Why Vladimir Putin is Angry with the West
Understanding the Drivers of Russia's Information, Cyber and Hybrid War

by Taras Kuzio

Russia's hacking of the 2016 US presidential elections has shed a spotlight on a broader assertion of Russian power using Russia's information and cyber war as components of covert hybrid war where Moscow denies its official involvement, as it has in Ukraine and the US. These are not new Russian policies but have been developed and improved over the previous decade. The origins of Russian cyber, information and hybrid war go much deeper than revenge against US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton for her support for anti-Putin protestors in Moscow in 2011-2012. There are two factors that are driving these policies. The first is President Vladimir Putin's deeply held anger at what he sees as a hypocritical and duplicitous West from which he needs to protect Russia and Eurasian civilisation. The second is the goal of reviving Russia as a great power which is respected by the West and recognises the former USSR as its exclusive "zone of privileged interests."

On 29 December 2016, in a move not seen since the 1962 Cuban Missile crisis, the US expelled 35 Russian diplomats and intelligence agents. A report published on the same day by the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Communications Integration Center said there had been "spearphishing, campaigns targeting government organisations, critical infrastructure, think-tanks, universities, political organisations, and corporations; theft of information from these organisations; and the recent public release of some of this stolen information."[1] These expulsions and the report described a "decade-long campaign" of Russian "behavior unprecedented in the post-Cold War era." The US government reached its conclusions after US think tanks had already pointed to Russia as the source of the hacking.[2]

Russia's use of cyber and information war did not begin in the US presidential elections. In 2008, Russia orchestrated violent riots and a month-long massive cyber attack in Estonia which targeted computer networks, banks and the media. A year after the attacks, NATO opened a Cooperative Cyber Defense Center in Tallinn. Six years later in Ukraine, cyber and information war was combined with hybrid war when Russian television whipped up into a frenzy pro-Russian sentiment which provided local supporters who collaborated with Russian special forces. Russia's growing use of misinformation led the EU in January 2016 to launch the website euvsdisinfo.eu to counter Pro-Kremlin disinformation. The Soviet Union had also undertaken ideological campaigns and active measures against the West but in the Cold War - before the age of 24-hour news, the Internet and social media - each of the two political systems was sealed off from the other. Soviet active measures were ineffective and easier to detect than contemporary Russian cyber and infor-

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[1] See Department of Homeland Security/Federal Bureau of Investigation (2016): GRIZZLY STEPPE – Russian Malicious Cyber Activity (Report), https://www.us-cert.gov/sites/default/files/publications/JAR_16-20296.pdf
[2] See Looking Glass Cyber Solutions (2015): Operation Armageddon: Cyber Espionage as a Strategic Component of Russian Modern Warfare (Report), https://www.lookingglasscyber.com/webinar-operation-armageddon

mation war. Today, with Russia integrated into a globalised economy and information space, the potential for more successful active measures is far greater and Russian information and social media resources have therefore become weaponised. In the Cold War it would have been unthinkable for the Kremlin to contemplate brazenly intervening in a US election.

Vladimir Putin's Convictions

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, Europe and North America believed in the "peace dividend" and most NATO members reduced their defence spending. In 2016 only five out of 28 NATO members spent the recommended two percent of gross domestic product on defense. NATO's defense spending only began to increase following Russia's aggression in Ukraine. In contrast, Putin's Russia never believed the Cold Wa of r had ended. In the late 1990s, at the same time that Putin was coming to power, Moscow viewed in a very negative manner the Kosovo war of independence, the US use of soft power to orchestrate a "bulldozer revolution" in Serbia and EU support for an independent Kosovo. In Moscow's eyes it was the West that again tore up the rule book when four years later a US-backed coalition invaded Iraq without UN authorisation.

The Russian public agree with Russian leaders that the outside world is a hostile environment. They, like their leaders, believe the onus for an improvement of relations lies with the West because Russia is the aggrieved party that has been forced to defend itself against Western malfeasance. The authoritarian political system created by Putin needs an external enemy, such as the US, NATO and more recently the EU to mobilise the population. According to a recent poll by the respected Russian Levada Centre, over two-thirds of Russians (68 percent) are convinced that their country has enemies and over half the population believe these enemies pose a real threat. Only 18 percent disagreed. The head of the Levada Centre said that the idea of enemies is popular and belief in the prevalence of enemies had been increasing since 2014 because it had been fanned by the Russian media. Russian leaders and public opinion do not comprehend why they have been punished with sanctions over the Crimea and eastern Ukraine. They defend Russia's annexation of the Crimea by pointing to the precedence of Western backing for Kosovo's independence. The same argument was made by Russia in September 2008 when it recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. In the case of eastern Ukraine, despite overwhelming evidence from a variety of sources, Russia continues to deny any involvement of its security forces.

Western Conspiracies and Support for Regime Change

Russian information, cyber and hybrid war is viewed by Moscow as strategic tools to respond to what they view as long-term Western support for regime change stretching back to the disintegration of the USSR and the recent colored revolutions in the Balkans, eastern Europe and Eurasia. The West, President Putin said, believed that "after the Soviet Union has fallen apart, we need to finish Russia off." Putin has long held the view that the West deliberately kept Russia weak in the 1990s and therefore his goal since coming to power is to revive Russia as a great power that would command respect by the West.

Putin has always understood color revolutions in Serbia, Georgia, and twice in Ukraine not in the same manner as Brussels and Washington. He believes them to be orchestrated by the CIA and more recently the EU working alongside the US in fomenting regime change in Russia's "zone of privileged interests". Color revolutions are viewed by Moscow as the equivalent of Western soft power complimenting the hard expansion of NATO and the EU. The Euromaidan Revolution was, Russian leaders said in spring 2014 when justifying their intervention in Crimea, cover for the Black Sea Fleet bases becoming NATO bases after Ukraine joined NATO and EU. That Ukraine has never had any membership offer for these two organisations was irrelevant to Moscow.

When the EU's Eastern Partnership was launched in 2009 for post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, Russia launched a competing Customs Union that became the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. Armenia was pressured to withdraw from the Eastern Partnership in favour of the Customs Union. Following the October 2016 presidential election of pro-Russian Igor Didon, Moldova may be next to withdraw from the Eastern

Partnership. Russian leaders pressured President Viktor Yanukovych with "kompromat" (compromising materials) and bribed him with a 15 billion Dollar "loan" to drop the Eastern Partnership. Putin was though – for a second time – foiled by Ukrainian protestors in his support for Yanukovych coming to power. If there had been no Euromaidan Revolution, Russia would have intervened in 2015 to ensure Yanukovych's re-election in return for Ukraine dropping European integration in favor of membership of the Eurasian Economic Union.

The EU never took Putin's plans for a Eurasian Union seriously and in the 2014 crisis Brussels was therefore stunned to realise that Russia views the EU in the same way as it has always viewed NATO; that is, as an expansionist Western project moving into its Eurasian "privileged zone of interests." European leaders became even more shocked to find that Putin had evolved from cajoling his Eurasian neighbours to drop European in favour of Eurasian integration into a broader strategy of undermining Europe by backing far right anti-EU political forces. Russia's support for extremist Russian nationalists in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eurasia has been replicated in the support Moscow has provided to far right anti-EU political forces. Russia has long provided financial support to Marine Le Pen who will most likely enter the second round of the April-May French presidential elections. On 19 December 2016, the "anti-fascist" United Russia party signed a cooperation agreement with Austria's right wing nationalist Freedom Party whose leader Norbert Hofer failed to win the presidential elections 15 days earlier. Russia backed the "Leave" campaign during the June 2016 UK referendum on the EU and it avidly supported the "No" campaign in the April 2016 Dutch referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. US realists, who now have the ear of President Donald Trump, were wrong to claim that Putin was not interested in moving beyond non-NATO members such as Ukraine. Russian leaders believe EU and NATO members should be targeted because these countries have been undertaking "aggressive" policies against Russia and its national interests.

Russia has launched a cyber and information war against NATO, the European Parliament and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, as well as several NATO and the prospective member state Montenegro. The German parliament has been cyber attacked and German intelligence has publicly aired concerns that Russia will cyber attack this year's federal elections. Russia has increasingly spread misinformation, or fake news, to sow public protests and spread negative propaganda against politicians deemed to be hostile to Russian interests. In January 2016, Russia was behind a fake story alleging a Russian-German 13-year old girl had been raped by migrants fuelling support for the far right and leading to condemnations of German politicians. Russian officials as senior as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov gave credence to the fake news story.

The Russian Idea of Counter-Revolution

It is wrong to believe that Russia has only begun using cyber, information and hybrid war since the crisis exploded in Ukraine. The ideological roots of Russian policies can be traced to after the 2003 Georgian Rose and 2004 Orange Revolutions when Moscow launched a "technology of preventive counterrevolution". Russia viewed both revolutions as examples of Western-backed regime change and feared the West was planning to spread this soft power "technology" to Russia. Although Putin's paranoia was exaggerated, he never forgave Hillary Clinton for publicly backing mass protests in Russia in 2011-2012.

Russia's turn to the right came sharply into the open in President Putin's 2007 speech to the Munich security conference – although at the time it was not viewed as heralding a significant change in Russian attitudes and policies. In 2007, the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation was created with the aim of supporting Russian speakers in the former USSR. Although touted as analogous to the British Council and Goethe Institute, the Russian World Foundation is in reality very different. Through close ties to Russian intelligence and extreme Russian nationalists, such as Aleksandr Dugin and senior presidential adviser Vladislav Surkov, Russian World provides paramilitary training and ideological indoctrination for extremist groups in Eurasia and post-communist states in central and eastern Europe. Formerly marginal extremist groups and parties, such as the Donetsk Republic in the Donbas and Russian Unity in the Crimea received paramilitary training in Russia in the decade leading up to the Russian-Ukrainian crisis.

In April 2008 – a full six years before the 2014 crisis – President Putin speaking to the NATO-Russia Council at the Bucharest NATO summit described Ukraine as an "artificial" country and questioned Ukraine's right to control its Russian speaking eastern and southern regions. Putin laid out as a legitimate policy Russia's right to intervene in its neighbors to "protect" Russian speakers. The following year, Ukraine's relations with Russia sharply deteriorated after two Russian diplomats accused of fomenting Crimean separatists and supporting Russian nationalists in Odesa were expelled. President Medvedev responded with a bellicose open letter to President Viktor Yushchenko outlining a host of demands that was tantamount to brazen interference in Ukraine's domestic affairs. In 2014, Putin described Ukraine's east and south using the Tsarist imperial term of "New Russia" to give ideological backing to pro-Russian separatists. In the same year as Putin laid out these territorial demands against Ukraine, Russia invaded Georgia and recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. No Western sanctions ensued against Russia for its invasion of Georgia and the following year the US launched a "Reset" of relations with Russia. These steps sent a signal to Putin that there would be no repercussions if he undertook military intervention in neighbouring states. Later this culminating in Russia's not anticipating Western sanctions for its invasion of Crimea.

Russia has always had a Janis faced policy towards separatism, condemning the phenomenon inside Russia's regions while promoting it in its neighbours. Russia has backed separatism in the four former Soviet republics of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan while brutally suppressing separatism in the Russian province of Chechnya. Russia Today and Russian social media strongly backed Scottish nationalists during the September 2014 independence referendum. But Russia does not limit its exertion of influence to such measures. It has also resumed the Soviet practice of "wet operations" (assassinations) abroad and at home. In 2004, Ukrainian opposition leader Yushchenko was poisoned by dioxin. Two years later radioactive polonium was used to murder FSB defector Aleksandr Litvinenko in London only a month after journalist Anna Polikovskaya had been gunned down in Moscow. The dioxin and radioactive polonium is produced in Russian laboratories inherited from the USSR and run by the secret services. Countless Chechen nationalists have been murdered in Europe, Turkey and the Middle East since 2004.

As in Ukraine, cyber and information war can be combined with hybrid war through the use of Russia's military intelligence (GRU) and Federal Security Service (FSB) special forces, paramilitaries, private contractors and mercenaries. Veterans with combat experience in Bosnia, Chechnya, Georgia and Ukraine are drawn upon by Russia's GRU to camouflage official Russian involvement and provide the means to deny Moscow's hand. In September 2014, Estonian security service officer Eston Kohver was kidnapped by Russian intelligence agents in a direct snub to the US coming only two days after President Barack Obama's visit to that country. The Russian authorities claimed Kohver had illegally crossed into Russia. Russia has returned to the Balkans where it seeks to stop Serbia joining the EU and Montenegro joining NATO. In January 2017, a train which Serbia brought from Russia and painted in the colours of the Serbian flag with pictures of churches, monasteries, and medieval towns as well as the words "Kosovo is Serbian" in 21 languages, was halted as it was heading for the Serb-dominated north of Kosovo.

The most egregious example was Russian backing for a coup attempt and assassination plot against Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic using nationalist Serbs and Russian Cossacks who had fought for the separatists in the Donbas. Cossack General Viktor Zaplatin, a Russian citizen, told a rally in Montenegro "The Orthodox world is one world. Here we see Serbs, Montenegrins, Russians, and Belarusians." Aleksandr Borodai, former editor of the Russian nationalist Zavtra (Tomorrow) newspaper and "Prime Minister" of the Donetsk People's Republic, sent greetings. Twenty Serbs and Russians are in custody in Montenegro which issued an international warrant for a further two Russians and three Serbs. One of the Serbs sought by Montenegro, Nemanja Ristic, was photographed next to Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov during his 12 December 2016 visit to Belgrade. This month, Serbia arrested Ristic and another Serb nationalist Predrag Bogicevic wanted in connection with the Russian-backed coup.

What Does Putin Want?

In the last two decades, Western leaders have twice failed to reset relations with Russia. President George W. Bush sought an alliance with Putin following the 9/11 attacks but soon found that the US and Russia viewed terrorism very differently. They also fundamentally disagreed over Iraq. President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pinned high hopes in the "liberal" Russian President Dmitri Medvedev but became disillusioned when Russian domestic and foreign policies failed to fundamentally change.

The US election of Trump has raised the possibility of a third attempt to reset US-Russia relations. Nevertheless, Putin's decade-long cyber, information and hybrid policies and two strategic objectives it seeks make a successful reset unlikely. Putin's first objective is for the US to come to accept that Russia is the innocent party in the deterioration of relations. Therefore, only the US and EU are supposed to change their behaviour towards Russia. Putin believes Russia is in a conflict with the West that it did not begin and has been forced to respond to. Putin sees himself defending Russia and Eurasian civilisation against a Western onslaught, and he believes the EU is a puppet of the US and the "artificial" Ukrainian state is a Western fifth column. It is highly improbable that a nationalist President Trump would agree to accepting that Russia is the innocent party. Trump would also blame the deterioration on his predecessor. A reset would also be attempted at the same time as greater European and American awareness of Russia's cyber, information and hybrid war. A second and more ambitious objective is a "Yalta-2" agreement that would divide up Eurasia and eastern Europe into nineteenth century-style spheres of influence. President Trump has support for such a policy among some realists from the foreign policy community. One of them could be former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger who is said to have advised Trump to roll out a plan to end sanctions on Moscow that would "recognise Russia's dominance" in the former Soviet states of Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and Kazakhstan.

It remains unclear at this early stage in his presidency if President Trump would be willing to go along with this realist policy. In the event that he did, he would face opposition from both Republicans and Democrats in the US Congress who seek tougher sanctions against Russia for hacking the US elections. Many NATO allies would also be opposed to a "Yalta-2." Speaker of the House and senior Republican in Congress Paul Ryan applauded the expulsions of Russian diplomats and intelligence agents as long overdue and "an appropriate way to end eight years of failed policy with Russia." Sanctions against Russia would be impossible for President Trump to repeal if they are ensconced in law. The mood in some parts of Europe is similar, particularly in eastern Europe, Scandinavia and the UK. During a January visit to Ukraine, UK Minister of Defence Sir Michael Fallon said in a warning to Trump "The values of freedom and democracy cannot be traded." He added that the "UK is sending a clear message that we are committed to defending democracy across the world and support Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity."

Conclusions

Putin's demands for a reset of relations with the US are unlikely to succeed for three reasons. The first is because Russia's demands are far too great and therefore impossible for the US to deliver. The second is that Putin's nationalist and authoritarian regime is highly dependent upon the fanning of mass anti-Western diatribes in the Russian media whose continuation would be problematical under a reset. The third is because anger – the driving force of Putin's decade-long cyber, information and hybrid war against the West – has been successful and therefore there would be opposition from the Russian "siloviky" (security forces) to ending it. When US intelligence pointed the finger at Russia for hacking its elections, a US official said "Russia is not going to stop. We have every indication that they will continue to interfere in democratic elections in other countries."

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