 2014), <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/505178.html>

⁷⁸ Anton Shekhovtsov, *The Kremlin’s marriage of convenience with the European far right*, openDemocracy (Apr. 28, 2014), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anton-shekhovtsov/kremlin-s-marriage-of-convenience-with-european-far-right>

⁷⁹ Nikola Krastev, *In the Heart Of New York, Russia’s ‘Soft Power’ Arm Gaining Momentum*, RFE/RL (Feb. 15, 2009), http://www.rferl.org/content/In_The_Heart_Of_New_York_Russias_Soft_Power_Arm_Gaining_Momentum/1493429.html

⁸⁰ Von Dirk Banse, Florian Flader & Uwe M Uwe Müller, *Deutscher Putin-Unterstützer gibt den Russland-Experten*, *Die Welt* (Apr. 20, 2014), <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article127133177/Deutscher-Putin-Unterstuetzer-gibt-den-Russland-Experten.html>

The Weaponization of Money

The Russian system uses corruption as an integral part of securing the Kremlin's power vertical. Notions of "market rules," "rule of law" and "private property" are erratically practiced. Many companies, and especially those in strategic industries, are operated along quasi-patrimonial lines, with business leaders allowed to control their assets as long as they pay off bureaucrats, pledge political loyalty and "sponsor" national projects. The lines between the state and the private sector are utterly blurred. Bureaucrats join official structures to have the opportunity of rent-seeking. This then becomes a source of power over them if they fall foul of the Kremlin. Meanwhile, a popular form of business takeover practice is known as "*reiding*," the ultra-violent, post-Soviet cousin of corporate "raiding." *Reiding* involves buying into a company and then using any means possible (violence, bribery, blackmail) to take it over. As Professor Alena Ledeneva of University College London has documented in her book *Can Russia Modernise*, *reiding* is increasingly practiced not just between business rivals but by state officials wanting to take over private businesses.⁸¹

This domestic context informs the Kremlin's mindset when dealing with the power of money in foreign policy. If the premise of the neoliberal idea of globalization is that money is politically neutral, that interdependence will be an impulse towards rapprochement, and that international commerce sublimates violence into harmony, the Russian view remains at best mercantilist, with money and trade used as weapons and interdependence a mechanism for aggression. The new Russia is the *reider* inside globalization.

"Asymmetric Interdependence"

From the threat of pork bans against Bulgaria to oil blockades against Lithuania and threats of renegotiation of energy contracts with British companies in Russia, the Kremlin employs a "systematic policy of coercive bilateralism that includes diplomatic pressure, trade embargoes, transport blockades and...gas or oil supply contracts."⁸² Despite its relative weakness the Kremlin has learned the art of what Nicu Popescu

and Mark Leonard of the European Council on Foreign Relations refer to as "asymmetric interdependence": advancing Russia's interests by making other states reliant on its money, markets and trade.

Each country is approached according to its unique vulnerability, whether that be Britain's overreliance on the City of London or Germany's need for Russian gas (see below in "The New Internationale" for a regional breakdown). Energy, in terms of both supplies and the granting of access to Russia's natural resources, is often the trump card in "asymmetric interdependence." Research by the Swedish Defense Agency shows 55 instances of energy cutoffs by Russia between 1992 and 2006. While officially explained by Russia as due to technical reasons, the cutoffs have almost always coincided with political interests, such as influencing elections or energy deals in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Kremlin's weaponization of money is aided and abetted by Western financial PR firms and influencers. "Russia's foreign policy purposefully blurs the line between economics and politics," says Reuters' European Breaking Views editor Pierre Briancon, "but in Russia there is no such thing as 'pure business.' So when financial PR firms or influencers working for Russian companies say that Western analysts should forget about politics and just focus on business, they are helping the Kremlin's game." "[When] Western businesses and Western politicians not only accept to play by Russian rules, but become lobbyists of the bureaucratic capitalism of Russia," writes Lilia Shevtsova, "it strengthens Russia's self-confidence and encourages the belief that the West can always be blackmailed or corrupted."⁸³

The Uses of Corruption

Acquiescence to Russian corruption, with illicit funds regularly laundered throughout the West, works to the Kremlin's advantage both domestically and internationally.

Inside Russia it strengthens the Kremlin's deal with its own elites, allowing them to carry on corrupt

⁸¹ Alena V. Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise?*, Cambridge, 2013.

⁸² For a full breakdown of Russian economic warfare see Mark Leonard & Nicu Popescu, *A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations*, ECFR 15 (2007), available at http://kms2.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ESDP/91773/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/9bdae328-1b65-406a-8b40-863985f9690a/en/Power_Audit_EU_Russia_1107.pdf

⁸³ Lilia Shevtsova, *Россия перед новым политическим циклом: парадоксы стабильности и Petro-State*, in Stefan Batory Foundation, *Putin's Empire* 13–28, 26 (2007), available at <http://www.batory.org.pl/doc/putins-empire.pdf>

deals at home and investing their profits abroad: some \$50 billion leaves Russian annually. This keeps elites happy while simultaneously giving the Kremlin a lever with which to come down on them at any time, ensuring loyalty and just the right amount of paranoia. Western acquiescence in profiting from the corrupt gains of Russian elites then acts as a psychological weapon to demoralize the Russian domestic opposition, which feels abandoned and finds the Kremlin's arguments regarding the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of the West reinforced: "I've regularly told the UK Financial Services Authority to investigate Russian state companies in the UK," says Vladimir Ashurkov, head of the Moscow-based Anti-Corruption Fund, "but they never do: at one point you realize it's a question of political will." For centuries, and especially during the Cold War and its afterglow, Russian dissidents spoke of the West as the beacon that attracted and guided them. This has shifted: by being so ready to take post-Soviet money and ask so few questions, the West, and financial capitals like London and Geneva in particular, is increasingly perceived as reinforcing the autocratic,

corrupt systems protesters in Moscow and beyond fight against. Kremlin appeasers, cultural relativists and many others have often argued that "whatever one might think of their system, the West shouldn't lecture Russia." But this argument has become outmoded. It is no longer a case of saying London should mind its own business: it's a case of the West actively making things worse.

But corruption has global consequences too. The Russian secret services are believed to work closely with organized crime syndicates in such activities as arms trafficking, leading to the country being referred to as a "mafia state" by a senior Spanish judge in a Wikileaks cable.⁸⁴ In Central and southeastern Europe the use of opaque shell companies and money-laundering schemes has allowed the Kremlin to covertly burrow into the political and economic core of countries such as Latvia and the Czech Republic (see regional breakdown below). "We have to reframe the way we look at corruption," argues Elena Panfilova of Transparency International. "This is not just a financial or ethical issue, it's a national security issue."

⁸⁴ Luke Harding, *WikiLeaks cables: Russian government 'using mafia for its dirty work.'* The Guardian (Dec. 1, 2010), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/01/wikileaks-cable-spain-russian-mafia>

The New, Non-Linear Internationale

In the following overview we look at how the Kremlin plays a different game in different regions. The Kremlin's influence can be thought of concentrically: in Ukraine it can create complete havoc; in the Baltic states it can destabilize; in Eastern Europe, co-opt power; in Western Europe, divide and rule; in the US, distract; in the Middle East and South America, fan flames. The Kremlin does not need to be the outright leader of a bloc of nations à la Warsaw Pact; instead, it can exacerbate existing divides, subvert international institutions and help create a world where its own form of corrupt authoritarianism flourishes. Its favored method is to divide and conquer. In energy politics, for example, Russia can be aggressive in Eastern Europe while going out of its way to be a reliable partner to Western European countries. "Russia shows a different face to different parts of Europe," an energy security adviser to a Central European government told one of the authors of this paper. "So when we talk about Russia, we find we're talking about different Russias, and that makes building a unitary position difficult."

Baltic States

With their large Russian-speaking populations, the Baltic states are perhaps the most vulnerable EU countries to Russian information, influence and money. Russian diaspora NGOs are very active. Media includes PBK, a Russian-language television channel that has 4 million viewers in the region and receives low-cost, high-quality Russian programming and news from state Russian TV.⁸⁵

"Huge parts of our population live in a separate reality created by Russian media and NGOs," says Raul Rebane, an expert on propaganda in Estonia. "This makes consensual politics difficult." Since the start of Putin's second term in 2004, Russia has used history

to create tensions within Estonian society. Most ethnic Estonians, and most historians around the world, argue that Estonia was occupied by the USSR in 1940. But Russian media and compatriot NGOs⁸⁶ offer a different version of events that argues that Estonia voluntarily joined the USSR. This message is sinking in: a 2005 opinion poll revealed that 56% of the Russian population agreed with the "voluntarily" thesis.⁸⁷

Things came to a head in April 2007, when a Soviet memorial statue, the Bronze Soldier, was relocated from the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery. According to the Estonian Security Police, who claim that the Russian secret services control most compatriot NGOs, Russian agents were behind the instigation of the over-emotional coverage of the Bronze Soldier conflict in the Russian media, one of the reasons behind the mass riots. Soon after came a series of cyber-attacks on Estonia, the second biggest in history, crippling government bodies, banks and newspapers. The attacks were led by "patriotic hackers" from Kremlin youth groups.

There is also a Russian presence inside Estonian political parties. "In 2010, the Estonian secret service named the mayor of Tallinn, Center Party leader Edgar Savisaar, as a Russian agent" after he asked for money from Moscow, writes David Satter in *The Last Gasp of Empire*.⁸⁸

Meanwhile, the Estonian security apparatus was rocked by the discovery in 2008 that Hermann Simm, "a middle-ranking civil servant in Estonia's defense ministry," was a Russian spy.⁸⁹

Of all the Baltic republics, Latvia has the highest percentage of individuals from the Russian diaspora—and PBK is the second most-watched channel in the country. PBK's news editor, former TASS correspon-

⁸⁵ For a detailed analysis see Juhan Kivirähk et al., *The "Humanitarian Dimensions of Russian Foreign Policy Toward Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Baltic States*. Centre for East European Policy Studies, 2010.

⁸⁶ The Security Police of the Republic of Estonia, *Annual Review 2003*, 13. 2003, available at https://www.kapo.ee/cms-data/_text/138/124/files/aastaraamat-2003-eng.pdf

⁸⁷ Juhan Kivirähk et al. 69.

⁸⁸ David Satter, *The Last Gasp of Empire, Russia's Attempts to Control the Media in the Former Soviet Republics*, 15. 2014, http://cima.ned.org/sites/default/files/CIMA-Russia%20report_David%20Satter.pdf

⁸⁹ *Fog in the Baltic*, *The Economist* (Nov. 6, 2008), <http://www.economist.com/node/12566943>

dent Nils Usakovs, became mayor of Riga in 2011, and leaked e-mails showed him asking for funding from Russian secret services for a previous municipal campaign in 2009 (Usakovs has never denied the veracity of the e-mails). Usakovs' party has also signed a cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia party, "deepening concerns that it is a proxy for Moscow's business and political interests."⁹⁰ According to Satter, Latvian Russian-language newspapers, such as the *Chas* and *Telegraf*, which are owned by Russian billionaires, promote the message that Russians are discriminated against in Latvia, praise Russia's domestic social policy and support the Kremlin's compatriots' policies.

Media and party politics aside, Latvia's role as a center for money laundering makes it highly dependent on financial flows from Russia. Half of the country's investment comes from foreign depositors, largely from former Soviet states. Latvia has become a "playground for Russian interests: business, political and, above all, criminal,"⁹¹ reports the *Guardian's* Luke Harding, raising concerns that "the Kremlin's agenda in Latvia is to slowly reverse the country's strategic direction from pro-West to pro-Moscow." "I'm afraid of all this Russian capital," Valeri Belokon, a Latvian banking tycoon, told Harding. "Capital is influence. Latvia is an open country. And I'm not against tourism or business. But the danger for a small country is that we become dependent on Russia. We definitely have to defend ourselves." Yet if the free flow of capital is a pillar of globalization, what mechanisms exist to do this?

Lithuania has a smaller Russian minority than the other Baltic states but is heavily dependent on Russian energy: Russia has raised the gas price in the country by 450% over the last seven years, in what many perceive as geopolitical punishment.⁹² Keeping Lithuania from switching to shale gas appears to be a key Kremlin aim in the country. As Satter reports, the main daily newspaper, *Lietuvos žinios*, carries anti-shale gas articles. It is owned by Achema, a fertilizer producer,

which "receives natural gas at a sharp discount from the Russian gas monopoly, Gazprom."⁹³

The Russian site regnum.ru, and the Russian language newspaper Litovskiy Kurier ("Lithuanian Courier"), which circulates widely in Lithuania, but whose financing is not transparent...have been instrumental in encouraging opposition to Lithuanian plans for energy independence....When representatives of the Chevron Oil Company arrived in Lithuania to discuss a shale gas project, they were met with demonstrators, many of them carrying signs in Russian.⁹⁴

Central and Southeastern Europe

The accession of Central and southeastern European countries to the EU and NATO was assumed to have closed the door on 20th-century struggles over those regions. This may have been premature.

More than 20 years after the end of communism, over four decades after the Red Army extinguished the Prague Spring, the Czech Republic is again in danger of falling under Moscow's shadow.⁹⁵

In the south, Cyprus and Greece consistently take up Moscow's cause in EU debates on issues ranging from EU policy in the Caucasus to the regulation of energy markets.⁹⁶ Cyprus is dependent on Russian financial flows (both legal and illicit), while Greece's "special relationship" to Moscow is cemented by energy ties and Russia's willingness to supply arms for Greece's standoff with Turkey. In the Balkans, the Russian ambassador to the EU has referred to Bulgaria as Russia's "Trojan Horse" inside the EU,⁹⁷ while the German secret services have expressed concern at how one-third of Bulgaria's output is controlled by Russia. The ruling coalition is closely aligned with Moscow and contains "former Communist party members, intelligence service workers and Bulgarian oligarchs who do business

⁹⁰ Satter 17.

⁹¹ Luke Harding, *Latvia: Russia's playground for business, politics — and crime*, *The Guardian* (Jan. 23, 2013), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/23/latvia-russian-playground>

⁹² Liudas Dapkus, *Lithuania shivers as Russia ramps up heating costs*, AP (Feb. 4, 2013), <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/lithuania-shivers-russia-ramps-heating-costs>

⁹³ Satter 12.

⁹⁴ Satter 14-15.

⁹⁵ Gregory Feifer & Brian Whitmore, *The Velvet Surrender*, *New Republic* (Sept. 17, 2010), <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/magazine/77397/russian-aggression-the-velvet-surrender-vladimir-putin-vaclav-klaus-czech-republic>

⁹⁶ Leonard & Popescu 30.

⁹⁷ *Interview with Vladimir Chizhov*, *Capital* (Nov. 10, 2006), <http://www.capital.bg/show.php?storyid=293214>. A Greek expert uses the same term to describe Greek-Russian relations; see Dimitris Apokis, *Dangers and Strategic Mistakes from the Burgas — Alexandroupolis Agreement*, *Investor's World* (Mar. 17-18, 2007), http://www.ctbookstore.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication_details&id=4934&pubType=Eurasia

with Russian President Vladimir Putin's minions."⁹⁸ The Kremlin's economic influence over the region has been increasing through recent bailouts of the government in Serbia and Republika Srpska, while Russia is also the largest external investor in Montenegro, controlling 32% of enterprises there.⁹⁹ The Kremlin's economic influence is supplemented by close associations with parties on both the left and the right, and a stress on common cultural and religious ties: "The Balkans is a region in which Russia seeks not only to advance its own interests, but also to halt the spread of Western norms and values," writes Dr. Andrew Foxall, describing his study with Andrew Clark of Russia's role in the region.¹⁰⁰ Further north, Russia's Sberbank has bought a controlling stake in Austria's Volksbank.

But it is Gazprom's South Stream pipeline project, which plans to connect Russian energy directly with the Balkans and Central Europe, which has perhaps been the Kremlin's key tool for securing influence. The European Commission opposed the construction of the pipeline, arguing it is against the Third Energy Packet and the EU's stated aim of "reducing energy dependence on Russia, following Russia's annexation of Crimea." European energy companies have resisted Brussels: South Stream involves a selection of top European energy companies, including Italy's ENI (20% stake), Germany's Wintershall/BASF (15%) and France's EDF (15%).¹⁰¹ Circumventing Brussels, Russia has made bilateral deals with all the countries through which South Stream will pass, countries which, as Anton Shekhovtsov writes,

ha[ve] either a pro-Russian government or a far-right party represented in parliament and openly pro-Kremlin: Bulgaria (pro-Russian government, Ataka), Serbia (pro-Russian government), Hungary (Jobbik), Austria (FPÖ, BZÖ), Greece (Golden Dawn), Italy (Lega Nord)... Given the cooperation between the Krem-

lin and the European extreme right, it is no wonder that, for example, Jobbik prefers the South Stream pipeline to Nabucco, another planned gas pipeline aimed at reducing the EU's dependence on Russian energy.¹⁰²

"South Stream has never been just an economically driven project for Russia. It is primarily geopolitical," says Dr. Frank Umbach of Kings College, London. "The pipeline project is now another weapon to divide and rule the EU."¹⁰³

Western Europe

There seem few ideological principles uniting Anglo-baiting, left-leaning Scottish National Party leader Alex Salmond and right-wing, Anglo-patriotic UKIP leader Nigel Farage apart from their avowed admiration of Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin has cultivated both ties carefully, with Scottish Nationalist and UKIP members both receiving exposure on RT. Farage's anti-EU agenda plays into the Kremlin's hands. Salmond's desire to deconstruct the United Kingdom does, too: during the Scottish independence referendum, Kremlin propagandists such as Konstantin Rykov and Anton Korobkov-Zemlyansky vigorously supported the breakup of the UK.¹⁰⁴

Russia cannot dominate the UK as it has Bulgaria—but it has sniffed out the country's weak spots.

The London Stock Exchange, with its looser (relative to the US) regulations, is perceived as an easier place for Russian companies to be listed. At least 70 Russian companies are listed and traded on the LSE, with companies from the former Soviet states raising \$82.6 billion in London in the past two decades.¹⁰⁵ But that's just the transparent money. Much more is thought to flow from Russia to London through the UK's network of murky offshore zones such as the

⁹⁸ Gerald Traufetter, *In The Kremlin's Grip: Fears Grow Over Bulgaria's Russian Dependence*, Der Spiegel (May 12, 2014), <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/fears-grow-in-europe-that-russia-will-influence-bulgaria-a-968955.html>

⁹⁹ Haris Stefanatos, *Ukrainian crisis: Montenegro between NATO and Russia*, Independent Balkan News Agency (Mar. 24, 2014), <http://www.balkan.eu.com/ukrainian-crisis-montenegro-nato-russia/>

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Foxall, *Russia's Role in the Balkans*, Russia Studies Centre at the Henry Jackson Society (July 1, 2014), <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2014/07/01/russias-role-in-the-balkans/>

¹⁰¹ See the company of Wintershall *South Stream*, Wintershall, <http://www.wintershall.com/en/press-news/energy-for-europe.html> (last visited Oct. 17, 2014).

¹⁰² Anton Shekhovtsov, *The Kremlin's marriage of convenience with the European far right*, openDemocracy (Apr. 28, 2014), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anton-shekhovtsov/kremlin%E2%80%99s-marriage-of-convenience-with-european-far-right>

¹⁰³ Frank Umbach, *EU's credibility at stake over South Stream Pipeline*, Geopolitical Information Service (Aug. 26, 2014), <http://geopolitical-info.com/en/energy/eu-s-credibility-at-stake-over-south-stream-pipeline>

¹⁰⁴ Tom Parfitt, *Pro-Kremlin bloggers throw weight behind Scottish independence*, The Daily Telegraph (Sept. 10, 2014), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11087449/Pro-Kremlin-bloggers-throw-weight-behind-Scottish-independence.html>

¹⁰⁵ Tom Bergin & Brenda Goh, *London's lucrative Russia ties hang over sanctions debate*, Reuters (Mar. 6, 2014), <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/ukraine-crisis-britain-russia-idUKL6N0M31RX20140306>

British Virgin Islands. According to the UK Financial Standards Authority, approximately one-third of UK banks “appeared willing to accept very high levels of money laundering risk if the immediate reputational and regulatory risk was acceptable.”¹⁰⁶ The UK has been slow to clamp down on these financial flows, not because the Russian money is such a huge amount, but because a clampdown would send a signal that London was surrendering its position as the financial capital of lucrative, murky money.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin has been attempting to make inroads into Britain’s political establishment. Elite officials are hired as members of the boards of Russian companies, leading to a phenomenon referred to in the UK as “lords on the boards” or “rent-a-peer.” The *Guardian* and *World Affairs Journal* exposed a Russian lobbying organization, Conservative Friends of Russia (since renamed the Westminster Russia Forum), set up under the coordination of a “diplomat” widely suspected of being an intelligence operative inside the Russian embassy, and apparently aimed at stopping British sanctions against Russian human rights violators.¹⁰⁷ The *Guardian* has shown how figures close to the Kremlin, including Putin’s judo partner and Russian MP Vasily Shestakov, attend Tory fundraising dinners, leading Labour MP Chris Bryant to claim: “This shows the utter hypocrisy of David Cameron’s Tory party and explains Cameron’s spinelessness in relation to Putin. Voters will think that it’s not just bizarre but despicable that Cameron will shake hands with, sit down to dinner with, and quite possibly take the money off, people such as these—the very people he is pretending to criticize over Crimea.”¹⁰⁸

Economic interests aside, France’s alliance with Moscow has traditionally been based around a mutual anti-Americanism in international relations. Recently this has been supplemented by close friendship

between France’s far-right Front National and the Russian government. On visits to Moscow, Front National leader Marine Le Pen has met with high-level Russian officials and ministers, appeared on Russian TV praising Putin and stated that “Russia saved Syria.” Front National “journalists” were involved in setting up the Kremlin’s first propaganda channel in France, ProRussiaTV.com.¹⁰⁹ ProRussiaTV.com is now off air, but RT is set to open a French-language station soon. With Front National polling at 20%, RT could find itself playing an active part in a Western European election.

Germany is Russia’s biggest trading partner, the most important market for Russian gas and a partner on the Nord Stream gas pipeline project. Former chancellor Gerhard Schröder sits on the board of Nord Stream, while former Stasi agent Matthias Warnig, who is one of the few Westerners to be in Putin’s inner circle, sits on the boards of several state companies¹¹⁰ and is the managing director of Nord Stream AG.¹¹¹ Schröder and Warnig’s attendance at Putin’s birthday party in St. Petersburg while the crisis over Ukraine was cresting is a sign of how close to the Kremlin some of the elites are.

German public opinion is cultivated through German experts involved in the Valdai and Russian-German Forums who are also given positions as communications consultants for Russian energy firms (see above). Edward Snowden’s revelations regarding US spying on the German chancellor helped provoke what *Der Spiegel* described as an “ice age” in US-German relations: “A recent poll finds that 57% of Germans describe relations with the United States as positive, down from a high of 92% less than two years ago. Not since Schröder decided to use Iraq as a wedge issue in the 2002 federal election have German-American relations been so rocky,” comments American journalist and Germany specialist James Kirchick.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Financial Conduct Authority, *Anti-Money Laundering Annual Report 2012/13*, 11. 2013, available at <http://www.fca.org.uk/static/documents/anti-money-laundering-report.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ Michael Weiss, *In Plain Sight: The Kremlin’s London Lobby*, *World Affairs* (Mar./Apr. 2013), <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/plain-sight-kremlin%E2%80%99s-london-lobby>; Luke Harding, *Tory blushes deepen over activities of Conservative Friends of Russia*, *The Guardian* (Nov. 30, 2012), <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/nov/30/activities-of-conservative-friends-of-russia>

¹⁰⁸ Robert Booth et al., *Tory summer party drew super rich supporters with total wealth of £11bn*, *Guardian* (July 3, 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jul/01/sp-tory-summer-party-drew-super-rich-supporters-with-total-wealth-of-11bn>

¹⁰⁹ Elena Servettaz, *Putin’s Far-Right Friends in Europe*, *Institute of Modern Russia*, (Jan. 16, 2014), <http://imrussia.org/en/russia-and-the-world/645-putins-far-right-friends-in-europe>

¹¹⁰ Von Dirk Banse et al., *Dieser Deutsche genießt Putins Vertrauen*, *Die Welt* (Aug. 3, 2014), <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article130829736/Dieser-Deutsche-geniesst-Putins-Vertrauen.html>

¹¹¹ Roman Kupchinsky, *Nord Stream, Matthias Warnig (codename “Arthur”) and the Gazprom Lobby*, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, volume 6, issue 114 (June 15, 2009), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35128#.VEQiEB3F_jw

¹¹² James Kirchick, *Angst Over Spying*, *Weekly Standard* (Feb. 24, 2014), http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/angst-over-spying_781538.html

“The Democracy Containment Doctrine”

In what Chris Walker, executive director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy, calls the “democracy containment doctrine,” Russia is helping create a global “authoritarian fraternity.” China and Russia block pro-democracy moves in the UN; Russia, Iran and China push for greater control over the Internet in intergovernmental bodies worldwide. Organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement and the Eurasian Customs Union “mimic their liberal counterparts but...aim...to institutionalize authoritarian norms. Authoritarian regimes work with each other to monitor activists and oppositionists and block their movement, for instance through international ‘watchlists’ and ‘blacklists’ that are generated within the context of the SCO and the Gulf Cooperation Council.”

The setting up of a BRICs bank as an alternative to the World Bank was another step in attempting to create an anti-Western international: it plans to lend without any of the democratization conditions enforced by Bretton Woods institutions. “What Russia is saying is, it’s fine for you to be the way you are,” argues Melik Kalayan. “You’re authoritarian, we’re authoritarian, let’s work together against the West.” Speaking in July 2014, Hungary’s Viktor Orban spoke of the emergence of a new model of successful “illiberal states” such as China and Russia, who were more competitive than “liberal democracies.”¹¹³

But even with countries committed to liberal democracy, sometimes merely fanning anti-US sentiment can be enough. As historian Anne Applebaum points out in a recent “Democracy Works” paper for the Legatum Institute,¹¹⁴ India, Brazil and South Africa should all be examples of how the Western model of liberal democracy can be more or less successful. However, Russia has managed to manipulate residual anti-colonial, anti-Western resentment in all three countries, so all refused to condemn its annexation of Crimea and refused to back sanctions against Moscow. “It’s not as if anybody here likes Russia that much,” says *Buenos Aires Herald* deputy editor Adrian Bono, “but one-half of the political spectrum is against the US, and they show Putin in a favorable light.” RT programs are

re-broadcast on TeleSUR, a network majority-funded by the Venezuelan government, to help show local audience that the anti-American sentiment is global.

The USA

Even as the Kremlin’s non-linear influence grows worldwide, there seems to be complacency in the US regarding the risks the Kremlin poses. Russia, the US leadership continues to believe, does not deserve to be taken too seriously. Putin’s annexation of Crimea and belligerence over Ukraine are, to quote President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry, a sign of “weakness,” the hallmark of a “regional” power stuck “in the old ways of doing things,” leading “no bloc of nations and no global ideology.” This misses the point: the Kremlin has worked out that in a rapidly shifting 21st century it’s how you use your relative weakness that counts.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin is making some small inroads into American discourse. “I see how parts of the left are pulled into watching the American RT because it confirms their view of the world that the reality around them is rigged. RT doesn’t try to introduce a new vision; it’s enough to sow doubt and eat away at the fabric of a reality-based conversation,” argues Sean Guillory of the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Russian and Eastern European Studies. While RT helps feed the American left, religious conservatives are seduced by Putin’s anti-LGBT stance and libertarians like Rand Paul by the idea of a common enemy—the US government. A further level of pressure is added by business lobbies who oppose sanctions against the Kremlin.

Does any of the above, however, add up to anything much? The US is certainly far less affected by the Kremlin’s influence and money than other countries. But could the Kremlin have been playing another game with Washington? The “reset” policy, President Obama’s signature attempt to build a positive relationship with Russia, was based at least in part on the presence of Dmitry Medvedev as president between 2008 and 2012, representing a seemingly liberal future for Russia. Medvedev was essentially a decoy president, inspiring faith in the possibility of a new Russia while giving the system time to

¹¹³ Zoltan Simon, *Orban Says He Seeks to End Liberal Democracy in Hungary*, Bloomberg (July 28, 2014), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-07-28/orban-says-he-seeks-to-end-liberal-democracy-in-hungary.html>

¹¹⁴ Ann Bernstein & Anne Applebaum, *The Democratic Alternative from the South: India, Brazil, and South Africa*, Legatum Institute, 2014, <http://www.li.com/docs/default-source/democracy-works/the-democratic-alternative-from-the-south-india-brazil-south-africa.pdf?sfvrsn=6>

cement power at home and to entrench its networks abroad. Timothy Thomas of the Foreign Military Studies Office describes how one of the major tools of Russian information war thinking is the concept of “reflexive control,” the use of disinformation or camouflage “as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline

him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.” The reasons for Medvedev’s presidency are many and complex, but there’s a hint of a reflexive control operation vis-à-vis Washington: rarely have we seen the Kremlin create a virtual reality that had such great consequences for very real policy.

Ukraine and the Advent of Non-Linear War

Redefining War for the 21st Century

The Kremlin’s weaponization of information, culture and money is an integral part of its vision for 21st-century “hybrid” or “non-linear” war: “In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace,” Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov writes in the *Military-Industrial Courier*.¹¹⁵

The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special-operations forces.

Echoing this idea, S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, writing in the Russian journal *Military Thought*, argue that in 21st-century “hybrid war,” asymmetric measures must be undertaken that are of a “systemic, comprehensive nature, combining political,

diplomatic, informational, economic, military, and other efforts.”¹¹⁶

Though it draws on many historical practices of covert warfare, and has perhaps emerged by accident rather than grand design, Russia’s hybrid war is re-defining the rules of engagement in the 21st century, and in Ukraine it is leaving the West flummoxed. “The essence of hybrid, or non-linear war,” says Professor Galeotti, is

to wage war without ever announcing it officially. This is why it represents such a challenge for NATO, the quintessentially 20th-century security alliance, built to deter and repel a conventional threat—which it did and does very well—but without the powers, scope or even mission to deal with these 21st-century challenges. Tanks don’t prevent cyber-attacks; you can’t respond to a propaganda campaign with a cruise missile.

Ukraine 2014: Welcome to the Future?

In its on-the-ground, military involvement in Ukraine, the Kremlin has generally sought to use a mix of covert troops directing local vigilantes. When this has not worked, Russia has resorted to small-scale incursions and “limited war,” which change facts on the

¹¹⁵ Valery Gerasimov, *Ценность науки в предвидении*, *Voenno-promyshlennyy Kurier* (Feb.27-Mar. 5, 2013), http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf. An English translation by Robert Coalson and commentary by Mark Galeotti is available here, <http://in-moscowshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>

¹¹⁶ S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, *Asymmetric Operations to Ensure Russia’s Military Security*, 13-22, *Military Thought*, No. 3 2010. An English translation from East View Press is available here: http://www.eastviewpress.com/Files/MT_FROM%20THE%20CURRENT%20ISSUE_No.1_2010_small.pdf

ground without ever quite seeming enough of a reason for a full-blown declaration of war. As Professor Jakub Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell write in *National Interest*, NATO, with its focus on extended deterrence, has no way to respond to this sort of low-intensity “jab and pause” approach.¹¹⁷

But military *maskirovka*, the war of deception and concealment, has only been one small part of the Kremlin’s campaign. Inside Russia, and in areas of eastern Ukraine where Russian television is popular, the Kremlin’s political technologists have managed to create a parallel reality where “fascists” have taken power in Kiev, ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine are in mortal danger and the CIA is waging a war against Moscow. “I’ve never seen anything like this use of media—it’s more like the behavior of people in a sect than anything you see in other conflict areas,” says David Patrikarakos, a Poynter Fellow at Yale who has reported from the front line of eastern Ukraine and compares it to his experience covering the Middle East. “Reality has been turned upside down and reinvented.” The political technologists’ bag of tricks is going global. Take Novorossiia,¹¹⁸ the name Vladimir Putin has given to the large wedge of southeastern Ukraine he might, or might not, consider annexing. The term is plucked from tsarist history, when it represented a different geographical space. Nobody who lives in that part of the world today has ever thought of themselves as living in Novorossiia and bearing allegiance to it. Now, Novorossiia is being imagined into being: Russian media are showing maps of its “geography,” and Kremlin-backed politicians are writing its “history” in school textbooks.¹¹⁹ There’s a flag¹²⁰ and even a news agency (in English and Russian).¹²¹ There are several Twitter feeds.¹²² The fantasy of Novorossiia is then used as a very real political bargaining chip. In the final days of August 2014, an apparent Russian military incursion into Ukraine—

and a relatively small one at that—was made to feel momentarily threatening when Putin invoked the term “Novorossiia” and urged talks on the statehood of southeastern Ukraine, leaving NATO stunned and Kiev intimidated enough to agree to a ceasefire.

In the Kremlin’s war, information precedes essence. Military maneuvers appear to be planned for Russian cameras—with the primary aim of spreading information rather than engaging in military warfare. “A grim joke in eastern Ukraine goes: if you see a Russian camera, run—it means something is about to go off,” says Peter Dickinson, a British journalist who now runs the Ukraine Today channel. In one incident, journalists were gathered by pro-Russian separatists to witness a Ukrainian garrison surrendering. Orhan Dzhemal,¹²³ a correspondent for *Forbes*, told independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* that the tour included extras to play the mothers of the soldiers, who were given banners with slogans like “Free our Boys”: “The journalists were supposed to film how, without shedding a single drop of blood, the army base would go over to the side of the ‘Donetsk People’s Republic,’” said Dzhemal. Tragically, reality intervened, the Ukrainian soldiers fought back and a Russian TV cameraman was killed.

Playing to an international audience, RT initially focused on giving space to experts blaming the troubles in Ukraine on the EU and its plans for expansion, trying to exploit right-wing, anti-EU sentiment in Western Europe,¹²⁴ while also slurring the post-Yanukovich Kiev government as a right-wing junta¹²⁵ and spreading stories of Jews being frightened of the upsurge in Ukrainian nationalism. An interview with the rabbi of Simferopol, Crimea, was edited in such a way as to give the impression he was leaving Crimea because of a wave of anti-Semitism from Ukrainian nationalists.¹²⁶ In fact, the rabbi, Misha Kapustin, has

¹¹⁷ Jakub Grygiel & A. Wess Mitchell, *Limited War Is Back*, *The National Interest* (Aug. 28, 2014), <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/limited-war-back-11128>

¹¹⁸ Paul Sonne, *With ‘Novorossiia,’ Putin Plays the Name Game With Ukraine*, *The Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 1, 2014), <http://online.wsj.com/articles/with-novorossiia-putin-plays-the-name-game-with-ukraine-1409588947>

¹¹⁹ *В Новороссии напишут собственный учебник истории*, *Lenta.ru* (June 27, 2014), <http://lenta.ru/news/2014/06/27/history/>

¹²⁰ K. Simmons, A. Kovalyova & F. Brinley Bruton, *Pro-Moscow Rebels Fly Flag of ‘New Russia’ in Eastern Ukraine*, *NBC News* (Sept. 3, 2014), <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/pro-moscow-rebels-fly-flag-new-russia-eastern-ukraine-n194751>

¹²¹ <http://novorossia.today/> and <http://novorossia.su/>

¹²² <https://twitter.com/NovorossiiaLive>

¹²³ Konstantin Poleskov, «Горзу» аяестовану, *Novaya Gazeta* (July 2, 2014), <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/inquests/64234.html>. For a translation of this article, see *The Interpreter* (July 1, 2014), <http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-this-week-decree-confirms-dugins-dismissal-but-confusion-remains/#1614>

¹²⁴ For example, see: William Engdahl, *‘Hypocritical agenda’: EU has only austerity to offer Kiev*, *RT Op-Edge* (Dec. 7, 2013), <http://rt.com/op-edge/ukraine-protests-hypocritical-agenda-868/>

¹²⁵ Willie Wimmer, *‘Junta government in Kiev trigger for mine that will explode sooner or later’*, *RT Op-Edge* (Apr. 26, 2014), <http://rt.com/op-edge/155112-washington-policy-europe-ukraine/>

condemned Russian action in the region,¹²⁷ encourages Western sanctions against Russia and told *The Times of Israel* that he was actually leaving Crimea because of Russian aggression. “There is no imminent danger to Jews in Crimea,” the head of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee said in a public statement. “The situation is being manipulated by the Russian government to make the world believe they are protecting us.”¹²⁸ But for all their protestations, the message spread, picked up in Western media and within Jewish communities in the EU and US.

“The Maidan never managed to shake the impression it was inherently far right,” says Judah. “We spent an age looking for right-wing Nazis among the revolution,” says the *Wall Street Journal*’s Matthew Kaminski. “The Kremlin narrative managed to keep journalists distracted with wild goose chases and it spoiled the image of the Maidan with people in the West who ought to have known better. I would get e-mails from Jewish community leaders in America that the Ukrainian revolution was run by Nazis.”

RT has also been involved in reports that are reminiscent of classic KGB *dezinformatsiya*. On July 3, a supposed RAND Corporation document was leaked online, meant to show that the think tank was advising President Poroshenko to ethnically cleanse eastern Ukraine, bomb it heavily and place locals in internment camps.¹²⁹ The fact that the document was found on the fringe conspiracy website *Before It’s News* should have alerted any news editor to its lack of

credibility. However, the story found its way onto RT. The RAND story was subsequently removed from the news site proper (but not before it had been broadly viewed) but continued to be referenced by RT’s opinions contributors as typical for “guidelines for genocide, exported by the US.”¹³⁰ Voice of Russia, part of the broader Russia Today conglomerate, continued to feature the story as news.¹³¹

After the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, RT spread conspiracy theories regarding the cause ranging from the flight being shot down by Ukrainian forces aiming at Putin’s personal plane to Ukrainian deployment of Buk SAMs in the area. RT also quoted a supposed air traffic controller named Carlos, who had written on his Twitter feed that Ukrainian fighter jets had followed the Malaysian plane.¹³²

The Carlos Twitter disinformation story was also pushed on the website of RT contributor Pepe Escobar—one of the stars of the RT chat show complaining about how Western media manipulate the truth.¹³³ Ultimately, the handling of the Malaysian story led Sara Firth, a London-based correspondent for RT, to resign because of the network’s “disrespect for the facts,”¹³⁴ and the British broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, to open an investigation into RT’s coverage.¹³⁵ Meanwhile, the Kremlin’s Internet-troll army also stepped up activity, inundating the *Guardian* with 40,000 comments a day in a coordinated Kremlin attack. As one letter to the editor put it:

¹²⁶ ‘Pushed to leave’: Packing moods among Ukraine’s Jewish minority amidst far-right rise, RT (Mar. 15, 2014), <http://rt.com/news/jews-jewish-ukraine-nationalist-106/>; Victor Davidoff, *Putin’s Fabricated Anti-Semitism in Ukraine*, Moscow Times (Apr. 13, 2014), <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/putin-s-fabricated-anti-semitism-in-ukraine/497950.html>

¹²⁷ Amanda Borschel-Dan, *Crimea’s sole rabbi advises Jews ‘not to become targets,’* The Times of Israel (Mar. 2, 2014), <http://www.timesofisrael.com/crimeas-sole-rabbi-advises-jews-not-to-become-targets/>

¹²⁸ Daniel K. Eisenbud, *Ukrainian Jewish Committee: Russian claims of anti-Semitism in Crimea are lies, propaganda*, The Jerusalem Post (Mar. 10, 2014), <http://www.jpost.com/international/ukrainian-jewish-committee-russian-claims-of-anti-semitism-in-crimea-are-lies-propaganda-344828>

¹²⁹ *Ukrainian President Uses RAND Corporation Plan In Eastern Ukraine*, Before It’s News (July 3, 2014), <http://beforeitsnews.com/politics/2014/07/ukrainian-president-uses-rand-corporation-plan-in-eastern-ukraine-2634472.html>

¹³⁰ Don Debar, ‘Guidelines for genocide is US prime export product’, RT Op-Edge (July 5, 2014), <http://rt.com/op-edge/170588-us-export-guidelines-genocide/>

¹³¹ *Plan for suppression of eastern Ukraine prepared by US Agency RAND for Poroshenko*, Voice of Russia (July 5, 2014), http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2014_07_05/Plan-for-suppression-of-eastern-Ukraine-prepared-by-US-Agency-RAND-for-Poroshenko-2636/

¹³² For a freeze frame of RT site with the original RT report see *Lies: Spanish Flight Operations Officer from Kiev Informed about Ukrainian Planes Involved in Boeing Tragedy*, StopFake.org (July 18, 2014), <http://www.stopfake.org/en/lies-spanish-flight-operations-of-ficer-from-kiev-informed-about-ukrainian-planes-involved-in-boeing-tragedy/>. An amended RT page is still available, which says that the Twitter account’s credibility has been put under question. *Испанский диспетчер: Два украинских военных самолёта были рядом с Boeing перед его исчезновением*, RT (July 17, 2014), <http://russian.rt.com/article/41346>

¹³³ Pepe Escobar, *It was Putin’s missile!*, Asia Times (July 18, 2014), http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/CEN-01-190714.html

¹³⁴ Heather Saul, *MH17: Russia Today presenter Sara Firth quits over Malaysia Airlines crash coverage*, The Independent (July 18, 2014), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/mh17-russia-today-presenter-sara-firth-quits-over-malaysia-airlines-crash-coverage-9615489.html>

¹³⁵ Jim Waterson, *Russia Today Faces UK Investigation Over MH17 News Coverage*, Buzzfeed (July 22, 2014), <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jimwaterson/russia-today-faces-uk-investigation-over-mh17-news-coverage>

The quantity of pro-Kremlin trolling on this topic...which has been documented extensively since 2012 as a real and insidious threat to online communities of idea and debate, has rendered commenting on these articles all but meaningless, and a worthless exercise in futility and frustration for anyone not already being mind-controlled by the Kremlin.¹³⁶

Kremlin *dezinformatsiya* have also made it into the mainstream Western press.

A Facebook post by a Dr. Rozovsky, who claimed to have treated victims of a fire where tens of pro-Russian separatists died after a street battle with pro-Ukrainians in Odessa, was quoted by the high-profile journalist John Pilger in a *Guardian* piece, helping make Pilger's argument that Putin was doing his best to stop a dangerous war.¹³⁷ The doctor's Facebook page, however, was soon debunked as a fake: no such person exists in Odessa, and the photo features a doctor who lives in a different country.¹³⁸ (The *Guardian* added a disclaimer about this later.)

In a cover story for *The Nation*, Princeton professor Stephen Cohen wrote that the Ukrainian prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, had referred to the separatists as "subhuman" (when he actually said "non-human," closer to "inhuman"), and that the Ukrainian defense minister wanted to set up "filtration camps" in Donbas (he was actually answering a question about how the Ukrainian government would make sure no pro-Russian fighters would avoid justice, replying that there could be a process of filtration).¹³⁹ These were not mere translation mistakes. Exactly the same willful misinterpretations were pushed actively in Russian media, while a show on English RT used the misquotes to

compare Kiev's actions in eastern Ukraine to the Rwandan genocide. The same program also alleged systematic massacres by the Ukrainian army in eastern Ukraine, which included dismembering locals and mass rape (the offending program was later taken down, but not before it had been broadly viewed).¹⁴⁰

As the crisis worsened, the "balance" trap became a frequent problem for Western journalists. An article in Germany's *Der Tagesspiegel*,¹⁴¹ to give a small example, wrote about Chechen fighters in pro-Russian battalions in Ukraine who, "according to Western media, are there with the separatists, according to Moscow, with the Ukrainian forces," before going on to repeat unverified claims from Russian officials about how Ukrainian militias had contact with Chechen leaders. "It's fine to repeat Kremlin propaganda," quips *Focus Magazine*'s Boris Reitschuster about the piece, "but you have to point out it's propaganda." A unique piece of research by Fabian Burkhardt of Munich University examined the bias of guests on German political TV shows during the crisis, investigating the number of pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian guests. The research analyzed 30 programs in a period between December 2013 and April 2014, splitting guests along party lines and various types of affinity to Russia: from those who "blame the West" to those who "prioritize Russia over Eastern European states," those with "economic interests" and so on. Burkhardt found that of the 81 guests invited, there was a "heavy lean towards pro-Russia guests," with a sizable proportion of these having "economic ties to Russia."¹⁴² 27 of the 81 guests were journalists—8 of these were from Russian media and none from Ukrainian; most of the German journalists were Russia experts rather than Ukraine focused;

¹³⁶ Chris Elliot, *The readers' editor on... pro-Russia trolling below the line on Ukraine stories*, *The Guardian* (May 4, 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/04/pro-russia-trolls-ukraine-guardian-online>

¹³⁷ John Pilger, *In Ukraine, the US is dragging us towards war with Russia*, *The Guardian* (May 13, 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/13/ukraine-us-war-russia-john-pilger>

¹³⁸ "For 15 years I saw a lot, but yesterday I wanted to cry, not from pain or humiliation, but from helplessness to do something. In my city what has happened did not occur even during the fascist occupation. I ask the question, why is the whole world silent?" was the fake doctor's eloquent post. See Planet Putin, *Cheap Russian FB Propaganda About Odessa Fire*, Facebook (May 4, 2014), <https://www.facebook.com/PlanetPutin/posts/572469812872477>

¹³⁹ Stephen Cohen, *The Silence of American Hawks About Kiev's Atrocities*, *The Nation* (June 30, 2014), <http://www.thenation.com/article/180466/silence-american-hawks-about-kiivs-atrocities#>. For a forensic analysis of the Cohen essay see: Cathy Young, *Putin's Pal*, *Slate* (July 24, 2014), http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/07/stephen_cohen_vladimir_putin_s_apologist_the_nation_just_published_the_most.html

¹⁴⁰ Halya Coynash, *Human Rights in Ukraine, Russia Today's "Genocide in Eastern Ukraine": Sick, distorted and deleted*, *Ukraine Business Online* (July 16, 2014), <http://www.ukrainebusiness.com.ua/news/12512.html>

¹⁴¹ Nina Jeglinski & Elke Windlich, *Der unbekannte Feind*, *Der Tagesspiegel* (May 30, 2014), <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/tschet-schenische-milizen-in-ukraine-krise-der-unbekannte-feind/9972094.html>

¹⁴² Fabian Burkhardt, *Освещение кризиса в Украине в немецких ток-шоу*, *Forum of New Eastern European History and Culture* 2014:1, available at <http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/forumruss21/27Burkhardt.pdf>

and, even if they were critical of the Kremlin, many would often “turn on the defend-Russia mode when they explain Russia to a broader audience that knows close to nothing about the country.”

The German business lobby had been among the most vocal opponents of sanctions against Russia, with the head of Siemens flying to Moscow to stand with Putin at the height of the crisis.¹⁴³ In America, the Chamber of Commerce and National Association of Manufacturers took out advertisements in major newspapers to lobby against the sanctions, arguing they would cost US jobs.¹⁴⁴ When Russia annexed Crimea, a British government advisor was seen walking into Downing Street carrying a note that affirmed: “The UK should not support for now, trade sanctions...or close London’s financial center to Russians.” Lord Skidelsky was one of several peers who came out against the sanctions, predicting Ukraine “would ‘fall to bits’ and that he wouldn’t leave his position on the boards of Russian companies unless Putin began to ‘act more like Hitler.’”¹⁴⁵ Finding all doors closed in its attempts to understand the workings of “Global Counsel,” a “business, politics and policy” advice company run by former minister Lord Mandelson, the *Daily Mail* could only point out the number of Russian companies and oligarchs in Mandelson’s network and ask:

How strong are these people’s current connections with Mandelson and Global Counsel? To what extent are they communicating with him and his staff? Are they, consciously or otherwise, allowing his firm to help wealthy Russians pull our levers of power? It is, of course, impossible to say.¹⁴⁶

Meanwhile, both the far-left in Britain and the anti-European right have supported the Kremlin, the former because they believe the crisis is America’s fault,¹⁴⁷ the latter because they blame the EU.¹⁴⁸

In the Czech Republic, former president Vaclav Klaus has said that Ukraine is an artificial entity.¹⁴⁹ The head of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church stated: “May he that is not loyal to the same-language, same-blood Russia, have the living flesh fall off him, may he be cursed thrice, and 3,000 times by me.”¹⁵⁰ In Bulgaria a leading socialist parliamentarian, Nikolay Malinov, responded to the annexation of Crimea by saying:

I’d like to congratulate all Orthodox Slavs around the world on winning the Third Crimean War and remind them that the Balkans come next. I reckon all Russophiles around this table may congratulate themselves.¹⁵¹

In his research of how Bulgarian media covered the conflict in Ukraine, Christo Grozev of the Risk Management Lab think tank found that the majority of newspapers had followed the Russian rather than the Ukrainian version of such events as MH17:¹⁵² “It’s not merely a case of sympathy or language,” believes Grozev. “The Russian media just tell better stories, and that’s what gets re-printed.” Deputy Minister Volin’s principle that ratings and fiction are more important than fact extends far beyond Russia.

Meanwhile, inside the EU, negotiations over sanctions have seen Greece, Italy, Finland, Hungary, Slovakia and Cyprus oppose tougher measures on Moscow. Gazprom has pushed forward with South Stream, making a mockery of a coherent EU position on sanc-

¹⁴³ William Boston, *Siemens Chief Meets Putin in Russia*, WSJ (Mar. 26, 2014), <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304418404579463304201839372>

¹⁴⁴ Lee Fang, *How Putin’s American Fixers Keep Russian Sanctions Toothless*, Vice (July 24, 2014), <http://www.vice.com/read/how-putins-american-fixers-keep-russian-sanctions-toothless-724>

¹⁴⁵ Jim Pickard & Sam Fleming, *Leading Britons’ business links with Russians under spotlight*, Financial Times (Mar. 26, 2014), <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0b254e3e-b4fe-11e3-af92-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3GKb3LFAo>

¹⁴⁶ Guy Adams, *Putin and the Prince of Darkness*, The Daily Mail (July 26, 2014), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2706344/Putin-Prince-Darkness-Revealed-web-links-Peter-Mandelsons-shadowy-global-consultancy-firm-billionaire-power-brokers-Putins-Russia.html>

¹⁴⁷ *Packed meeting in London to launch the campaign in Solidarity with the Antifascist Resistance in Ukraine*, Solidarity with the Antifascist Resistance in Ukraine (June 3, 2014), <https://ukraineantifascistsolidarity.wordpress.com/2014/06/03/packed-meeting-in-london-to-launch-the-campaign-in-solidarity-with-the-antifascist-resistance-in-ukraine/>

¹⁴⁸ John Laughland, *Ukraine: It’s not about Europe vs Russia*, Spectator (Feb. 19, 2014), <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2014/02/ukraine-its-not-about-europe-vs-russia/>

¹⁴⁹ Andrei Illarionov & Dalibor Rohac, *Former President Klaus’s Flawed Defense of Crimea’s Annexation*, World Affairs, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/former-president-klauss-flawed-defense-crimeas-annexation> (last visited Oct. 17, 2014).

¹⁵⁰ *Montenegrin PM blasted over Russia policy*, B92 (Apr. 29, 2014), http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2014&mm=04&dd=29&nav_id=90152

¹⁵¹ Dimitar Bechev, *Will Bulgaria take Russia’s side?*, ECFR Blog (Mar. 19, 2014), http://www.ecfr.eu/blog/entry/will_bulgaria_take_russias_side

¹⁵² Christo Grozev, *Kremlin: Facing a Fateful Decision* 7 (2014), available at http://riskmanagementlab.com/en/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/news/sled_svaljaneto_na_mn17-_kreml_pred_sdbonosn_izbor_en.pdf

tions against Russia. President Putin arrived in Vienna for a triumphant signing off on the agreement in June 2014, praising Austria as an “important and reliable partner” and leaving the US embassy to comment that trans-Atlantic unity had been essential in “discouraging further Russian aggression” and that the Austrians “should consider carefully whether today’s events contribute to that effort.”¹⁵³ In the UN, the BRIC countries abstained from voting against Russia, which Moscow spun as a sign of support.

Other rising authoritarian states are watching what happens carefully. “Russia may be the principal exponent of hybrid warfare but other states have the resources and will at their disposal, too,” writes Sam Jones of the *Financial Times*.¹⁵⁴

The combination of resource competition, geostrategic tensions and a huge ethnic Chinese diaspora make the whole of the South China Sea region, for example, a tinderbox when it comes to the hybrid war model.... In the Middle East,...Iran has invested huge sums in developing its cyber warfare capabilities....It has huge energy resources and a government-controlled media regime. If international negotiations succeed...in bringing the country back into the international economic system, the unintended effect may be a significant expansion of Tehran’s use of hybrid warfare.

Does the West have any tools with which to deal with this new challenge?

Responses to 21st-Century Challenges

Defining Western Weak Spots

The Kremlin’s approach is based on searching out and exploiting systemic weak spots and soft underbellies in the dominant liberal concept of globalization, providing a sort of X-ray of the vulnerabilities of 21st-century liberal democracy. “Our first response should be to look at the weaknesses of the Western system and think about areas for target hardening,” says Professor Galeotti.

The Menace of Unreality

Russia’s approach to information takes advantage of the idea of freedom of expression in order to subvert it, replacing information with *dezinformatsiya*, abusing the idea that “truth is always relative” to the point where Kremlin media show “complete

disregard for facts.” But as the Kremlin’s political technologists negotiate the international information space, they are working on fertile ground. On a philosophical level, the West is having its own crisis with the ideas of “truth” and “reality,” while on an institutional level, the space previously taken by journalism is being increasingly occupied by PR.

“Employment in US newsrooms has fallen by over a third since 2006, according to the American Society of News Editors, but PR is growing,” reports the *Financial Times*.

For every working journalist in America, there are now 4.6 PR people, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, up from 3.2 a decade ago. And those journalists earn on average 65 per cent of what their PR peers are paid. As journalism schools pump out new generations of would-be Woodwards and Bernsteins, many of those not finding

¹⁵³ *Austria defies US, EU over South Stream during Putin visit*, Deutsche Welle (June 24, 2014), <http://www.dw.de/austria-defies-us-eu-over-south-stream-during-putin-visit/a-17734602>

¹⁵⁴ Sam Jones, *Ukraine: Russia’s new art of war*, *Financial Times* (Aug. 28, 2014), <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/ea5e82fa-2e0c-11e4-b760-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3FXiYDmbp>

newsroom jobs have turned instead to the business of how to present the news in the most flattering light.¹⁵⁵

In a 2014 paper for the Reuters Institute,¹⁵⁶ *FT* associate editor John Lloyd looks at the impact of how PR has spread into the territory previously occupied by journalism. He cites the historian Daniel Boorstin, Librarian of Congress from 1975 to 1987, who wrote in *The Image*

that advertising allied to the media, especially television, had flooded the public sphere with “pseudo-events,” a happening which is created by advertising people or journalists for the purpose of being reported or reproduced—“The question: ‘is it real?’ is less important than ‘Is it newsworthy?’ We are threatened by a new and peculiarly American menace...the menace of unreality.”¹⁵⁷

This thought, first explored in the realms of commercial advertising, was famously echoed by an unnamed presidential aide in a 2004 *New York Times* essay by John Susskind:

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality....That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out.”¹⁵⁸

A powerful, bottom-up movement also advocates for an abandonment of objectivity that precludes an abandonment of accuracy. In a *Prospect* magazine review of Glenn Greenwald’s book on the Snowden affair, *No Place to Hide*, George Packer writes:

Greenwald has no use for the norms of journalism. He rejects objectivity, as a reality and an ideal....This is hardly a new notion, but it’s also a destructive one.

Examining the many sins of omission, biased value judgments and half-truths in Greenwald’s book, Packer concludes. “They reveal a mind that has liberated itself from the basic claims of fairness. Once the norms of journalism are dismissed, a number of constraints and assumptions fall away.”¹⁵⁹

“In America we’re seeing more and more people go off the news grid from news as conventionally described,” says Tunku Varadarajan, Virginia Hobbs Carpenter Research Fellow in Journalism at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, and a former editor of *Newsweek International*.

There’s an abandonment of the need for persuasion as everyone is in their own archipelago. The decline of the need for public debate can transmogrify into the need not to tell the truth, while the Internet necessitates making flashy points more attractive.

The breakdown in the consensus on reality and the trend towards a relativization of truth are compounded by a breakdown in trust in Western media. “The US media establishment is going through a crisis of confidence after its failure to provide proper checks to the White House narrative before the Iraq War,” says *New Yorker* editor David Remnick. “There’s a strong attitude that says ‘Why believe US media any more than others?’”

All these factors help to reinforce the Kremlin’s underlying message that “everything is propaganda,” contributing to the idea that all narratives are equivalent—and creating ideal conditions to exploit.

Playing Between the Lines

During the Cold War, the West managed to defeat the Soviet Union by uniting free market economics, popular culture, and democratic politics into one package: parliaments, investment banks, and Jackson Pollock fused to defeat the Politburo, planned economics, and socialist realism. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the West has divided these strands

¹⁵⁵ Andrew Edge-Cliff Johnson, *The invasion of corporate news*, Financial Times (Sept. 19, 2014), <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/937b06c2-3ebd-11e4-ade0-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3DsKn0WRF>

¹⁵⁶ John Lloyd & Laura Toogood, *Journalism and Public Relations*, Reuters Institute & I.B. Tauris (forthcoming — December 2014).

¹⁵⁷ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*, 240, Vintage, 1992.

¹⁵⁸ Ron Suskind, *Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush*, The New York Times Magazine (Oct. 17, 2004), http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?ex=1255665600&en=890a96189e162076&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&_r=0

¹⁵⁹ George Packer, *The errors of Edward Snowden and Glenn Greenwald*, Prospect Magazine (May 22, 2014), <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/the-errors-of-edward-snowden-and-glenn-greenwald>

into separate areas: politics and security are one area, finance a second, culture in the sense of both popular culture and elite ideas—a distinct third. The Russian regime works from the opposite logic, playing inside gray areas. Is Gazprom a company or an extension of Russian foreign policy? Are Russian state banks security threats?

The conceptual difficulty is compounded by practical ones. Investigating trails of Kremlin money is slow and expensive, the process made even more expensive with likely legal fees resulting from the subsequent threat of libel litigation, especially in the UK. As *The Economist* found out to its detriment after it wrote of oligarch Gennady Tymchenko's connection to Vladimir Putin, just getting a court case dropped can cost over a million pounds.¹⁶⁰ It matters little whether the journalists are right; the threat of a case is enough to put many publications off.

Le Trahison des Experts 2

A similar opaqueness exists at the borders between “think tanks” and “lobbying,” “influencers” and “experts.” In the US a lack of transparency in the funding of think tanks has led to an atmosphere described by one DC insider as “poisonous.” A front page *New York Times* article in September 2014 entitled “Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks” highlighted this issue,¹⁶¹ arguing that think tanks “have received tens of millions of dollars from foreign governments in recent years while pushing United States government officials to adopt policies that often reflect the donors’ priorities,” with big money “increasingly transforming the once-staid think-tank world into a muscular arm of foreign governments’ lobbying in Washington.”

Soon after, however, the *Times* found itself at the center of a similar story—though this time it was the subject of controversy. The investigative spadework done by Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty’s Robert Coalson¹⁶² forced *The New York Times* to append

an editorial note to the bottom of an op-ed written by Brenda Shaffer entitled “Russia’s Next Land Grab”—she meant Nagorno-Karabakh—explaining that Shaffer had worked as an advisor for “strategic affairs” for Rovnag Abdullayev, the president of the state oil company of Azerbaijan.¹⁶³ “Like other Op-Ed contributors,” the *Times*’ editors admitted, “the writer, Brenda Shaffer, signed a contract obliging her to disclose conflicts of interest, actual or potential. Had editors been aware of her ties to the company, they would have insisted on disclosure.” (In another layer of irony, as Coalson observed, the same newspaper had conducted its own investigation into Azerbaijani money and influence-peddling in Washington designed to shore up support for the oil-rich dictatorship as “an important security partner.”) In a letter to the paper, Transparify’s Till Bruckner argued that “the *NYT* may be unwittingly aiding and abetting the very manipulations of public opinion and government policies that it publicly deploras.”¹⁶⁴ The *Times* has promised to be more rigorous in exploring the interests of its contributors.

The problem is not confined to *The New York Times*. Following a comment piece in the *Financial Times* by former White House national security advisor Thomas Graham in which Graham advocated against imposing sanctions on Russia after its annexation of Crimea and belligerence in Ukraine, David Kramer of Freedom House wrote to the editor:

In his July 21 comment, “To stop Putin, the West should repair Ukraine’s economy,” Thomas Graham and/or the Editor left out his current affiliation, disclosure of which is relevant. He is currently a Managing Director at Kissinger Associates in New York, a consulting firm with clients with business interests in Russia. Failure to disclose this was a disservice to readers.

The *FT* responded that the affiliation had been left out accidentally. However, at the time of writing, the op-ed had not been amended, nor had the affiliation with

¹⁶⁰ Luke Harding, *Russian billionaire drops libel case against the Economist*, *The Guardian* (July 30, 2009), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/30/russian-billionaire-timchenko-libel-economist>

¹⁶¹ Eric Lipton, Brooke Williams & Nicholas Confessore, *Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks*, *The New York Times* (Sept. 6, 2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html>

¹⁶² Robert Coalson, *Azerbaijan’s Opinion-Shaping Campaign Reaches ‘The New York Times’*, RFE/RL (Oct. 20, 2014), <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-lobbying-western-media-brenda-shaffer/26592287.html>

¹⁶³ Brenda Shaffer, *Russia’s Next Land Grab*, *The New York Times* (Sept. 9, 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/10/opinion/russias-next-land-grab.html?_r=0

¹⁶⁴ Margaret Sullivan, *Hidden Interests, Closer to Home*, *The New York Times* (Sept. 20, 2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/public-editor/new-york-times-public-editor-on-conflicts-of-interest.html>

Kissinger Associates been mentioned on Graham's other op-ed for the newspaper.¹⁶⁵

In testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, a senior academic stated:

Policies should be enacted that would remove the nonprofit status of these groups that collaborate with Russia and legislation similar to that that combats terror financing should bar European organizations from receiving funds from Moscow that are intended to promote Russia's foreign and security policy aims.¹⁶⁶

The fact that the academic who made this statement is the aforementioned Professor Brenda Schaffer is perhaps indicative of an environment in which the lack of transparency leads to an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and circular accusations. According to Hans Gutbrod of Transparify, "think tanks should thrive on transparency—they live on research. But in this industry, which is worth a billion dollars, only a handful of organizations are entirely transparent themselves, and too many remain opaque about who funds their work."

Think tanks will always have funders—this paper, for example, is funded by a think tank that receives support from the family of Mikhail Khodorkovsky—but more clarity over funding sources and clearer rules about how think tanks should prove the independence of their research would be first steps toward restoring faith in the sector.

Money, however, is only part of the issue. Think tanks can be involved in complicated games for high-level access and influence, while there can also be pressure for a think tank to retain its physical status in a country by avoiding strong criticism. After several vocal Kremlin critics (including Lilia Shevtsova and Maria Lippmann) left Carnegie Moscow Center as the country's political mood darkened, some in the media (including the authors of this paper) wondered whether the Center, so long a beacon of outspoken excellence, was being put under

pressure to dampen its criticism of domestic Russian government policy (a similar process is playing out in Russia media such as *Kommersant*). Carnegie Moscow Director Dmitry Trenin strongly denies that any political pressure was put on the Center or that his own writing, which has included assertions that Russia has no intention of intervening militarily in eastern Ukraine or that members of the Russian military are among the fighters,¹⁶⁷ is in any way entangled with Russian propaganda.¹⁶⁸ "I have also heard accusations of being a mouthpiece of the US State Department," writes Trenin.

A bunch of thugs even staged a small demonstration outside our office in Moscow a few years ago, branding me as a traitor to Russia and asking President Putin to kindly have me executed by firing squad. I have survived, and have learned to take these labels in stride. In the current atmosphere of information warfare in the media world, and polarization of parts of the think tank communities, it is sometimes held that "those who are not with us are against us." This is understandable, if sad. I see my own and my institution's mission as objective analysis based on solid research and aimed at promoting international peace. One last thing: having lived in the Soviet Union, I cherish the freedom of speech, and detest ideology and conformism, of whatever breed. I say and write what I think, even if people here and there disagree. I have my values, and stick to them, as others stick to their guns.

The authors of this paper sincerely hope that Carnegie Moscow will be able to live up to these virtuous, and challenging, ideals in its future work.

"The think tank and expert community has been compromised by the lack of clarity about funding and motivations," says Judah. "Who is trying to get close to curry favor with the Kremlin? Who is working with companies that have vested interests? We can no longer talk of an intellectual space of pure research, where 'expert' findings can be taken at face value."

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Graham, *Punishing an aggressive Russia is a fool's errand*, Financial Times (Apr. 27, 2014), <http://www.ft.com/cms/0/5d018602-cc9e-11e3-ab99-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3GQ4rwHTH>

¹⁶⁶ Till Bruckner, *US Foreign Policy Manipulation via Media Is Systemic*, Wams Expert, The Huffington Post (Sept. 22, 2014), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/till-bruckner/us-foreign-policy-manipul_b_5842272.html

¹⁶⁷ Dmitri Trenin, *Both empires will lose from this treacherous tussle*, Financial Times (Apr. 15, 2014), <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c4d5fd58-c3d9-11e3-a8e0-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3FXiYDmbp>; Dmitri Trenin, *Russia's goal in Ukraine remains the same: Keep NATO out*, Al-Jazeera America (June 2, 2014), <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/2/russiaa-s-goal-inukrainereainsthesametokeepnatoout.html>

¹⁶⁸ Reuters European Breaking Views Editor Pierre Briançon has referred to Trenin as a "Kremlin Mouth Piece" on Twitter (July 28, 2014, 7:10AM), <https://twitter.com/pierrebri/status/493760428678213633>. He added: "It is difficult to know whether Trenin is saying what he thinks or whether he's been caught in the Moscow propaganda machine."

The Abandonment of Public Diplomacy and Academic Funding

The United States Information Agency was set up in 1953 “to submit evidence to peoples of other nations by means of communication techniques that the objectives and policies of the US are in harmony with and will advance their own legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress and peace.”¹⁶⁹ After 1999, however, the USIA was dismantled. Since the end of the Cold War, the US especially has worked on the premise that the power of Western entertainment and popular culture will be enough of a soft power magnet to create a positive bond with the new democracies and emerging authoritarian powers. Liking Taylor Swift would equal liking America. This has proven to be naïve. The new Russia has shown it is perfectly possible to have MTV, reality shows and Hummers while preaching hatred of the West and anti-Americanism. “The entertainment industry is not an adequate substitute for a robust and effective public diplomacy,”¹⁷⁰ argues Martha Bayles of Boston College in her book on the decline of US advocacy abroad. The decline in funding for foreign-language broadcasting by Western states has been likened by former BBC Russian Service editor Masha Karp as “informational unilateral disarmament” (the BBC has also radically decreased its funding for the Russian service).

Best Practices

The Long Battle Against *Dezinformatsiya*: From Truth Squads to Stop Fake

Founded in the early 1980s, the Interagency Active Measures Working Group was a US government body dedicated to debunking Soviet *dezinformatsiya*. After years of détente, it took no little persuasion from the Working Group’s founders to convince the White House of the need for such work: “[T]he normal attitude in the Department of State was, ‘We don’t want to dignify that kind of stuff with a comment,’” recall the heads of the Working Group.

With the arrival of a more proactive policy towards the Soviet Union under the Reagan administration, the Interagency Group was given the go-ahead. The Working Group focused purely on “disinformation,” “exposing base falsehoods that no reasonable person would countenance as acceptable diplomatic discourse,” as opposed to “mere propaganda” or “persuasion.” The group made their research ideology-free and facts-oriented, solid enough to “get a grand jury indictment.”

“The group instructed USIA overseas offices specifically to report all disinformation media stories and forgeries that they came across,” write Fletcher Schoen and Christopher J. Lamb in their thorough history of the Working Group. “When this information arrived...in-house analysts as well as the CIA disinformation experts analyzed it...In less than a year, Kux and his interagency group had built a picture of ongoing Soviet disinformation and come up with a strategy for collecting, analyzing, and confronting it with fact-based research and publicity.”

The group developed a “road show,” run by teams nicknamed “truth squads” that toured across the world, briefing the host country’s intelligence services on active measures in the morning and then making presentations to journalists and doing local press interviews. “[T]he fact that we made a credible presentation—not an ideological show—lent a certain amount of professionalism to the whole effort...[P]eople don’t like to be duped. Not only were we telling them they were being duped but we told them how.”

The group knew they had struck a nerve when their work started to bring vociferous denials from senior Soviet officials, including General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev.¹⁷¹

The UK also took on Soviet *dezinformatsiya*, with the British Foreign Office launching an Information Research Department in 1948. At its peak, the office had a staff of 300 producing reports on Soviet disinformation. The IRD specialized in the difference between rhetoric and reality in the Soviet Union, with subjects such as “Forced Labor in the USSR,” “The Peace Movement in the USSR” and “Russian Imper-

¹⁶⁹ NSC Action No 936 (October 22, 1953) and NSC action 165/1 (October 24, 1953).

¹⁷⁰ Martha Bayles, *Through a Screen Darkly*, 120, Yale University Press, 2014.

¹⁷¹ Fletcher Schoen & Christopher J. Lamb, Institute for National Strategic Studies, *Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications: How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference* 35–43 (June 2012), available at <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-11.pdf>

alism and Asian Nationalism,” which were distributed to news agencies and journalists. The IRD’s biggest publication, *Background Books*, was delivered free of charge and was aimed at “the educated middle classes in the third world.” According to *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia*, most of the IRD’s material was “solidly based on fact and one of its slogans was *anything but the truth is too hot to handle*....It was quite prepared to respond to Soviet targets and to escalate the propaganda offensive by forcing the enemy to defend itself and its policies.” The IRD also attempted to influence opinion domestically, delivering reports to the British labor movement.¹⁷²

During the Cold War, the Congress-funded Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty contained an Analytics Department with some 40 employees—2 or 3 for every country in their region—publishing regular press reviews and daily reports. The Analytics Department was slashed after the Cold War, though its surviving remnant, the News and Current Affairs, re-engaged with past tradition during the Ukraine crisis with its series *Ukraine Unspun*, which deconstructed *dezinformatsiya* and spin about the Ukraine crisis.¹⁷³

But the question of how to counter *dezinformatsiya* in a digital age, where lies are so easy to produce and disseminate, remains open. For every myth busted, a thousand more can be created. And while it is true that people might not like being lied to, neither do the producers of the falsehoods mind having their myths busted. If the Soviet leadership was offended and upset at the activities of the Active Measures Working Group, the new Kremlin propagandists are happy to just flood the information space with ever new falsehoods.

The Magnitsky Act as Information Campaign

Sergey Magnitsky was a Russian lawyer employed by the investment firm Hermitage Capital who accused several Russian interior ministry officials of a tax fraud worth hundreds of millions of dollars—the largest such fraud in Russian history. After going public with his accusations, Magnitsky was immediately arrested, and after failing to give false confessions that would have incriminated him and his former employers, he died in custody following beatings and

lack of treatment for pancreatitis. The story caused some controversy straight away, with the Russian president’s own Human Rights Council blaming prison officials for his death, accusing them of torture and willful neglect. The Kremlin began an information campaign, claiming (despite the evidence) that Magnitsky had never complained about his health, and that Magnitsky and the head of Hermitage, William Browder, were themselves tax evaders. Western media found themselves giving column inches to the Kremlin charges for the sake of “balance,” whether they were substantiated or not.

“I would show evidence from human rights organizations that showed Magnitsky had complained about his health in prison, but the Kremlin didn’t care, and for the Western press it wasn’t a big deal,” remembers Browder. “There are so many deaths in detention. Human rights abuses just aren’t a big media issue. We needed to tell what happened to Sergey as a story. Make it human-centered. But Western media were too scared to get deep into it for fear of litigation.”

Browder hired his own due diligence and investigative teams and created online movies about the perpetrators of the crime. The films were executed in a popular manner, much like a racy crime documentary on the National Geographic or Discovery channels. The reaction was astounding, with millions of hits. Browder had essentially become his own media outlet. The story exploded. Browder began to push for a Magnitsky Act: a bill that would ban those responsible for Magnitsky’s death from travel or investing in the US and Europe.

The Kremlin ramped up its information war, trying Browder in absentia and Magnitsky post-mortem for tax evasion and applying to have Browder extradited via Interpol. The charges were viewed as politically motivated, and the Interpol request was rejected, but journalists still had to quote both the trial and the Interpol charge in their reports. Within the Council of Europe, the Kremlin tried to use its good relations with the British Conservative Party to quash an investigation into the Magnitsky affair, while inside Britain, the Conservative Friends of Russia group tried to attack Chris Bryant, a parliamentarian who wanted to raise the case, by posting embarrassing

¹⁷² Nicholas John Cull, David Holbrook Culbert, David Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*, 187, ABC-CLIO, 2003.

¹⁷³ See, e.g., Yury Veksler & Claire Bigg, *The Mysterious Professor Haag: Russian Media’s Favored ‘Expert’ Has Dubious Credentials*, RFE/RL (Oct. 11, 2014), <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-media-professor-haag-dubious-credentials/26632541.html>

photos of him.¹⁷⁴ Western financial groups stepped in to oppose the Magnitsky Act, arguing that sanctions would be bad for business. Leftists, including Stephen Cohen, opposed the act for being “prejudicial towards Russia.”¹⁷⁵

In the US these Kremlin efforts failed, and the Magnitsky Rule of Law and Accountability Act was enacted in 2013. In the UK, where Browder is based and has citizenship, a cross-party motion unanimously backed the act, but the government refused to make it law. Instead one of the officials accused of helping to kill Magnitsky and profiting from the tax fraud he uncovered, Pavel Karpov, tried to sue Browder for libel through the British courts. Though the case was thrown out, it still cost Browder a million pounds in legal fees and further helped harm

his image: a case of courts being used as information and financial weapons rather than for justice.

The information campaign around the Magnitsky case highlights several key lessons. Much of anti-corruption research is very dry: by turning the case into a human-centered story, the case got attention. Classic media are constrained, both in terms of the resources they can spend on investigative research and because of fear of libel, but the Internet opens the opportunity to deliver independently produced, ratings-winning programs (as long as their producers have the money necessary for the relevant legal fees). The challenge of establishing credibility remains: Browder’s films were frequently accused of bias, and in such a context, the need for facts “solid enough to get a grand jury indictment” becomes even more necessary.

Recommendations

Some of the state-level responses to challenges the Kremlin poses are already being discussed: the reinvention of public diplomacy by the EU and the United States, the development of military capabilities to defend against “limited war,” and the setting up of TV stations for Russian speakers both inside and outside Russia.

The recommendations below are those that could be fulfilled by civic or public bodies operating on smaller budgets.

For Weaponization of Information

Transparency International for Disinformation

“If in the 20th century the great challenge was the battle for freedom of information,” says Vasily Gatov, “in the 21st century the greatest challenge will be

from states and other powerful actors abusing freedom of information.” Gatov’s observation strikes at a core problem. An underlying issue in addressing such media as RT is the lack of any stable definitions for “propaganda” or “disinformation.” “Isn’t everything propaganda?” was a sentiment often heard by the authors during the research for this paper. But this dismissive attitude risks opening up the space for the weaponization of information, making deception equivalent to argumentation and the deliberate misuse of facts as legitimate as rational persuasion.

An initiative is needed that will bring together international media and experts to define the terms of reference for “propaganda,” with the purpose of agreeing on a common set of definitions, and to explore the possibility of a ratings system for disinformation inspired by such methodologies as Freedom House’s Freedom Ranking and Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index to create a benchmark for behavior. The amount of bias and disinformation in every particular region needs to be regularly mon-

¹⁷⁴ Tom Rowley, *I’m a victim of a Russian smear campaign*, Telegraph (Nov. 23, 2012), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9697949/Im-a-victim-of-Russian-smear-campaign-says-MP-photographed-in-underwear.html>

¹⁷⁵ Stephen Cohen, *Magnitsky Act the result of ‘know-nothing Congress and lack of leadership from White House,’* RT: Op-Edge (Apr. 14, 2013), <http://rt.com/op-edge/magnitsky-lists-stephen-cohen-828/>

itored with research such as Fabian Bukhardt’s about the presentation of the Ukraine crisis on German TV and Christoph Grozdev’s on Bulgarian coverage of the MH17 tragedy, which would offer the public rigorous analysis of the real balance of opinions in both traditional and social media.

A “Disinformation Charter” for Media and Bloggers

Where is the line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of communication? Is lying a form of communication? Are consciously false assurances? Conspiracy theories? How do you respond to actors who abuse the idea of freedom of information to sow disinformation? Top-down censorship is a step to be avoided. But rival media, from Al-Jazeera to the BBC, Fox and beyond, need to get together to create a charter of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Vigorous debate and disagreement is of course to be encouraged—but media who practice conscious deception should be excluded from the community. A similar code should be accepted by bloggers and other online influencers.

Counter-Disinformation Editors

If the goal of active measures is to use Western institutions such as news platforms to spread disinformation, then to what extent are those institutions duty-bound to immunize themselves from such exploitation? Is it really necessary to “report” every self-evidently ridiculous conspiracy theory advanced by the Russian Foreign Ministry about chemical weapons use in Syria, the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, or the “fascist junta” that supposedly governs Kiev? And if these platforms’ coverage must encompass those theories, how might they be “framed” editorially to show that what is being relayed is inherently contradictory, originates from fringe or extremist sources, or *prima facie* does not withstand even cursory scrutiny, as with the YouTube date-stamping incident discussed earlier? Relatedly, should an outlet’s relay of propaganda or disinformation itself not engender self-critical news analysis?

Many newspapers now employ “public editors,” or ombudsmen, who question their outlet’s reporting or op-ed selections and address matters of public controversy that these might entail. Given the frequency and amount of Kremlin propaganda and how transnational it is—affecting events from the crisis in Syria to nuclear negotiations with Iran to the war in Ukraine—news organizations should establish “counter-propa-

ganda editors” to pick apart what might be called all the news unfit to print. We stand before a deluge of disinformation—the Kremlin’s use of disinformation is, and will be increasingly, used by other states. If media organizations are unwilling to take this step, then other outlets, modeled on Ukraine’s “Stop Fake” or the popular US website “PolitiFact,” which judges the veracity of American politicians’ statements, can be created for exactly that purpose.

Beyond “Truth Squads”

Myth-busting of the type carried out by the Disinformation Working Group is not enough in a digital age where disinformation can be produced en masse and at high speed. Modern “truth squads” need to develop more strategic approaches, targeting not just disinformation but also the networks and influencers who disseminate them, ensuring that Kremlin-supported spokesmen, officials and intellectuals are held to account. Employees of think tanks, pundits or policy consultants with vested financial interests in the countries they cover need to disclose their affiliations in public statements. A few of these individuals have been mentioned already by name in this paper, but there are many more who turn up in broadcast media or in op-ed sections of major broadsheets, their affiliations obscured. Public pressure should be brought to bear on news organizations that opt to run comment pieces by contributors without disclosing their interests.

Stopping all disinformation at all times is impossible. Public information campaigns about how disinformation works are needed to change the public’s behavior and foster more critical thought towards the messages that are being “buzzed” at them.

Targeted Online Work

Audiences exposed to systemic and intensive disinformation campaigns, such as the Russian-speaking communities in the Baltic states, need to be worked with through targeted online campaigns that include the equivalent of person-to-person online social work. There is an increasing amount of online work being done with violent extremists and other radicalized groups by such initiatives as Against Violent Extremism¹⁷⁶ (a joint effort of Google Ideas and the Weidenfeld Institute). Could the experience gained through these initiatives help guide work with those affected by intense Kremlin propaganda?

¹⁷⁶ <http://www.againstviolentextremism.org/>

For Weaponization of Money

Strategic Corruption Research and a Journalists' Libel Fund

The Kremlin's weaponization of money and use of high-level influence is perhaps its most potent weapon. RT might provide the *Sturm und Drang* of propaganda, but it is the strategic use of corruption that has the real clout. But paradoxically corruption is also the Kremlin's Achilles heel: if nothing else registers as powerfully within the halls of the Kremlin as beyond them, it is rampant, ostentatious stealing by government officials. Anti-corruption activist and opposition politician Alexey Navalny's coinage of "the party of crooks and thieves" for the ruling United Russia Party gained almost universal recognition in Russia.

Journalists are aware of this but have neither the time nor the resources to chase these stories, particularly with the added fear of costly litigation. Editors will preemptively kill investigative features for similar reasons. Financial and institutional support needs to be made available so that deep research can be carried out in the sensitive area where politics, security and corruption meet; this needs to be backed up by a fund for journalists who face potential libel litigation for the offense of doing their jobs. A non-profit organization based in Western capitals and modeled on Lawyers Without Borders, but dedicated exclusively to defending journalists, is long overdue.

The results of the research can be delivered to existing media, though, as the example of the Magnitsky case has shown, it is perfectly possible to deliver ratings-winning products directly online. The aim has to be both to conduct sensitive research and to make the consequences of the Kremlin's weaponization of money and use of strategic corruption compelling for audiences. Evidence has to be "grand jury-proof."

Target: Offshore

A network of stringers in offshore jurisdictions is needed to carry out deep research into the financial holdings of Russian oligarchs and officials. Cyprus, the British Virgin Islands, the Bahamas and the Seychelles are where billionaires with inscrutable incomes go to open bank accounts and shell companies to launder money or hide assets through third-party nominees or directors. These destinations, prized for their secrecy laws and tax havens, often make cameos whenever Russian corruption scandals are exposed in the international press.

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists has already compiled its own useful "Offshore Leaks" database, demonstrating the known ownership structures of thousands of offshore entities and providing a kind of transnational footpath for following dirty money. NGOs such as Global Witness and Transparency International identify hundreds of suspect companies, the banks they use to transact business, and the national or international legislation that can be brought to bear in publicizing their true owners.

Dispatching teams of trained investigative journalists to ferret out examples of Russian corruption can be prioritized by established news outlets, perhaps working cooperatively. Or new outlets dedicated exclusively to Russian graft stories can be created with modest financial commitments.

Crowd-sourced Investigations

Because the 21st-century media landscape has been revolutionized to allow anyone, anywhere, to do full-bore investigative work into stolen assets, war crimes, or diplomatic lies, combating Russian propaganda can be crowd-sourced. It is in the interest of NGOs to enlist experienced bloggers, citizen journalists or adept social media users to collaborate on specific events or news stories that adhere to the same standards of empirical rigor used by traditional journalists. A handful of analysts armed with YouTube, Google Maps, Instagram, or foreign company registration websites can generate headlines.

For Weaponization of Ideas

Re-establishing Transparency and Integrity

The current think-tank and intellectual discussion has been undermined by the opaque nature of funding and the complex games Russia and other authoritarian regimes play in exchanging access for acquiescence, funding for friendship. The lines between research, advocacy, lobby groups and "track 2" diplomacy have become blurred. All of these are perfectly legitimate activities, but they need to be described as such by their practitioners: a spade should be called a spade. Self-disclosure of funding by think tanks and a charter indicating clear lines between funders and research would be first steps in helping the sector regulate itself and re-establish faith in its output.

The Valdai Alternative

To counter the challenges posed by Valdai, Kremlin-friendly NGOs and the use of the Church, there needs to be a broad gathering that brings together think tanks, experts and policymakers to help reinvigorate the debate about the implications of Russian policy for both regional and global issues. This “Valdai Alternative” would prioritize the following areas:

- **Address Fears Around the Erosion of Tradition, Religion and National Sovereignty**

There is more genuine, grassroots religious conservatism (and religious modernism) in Poland, the US and Western Ukraine than in Russia—yet Russia has somehow managed to advertise itself as the harbinger of religious thinking. The “Valdai Alternative” would strengthen the connection between religious thinkers in the US and in the countries in Russia’s near abroad, and help show that democracy can be a thriving environment for religion. Likewise the question of national identity and tradition: Russia is an empire that has a history of swallowing and trying to destroy whole peoples yet now positions itself as the bulwark of traditionalism, playing on the fears of nations who feel themselves at risk from “globalization.” These are important issues with which to engage, and the Valdai

Alternative would help ensure the debate is not spun by the Kremlin.

- **Including Russia’s Neighbors in the Debate About Russian Policy**

Focus on experts, policymakers and think tanks from countries in Russia’s “near-abroad,” including Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, so that their voices are central to the debate about Russia. Current initiatives often bypass these relatively smaller countries. In late August 2014, experts from Kissinger Associates and Carnegie Moscow, working together with Russian counterparts, met on a Finnish island to hammer out a “24-step plan” to “resolve the Ukrainian crisis.”¹⁷⁷ Known as the Boisto Group (named for the island), this initiative contained no Ukrainians to discuss a peace plan for Ukraine:¹⁷⁸ their absence was enough to spur a published denunciation of the Boisto Group, signed by dozens of academics, members of think tanks, NGO heads, editors and former ambassadors. Of course any peace initiative is to be welcomed, but Russia’s neighbors ought to be mainstreamed into the conversation.

- **Engaging with “Swing States” Such as the BRICs and Others** in the Middle East, Asia and South America that are being courted by the Kremlin to join its anti-Western Internationale.

Overall, the challenges posed by the Kremlin’s weaponization of information, culture and money have to be seen in the broader context of establishing the institutions to face 21st-century challenges. Today’s Kremlin preys on the weaknesses, contradictions and blind spots of the Western system. It thus serves as a sort of X-ray of the defects of the system. The battle against disinformation and strategic corruption, and the need to reinvigorate the global case for liberal democracy, are not merely Russia-specific issues. The Kremlin acts as an avant-garde of malevolent globalization, pioneering and pushing approaches that risk being taken up by other actors—many of the recommendations suggested in this paper to deal with the Kremlin’s challenge can, and should, be extrapolated to other cases.

¹⁷⁷ Uri Friedman, *A 24-Step Plan to Resolve the Ukraine Crisis*, The Atlantic (Aug. 26, 2014), <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/a-24-step-plan-to-resolve-the-ukraine-crisis/379121/>

¹⁷⁸ Uri Friedman, *‘A Ukraine Peace Plan That Excludes Ukrainians Is Unacceptable’*, The Atlantic (Sept. 1, 2014), <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/response-boisto-peace-plan-ukraine-russia-us/379428/>

About the Authors

Peter Pomerantsev is a British author and documentary producer. His writing is featured regularly in the *London Review of Books*, the *Atlantic*, *Newsweek/Daily Beast*, *Foreign Policy*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *Financial Times*, the *New Yorker*, and other European and US publications. He has also worked as a consultant on EU and World Bank development projects in the former USSR. He is the winner of the SOPA (Society of Press in Asia) award for writing about Mongolia and was a fellow of the “Russia in Global Dialogue” programme at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM) in Vienna. He writes regularly for think tanks about the post-Soviet space. His book about working inside Russian media, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, is to be released in November this year by Public Affairs and Faber.

Michael Weiss is editor-in-chief of *The Interpreter*, as well as a columnist for *Foreign Policy*, the *Daily Beast*, and *NOW Lebanon*. A longtime journalist, Weiss has covered the Syrian revolution from its inception, reporting from refugee camps in southern Turkey and from the frontlines of war-torn Aleppo. He has broken several news stories for *Foreign Policy*, including how Iran has given virtually free oil to the Assad regime in Syria (based on leaked state documents), how Angola’s energy sector works closely with a Swiss commodities trader (and how an Angolan general profits from the relationship), and how Russia fired Grad missiles into eastern Ukraine. He founded *The Interpreter* as a news and translation service in May 2013. In just over a year, the website has become a high-traffic resource for journalists, diplomats, and policymakers from around the world, with its articles cited by presidents, parliamentarians, ambassadors, and supranational governing bodies.

© The Institute of Modern Russia, Inc. 2014
231 West 29th Street, Suite 908, New York, NY 10001

Editors: Pierre Vaux, Sarah Vogelsong
Proofreading: Dmitry Pospelov, Grace Lee, Haley Anderson
Cover photo: Tim Parchikov
Design: Olga Bolshchikova
Printed by Digital City Services, LLC (New York)