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# Russia's Hybrid War

Maxim Trudolyubov FEB. 24, 2016

Almost anything Vladimir Putin touches these days is perceived by the West as a weapon, and almost everything he does is seen as an attack, very often a successful one. The Kremlin can change facts on the ground, stage quasi cease-fires and create zones of influence to exert pressure on other nations. It has done so in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, and the pattern is now being repeated in Syria.

Meanwhile, the West goes on declaring one Kremlin success after another in ways that many Russians themselves cannot see. Under an editorial headline “Putin’s Syria Victory,” for example, The Wall Street Journal opined on Feb. 12: Negotiations can “freeze’ the conflict in place, a tactic Russia used to its advantage after the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and last year’s Minsk agreement over eastern Ukraine.”

It is not by crude force alone that Russia twists events to its advantage. By using its total control over the Russian news media to sow confusion in the West, Mr. Putin has managed, in the words of the journalists Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, to “weaponize” information. In a report published in late 2014 by the New York-based Institute of Modern Russia, they outlined how the Kremlin manipulates the media, ethnic tensions and trade and financial transactions abroad to further its own ends.

Take the example of a news story by Russia's state-run television this January about the alleged rape by migrants of a German girl of Russian extraction in Berlin. German prosecutors said the allegations were not confirmed, and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier — who usually weighs his words with great care — dismissed the affair as “propaganda.” But the Russian media succeeded in blowing the incident out of all proportion, stoking anti-immigrant protests and resentment among Germany's nearly six million Russian speakers.

Moscow is also widely seen to have “weaponized” the migrant crisis. Many analysts and government officials — the Turkish security services among them — agree that Moscow not only thwarts U.S. policies in the Middle East, but is targeting Russia's perceived enemies by purposely creating additional flows of migrants moving through Turkey and, ultimately, on to the European Union. Mr. Putin's strategy, Senator John McCain said recently, is “to exacerbate the refugee crisis and use it as a weapon to divide the trans-Atlantic alliance and undermine the European project.”

Moreover, proposals to build another natural gas pipeline are being used to divide the European Union. Germany, France and Britain treat the Nord Stream 2 project as a business venture; Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine bitterly oppose it. They say it would enable Moscow to avoid funneling gas through Central Europe, deprive them of revenue from transit fees, and enable Moscow to cut off their supplies without jeopardizing its customers in Western Europe.

The German vice chancellor, Sigmar Gabriel, who also serves as minister of economic affairs and energy, recently went to Warsaw to push for the project, even though his partner in Germany's governing coalition, Chancellor Angela Merkel, remains silent. Opponents argue that another pipeline is unnecessary at a time when Nord Stream 1 is operating at half its capacity. Brussels has yet to issue a ruling.

Mr. Putin's talent for disruption amounts to a kind of “Midas touch.” It has made him a formidable adversary in Russia's hybrid war of force and manipulation, where anything can be a target and everything can be a weapon. It has also given him what he has long coveted: Western acknowledgment that

Russia is a force to be reckoned with.

“It is much safer to be feared than to be loved” Machiavelli wrote, an observation that the Russian leader and generations of his predecessors have taken to heart. As one high-ranking Russian official told me: “We are not known for being particularly nice or elegant. But that is fine with us as long as our interests are taken seriously.”

And so Moscow is not loved but feared. But snatching land from other nations, scaring your neighbors and destabilizing your business and political rivals are not policies you can maintain forever. They will return to haunt Moscow.

Historically, the Kremlin's rulers have always considered their country's first line of defense against what they perceive as Western mischief to lie well beyond Russia's borders. But Moscow has made people in the West think that its policies are motivated by aggressive revisionism, not defense. Their success is full of ironies.

It may not be true that Mr. Putin is purposefully exacerbating the refugee crisis, or that there is no sound economic logic behind Nord Stream 2. But if you have the reputation of turning everything you touch into a weapon, everything you say and do might be construed as an attack. You become everyone's enemy. Russia's leaders have become so adept at their game of projecting menacing ambiguity that it is now impossible for them to persuade anyone that sometimes the Russians might just simply want to do business.

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