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CONTROLLING CHAOS: HOW RUSSIA MANAGES ITS POLITICAL WAR IN EUROPE

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SUMMARY

- Russia carries out and encourages ‘active measures’ in Europe to destabilise and confuse governments and societies. But these are often opportunistic and shaped by local conditions. There is no grand strategy, beyond weakening the EU and NATO and creating a more conducive environment for itself.
- This involves a wide range of actors, from officials and the media, through military threats, to business lobbies and spies. Russia pursues different priorities in different countries. This is largely determined by the correlation between the strength of countries’ national institutions and their vulnerability to Russian influence.
- Nonetheless, there is an effort to coordinate certain operations across platforms. Insofar as there is a command-and-control node, it is within the Presidential Administration, which is perhaps the most important single organ within Russia’s highly de-institutionalised state.
- Without giving up hope of persuading Moscow to change its policies, Europe must nonetheless address its own vulnerabilities: ‘fixing the roof’ rather than simply hoping the rain will stop. Among other things, this includes addressing democratic backsliding in parts of the continent.

“Listen: we engage in foreign policy the way we engage in war, with every means, every weapon, every drop of blood. But like in war, we depend on both the strategy of the general in the High Command, and the bravery and initiative of the soldier in the trench.”

Russian former diplomat, 2017¹

Russia sees ‘active measures’ (*aktivnyye meropriyatiya*) – from supporting populist parties through disinformation and espionage campaigns, all the way to incidents such as the attempted coup in Montenegro – as an essential part of its efforts to influence Europe.² Along with the usual instruments of foreign influence, such as diplomacy and economic levers, Russia is especially active in using covert and non-traditional means, from intelligence operations to military pressure and even organised crime, all of which have been the foci of recent policy briefs for ECFR.³ This final publication in an informal series seeks instead to

¹ Conversation in Moscow, April 2017.

² By definition, this report addresses issues involving sensitive, covert, and sometimes illegal matters. Therefore, over and above direct quotes that are footnoted, many of the assertions and examples used have been drawn partially or wholly from off-the-record conversations in Europe, the United States, and Russia. Of course, it is always hard to accept all such information at face value, but wherever possible it was also corroborated by other sources.

³ “Putin’s hydra: Inside Russia’s intelligence services”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 11 May 2016 available at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/putins_hydra_inside_russias_intelligence_services; (hereafter, “Putin’s hydra: Inside Russia’s intelligence services”); ‘Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia’s Political Use of its Military in Europe since 2014’, European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 December 2016 available at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/heavy_metal_diplomacy_russias_political_use_of_its_military_in_europe_since, hereafter (“Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia’s Political Use of its Military in Europe since 2014”); ‘Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia’s criminal networks in Europe’, European Council on Foreign Relations, 18 April 2017 available at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/crimintern_how_the_kremlin_uses_russias_criminal_networks_in_europe, hereafter, “Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia’s criminal networks in Europe”).

consider the extent to which these campaigns are carefully planned and coordinated – and, if so, by whom.

How far is this a carefully staged campaign, and how far an exercise in improvisation? To a large extent, individual initiatives appear unconnected, often opportunistic, their moves shaped by local conditions, concerns, and considerations. They connect only sometimes and frequently clumsily. There appears to be no master plan, but rather a broad strategy of weakening the European Union and NATO, distancing Europe and the United States from each other, and generally creating a political and cultural environment more conducive for Moscow and its interests. Indeed, to a great degree the voluntarist and dispersed nature of this campaign reflects the relative weakness of Russia, which lacks the economic, political, and soft power strength directly to challenge a much stronger (if less focused) West.

Nonetheless, observation suggests that there is clearly some effort to coordinate certain operations across platforms. Often this happens after an initiative is taken by individual agents and actors. For example, in the infamous 2016 “Lisa Case” (when a 13-year-old Russian-German girl was reported to have been kidnapped and raped by Turkish or Arab men – a story later proven to be groundless), initial social media accounts were then recycled in the Russian media, and subsequently cited by Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov.⁴ The government was simply reacting to, and trying to exploit, something that started independently.

There also appear to be certain national and regional priorities and approaches. There is of course the deep cynicism which often sees Moscow cultivating rival extremes, all in the name of spreading chaos and division. In Greece and Italy, for example, it eggs on parties on both the left and right (the Five Star Movement and the *Lega Nord*, *Syriza* and Golden Dawn, respectively). In its broader narrative it is happy to encourage anti-capitalist and liberal protest movements such as Occupy, as well as to play to social conservatives. One Russian journalist expressed amazement that “the methods, even much of the language is the same: left or right, radical or conservative, you can use the same approaches with both sides, just change some of the language.”⁵ More broadly, though, the evidence suggests different ambitions and expectations for Kremlin operations in different European countries. This has very significant implications not just for understanding Russian policy but also in shaping European responses. This report seeks to identify the degree to which this is more than just a random medley of negative memes and self-interested falsehoods, and where the semi-structured political offensive against the West is planned and managed.

⁴ “Fall Lisa: Das sind die Fakten”, *n-tv*, 26 January 2016, available at <http://www.n-tv.de/panorama/Fall-Lisa-Das-sind-die-Fakten-article16865016.html>.

⁵ Conversation, Prague, November 2016.

Agents of chaos

Under Vladimir Putin, traditional Russian and even Soviet notions of the supremacy of the interests of the state have led to the creation of not so much a totalitarian state but a “mobilisation state”.⁶ As he put it, “It is only by mobilising all the resources at our disposal, both administrative and financial, that we will be able to get results.”⁷ The government is willing – within certain bounds – to accept the presence of civil society, a free press, independent economic activity, and even some political pluralism. However, in keeping with its general philosophical belief that it is at (political) war and faces an existential cultural and political threat from the West, it reserves to itself the right to co-opt any individual or organisation when it feels the need. As a result, it is worth dwelling on just how bewilderingly broad an array of different kinds of players are involved, sometimes constantly, at others episodically, in the Kremlin’s active measures campaigns:

The Kremlin and the Presidential Administration

Putin is both the final source of authority and control in these campaigns and also an active player. Sometimes, he and those who speak with his voice simply support particular players and ventures. Other times, they provide alternative messages, either to refine or correct (such as when, in 2016, Putin personally dialled back some of propaganda-primadonna Dmitry Kiselev’s more extreme rhetoric about potential Russian nuclear threats) or simply to spread confusion, uncertainty, and deniability.⁸

MID and Russian diplomacy

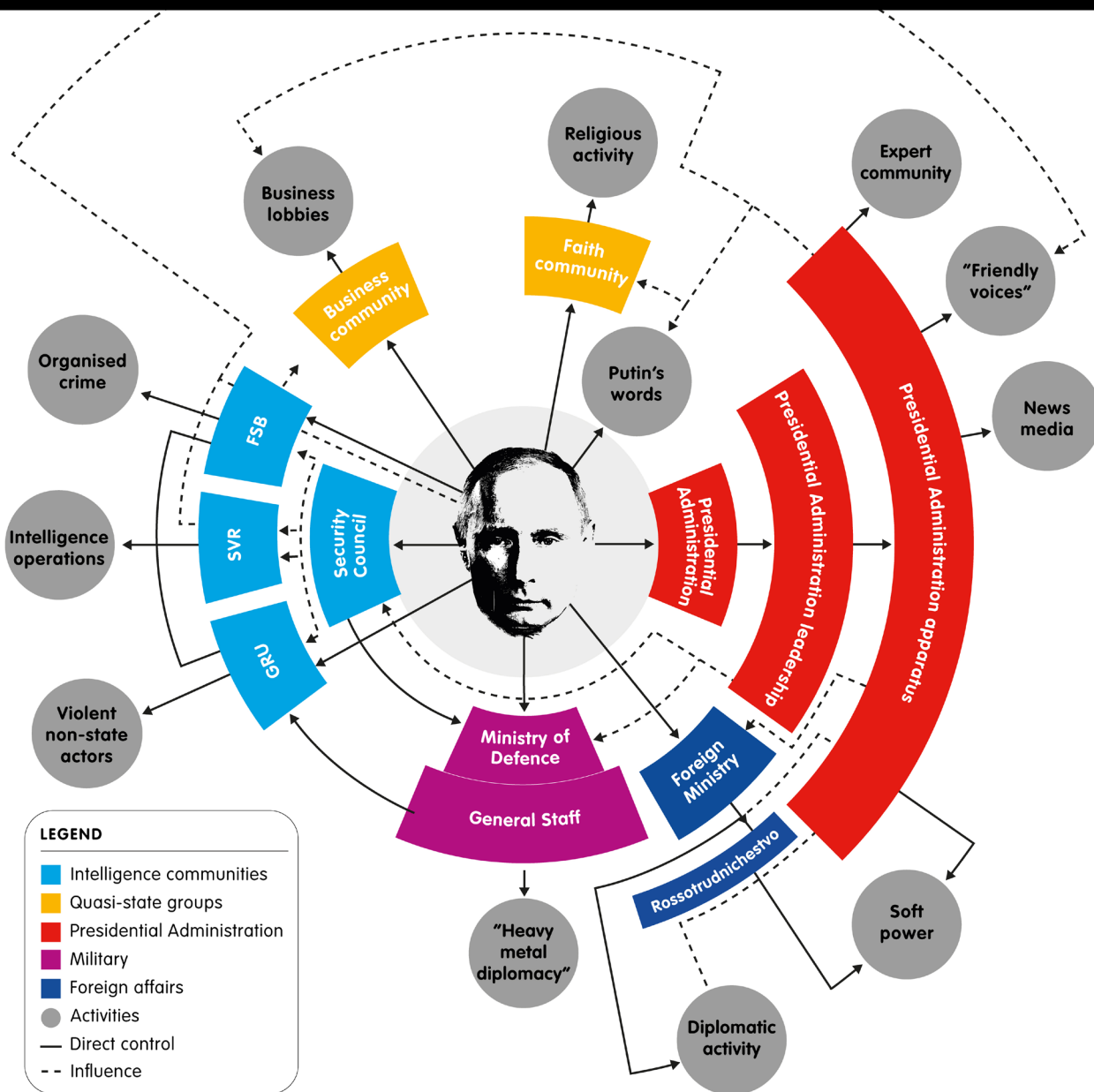
The primary official instrument of foreign affairs is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) and its global network of embassies, consulates, and other representations. As will be discussed below, MID’s role within decision-making has diminished markedly, such that it often supports projects and spins narratives not of its choosing. Nonetheless, MID is notionally responsible for *Rosstrudnichestvo* – the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation – which is discussed below. From championing supposedly oppressed Russian minorities abroad to thundering against the alleged iniquities of Western policy, it continues to be a powerful presence. For example, in 2016, MID and its agencies paid for representatives of the Legal Information Centre for Human Rights and the Russian School in Estonia, two Kremlin-friendly NGOs, to take part in an annual OSCE

⁶ Andrew Monaghan has written especially perceptively about this in a more directly military context. See: “Russian State Mobilization: Moving the Country on to a War Footing”, Chatham House, 2016, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-05-20-russian-state-mobilization-monaghan-2.pdf>.

⁷ “Expanded meeting of the Government”, the Kremlin, 31 January 2013, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17396>.

⁸ “Putin Distances Himself From Remarks by the Kremlin’s ‘Chief Propagandist’”, the *Moscow Times*, 28 October 2016, available at <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/putin-distances-himself-from-remarks-by-kremlin-chief-propagandist-55919>.

HOW PUTIN COORDINATES RUSSIA'S ACTIVE MEASURES



Vladimir Putin icon courtesy of Faloomabinga, Wikimedia Commons

meeting. The KaPo, Estonia's security police, claims they "painted a picture of Estonia that completely met the expectation of the sponsor – Estonia violates the rights of Russian children to be educated in their mother tongue and has a 'massive' issue with people without citizenship, and so on."⁹ This was an operation jointly coordinated by the Russian embassy in Tallinn, and MID's Department for Relations with Compatriots Abroad, in Moscow.¹⁰

⁹ Estonian Internal Security Service Annual Review 2017, p. 7, available at <https://kapo.ee/en/content/annual-reviews.html>.

¹⁰ Conversation with Russian foreign ministry staffer, March 2016.

The military

All nations' armed forces perform roles broader than simply defence: But, for Russia, the relative strength of its military compared with other instruments of foreign influence ensures that the military is called on to perform an especially broad range of other duties. Sometimes, this is as an agency of influence and propaganda, engaged in coercive 'heavy-metal diplomacy' that is "intended to divide, distract, and deter Europe from challenging Russia's activities in its immediate neighbourhood."¹¹ However, the Ministry of Defence and General Staff are also

¹¹ "Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia's Political Use of its Military in Europe since 2014".

involved in their own forms of foreign political operations (even setting aside the military intelligence role of GRU), including building a kind of ‘khaki soft power’ through joint exercises with other militaries and gifts of materiel and training – such as its support for plans to sell Serbia aircraft, tanks and air-defence missiles on very preferential terms, and cooperation with Turkey.¹²

The intelligence community

Russia’s espionage and security agencies – notably the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Federal Security Service (FSB), and military intelligence (GRU) – have an unusually close connection with power, and likewise engage in an unusually broad range of duties.¹³ Active measures, rather than an occasional emergency operation as is generally the case in the West, are a regular part of their work. To this end, they undertake a broad range of political missions, from computer hacking to gather potentially compromising material, through spreading disruptive disinformation and funding outlets for them, all the way actively to fomenting unrest, and direct sabotage, as visible in Ukraine now, and Estonia and Georgia (especially in 2007 and 2008, respectively, but also continuing). The SVR, the primary foreign intelligence service, is perhaps the least influential of the three at present, and mostly concentrates on intelligence gathering across the spectrum, from political and military secrets through to commercial information. It is also ready and willing to engage in active measures, allegedly even including assassinations (such as of Chechens active in Turkey),¹⁴ even though, in the words of one Russian scholar who follows intelligence affairs, “they are still more about gathering information and compromising foreigners than killing them; that is usually the job of others.”¹⁵ The GRU (technically, the Main Administration of the General Staff) has a narrower remit. Its increasing role in cyber espionage gives it a particular hand in active measures, but otherwise it essentially confines itself to more ‘kinetic’ adventures, from the attempted coup in Montenegro to cultivating and supporting paramilitaries, such as the Hungarian National Front and the so-called Czech National Home Guard.¹⁶ The FSB is increasingly involving itself in foreign operations and has a particular bent towards political affairs given its primary role as an internal security agency.¹⁷ Its secret police mindset, its relative impunity given Putin’s personal patronage, and its relative inexperience in the espionage world mean that it is focused on political operations, is willing to make diplomatic trouble, and is unconcerned

with the traditional ‘etiquette’ of intelligence operations. It is especially interested in active measures. The FSB has been blamed for the murder in 2006 of defector Alexander Litvinenko in London, for instance, a killing that not only silenced one man, but also had a wider political impact in cowering the so-called ‘Londongrad’ set of wealthy Russian expatriates, who were in some cases openly critical of Putin.¹⁸ It seeks to undermine critics of the regime, penetrate Russian émigré communities, gather *kompromat* (compromising information), and otherwise advance Moscow’s agenda. Like the GRU, it also has a substantial cyber capability.

Businesses and commercial lobbies

State-owned or state-dominated corporations such as Vnesheconombank, Rosneft (50 percent government share), and Gazprom (50.23 percent), have long been used as instruments of state policy, whether channelling resources to projects that the Kremlin considers a priority, or exerting pressure through limiting energy supplies. However, a crucial aspect of the mobilisation state is that the government can and will from time to time issue requests or ask favours that are clearly offers that cannot be refused. As part of the price of doing business without potential hindrance, or in the hope of future benefit, companies may be expected to provide funding for foreign political parties or campaigns, contribute to favoured causes, or otherwise dance to the Kremlin’s tune. This is not always or necessarily a reactive response, as some wealthy Russians are also enthusiastic participants in active measures, out of conviction or ambition. Investment banker Konstantin Malofeev, for example, stands accused by the European Commission and the US of being a prime mover behind the seizure of Crimea and destabilisation of Donbas.¹⁹ He appears to have bankrolled active measures operations in Crimea preparing the ground for annexation and admits he was behind the deployment into Donbas of Igor Girkin, the Russian operator known as “Strelkov”, who boasts of being the man who “pulled the trigger” on that undeclared war. He was also the former employer of Alexander Boroday, first premier of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic.²⁰ To give another example, former Russian Railways head and still-close Putin ally Vladimir Yakunin is active abroad. In Estonia, he contributed to the construction of an Orthodox cathedral in Tallinn and Edgar Savisaar’s Centre Party, a handily divisive force in Estonian politics.²¹ The World Public Forum co-founded by

18 “The Litvinenko Enquiry”, House of Commons, 2016, p. 246, available at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160613090753/https://www.litvinenkoenquiry.org/files/Litvinenko-Inquiry-Report-web-version.pdf>.

19 See: Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No 826/2014, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A2014R0826>; US Treasury, “Treasury Targets Additional Ukrainian Separatists and Russian Individuals and Entities”, 19 December 2014, available at <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jlg729.aspx>.

20 “Из Крыма в Донбасс: приключения Игоря Стрелкова и Александра Бородай”, *Slon*, 19 May 2014, available at https://republic.ru/russia/iz_kryma_v_donbass_priklyucheniya_igorja_strelkova_i_aleksandra_borodaya-1099696.xhtml; “Премьером Донецкой республики избран Александр Бородай, бывший консультант «Маршал капитала», *Vedomosti*, 16 May 2014, available at <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2014/05/16/premerom-doneckoj-respubliki-izbran-aleksandr-borodaj>.

21 “Savisaar’s leadership under fire”, *Baltic Times*, 1 May 2011, available at <https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/27656/>; “Estonia Can Handle Putin’s Soft Power”, *Bloomberg*, 2 March 2015, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-03-02/estonia-can-handle-putin-s-soft-power>.

12 “Serbia seeks jets, tanks, air defense system”, *Defense News*, 18 April 2017, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/serbia-seeks-jets-tanks-air-defense-system>; “Erdogan says military cooperation important for both Russia and Turkey”, *TASS*, 10 March 2017, available at <http://tass.com/world/934900>.

13 “Putin’s hydra: Inside Russia’s intelligence services”.

14 “Russian intelligence suspected in Chechen commander’s assassination in Turkey”, *Intelnews*, 12 December 2008, available at <https://intelnews.org/2008/12/12/04-8/>.

15 Conversation in Moscow, April 2017.

16 “Russian diplomats exercised with Hungarian cop killer’s far-right gang”, *index.hu*, 28 October 2016, available at <http://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/28/russian-diplomats-exercised-with-hungarian-cop-killer-s-far-right-gang/>; “Experts warn of national home guard groups”, *Prague Daily Monitor*, 11 July 2016, available at <http://praguemonitor.com/2016/07/11/experts-warn-national-home-guard-groups>.

17 “Putin’s hydra: Inside Russia’s intelligence services”.

Yakunin organises regular gatherings of senior current and former European leaders in Rhodes featuring a strongly anti-American agenda, and set up its own think-tank in Berlin, the Dialogue of Civilisations.²²

Think-tanks and intellectual lobbies

Russia has a relatively under-developed think-tank 'economy', and, while there are conspicuous exceptions such as the Carnegie Moscow Center and CAST, the majority are heavily dependent on either a relative handful of benefactors or, more usually, the state. Think-tanks, research centres, even simply some 'public intellectuals' such as the notorious Eurasianist-nationalist Alexander Dugin and fellow national-imperialist Alexander Prokhanov not only compete for the favour and funds of the state, they may also be used to deliver narratives or for more direct purposes. For example, RISI, the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, has become infamous in the Balkans not only for lobbying for a more assertive Russian policy but also as a source of funds for certain local groups, and a front for agents and agitators.

The Russian Orthodox Church

Although Islamic institutions such as the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia are used by the state to reinforce Putin's claims that Russia is and will remain a "reliable ally" of the Muslim world, the role of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church is especially strong.²³ It is deeply entwined with the Russian state, a modern-day form of the traditional alliance with the tsars, reflecting their role as God's chosen ruler. It also reflects Soviet-era KGB penetration and generous contemporary financial privileges. The current hierarchy under Patriarch Kirill – who began his career under the Soviets and has described Putin's presidency as a "miracle of God" – appear delighted to continue the relationship.²⁴ In Ukraine, for example, the Patriarchate is involved in an active political-religious struggle with the Kiev Patriarchate, while in the Balkans it is involved in reviving and strengthening historical and religious connections. Even its outreach to the Papacy has an inevitable political dimension, successfully keeping it talking about a "civil war" in Ukraine rather than a Russian-instigated pseudo-rebellion.

22 "Rhodes gathering blames the world's woes on the west", *Financial Times*, 5 October 2016, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/fc49d136-896d-11e6-8aa5-f79f5696c731?mhq5i=e2>; "Putin associate opens Russia-friendly think tank in Berlin", *Deutsche Welle*, 1 July 2016, available at <http://www.dw.com/en/putin-associate-opens-russia-friendly-think-tank-in-berlin/a-19372110>.

23 "Встреча Главы мусульман России и Генерального секретаря Национального Совета Безопасности Турецкой Республики", *Sovet Muftiev Rossii*, 26 May 2017 available at <https://www.muslim.ru/en/articles/138/18364/>; "Путин: исламский мир всегда будет надежным союзником в лице России", *Novosti*, 27 May 2016, available at <https://ria.ru/politics/20160527/1439892313.html>.

24 "Russian patriarch calls Putin era 'miracle of God'", *Reuters*, 8 February 2012, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-putin-religion-idUKTRE81722Y20120208>.

Soft power instruments

Moscow is painfully deficient in soft power – the capacity to influence through affection and positive example. To Western eyes, soft power does not fit into the context of active measures, but in Russian thinking it is simply one more lever to influence other countries to one's own advantage. It is, moreover, driven by state action, not civil society.²⁵ Often, Russian 'soft power' is confined to national leaders, to whom Putin's image as the model of the decisive modern autocrat appeals.²⁶ In south-east Europe, it can draw on shared religious faith in Bulgaria, Serbia, and the like, but also play up its historical role as defender, not least against the Ottoman Empire. Elsewhere, Russia has a certain cachet, even if often for mythologised and misunderstood reasons, as an obstacle to supposed American hegemony or as a bastion of traditional values. Organisations including *Rossotrudnichestvo*, notionally independent charities, and other structures, work specifically with Russian émigré communities.²⁷

Russian state and state-influenced media

A crucial instrument of Russia's active measures is its media, and its capacity to influence media narratives in target countries. That said, its role is often misunderstood and over-stated, perhaps precisely because it is by definition public, and also because it is easy to assume causation where it might not exist. It is not, after all, as though every Eurosceptic or even NATO-sceptic individual was made that way by Russian propaganda. Nonetheless, disinformation – the spread of often false or distorted news – and a deluge of alternative opinions meant to drown out the realities are undoubtedly central elements of the current political war. In part, this is the realm of foreign-language media such as RT (which broadcasts in English, Arabic, and Spanish) and the Sputnik online news agency (which publishes in 30 languages). However, Russian-language television is widely available outside the country, and there is a plethora of newspapers and sites available online.

Friendly voices

Beyond using media outlets, Moscow also looks for others whom it can use to push its message or conduct political operations. Sometimes, these are politically sympathetic, often not so much because of an informed enthusiasm for all things Russian, so much as out of a sense of shared animosity, whether to the US or liberal values. Others are essentially suborned agents, or acting out of personal self-interest, whether as paid lobbyists or for other direct gain. There are also the so-called 'useful idiots' (after a term

25 "What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>.

26 "Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and the lure of the strongman", *Financial Times*, 16 May 2016, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/1c6ff2ce-1939-11e6-b197-a4af20d5575e>; "Trump, Putin, Xi, and the Return of Kingship", *The Diplomat*, 19 January 2017, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2017/01/trump-putin-xi-and-the-return-of-kingship/>.

27 Orysia Lutsevych, Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood, Chatham House, April 2016, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/agents-russian-world-proxy-groups-contested-neighbourhood>.

ascribed mistakenly to Lenin, who never actually seems to have used it) who may not even realise whose side they are taking. Finally, along with the self-motivated individual internet ‘trolls’ who faithfully redistribute Russian talking points, excoriate Kremlin critics, and generally jam the online discussion sphere with chaff, there are also the much-mythologised but nonetheless real ‘troll farms’ such as the infamous St Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (since relocated and rebranded).²⁸ Here, paid workers spend their shifts faithfully placing online posts and comments according to strict instructions from the management, sometimes advertising commercial products and services, but largely working to promote a political agenda.

Organised crime and other malign non-state actors

Finally, Moscow is especially willing to make use of malign non-state actors such as insurgents, terrorists, extremist paramilitaries and, increasingly, organised crime groups.²⁹ These last may not even know for whom they are working, but are typically Russian-based groups (who can thus be pressurised by the Kremlin) which, like ‘upperworld’ businesses, can occasionally be ‘asked’ to carry out missions large or small, from smuggling someone across a border to an outright murder, to avert Moscow’s ire and perhaps gain some advantage in the future. These assets also include computer hackers. Increasingly, the security agencies are building their own in-house cyber espionage capabilities, but for some time to come Russia will continue to outsource some activities to a motley array of individuals and groups: mercenary computer criminals and individuals working for money or under duress, and ‘patriotic hackers’ inspired by a sense of national pride and duty. They are generally used to provide ‘surge capacity’ in times of major cyber attacks (such as those experienced by Ukraine, Estonia, and Georgia), and also smaller-scale sabotage such as the defacing of websites perceived as ‘Russophobic’ or the persecution of individuals likewise considered hostile.³⁰ Putin’s disingenuous claim that the US electoral hack could have been carried out by “patriotically minded” individuals fighting for a cause “which is right, from their point of view” only swelled the ranks of patriotic hackers in Russia.³¹

28 “The Agency”, the *New York Times*, 2 June 2015 available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>; “One Professional Russian Troll Tells All”, RFE/RL, 25 March 2015 available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/how-to-guide-russian-trolling-trolls/26919999.html>; “Salutin’ Putin: inside a Russian troll house”, the Guardian, 2 April 2016, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/02/putin-kremlin-inside-russian-troll-house>.

29 See “Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia’s criminal networks in Europe”.

30 See, for example, the activities of “CyberBerkut” attacking journalists such as Bellingcat’s Eliot Higgins involved in trying to identify the real perpetrators of the Malaysian Airlines MH17 shoot-down over Donbas; “Meet CyberBerkut, The Pro-Russian Hackers Waging Anonymous-Style Cyberwarfare Against Ukraine”, *International Business Times*, 17 December 2015, available at <http://www.ibtimes.com/meet-cyberberkut-pro-russian-hackers-waging-anonymous-style-cyberwarfare-against-2228902>.

31 “Maybe Private Russian Hackers Meddled in Election, Putin Says”, the *New York Times*, 1 June 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/world/europe/vladimir-putin-donald-trump-hacking.html>.

Different targets, different goals

There are common themes to Russian propaganda, largely relating to the alleged iniquity of the US, the need for cooperation with Russia against terrorism, and the moral equivalence of Moscow and the West. There is also an overarching hope of kicking up a sufficient dust cloud of rumour, speculation, half-truth, conspiracy, and outright lie, to obscure the realities of Russian activities in Ukraine, Syria, and at home, and leave people feeling that it is impossible to know the objective truth. The next best thing to being able to convince people of your argument, after all, is to make them disbelieve all arguments.


There is also considerable variation in the techniques and messages. In part, this reflects a desire to keep the messages fresh and foil routines intended to identify or block Russian gambits, and in part the considerable autonomy of the agents involved. However, the nature of active measures activities is also a product of geography and culture, of the way that different regions and countries of Europe offer different points of vulnerability and are susceptible to particular approaches. There are clear differences between the approaches taken by Russian agents in various European countries. Figure 1 provides a broad characterisation of how the aims reflect the interaction between states’ institutional strengths and their levels of vulnerability to Russian active measures, based on everything from economic dependency to shared culture and histories.

Russia’s broad objective for countries which have strong cultural and historical affinities with it (perhaps as well as considerable economic penetration, yet with moderate institutional strength) appears to be **social capture**: winning hearts and minds, or at least a degree of sympathy. In Slovakia, for example, Moscow appears to be mounting a two-pronged campaign. On the one hand, it is seeking to build bridges with the prime minister, Robert Fico, who has connections with Russia (he was even present in Moscow at a United Russia bloc rally in 2011 on the night Putin announced his plan to reassume the presidency). However, since the 2016 general election Fico has also allied again with the more overtly Russia-friendly right-wing Slovak National Party. That said, he continues to seek to toe the line with Brussels.³² So at the same time, Moscow is seeking to build closer alliances with the far-right in Slovakia, exploiting moral panic about migrants and refugees, and seeking to build media alliances which will allow Russian news – and disinformation – easier and wider access into the country’s information sphere.³³ As a result, although the scale is open to question, opinion polls have shown a distinct rise in Eurosceptic, anti-American, and pro-Russian views. This creates a political environment

32 Gustav Gressel, “Fellow travellers: Russia, anti-Westernism, and Europe’s political parties”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 July 2017, available at <http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/fellow-travellers-russia-anti-westernism-and-europes-political-parties-7213>.

33 “The Real Russian Threat to Central Eastern Europe”, *Foreign Policy*, 30 March 2017, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/30/the-real-russian-threat-to-central-eastern-europe-2/>; “Central Europe under the Fire of Propaganda”, GLOBSEC report, September 2016, available at http://www.cepolicy.org/sites/cepolicy.org/files/attachments/glb_trends_en.pdf (hereafter, “Central Europe under the Fire of Propaganda”).

State vulnerability to Russian 'active measures'



		LEVEL OF AFFINITY OR VULNERABILITY		
		HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTH	HIGH	None	DISRUPT Examples: France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden	EXPLOIT Example: United Kingdom
	MEDIUM	SOCIAL CAPTURE Example: Slovakia	INFLUENCE Examples: Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania	DEMONISE Examples: Estonia, Poland
	LOW	STATE CAPTURE Examples: Bulgaria, Greece	TARGET STATE Examples: Hungary, Montenegro, Romania	None

Notes: Institutional strength is based on the Fund For Peace Fragile States Index; the Level of affinity or vulnerability is based on Pew polling data on perceptions of Russia, modified for levels of economic dependence or penetration.

that, in the future, may constrain any government that seeks to take a tougher line on Moscow.³⁴

Where institutions are weaker, Russia may even seek **state capture**, such as in Bulgaria where the ambition – even if strongly resisted by many within the country – appears to be to establish powerful networks of allies and clients inside the country, while leaving Bulgaria inside NATO and the EU, precisely to be a ‘Trojan horse’. Although it is probably premature and unfair to claim that Bulgaria is already “at an advanced stage of state capture”, it is nonetheless striking how far political, cultural, and economic interests are often aligned,³⁵ with Russian oil company Lukoil and its various local subsidiaries the largest corporation and taxpayer in the country.³⁶ Especially telling is the way that Bulgarian outlets generate and distribute pro-Russian stories not because of pressure or promises from Moscow, but because there is a ready local market for them. This provides traction on the political process, suggesting a certain vicious circle is now spinning in Bulgaria, independent of Russian actions.³⁷

³⁴ “Central Europe under the Fire of Propaganda”.

³⁵ Heather A Conley et al, *The Kremlin Playbook*, CSIS, 2016, p. 4. (hereafter “The Kremlin Playbook”). For a useful counterpoint, see “Bulgaria: how not to mistake Russian propaganda for Russian policy,” openDemocracy: Russia, 30 November 2016, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/tom-junes/bulgaria-how-not-to-mistake-russian-propaganda-for-russian-policy>.

³⁶ “The Kremlin Playbook”.

³⁷ “Made in Bulgaria: Pro-Russian Propaganda”, *Coda Story*, 9 May 2017, available at <https://codastory.com/disinformation-crisis/foreign-proxies/made-in-bulgaria-pro-russian-propaganda>.

However, most European countries have no more than moderate affiliation with and exposure to Russia, and this is often based on purely pragmatic issues such as energy supply or a negative connection deriving from anti-US or anti-EU sentiment, or simply a reluctance to consider Russia to be a threat. Where institutions are strong, the best Moscow really can hope for is **disruption**, encouraging internal divisions and uncertainties in the hope of rendering the nation in question incapable of playing a strong role. A study of the messages being transmitted to the Swedish population via the Russian media, for example, found the overwhelming majority related to presenting the West as hypocritical, hostile, and in crisis.³⁸ Likewise, when apparently Russian hackers took control of France’s TV5 television channel in April 2015, they played, not Moscow’s propaganda, but jihadist messages supposedly from the Islamic State’s “CyberCaliphate”. The goal was to cause alarm, to play to the nationalist right, and to turn national attention towards the Middle East.³⁹ The aim of such operations, after all, is essentially to question the country’s support for Western policies and institutions, as far as possible by playing to traditional values, rather than

³⁸ The specific distribution of messages was: ‘Crisis in the West’ (705 articles), ‘Positive image of Russia’ (643), ‘Western aggressiveness’ (499), ‘Negative image of countries perceived to be in the West’s sphere of influence’ (424), ‘West is malicious’ (309), ‘International sympathy and cooperation with Russia’ (304), ‘Western policy failures’ (112), and ‘Divisions within the Western alliance’ (72). In other words, 2,121 anti-West to 947 pro-Russia messages. Martin Kragh & Sebastian Åsberg, “Russia’s strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2017.

³⁹ “How France’s TV5 was almost destroyed by ‘Russian hackers’”, *BBC*, 10 October 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-37590375>.

trying to replace those views with any coherent alternative. If anything, attempts to go beyond the negative and play a more active role in such countries tend to backfire, such as in France where clumsy hacking and an infamous loan to Marine Le Pen's *Front National* if anything drove Emmanuel Macron to a more hostile position.

Where institutions are of only moderate strength, Russia can hope to acquire a degree of **influence**, at least through specific individuals and minority parties. These connections can help Russia do things such as potentially exert leverage in the future. While the Czech government remains a steadfast supporter of NATO and the sanctions regime, for instance, President Miloš Zeman's outspoken criticisms of NATO and the EU are gleefully repeated in Moscow's propaganda campaigns throughout central Europe. Likewise, the pressure to resume Italy's long-standing good relations with Moscow continue to grow, and, although again there is no question of Rome's commitment to the EU and NATO weakening, the political cost of remaining firm on issues such as economic sanctions is considerable.⁴⁰

In countries where institutional safeguards are weak, then Moscow will **target the state**, not in the expectation of being able to capture it, but to seek to influence it on specific issues – such as sanctions – and to work on nudging it into a more favourable position. Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, for example, is no ally of Moscow's in the grand scheme of things, but the Russians are deeply appreciative of his disruptive role within the EU and seek to encourage that.⁴¹ Russian active measures in Hungary push an anti-American and, especially, anti-EU narrative that works with the grain of the government's own propaganda, as well as a social conservatism that chimes with Orbán's positions.⁴²

As a country with low affinity or vulnerabilities, the United Kingdom, while institutionally strong, appears not to be especially concerned about the Russian challenge, precisely for that reason. As a result, Russia hopes simply to **exploit** it. Despite a growing movement to address the City of London's position as one of the world's piggy banks for kleptocrats of every stripe, the UK remains a tempting hub and depository for Russian funds. The economic dislocations of Brexit may only deepen the temptation for the British authorities to turn a blind eye to questionable transactions.⁴³ This both secures Putin's position at home,

40 "A marriage of convenience? The future of Italy–Russia relations", European Council on Foreign Relations, 15 July 2016, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a-marriage-of-convenience-the-future-of-italy-russia-relations.

41 It is noteworthy, after all, how far Hungary's laws on NGOs echo Russia's 'foreign agent' laws, as well as the broader echoes in claims by government figures such as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó that Washington has sought to destabilise the Orbán regime. "Orbán: Foreign attempts at influence are 'real and constant' and come from multiple directions", *Budapest Beacon*, 21 March 2017, available at <http://budapestbeacon.com/featured-articles/orban-foreign-attempts-influence-real-constant-come-multiple-directions/45227>.

42 Many thanks to Mira Boneva for this and other observations.

43 "Police to examine 'Global Laundromat' money laundering allegations", the *Guardian*, 21 March 2017, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/21/police-to-examine-global-laundromat-money-laundering-allegations>; "Death of a Londoner", *The Economist*, 30 January 2016, available at <https://www.economist.com/news/britain/21689583-appeasing-russias-kleptocrats-harms-both-britains-moral-integrity-and-its-hard-nosed>.

providing safety valves for wealthy officials who might otherwise chafe at his confrontational policies if truly locked out of the global financial system, and also buys Moscow influence in the UK and elsewhere, too. One British official morosely anticipated that, in practice, "London will become even more obviously a hub for dubious regimes around the world, led by the Russians, not least thanks to all the financiers, lawyers, estate agents, and other guys who benefit."⁴⁴ This is a perfect example of the power of 'friendly voices' and business lobbies who may well have no ideological or cultural affinity with Moscow, yet are motivated to act in ways that work to the advantage of the Kremlin out of simple self-interest.

However, those countries characterised by intractable hostility, notably Estonia and Poland, are clearly not likely to be won over. As a result, Moscow seeks to **demonise** them, to exploit them as a negative example to others, whether by presenting them as unthinkingly paranoid Russophobes or, where possible, by targeting them as convenient warnings. The covert and overt onslaught on Estonia, from the 2007 cyber attacks, through the 2014 kidnap of security officer Eston Kohver, to the continued threats embodied in Russian military exercises, all demonstrate the way that Tallinn is targeted not simply because of its location, nor simply because of Putin's own apparent animus, but also as a proxy for all of the West. The thinking, according to one MID insider, is that "we can hardly make the Estonians hate us more, so we have nothing to lose."⁴⁵ Likewise, in Poland one of Moscow's key aims is to stir up extreme nationalist elements – even if, ironically enough, these are also anti-Russian – to widen divisions with Washington and Brussels and make the country appear unreliable and extreme in the eyes of its allies.⁴⁶

Is there a coordinator?

Different approaches, different narratives, each of which plays to different strengths and brings to the fore different agencies: how far does this complex and multi-vectored challenge reflect a command-and-control system of equally extraordinarily capability?

On the whole it does not. Russia's is a broad-based campaign in which the majority of ventures come from the initiative of individuals within and without the government apparatus, guided by their sense of the Kremlin's desires rather than any detailed master plan. What emerges from all kinds of different sources, open and closed, is that Putin himself tends not to be an originator; he would much rather arbitrate between rival approaches, pick from a menu of options, or give people enough rope to hang or lift themselves. As one former Presidential Administration staffer put it, "we would push plans and options up, and eventually get some kind of response back. But it was rare that we'd actually get tasked from the boss [Putin] out of nowhere. I say 'rare': I can't actually

44 Conversation in London, May 2017.

45 Conversation in Moscow, March 2016.

46 Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, "Winning the Information War", CEPA, 2016, pp. 30–32, available at <http://cepa.org/reports/winning-the-information-war>.

think of a time when that happened.”⁴⁷

Instead, the Kremlin has adopted an innovative and parsimonious approach that, in effect, mobilises the ambitions and imaginations of sundry actors and agencies. It sets broad objectives and aspirations: to assert Russia’s claim to ‘great power’ status; to consolidate dominance over its self-proclaimed sphere of influence; to weaken and distract the West such that it cannot offer any meaningful counters to Russian actions; to undermine hostile governments; and to shatter inconvenient structures such as NATO and the EU. The detail is left deliberately open, so individuals and agencies scramble to identify how they can use the instruments and opportunities at their disposal in ways they hope will further these ends and please the Kremlin.

Sometimes, these actors and initiatives will stumble and fall, and the Kremlin can deny any role, or distance itself. Outspoken ‘Eurasianist’ Russian nationalist Alexander Dugin has, for example, sometimes been elevated to a virtual ideological spokesman of the state, then excluded when convenient. He is a key exponent of the *Russky mir*, a ‘Russian world’ asserting a role wherever Russians were to be found. This argument was used in 2014 to rationalise support for the manufactured rebellion in Donbas, and as outreach to ethnic Russians in the Baltic states. However, since 2014 the language of the *Russky mir* and Dugin’s own position within Moscow’s narratives have declined markedly.⁴⁸ Despite heated claims about his influence in US alt-right circles and Moscow alike, Dugin’s neo-fascist rhetoric was, around late 2015 or early 2016 deemed counter-productive, and so he was, for the moment, put on the shelf.⁴⁹

At other times, if actors and initiatives show promise, the Kremlin will throw its weight behind them. One of the ways it does this is through Dmitry Kiselev’s programme, *Vesti Nedeli*, which has become an implicit source of guidance on the official line – at least for any given week. This underlines the extent to which even this diffuse, initiative-driven system requires certain mechanisms to work. Actors carefully scrutinise Putin’s own public pronouncements for clues as to his goals. They seek guidance from key government-controlled sources such as the newspaper *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, as well as those stars of the moment deemed to speak with their master’s voice. Then there are more explicit forms of guidance. Presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov meets the editors of the main government media platforms in the Kremlin each Friday to outline the expected – demanded – lines and topics for the

week ahead.⁵⁰ These are supplemented by written secret guidance memoranda known as *temniki*. Likewise, specific tasking is given to other agencies. The ‘troll farms’ receive daily and weekly targets and talking points. Telegrams from MID guide the activities of Russia’s embassies abroad.

Some operations clearly require approval from the Kremlin. In some cases it is when some initiative from below is chosen to receive greater attention, and in others because the move has been launched from above. For example, in 2016, Finland faced a coordinated Kremlin campaign to ensure its politicians would block any NATO membership bid. The tempo of hostile trolling and disinformation picked up strikingly, with the addition of claims that Lenin had not had the right to grant Finland independence from the Russian Empire in 1917.⁵¹ Putin himself broadly hinted at retaliation if Helsinki made such moves, including new troop deployments on the Russo-Finnish border.⁵² As if to illustrate the point, later in the year, literally hours after Helsinki signed a limited defence cooperation pact with the US, Russian warplanes made suspected incursions into Finnish airspace.⁵³ This was clearly not random, but a deliberate, multi-vector campaign of intimidation.

It is hard to determine any hard and fast rule, but it appears that any activities requiring cross-agency coordination will need some kind of approval from above. Whether it makes it all the way to Putin’s desk depends on the scale of the operation and potential risk. According to a Bulgarian intelligence officer, for example, Konstantin Malofeev, very active on both economic acquisitions and political networking in the Balkans since 2014, originated the idea to attempt a coup in Montenegro in 2016.⁵⁴ But this ultimately was too big for him to be allowed to be in charge, and Security Council chief Nikolai Patrushev – with Putin’s approval – took it over.⁵⁵ Activities which will clearly have some major political or economic fallout, such as the American DNC leaks (though not necessarily the cyber espionage operations which preceded them), and the 2006 Litvinenko murder in London, would, at the very least, require approval to go ahead, whether from Putin for truly important ones, or otherwise from some other figure in his circle with that authority.⁵⁶

50 Described by a former insider in “Confessions of a (Former) State TV Reporter”, *Coda Story*, 25 April 2017 available at <https://codastory.com/disinformation-crisis/information-war/confessions-of-a-former-state-tv-reporter>, and corroborated by a number of informal conversations with other journalists.

51 “Finland sees propaganda attack from former master Russia”, *Reuters*, 19 October 2016, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-finland-russia-informationattacks-idUSKCN12J197>.

52 “Putin: Russia to respond if Finland joins NATO”, *RT*, 1 July 2016, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/349185-putin-nato-dialogue-start>.

53 “Finland jets monitor Russian fighters on border flights”, *BBC*, 7 October 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37584058>.

54 For useful background on this, see “Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang”, *Bellingcat*, 25 March 2017, available at <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/>.

55 Conversation in Sofia, March 2017.

56 This was confirmed by a former Presidential Administration staffer, a former intelligence officer, and also several Western government officials working on Russia.

47 Conversation in Moscow, January 2014.

48 A study of the best-known politologs, the politically oriented talking heads in the Russian media, found that in 2016, Dugin had fallen from 22nd in 2015 to 39th. See the results at <http://www.regcomment.ru/investigations/rejting-rossijskikh-politologov-po-upominaemosti-v-smi-v-2016-godu/> and <http://www.regcomment.ru/investigations/rejting-rossijskikh-politologov-po-upominaemosti-v-smi-v-2015-godu/>.

49 “Putin’s ‘Mad Philosopher’ Is Out of a Job”, *War is Boring*, 29 June 2014, available at <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/putins-mad-philosopher-sacked-from-top-post-38c6d14b3a2>.

The Presidential Administration: The hidden controller

On a strategic level, Putin sets the tone. On a tactical level, a series of methods for exerting control exist, typically within specific sectors. But what of the all-important operational level that connects the two, that provides whatever command and control exists within this diffuse campaign?

Peskov – despite his bizarre role in the so-called “Steele Dossier” as the reputed coordinator of a grand Kremlin political operation to suborn and elect Donald Trump – lacks the time, experience, or authority to work outside the realm of the media.⁵⁷ None of the ministries has the power to tell the others what to do; MID, which would appear to be the closest fit, has actually seen its power eroding steadily.⁵⁸

Even foreign service insiders glumly acknowledge that “we are often called on to support other ministries, not the other way round” and that “Lavrov no longer has the kind of personal authority he once had.”⁵⁹ Although, as Orysia Lutsevych has noted, the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept for the first time explicitly gave MID a mandate “to engage the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation and other NGOs to promote ‘interstate cultural and humanitarian relations between Slavic peoples’,” this is a relatively narrow level of control.⁶⁰ (Furthermore, MID is only one of the voices *Rosstrudnichestvo* heeds, and that body also has a key role relating to NGOs and government-organised non-governmental organisations abroad.)

The intelligence agencies exist largely in a state of competition with one another, rather than in any coordinating role. Although this is unconfirmed, it appears from multiple conversations in Moscow and elsewhere that the infamous hack-and-leak operation against the Hillary Clinton campaign used information gathered by the GRU – but which the FSB convinced the leadership ought to be leaked to undermine her electoral chances. Yet Putin is unwilling to grant the FSB the kind of overarching authority that it would need to be able to direct its rivals without getting his mandate.

The Security Council is the state structure tasked with coordinating all security-related issues – which the active measures campaign could be considered – and it is a forum for the promulgation of instructions from above and the resolution of jurisdictional disputes. Its secretary, Patrushev, is an FSB veteran close to Putin, and as such a trusted fixer and spook-watcher. One could therefore regard it as the possible command-and-control nexus for the active measures campaign. However, the Security

Council secretariat is far too small for such a role. Its total strength is unclear, but it had 200 staff on Putin’s accession to power in 2000, and, while this is likely to have grown to an extent, it has not expanded beyond its existing offices on Ipatevsky Alley. As well as supporting the regular meetings of the Security Council, the secretariat is also charged with providing it with analytic support, drafting documents including periodic revision of the National Security Strategy, and also monitoring the implementation of presidential instructions. One government insider threw up his hands at the suggestion that the Security Council played a major role in the formulation of active measures strategy: “Sure, just add it to everything else they do. Seriously, these guys have more than enough on.”⁶¹

Furthermore, Patrushev is himself a player, not a referee. In particular, he increasingly appears to be emerging as the Kremlin’s point man on the Balkans, especially since 2016, as the Russians begin to take the region more seriously.⁶² After the failed Montenegro coup, it was Patrushev who hurriedly travelled to Belgrade to assuage local anger at an operation being launched from Serbian soil and also to arrange the quiet return to Moscow of three Russian intelligence officers to avoid a public scandal.⁶³

Instead, insofar as there is a command-and-control centre, it appears to be the Presidential Administration. This is a much larger organisation than the Security Council, with almost 2,000 staffers, as well as the capacity to task various government and even outside bodies with analytic and other responsibilities.⁶⁴ More to the point, it has emerged as Putin’s main agency for political control. The Cabinet of Ministers administers presidential policy. But it is the Presidential Administration that helps the president formulate that policy, communicates it to the executive agencies, and monitors performance. It also houses figures who, like Peskov, have a close relationship with the president, including Vladislav Surkov (the political technologist widely assumed now to be managing strategy in Ukraine under the anodyne title of “assistant to the president”) and Yuri Ushakov, Putin’s main foreign policy adviser.

The Presidential Administration is a powerful and complex agency under the presidential chief of staff, whose influence extends far beyond that envisaged in the law which frame it, for the very reason that it dominates access to the president and is the main conduit for his decisions. As such, it speaks with the authority of the Kremlin. Crucially, it also appears to be the institution through which requests for approval for major active measures operations appear to be routed, with a few exceptions largely relating to

61 Conversation in Moscow, April 2017.

62 “Vladimir Putin’s man in the Balkans”, *Politico*, 21 June 2017, available at <http://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-balkans-point-man-nikolai-patrushev/>.

63 “Совбезными усилиями”, *Kommersant*, 28 October 2016 available at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3127392>; “Serbia released Shishmakov at Patrushev’s urging”, *CdM*, 31 March 2018 available at <https://www.cdm.me/english/serbia-released-shishmakov-patrushevs-urging/>.

64 Its official establishment strength is just under 1,600, but this excludes staff seconded to the Presidential Administration from other agencies, including the intelligence and security services. This also excludes many of the support staff, such as the guards provided by the Federal Protection Service.

57 The first of the various reports comprising the dossier stated that the file on Trump was “controlled by Kremlin spokesman PESKOV, directly on PUTIN’s orders.” See the full dossier, available at <https://www.buzzfeed.com/kenbensinger/these-reports-allege-trump-has-deep-ties-to-russia>.

58 “Free Sergei Lavrov!”, *Foreign Policy*, 17 February 2016 available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/17/free-sergei-lavrov-putin-russia-syria/>.

59 Conversation with foreign service officer, Moscow, January 2016; conversation with retired diplomat, Moscow, April 2017.

60 “Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood”, Chatham House Research Paper, April 2016.

personal relationships with the president. As described earlier, the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016, for example, appears to have been enthusiastically overseen by Patrushev, who took it personally to Putin – crucially, not before informing the Presidential Administration, which still had a chance to weigh in on the decision.⁶⁵

Until August 2016, the Presidential Administration was headed by Sergei Ivanov, a heavy-hitting veteran of the KGB and FSB, with a powerful reputation in the security and executive communities. His successor, Anton Vaino, is a rather less powerful figure, so far at least, but in common with many of the key figures within the Presidential Administration, he is a foreign service MID veteran (and part of the ‘MGIMO mafia’ of alumni of MID’s own university). Although Vaino has both the MID background and was born in Estonia, the consensus among both Western Kremlin-watchers and Russian insiders and near-insiders seems to be that he is focused on domestic policy and management issues, working with first deputy chief of staff Sergei Kirienko.

Foreign affairs are instead part of the portfolio of the other first deputy chief of staff, Alexei Gromov. Another MID veteran, it is noteworthy that Gromov is under both EU and US sanctions for his role in the 2014 annexation of Crimea – while his superior at the time, Ivanov, is only under EU sanction. It is also indicative that Gromov (a patron of Margarita Simonyan, head of RT)⁶⁶ appears to be responsible for media affairs, even though Kirienko is the point man for domestic politics.⁶⁷ Gromov may therefore be coordinating, and possibly even commanding, the active measures campaign, given that it brings together foreign policy, media, and other instruments.

To this end, he and the other key players (including Ushakov and Surkov) draw on key elements of the Presidential Administration of relevance to the active measures campaign, notably:

• **The Foreign Politics Department (UPVneshP)**, headed by MID veteran Alexander Manzhosin. He has been especially connected with attempts to undermine the sanctions regime, notably by engaging Western lobbyists and seeking to encourage foreign businesspeople to campaign against them in their own countries.⁶⁸ This department is also a primary consumer of intelligence materials, and thus also a key tasking body for the services, even if only relatively few staffers have an intelligence background.

65 Patrushev’s role was asserted by a Bulgarian intelligence officer in a conversation in Sofia in March 2017 and confirmed by a Russian intelligence veteran in Moscow, April 2017, who added the detail about how this was brought to Putin.

66 This is, ironically, something asserted both by the US intelligence community and Simonyan herself; see the “ODNI Statement on Declassified Intelligence Community Assessment of Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections”, 6 January 2017, available at <https://icontherecord.tumblr.com/post/155494946443/odni-statement-on-declassified-intelligence>; and Simonyan’s light-hearted response at <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201701071049356450-sputnik-simonyan-report/>.

67 “Кириенко и Громов поделили сферы кураторства СМИ”, *RBK*, 22 November 2016, available at <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/22/11/2016/58341c319a79471ca4220674>.

68 “Операция ‘Внедрение’”, *Ura*, 21 January 2015, available at <https://ura.news/articles/1036263881>.

• **The Department for Interregional Relations and Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries (UPMKSZS)** has a particular role in managing soft power operations, including *Rossotrudnichestvo*’s work courting the Russian diaspora (even though the agency is technically subordinated directly to MID). Its head, Vladimir Chernov, is a specialist in international economic affairs, but was also Ivanov’s head of secretariat and has been described as “well able to work in an intelligence-heavy and conspiratorial environment.”⁶⁹

• **The Department on Social and Economic Cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia (UPSESG)** is by definition involved in political operations within the so-called ‘Near Abroad’ of the post-Soviet states, and it is unlikely to be a coincidence that its head, Oleg Govorun, is known to be a close ally of Surkov’s.⁷⁰

• **The Domestic Politics Department (UPVnuP)** may seem an unlikely inclusion, but it handles parliamentary and party-to-party contacts with European politicians and parties, placing it very much at the forefront of attempts to suborn some and support others. It was, for example, the deputy head of this department, Timur Prokopenko, who arranged for Marine Le Pen’s *Front National* to receive loans from Russian banks, and then – via Russian politician, wealthy media producer, and French tax resident Konstantin Rykov – pressed her to endorse the Crimean referendum.⁷¹

• **The Press and Information Directorate (UPSIP)**, headed by Alexander Smirnov but very much under Peskov’s sway, is the main nexus for control of the media and the issuance of regular talking points and *temniki* guidance memos. It also seems likely that contracts with the ‘troll farms’ and their instructions come directly or indirectly from UPSIP.⁷²

• **The Experts’ Directorate (EUP)**, under former deputy minister for economic development Vladimir Simonenko, not only conducts its own analytic work, it acts as a point of contact for a wide range of scholars, think-tanks, and the like that, in turn, can sometimes be more than simply sources of information. One of the think-tanks from which it regularly commissions

69 Well-connected Russian scholar, in conversation in Prague, November 2016.

70 “В Кремль вернулся опытный кремлевец”, *Kommersant*, 12 October 2013, available at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2318925>.

71 “Financement du FN: des hackers russes dévoilent des échanges au Kremlin”, *Le Monde*, 2 April 2015, available at http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/04/02/fn-des-hackers-russes-devoilent-des-echanges-au-kremlin_4608660_4355770.html.

72 This was suggested by both a Russian journalist who had looked at the St Petersburg operation, who was pretty bullish about the Presidential Administration’s role, and also a former Presidential Administration staffer, who was more tentative, but came from a different department. Conversations, Moscow, January 2016 and May 2016, respectively.

Who influences whom in Russia's bureaucracy

Influence on	Pres. Admin lead	UPVneshP (Foreign policy)	UPVnuP (Domestic policy)	UPMKSZS (Cultural contacts)	UPSESG (CIS)	UPSIP (Press)	EUP (Experts)
Foreign Ministry		✓		✓	✓		
Rossotrudnichestvo		✓		✓	✓		
Security Council	✓						
Ministry of Defence	✓						
Faith community			✓	✓			
Diplomatic activity	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Soft power		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Media						✓	
'Friendly voices'							✓
Expert community							✓
Putin's words						✓	
Business lobbies		✓	✓				

Notes: This table simply notes primary responsibilities; in practice there is considerable overlap, and the Presidential Administration leadership may well involve itself in any areas it deems appropriate.

reports is the aforementioned RISI, once part of the SVR and now notionally independent, although still closely connected to the spooks. RISI is not just an analytic centre (of especially hawkish character and debatable impact), though.⁷³ It has also played a more active role in lobbying and cultivating clients in the Balkans and Scandinavia. In Finland, for example, RISI's official representative is the scholar and pro-Russian activist Johan Bäckman who has been an outspoken supporter of the Donbas rebels.

• **Presidential Councils.** Notionally independent,

these advisory bodies are housed within and serviced by the Presidential Administration, and a number play a significant role in active measures. The Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, for example, disburses grants which have in the past gone to a number of Russian soft power and lobbying front organisations abroad, as has the Presidential Council on the Russian Language (which supports friendly émigré groups under the cloak of assisting language education and cultural programmes). The Presidential Council for Coordination with Religious Organisations plays a crucial role in liaising with the Russian Orthodox Church and other state-affiliated faith bodies. The Presidential Council for Cossack Affairs plays a central role in not only mobilising

⁷³ For rival assessments of its importance, see "Putin-linked think tank drew up plan to sway 2016 US election – documents", *Reuters*, 19 April 2017, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-election-exclusive-idUSKBN17L2N3>; "Where Old Spooks Are Sent to Retire: Russia's Institute of Strategic Studies", *Moscow Times*, 20 April 2017, available at <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/where-old-spooks-are-sent-to-die-russias-institute-of-strategic-studies-57775>.

Cossacks for domestic political purposes, but also encouraging pro-Kremlin Cossack groups abroad, such as the hundred Cossacks who turned up in Republika Srpska as a visible demonstration of Moscow's support for local nationalists in 2014.⁷⁴

The Presidential Administration is the single most central institution in modern Russia, cocooning the president, curating his information flows, and communicating his wishes. But it also has a unique breadth of responsibilities and unusual level of coherence. A number of interlocutors have suggested that a combination of an organisational esprit de corps and a keen awareness of the privilege of their position (and by extension the desire not to lose it) tends to mean that these are far less cannibalistic than is often the case within Russian officialdom.

The Presidential Administration is a secretive structure, and even former staffers are often reluctant to discuss the detail of its work. A very tentative assessment is that – when active measures operations move beyond the level of local and agency initiative – it is the primary locus of coordination. Some actions are managed at the Security Council level when they fall squarely within its remit. Others are driven by direct instruction from Putin, or his personal entourage, or are managed through other institutions. The general instrumentalisation of both business and the Russian Orthodox Church, for example, do not appear usually to be handled through the Presidential Administration, although there are regular contacts between certain oligarchs and lesser 'minigarchs' such as Malofeev and the Presidential Administration leadership. The result is a messy structure belying any suggestion that Putin's Russia is ruled through a tight, almost military hierarchy.

When looking for a single command-and-control hub directing Russia's destabilising steps across Europe, it is striking that there appears to be no regularised structure, standard task forces, or committees taking overall charge. Instead, individuals and departments within the Presidential Administration act as 'curators' – a very Russian usage, meaning a political handler and manager – for various other agencies, groups and activities. Sometimes, they acquire this role because of their function – UPVP takes the lead with the foreign ministry, for example, and UPSIP with the media – but the individuals concerned often acquire these functions because of their past experience, or simply because, having had to play a curator's role in one case, they become invested in that role. One former staffer recounted how he had become UPVneshP's informal 'go-to' curator for operations in a Mediterranean EU country simply because he spoke and read the local language, and no one else seemed more suited.⁷⁵ He recalled that "it was surreal" when "special services and newspaper editors would ask me if it was OK to do or say something" when "I was basically an administrative specialist." Lest this

⁷⁴ "Ruski 'umjetnici' učestvovali u pripremama demonstracija na Krimu?", Klix, 3 October 2014, available at <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/ruski-umjetnici-ucestvovali-u-pripremama-demonstracija-na-krimu/141003068#2>.

⁷⁵ Conversation in Moscow, April 2017. In order to protect the source's identity, the country in question cannot be named.

sound too amateurish, though, he did acknowledge that he received considerable support and guidance from his line manager, who understood the situation, as this was by no means unique.

In some cases, the Presidential Administration is able essentially to dictate the official line, such as to the state-controlled media or, increasingly, to MID. In other cases, the relationship is more delicate. Dealing with the intelligence services, for example, appears to be something done not by Presidential Administration departments, but by personal aides to key leadership figures such as Gromov. As one SVR veteran put it, "at an operational level, we never dealt with them, nor did we get any instructions from them. That was something negotiated high above our heads, in the *banya* [bathhouse] or over drinks."⁷⁶ However, given the concentration of power in the Presidential Administration, its capacity to task both gathering operations and analyses from the intelligence community also reflects a powerful, indirect way of communicating, if not instructions, at least guidance as to the lines of action likely to be smiled upon. Likewise, inside the Presidential Administration the Ministry of Defence and General Staff are considered formally beyond being browbeaten by departments, but are instead handled at the Presidential Administration's managerial level.

Conclusion

Russia's active measures campaign is characterised by bottom-up initiatives from a variety of actors, but one which is also driven by the broad guidance and encouragement of the Kremlin, and the hope of political and economic rewards if successful. Many of these initiatives come to nothing, or are simply part of the diffuse, low-level 'static' with which the Russians are trying to jam Western public and political discourse. They may be counter-productive or even derive from misunderstandings of the Kremlin's interests – although, even then, they will typically at least have a secondary benefit of cluttering and confusing the information space.

Moscow's role is threefold:

- **It is an inspiration** for myriad bottom-up initiatives.
- **It is a curator for initiatives**, too, killing off some that appear dangerous or inconvenient, but more often encouraging and even taking over those which seem promising.
- **It is the initiator** for certain operations that address specific immediate or strategic needs.

To this end, it adopts not just a whole-of-government, but whole-of-state, approach which sees every aspect of Russian society as having a duty to participate, and which

⁷⁶ Conversation in Moscow, February 2014.

is happy to exert managerial oversight through more than conventional government channels. These range from quiet words to independent businesses and businesspeople (who nonetheless may depend on state contracts or simply want to avoid adverse pressure) through to engaging criminal organisations. This reflects the way Russia now has a hyper-presidential, largely de-institutionalised political system. It is essentially an ‘adhocracy’, in which the true elite is defined by service to the needs of the Kremlin rather than any specific institutional or social identity. They may be spies, or diplomats, journalists, politicians, or millionaires; essentially they are all ‘political entrepreneurs’ who both seek to serve the Kremlin or are required to do so, often regardless of their formal role.⁷⁷

This personal, transactional relationship to the state – or rather Putin, and his court – is managed through a variety of organs, of which the Presidential Administration is undoubtedly the most important. There are, however, many others, from the Security Council to key institutions such as the ministries of defence and foreign affairs and the security agencies that retain a certain degree of autonomy, at least over their own apparatus.

Recommendations

Europe faces three broad challenges in responding to this diffuse active measures campaign. It should do so in the following ways.

1. Comprehend the challenge: Understanding how the Kremlin’s ‘controlled chaos’ works is hard, not least because the Russians themselves are not working to any set doctrine or playbook, but rather improvising and seizing opportunities. Nonetheless, central to crafting any kind of holistic and meaningful national or Europe-wide response is to comprehend better how it works.

1.1 Find the middle way. One of the greatest analytic challenges is precisely to appreciate which activities are local or departmental initiatives and which are being coordinated by the centre. Indeed, the former may become the latter, if they seem promising or catch the eye of someone at the top. To this end, a delicate balance needs to be maintained between regarding everything as part of some master plan of fiendish complexity and, conversely, assuming that nothing is meaningful. This requires not only effective intelligence on the ground (see recommendations 1.3 and 2.2), but also considerable and serious analytic capacity, whether within government structures or from outside. The analysis must drive policy, rather than the other way round.

1.2 Watch the Presidential Administration.

The coordinating role of the Presidential Administration is complex and still imperfectly understood. Observing the Presidential Administration ought to become something of a priority for open source analysis and more recondite methods alike, both better to grasp how it operates and also to be able to predict their approaches, through identifying the interests and contacts of its key figures. Again, this demands considerable investment in analytic capacity. Countries such as the UK, Germany, France, Poland, Estonia, Sweden, and Finland, which have strengths in Russia-watching, need to drive the effort. They should also be willing to share their findings with European partners lacking the same strengths.

1.3 Identify ‘curators’ and their methods and interests.

As an extension of the above, it is clear that certain figures have particular roles within the active measures campaigns, whether officials such as Surkov, Patrushev, and Peskov, or semi-autonomous actors including Malofeev and Kiselev. It is worth focusing less on formal power figures (who are often largely place-holders and managers) and more on these ‘adherents’, both to track and perhaps to pressurise them. As with watching the Presidential Administration, this kind of political intelligence may well fit within the remit and capabilities of the European External Action Service’s Intelligence Centre (INTCEN), providing it with a useful role within the wider European campaign. Furthermore, given that specific curators often have particular geographic areas of interest and contacts, this is not only a challenge which demands cross-border cooperation, it is also one in which smaller countries or those with less ambitious security services nonetheless may be able to contribute to the collective European understanding, because of their home-country advantage.

2. Containing chaos: Europe’s democratic freedoms, as well as structural tensions within and between countries, and the impact of current anti-system moods, all make it vulnerable to Russia’s active measures campaign. Without giving up hope of persuading Moscow to change its policies, Europe must nonetheless adopt a more systematic approach to minimising its vulnerabilities: ‘fixing the roof’ rather than simply hoping the rain will stop. Key areas include:

2.1 Broadening European understandings of ‘security’.

In an age of ‘hybrid war’ that is as often fought through divisive memes and dirty money as tanks and missiles, Europe must go beyond its overdue efforts to spend enough on conventional military security and also take a more serious and comprehensive line on non-kinetic defence. Without falling into the trap of securitising everything – which

⁷⁷ I explore this further in “Russia has no grand plans, but lots of ‘adherents’”, *Business New Europe*, 18 January 2017, available at <http://www.intellinews.com/stolypin-russia-has-no-grand-plans-but-lots-of-adherents-114014/>.

both securitises nothing, and would also undermine the very values we seek to protect – issues such as corruption, the presence of Russian-based organised crime, media regulation, and bank secrecy all need to be considered in the context of national defence.⁷⁸ Again, this is an issue for which a common European position is helpful, but the specificities will vary very much from country to country. Latvia has done much to address the integrity of its financial system, for example, but more needs to be done, while Romania, Ireland, and Denmark have been identified as being at particular risk from cyber attack.⁷⁹

2.2 Addressing the ‘counter-intelligence gap’.

There is a huge variation in European countries’ spending on counter-intelligence (as well as their willingness to act on their security services’ findings). Countries such as the UK and Estonia are spending several times more as a proportion of GDP on intelligence than, for example, Hungary, Portugal, or Norway.⁸⁰ This affects not just national but continental security, as Russian agents use the freedoms of the Schengen zone to operate beyond their base country. Officials believe that Russian agents based in Hungary and the Czech Republic roam more widely.⁸¹ Just as NATO is the primary driver for pressing European countries to reach the alliance’s 2 percent of GDP defence spending target, so too the EU could look to create standard measures of intelligence and counter-intelligence spending at an agreed minimum level.

2.3 Fighting gullibility, not disinformation.

Although a long-term approach, it is important to educate national populations to be more critical of media of every kind (by no means just that ostensibly relating to Russia) and the dangers of disinformation. No amount of ‘myth-busting’ and counter-propaganda can be as effective in addressing the challenge.⁸²

2.4 Addressing the ‘legitimacy gap’ and the ‘institution gap’.

The countries at most risk are largely characterised by weak (and sometimes weakening) institutions, and low levels of trust in their own and/or European governance. Russia eagerly

exploits these vulnerabilities, but cannot create them, and so dealing with them ought to be considered a security priority, not just a political issue.⁸³ The democratic backsliding visible in Hungary and Poland and, to a lesser extent, Slovakia, not only open up these countries to Russian influence operations, they also generate Europe-wide vulnerabilities. From the financial weaknesses visible in different forms in the UK, Latvia, and Cyprus, through to the continued political weaknesses of Greece and Italy, these create opportunities for Russian active measures.

3. Deterring diffuse threats: One of the key reasons for ‘target hardening’ Europe is that trying to counter every lie, watch every spy, and marginalise every extremist is impossible given both resource constraints and also the freedoms of democratic societies. The best way of reducing this campaign of diffuse subversion is to persuade the Kremlin that the costs of its political war outweigh the potential advantages, while at the same time avoiding the temptation to respond in kind. This would, after all, only legitimise Putin’s narrative that the West is actively trying to destabilise Russia and erase its cultural identity.

3.1 Make consistent but asymmetric responses.

European responses to Russian active measures have in the main been strikingly limited, typically restricted to direct sanctions against those identified as directly involved, whether expelling spies or revoking press credentials. The only truly negative outcomes have been through unwanted effects, such as alienating Macron or Angela Merkel. In Moscow, the lack of clear and strong responses is considered a sign of extreme weakness and an inducement to continue: “we really have no reason not to carry on as we are”, mused one recently retired General Staff officer.⁸⁴ Without being needlessly provocative, European countries and the EU as a whole should develop a strategy for consistent and meaningful retaliation. A key point is that they need not be defined by the form of interference: a disinformation campaign can be punished through targeted sanctions of political leaders, illegal payments to extremist groups, or by expelling diplomats. This is, after all, a campaign driven by the Russian state, and so any arm of the state is fair game for retaliation.

3.2 Target the ‘adhocrats’. Although financial sector sanctions in particular do worry the Kremlin, besides these, a particularly effective weapon at Europe’s disposal is to name, shame, but above all exclude and punish the ‘curators’ and ‘adhocrats’ directly and personally responsible for the campaign. Following the annexation of Crimea, this was the first approach adopted. From personal experience of living in Moscow at the time, the chilling effect this had on the elite was clear. When the emphasis shifted

⁷⁸ For a useful warning, see Benjamin Tallis & Michal Šimečka, “Collective Defence in the Age of Hybrid Warfare”, Institute of International Relations, 2016, available at http://www.dokumenty-iiir.cz/DiscussionPapers/Discussion_paper_B_Tallis_2_TR.pdf.

⁷⁹ “Emerging Europe: Latvia looks beyond its big bank clean-up”, *Euromoney*, 15 September 2016, available at <https://www.euromoney.com/article/b12kpxwcjfg5dk/emerging-europe-latvia-looks-beyond-its-big-bank-clean-up>; “Rapid7 2017 National Exposure Index”, available at <https://www.rapid7.com/data/national-exposure/2017.html>.

⁸⁰ “Trump Was Right: NATO Is Obsolete”, *Foreign Policy*, 20 July 2017, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/20/trump-nato-hybrid-warfare-hybrid-defense-russia-putin/>.

⁸¹ Conversation with Czech BIS counter-intelligence officer in Prague, June 2017, and EU official, Brussels, June 2016; “Egy magyar titkosszolga részletesen felfedi, mennyire súlyos az orosz fenyegetés”, *index.hu*, 21 March 2017, available at <http://index.hu/belfold/2017/03/21/titkosszolga-orosz-fenyegetes-romagvikossag-interju/>; “Moscow spooks return to Hungary, raising NATO hackles”, *Politico*, 19 July 2017, available at <http://www.politico.eu/article/moscow-spooks-return-to-hungary-raising-nato-hackles/>.

⁸² “Why Is Finland Able to Fend Off Putin’s Information War?”, *Foreign Policy*, 1 March 2017, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/01/why-is-finland-able-to-fend-off-putins-information-war/>.

⁸³ “Hybrid War as a War on Governance”, *Small Wars Journal*, 19 August 2015, available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/hybrid-war-as-a-war-on-governance>.

⁸⁴ Conversation, Moscow, April 2017.

to sectoral economic sanctions, the sense of relief was palpable. The practice of personal sanctions, including freezing property and – despite some legal challenges – also targeting individuals’ families, is one that not only gives a clear signal to the elite of the cost of being involved in Putin’s political war, it is also a message to the Russian people that Europe is not opposed to them, but to the corrupt Russian government.

3.3 Blunt the instruments. At the same time, the pressure deployed behind particular instruments needs to be stepped up. It is, again, a question of balance, as the rights of citizens, visitors, and the press need to be protected. But, just as there is a case for treating Russian-based organised crime as a particular threat because of this connection, so too Russian companies and media organisations, and other institutions, need to be considered as, to use the Russian expression, “foreign agents” as soon as they appear to be acting with hostile intent.⁸⁵ Above all, this means doing everything possible to squeeze the flow of illegal funding - whether overt or hidden - to subversive interests in Europe.

⁸⁵ “Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia’s criminal networks in Europe”.

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