

# THE BALTIC DEFENCE COLLEGE

## NATO AT 70 AND THE BALTIC STATES: STRENGTHENING THE EURO-ATLANTIC ALLIANCE IN AN AGE OF NON-LINEAR THREATS

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# **REVERSING MOSCOW'S OFFENSIVE**

## **A Strategy for Winning the Shadow War with Putin's Russia**

**Janusz Bugajski, May 2019**

Western governments have tried and failed in applying various remedies to curtail Moscow's neo-imperialist ambitions. Containment, appeasement, and engagement have not cured Russia from its imperial designs. Indeed, each approach has simply reinforced Kremlin perceptions that the West is weak, divided, and incapable of preventing Russia's restoration as a major global power. The absence of a coherent, dynamic, and offensive Western strategy has encouraged Moscow to intensify its anti-Western Shadow War to dismantle the NATO alliance, limit American influence in Europe, and further fracture the European Union.

But despite its escalating anti-Atlanticist offensive, Russia is facing growing domestic problems on several fronts: economic, demographic, social, regional, and ethnic. This provides Western governments with a unique opportunity not only to defend against Moscow's attacks but also to devise a strategy that reinforces Russia's decline while managing the international consequences of its prospective dissolution. Such a strategy needs to be multi-dimensional, combining the informational, cyber, economic, diplomatic, and military domains. Russia pursues a strategy that integrates all elements of state power, from "hard" military campaigns to "soft" psychological operations. Washington and its NATO allies will also need to adopt a comprehensive approach to capitalize on Russia's vulnerabilities.<sup>1</sup>

### **Decline Wrapped in Aggression inside a Crisis**

To adapt Winston Churchill's memorable insight at the outset of World War Two - that Russia's actions are "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" - Vladimir Putin's Russia is a declining state, donning the camouflage of external aggression to disguise its increasing fragility. Nonetheless, a declining Russian state can prove more threatening than a rising power because its leaders calculate that time is working against them and may take more risks to pursue their objectives. Moscow disguises its decline by projecting itself as the key power in Eurasia, mobilizing imperial sentiments among its citizens, and engaging in external revisionist offensives against its neighbors. The Kremlin's strategic objective necessitates undermining NATO's security posture throughout Europe, fracturing the EU, splitting the US from its European allies, and eroding America's global influence by undermining its political system and discrediting its leadership role.

Russia's external offensives cloak its internal infirmities. Through a combination of low fossil fuel prices, failed economic diversification, infrastructural decay, pervasive

corruption, and Western financial sanctions, state revenues are declining, living standards falling, social program diminishing, incomes contracting, social conflicts intensifying, and regional disquiet mounting. Russia's economy is stagnating. According to World Bank statistics in 2017, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita ranks 60<sup>th</sup> in the world.<sup>2</sup> The poverty rate is rising sharply and a growing numbers of citizens face destitution. Increased defense spending to project Russia's power has come at the expense of education, health care, and infrastructure. But even military expansion is slowing down as the defense budget is shrinking and over the coming decade Russia's armed forces will fall further behind that of the US and China. According to data from 2017, Russia's military spending is almost one quarter that of China's and only a tenth of the US military budget.<sup>3</sup>

Russia's longer-term prospects look even bleaker. Demographic indicators underscore a shrinking population with high mortality, low fertility, and rising emigration of the best educated. Russia's population has dipped from about 148 million after the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s to only 144 million in 2018. Various agencies estimate that this total will fall to around 128 million by 2050 and a steadily increasing percentage will be neither ethnic Russian nor Orthodox Christian.<sup>4</sup> Life expectancy among Russian males stands at about 60 years, or 15 years less than the norm in industrialized states and lower than in many African countries.

Russia's economic performance alone is insufficient to measure susceptibility to decline and potential fracture, as evident in the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly three decades ago. Numerous additional factors must be examined, particularly the extent of social, ethnic, and regional tensions. The unwieldy Russian Federation consists of 85 "federal subjects," of which 22 are republics representing non-Russian ethnicities and numerous regions with distinct identities that are becoming increasingly estranged from Moscow. Instead of pursuing decentralization to accommodate their aspirations, the Russian government is downgrading their autonomy. This is evident in the recently introduced language law designed to promote Russification and plans to merge and eliminate several autonomous regions and republics.<sup>5</sup> Pressure is mounting across the country, with growing public anger at local governors appointed by the Kremlin and resentment that Moscow appropriates regional resources but cannot guarantee stable living standards.

To compensate for its military inferiority and economic weakness vis-à-vis the West, Moscow deploys a wide assortment of both open and clandestine political, financial, economic, cyber, and propaganda tools to achieve its objectives. It capitalizes on the vulnerabilities of targeted countries, whether through cyber attacks, psychological offensives, energy dominance, state corruption, political blackmail, or numerous other "soft power" tools.

For the West, a reactive defense toward a declining Russia is insufficient to deter Moscow's ambitions. Instead, a broad offense is needed to divert Moscow's attention away from external aggression and toward its own internal protection. While the Kremlin has opened several fronts in Europe and the US, Russia itself is afflicted by many more economic, social, political, cyber, ethnic, religious, and regional

vulnerabilities than its adversaries. These deficiencies and potential pressure points need to be thoroughly assessed and exploited.

The new US National Security Strategy issued in 2017 affirms that Russia is a rival and competitor that aims to weaken Washington's international influence and divide the US from its allies and partners.<sup>6</sup> Given this astute geopolitical assessment, policies need to be developed to capitalize on Moscow's weaknesses. The minimum Western objective would be to curtail Moscow's subversive assault against the US and its allies. The intermediate objective would be to deflect Russia's external aggression into internal turmoil that the Kremlin becomes increasingly focused on pacifying. The maximum and long-term objective would be to fracture the Russian Federation and manage the country's dissolution, thus significantly curtailing if not fully eliminating Moscow's geopolitical ambitions. A wide assortment of tools can be deployed to achieve this range of goals.

### **Exposing Influence Operations**

The Russian state is engaged in systematic informational warfare to undermine Western cohesion and promote Moscow's expansionist enterprise. This informational subversion is designed to steer the Western media, implant the Kremlin narrative, infect public opinion, and influence decision-makers. Moscow's espionage penetration and media disinformation networks are supplemented by modern-day "fellow travellers," whether duped, manipulated, or complicit, including politicians, businessmen, diplomats, academics, lobbyists, and policy analysts.<sup>7</sup> These human assets fall into several categories, including those working for the Kremlin but who do not make their affiliations public, those who are avowedly independent but support Russia's foreign policies, and those who become co-opted and obligated through financial and other payments from sources tied to the Putin administration and become a conduit for Kremlin disinformation.

A number of initiatives could bring significant success in combating Moscow's penetration of American and European societies. Law enforcement bodies and investigative journalists need to probe and expose the wide array of Russian state influence operations. In the US, this would include several former members of Congress and the administration, lobbyists, public relations firms, policy institutes, and various NGOs receiving funding directly or indirectly from Kremlin sources or from oligarchs and foundations working on behalf of the Russian government, such as *Russkiy Mir* and Gorchakov. In the US, campaign-financing laws are inadequate to stymie the flow of foreign donations designed to influence national policy.<sup>8</sup> Urgently needed is anti-money laundering (AML) legislation so that hostile actors identified by intelligence services or law-enforcement can be blocked or apprehended. At the same time, politicians and major funders must be required to make full disclosures regarding the source of their revenues and assets as well as tax returns and other financial documents.

In the US, lax regulations enable lobbyists to operate on Moscow's behalf and the Foreign Agent's Registration Act (FARA) is insufficiently enforced. The focus must also encompass Putin's supporters in the media and academia who receive finances or favors

from the Russian state. Funding sources, often channeled through shell companies or third parties, should also be investigated for potential US sanctions busting or financial crimes such as money laundering and tax avoidance. To retain credibility, universities and NGOs in the West need to screen and investigate their funding sources and whether these are connected with Kremlin influence operations or with financial crimes perpetrated by Putin's oligarchs. PR campaigns by lobbyists seeking to lift sanctions against Russian oligarchs and business entities engaged in implementing the Kremlin's revisionist foreign policy need to be exposed, particularly those individuals and entities already sanctioned by the US and the EU. One recent example has been the attempt by lobbyists to influence the US Justice Department in easing sanctions against Oleg Deripaska, one of President Putin's key oligarchic accomplices.

Benefiting from the extensive evidence unearthed by US Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation, the FBI needs to conduct probes of all Kremlin-connected business deals and bank use in the US. As of December 2018, Mueller has issued indictments against 29 Russian entities and extracted six guilty pleas and a conviction. The findings of the Mueller probe, once it discloses all the connections between Kremlin agencies, Russian oligarchs, Western businessmen, social networks, and American collaborators during Moscow's attack on the 2016 US elections, would be a victory in defense of American democracy and sovereignty. This would send an important signal to the Kremlin that any future penetration would be more effectively combated.

### **Countering Informational Offensives**

Information warfare is a systematic attempt to weaken and defeat the morale and resistance of one's adversary. State-sponsored information offensives are designed to undermine governments, divide societies, debilitate decision makers, weaken national security, and strengthen the position of the aggressor state. Compared to its Soviet predecessor, the contemporary Russian disinformation offensive directed at Western states and societies transmits a broader diversity of messages and employs a wider assortment of methods.

Although Moscow's overriding strategic objective is similar to Soviet times - to defeat the West - it has several supplementary goals: to confuse and frighten citizens in Europe and America, to delegitimize and disrupt Western democracies, to corrupt and corrode state institutions, to undermine the credibility of legitimate news sources, and to strengthen nationalists and populists who may favor Russia's policies. Kremlin disinformation focuses on gullible sectors of the Western public to depict Russia as a fully independent state founded on traditional values. Such a message has appeal across the political and social spectrum in the West - from leftist and rightist anti-American Europeans to American nationalists, conservatives, and evangelicals.

Regarding the means of attack, modern disinformation has a much wider and faster assortment of channels for distribution than during Soviet times. In addition to standard media outlets, fabricated stories can be disseminated through social internet platforms and rapidly reach millions of consumers. As with village gossip, many people fail to check the source before further spreading fabricated stories. Repetitive electronic

methods increase the reach of disinformation and even infect the more credible mass media with bogus items. To win the information war against the Kremlin a multi-national counter-propaganda strategy is needed containing several defensive and offensive elements.

On the defensive front, social internet companies must provide greater transparency and data protection from Russian trolls spreading disinformation among American and European citizens.<sup>9</sup> These companies can intensify their efforts to eliminate fake accounts that spread propaganda. Twitter and Facebook purges of Russian-linked accounts have reduced the effectiveness of Moscow's disinformation. However, the US Congress should pass the Honest Ads Act, requiring political advertising on social channels to have the same level of transparency as on television and radio by revealing the funding sources of sponsored content. Tech companies must also do more to protect the private data of users, as this can be exploited to manipulate public opinion or even blackmail and recruit foreign agents.

Russia's state or oligarch-funded media outlets, including television, radio, internet, and print media should not be presented as legitimate media sources but as propaganda arms of the Kremlin. This does not mean that they should be outlawed or banned but closely monitored, exposed for the most egregious falsehoods, and where possible labeled as spreading fabricated news or propaganda. Simultaneously, media literacy among Western publics has to be enhanced, or at least the capability to distinguish between credible and fraudulent media sources.

Anti-disinformation initiatives can be more substantially funded and expanded both in the US and Europe. The Polygraph initiative launched by Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty serves as a valuable means to verify the increasing volume of disinformation.<sup>10</sup> In order to expose the most blatant political fabrications, VOA and RFE/RL journalists research and analyze statements and reports distributed by government officials, government-sponsored media, and other high-profile individuals.

In Europe, an EU team StratCom East documents disinformation originating from Russian sources and issues a weekly bulletin highlighting numerous distortions, as well as a Twitter feed called EU Mythbusters. Ukraine's StopFake is a valuable resource reporting on Moscow's disinformation tactics. MythDetector tracks and debunks anti-Western disinformation. Digital Sherlocks expose and explain disinformation at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic. Prague has established a specialist unit dealing with fake news spread by websites supported by Moscow. The Czech interior ministry Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats scrutinizes disinformation and counters it via social internet platforms. An informal internet army of Lithuanians "elves" counters hate speech and pro-Moscow propaganda. They patrol social platforms, coordinate their actions through Facebook and Skype to expose fake accounts, and post blogs to discredit conspiracy theories. At the same time, the European Commission has called upon social platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Mozilla, to do more to block Russian trolls from disrupting European elections.

Exposure of Russian disinformation is vital, but to be more effective in countering

disruptive attacks Western governments and NGOs need to undertake an informational offensive targeted at public and political opinion inside Russia. Such a psychological operation should be geared toward two core objectives: alienating the Russian public from the regime and provoking power struggles inside the ruling stratum. Detailed revelations about financial abuse among officials while living standards for the masses continue to plunge can help fuel social, ethnic, regional, and religious unrest. Western sources can disseminate poignant information for Russian citizens that is avoided by the state media, including economic decline due to government corruption; the country's neglected and crumbling infrastructure; Russia's looming demographic catastrophe; and growing regional unrest.

Western intelligence services can acquire, leak, and dump *kompromat* material about Putin and his inner circle. A key component would be to disseminate official Russian communications, with a focus on the Kremlin, government ministries, parliament, key businesses, and subservient political parties, as well as private correspondence between officials, particularly at local level, which negatively affect the lives of ordinary citizens. Potentially incendiary information can be circulated through the internet and various social platforms.

The objective would be to disclose the most provocative scandals of Russia's state and local officials and the extent of their corrupt governance, opulent lifestyles, public lies, and contempt for ordinary citizens. Especially valuable would be messages that reveal the willingness of state officials, oligarchs, and bureaucrats to betray the country for personal gain from the Russian budget. Humor, irony, and satire are also valuable assets in addressing Kremlin propaganda and the nature of the Putinist system.

Disclosures about conflicts within the ruling elite can generate uncertainty and anxiety in government circles and expose the regime's political vulnerabilities. The promotion of internal power struggles may not precipitate Putin's downfall, but it can help divert the Kremlin from its unchallenged information war against Western democracies. By spreading suspicion and distrust between officials and raising fears of political purges or state expropriation of oligarchs, factional infighting can be aggravated to endanger Putin's presidency.

Participation in social internet platforms has soared among Russia's younger generation in recent years. The West needs to target sectors of Russian society, including young people, the unemployed, nationalists, ethnic and religious minorities, regionalists, separatists, and numerous other groups to help sow discord and inspire the emergence of anti-Kremlin movements. Russia itself may not be immune from the anti-establishment populism that has swept through Europe and the US in recent years and from which the Kremlin has tried to benefit in disassembling the West.<sup>11</sup> This populist boomerang, outraged by failing living standards, the yawning gap between rich and poor, and rampant official corruption, may be manifest in street protests and even violent acts against state property or government officials, as there is no effective political outlet for mass grievances.

Some Western policy makers will caution that informational offensives against Moscow would be too provocative and could escalate bilateral disputes. However, from the Kremlin's perspective, the lack of an effective US response to its own interference in Western societies is perceived as a major vulnerability that invites further intervention. The attacks continue primarily because Moscow faces an inadequate defense and a tepid counter-attack. Although the EU's East StratCom, NATO's StratCom, and the newly established national StratComs in Europe can be effective tools, they still lack sufficient resources and coordination to combat and counter Kremlin-directed disinformation.<sup>12</sup> Since officials in Moscow will in any case accuse the US of interfering in its domestic affairs, Washington together with its allies should make sure that their involvement is politically consequential.

### **Cyber Defense and Counter-Attack**

Cyber attacks on the West can include systematic assaults and denial of service attacks on government sites by Kremlin agencies or hired hackers. It can also entail the monitoring of telecommunications, infecting targeted networks with viruses, or disabling entire systems. Such attacks can affect critical infrastructure and the defense industrial base, including power stations and grids, transportation and telecommunication networks, banking and financial services, as well as law enforcement and national security systems. An internal US Department of Defense report released in December 2018 enumerated various gaps in cyber security, including failure to encrypt classified flash drives or place physical locks on critical computer servers, that have left the country vulnerable to missile attacks.<sup>13</sup>

Measures must be taken to better protect vital infrastructure, including national defense systems, in case Moscow escalates its cyber probing into an actual attack. Lessons learned from European countries that have been targeted by the Kremlin must also be incorporated in the US response, including Ukraine where a major Russian attack (NotPetya) in June 2017 disabled about 10% of all computer systems and affected airports, banks, electrical networks, and communications services. Critical infrastructure among NATO allies needs better protection from cyber attacks.<sup>14</sup> Key measures should include state funding of public utilities and commercial providers to upgrade their systems; contingency plans to ensure a rapid response and coordination among NATO members; better public information and preparation for cyber-related disruptions of vital supplies; and modernization of emergency services to handle large-scale emergencies.

Stricter sanctioning against cyber attackers needs to be pursued. In June 2018, the US Treasury imposed sanctions on five Russian entities and three individuals, including a firm that is controlled by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), in response to Russian cyber attacks on the US and its allies, including the NotPetya cyber attack and cyber intrusions of America's energy grid. The US Cyber Command, established in 2009, has targeted Russian operatives to deter them from spreading disinformation in US elections.<sup>15</sup> American operatives inform them they have been identified, that their work is being monitored, and they could be indicted or sanctioned. This is a useful first step but may not dissuade the broad array of Kremlin-affiliated hackers and trolls. To pursue

a more potent offensive, an example should be made by releasing personal information about pro-Moscow cyber offenders and pursuing ways to neutralize their online operations.

The US Cyber Command defends military networks but has also developed offensive capabilities. In September 2018, the Pentagon issued a comprehensive cyber strategy document focusing on Russia and China as the chief adversaries and calling for “confronting threats before they reach U.S. networks.”<sup>16</sup> U.S. Cyber Command has been tasked with defending the country against attacks. However, this approach needs to be more assertive and extensive, particularly as there is consensus that lower-level malicious campaigns pose a major, cumulative risk to the US. The strategy also makes more explicit the Defense Department’s role in deterring or defeating cyber operations targeting US critical infrastructure that is likely to cause a significant “cyber incident.”

The US and its allies need to develop and deploy its offensive cyber capabilities to deter and attack aggressors. In September 2018, President Trump signed the National Security Presidential Memorandum 13, a directive that enables offensive U.S. cyber operations.<sup>17</sup> It allows the military and other US agencies to undertake cyber operations intended to protect their systems and the country’s critical networks. Washington must make it clear that it is prepared to use all available tools, including cyber offensives, against state-sponsored assailants. In deterring and defeating cyber adversaries, a Cyber Force should also be established that can work more closely with allies and partners.<sup>18</sup>

Moscow’s reaction to a US cyber attack will prove instructive, given that America has superior electronic capabilities and can take down critical infrastructure in Russia itself. As a warning, Washington could demonstrate its cyber capabilities vis-à-vis third parties that have attacked US systems. A resolute action is more likely to deter Moscow’s attacks than repetitive warnings and fruitless admonitions.

### **Economic and Financial Penalties**

The Kremlin uses a number of economic tools to enmesh specific states in a web of financial ties that buttress its political penetration. It tries to influence European governments through ownership of strategic economic sectors, particularly in energy, banking, and telecommunications. Russian company ownership of key energy infrastructure, such as pipelines, refineries, and storage sites, enables Moscow to exert political leverage. The supply of energy and other strategic resources can be decreased or severed at important junctures to exert pressure on particular capitals, or their price can be lowered or raised to gain political concessions. Russia’s business penetration also fosters corruption, non-transparency, money laundering, tax evasion, and links with international organized crime.

To undercut Moscow’s financial offensive several initiatives can prove beneficial. Financial sanctions should be extended on Russian government officials and Kremlin connected oligarchs, including freezing their international bank accounts, investment funds, and safe deposit boxes, denying access to credit cards and the SWIFT banking network, and seizing their real estate, investment funds, planes, cars, boats, and other

properties in the West. Putin himself can be included in the expanded list of targets, together with major energy companies and other Kremlin-linked businesses. Thus far the “sectoral sanctions” imposed on Russian companies have had a limited impact. To be more effective “blocking sanctions” are needed that freeze all Russian transactions via the US financial system.<sup>19</sup> This could be replicated in Europe’s financial system. An asset freeze on Russian banks can be combined with a suspension of any new trade and investment with Moscow.

Current money laundering regulations in Western countries are inadequate and insufficiently enforced; they must be significantly tightened and the sources of cash flows investigated. The bi-partisan 2018 Defending American Security from Kremlin Aggression Act needs to be passed and implemented by Congress.<sup>20</sup> This legislation expands financial sanctions on new Russian sovereign debt, against investment in state-owned energy projects, and on key political and business figures who facilitate the Kremlin’s subversive activities.

Additional measures can be taken to reverse Russian state penetration of Western economies. This can include counter-intelligence and law enforcement investigations of all Kremlin-connected business and banking deals; bans on purchases of Russian sovereign and state corporation bonds; embargos on the transfer of dual use technologies; countering Russia’s monopolistic energy schemes by suspending support and financing for the Nord Stream II natural gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea as well as Moscow’s other politically-motivated energy projects; and the imposition of sanctions on all companies investing in Russian-controlled infrastructure and which contribute to undermining Western democracies and alliances.

### **Military and Security Instruments**

Russia's new military doctrine signed by President Vladimir Putin in December 2014 describes an increasingly threatening international environment that can generate problems at home.<sup>21</sup> It claims that intensifying “global competition” from NATO and the US in particular constitutes a direct threat to Russia. In disguising its own neo-imperial aspirations, Moscow asserts that it will counter Western attempts to gain strategic superiority by deploying strategic missile defense systems.<sup>22</sup> It also reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction against Russia or its allies, and even in case of an “aggression” against Russia with conventional weapons that would endanger the existence of the state. The threat of nuclear strikes against NATO members is intended to terrorize citizens and convince Western governments that they need to negotiate and acquiesce to Moscow’s demands.

The Kremlin employs an assortment of tools to undermine the security of its neighbors and prevent them from acting in unison to defend their national interests. These include persistent military threats, dangerous military encounters and other provocations, intimidating exercises, nuclear blackmail, unconventional offensives, proxy wars, sponsorship and funding of separatist militias, conventional military intervention,

territorial fragmentation, and the creation and manipulation of “frozen” or unresolved conflicts.

Western states and NATO can pursue a number of counter-measures to impair Russia’s offensives and dent its ambitions. All aspirant states in the Western Balkans should gain membership in NATO in the quickest possible time once they fulfill basic conditions for accession, particularly Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosova. Membership Action Plans (MAPs) on route to NATO entry should be provided to Ukraine and Georgia. MAPs should also be offered to Serbia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and whichever NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries request accession and commit themselves to qualifying for membership.

Ukraine, Georgia, and other countries facing a direct Russian armed assault must be effectively armed with whatever weapons they need to inflict heavy losses on invading Russian forces and their proxies. In the Black Sea and Azov Sea the US and NATO need to dispatch naval vessels to Ukrainian ports to demonstrate the validity of Freedom of Navigation Operations and underscore that these are not Moscow’s lakes. This will also highlight the fact that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has positively intensified NATO-Ukraine relations – precisely the outcome that the Kremlin aimed to prevent.<sup>23</sup> NATO members along the eastern flank from the Baltic to the Black Sea regions confronting an assertive Russia must be more intensively assisted in developing their maritime and territorial defensive capabilities.

NATO military drills should be regularly staged in different zones close to Russia’s borders with minimal prior warning. All states neighboring NATO should be invited to participate in such exercises, including Belarus and Moldova. Numerous scenarios can be simulated in the drills, including repulsing indirect or direct military invasions and territorial seizure by foreign forces. Such maneuvers could help disrupt Moscow’s military planning and disperse Russian forces along its long borders with NATO states.

NATO planners also need to prepare contingences for opening alternative fronts and conflict zones for Moscow in the event of a Russian military attack on any part of NATO territory. The aim would be to convince the Kremlin that the Western alliance is capable of creating and exploiting potentially destabilizing scenarios inside Russia and along its borders if Moscow intervenes in a NATO state. In addition to strengthening conventional military forces to deter a Russian assault, NATO can also prepare plans for special operations on Russian territory or missions whereby it can draw Moscow into internal or external conflicts that backfire politically. Such moves are more likely to place the Kremlin on the defensive rather than allowing it to maintain the initiative in its attacks on the West.

### **Managing Russia’s Dissolution**

The US and NATO need to return to core principles in dealing with Putin’s Russia by applying and adapting policies that hastened the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This should be anchored in supporting political pluralism, minority rights, genuine federalism, administrative decentralization,

and self-determination among Russia's disparate regions and numerous ethnic groups. The impending fragmentation of the Russian Federation may not be as peaceful as the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the West needs to start planning for a range of scenarios that will affect several of Russia's European neighbors, NATO allies, and EU members. The basis for such a strategy would be a comprehensive assessment of each federal unit, ethnic group, and regional identity to reveal all of Russia's vulnerabilities and determine the opportunities for resistance, protest, sovereignty, and secession.

Russia has failed to develop into a nation state with a distinct ethnic or civic identity but remains an essentially imperial construct. In order to retain its state integrity, Russia needs to operate along more inclusive lines to manage disparate domestic interests. The country's increasingly stifling authoritarianism, much like Soviet communism, will eventually fragment the country. Russia's numerous nationalities are in effect trapped within a colonial federation that only benefits a narrow elite of security personnel, bureaucrats, oligarchs, and politicians tied to the Kremlin. Moscow extracts maximum resources from the federal regions while disbursing and investing as little as possible. Without local self-determination and regional autonomy, the federal structure will become increasingly unmanageable with the prospect of violent collapse.

While Moscow seeks to divide the West and fracture the EU and NATO by supporting nationalist, populist, separatist, anti-American, and anti-EU parties throughout Europe, Washington and its Allies can counteract by promoting regional and ethnic autonomy inside the Russian Federation and eventual independence from Moscow.<sup>24</sup> The rationale for such a strategy should be logically framed: in order to survive Russia needs a federal democracy and a robust economy; with no democratization on the horizon and economic conditions deteriorating the federal structure will become increasingly ungovernable; to manage the process of dissolution and lessen the likelihood of conflict that spills over state borders the West needs to establish links with Russia's diverse regions and promote their efforts for a peaceful transition toward statehood.

In the West's information offensive against the Putin regime, Russia's fake federalism should be contrasted with the genuine federalism of the US system and other federal states in Europe and elsewhere. Western governments can diplomatically support self-determination and federalization inside Russia in key international institutions. As during the Cold War, when Washington backed the "captive nations," including Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Estonians, and Latvians, Western services can both openly or covertly assist autonomist and independence movements throughout the Russian Federation -- from Kaliningrad and Karelia, through the Middle Volga and the North Caucasus to Tuva and Sakha in Siberia and the Far East. Indeed, Western leaders need to underscore that regions such as Sakha and Magadan, with their substantial mineral wealth, could develop into successful independent states without Moscow's political control and economic exploitation.

Governors of Russia's federal units appointed by the Kremlin may be faced with a stark choice as public disaffection mounts. They can either continue to implement Moscow's repressive and exploitative policies and face growing domestic opposition and even violent revolt, or they can transform themselves into genuine leaders pushing for the

interests of their republics and resist pressures from the Kremlin. Recent public protests in Ingushetia against a land exchange deal with Chechnya that favors Grozny and was backed by the Kremlin indicates that the power and policies of local governors will come under increasing question at the same time that Moscow has diminishing financial resources to support the poorest republics.<sup>25</sup>

Demands for authentic autonomy among Russia's diverse regions can be boosted through foreign economic connections. Local populations in several regions will benefit from forging closer trading contacts with neighboring states rather than depending on Moscow, whose federal budget is drastically shrinking. The Russian government has been calling for the richer regions to help subsidize the poorer ones, thus further aggravating their relations with the Center. Collapsing infrastructure means that residents of enormous regions such as Siberia and the Russian Far East will become even more separated from Moscow and European Russia, a trend that encourages regionalist or even independence movements. Siberia has also been hit particularly hard by international financial sanctions, as some of the major sanctioned oligarchs operate large enterprises in the region employing tens of thousands of workers.

It will be important to base Western policy on the calculation that the Russian Federation may not disintegrate simply along ethnic lines, as regional identities and grievances are growing even among Russian ethnics in Siberia and the Far East who may favor separation and statehood. Simultaneously, separatist sentiments among non-Russians can be encouraged through an information campaign underscoring Kremlin plans to downgrade the distinctiveness of ethnic republics, absorbing them into Russian-majority regions, or eliminating them altogether. This is evident in Moscow's plans to amalgamate and reduce the number of federal units, as well as the recently enacted language law designed to promote Russification and curtail native languages.<sup>26</sup>

Support for autonomist and independence movements will also send a strong signal that the West can react to Moscow's aggression against NATO states by intensifying its backing for Russia's rupture. Indeed, NATO should prepare contingencies for both the dangers and the opportunities that Russia's fragmentation may present. This would involve a twin-track approach. First, Russia's European neighbors must be provided with sufficient security in terms of weapons systems and NATO military support to shield themselves from the most destabilizing scenarios emanating from Russia's dissolution. Plans can also be drawn up for handling refugee outflows, cross-border military spillovers, and other incidents that can negatively impact on nearby states.

Second, detailed plans should be drafted for engaging with the new entities emerging from a splintering Russian federation. New aspiring states may not necessarily be based on ethnic principles but on regional multi-ethnic identities amidst increasing local estrangement from Moscow even among Russian populations. Some regions could join existing countries such as Finland, Ukraine, China, and Japan, from whom Moscow has forcefully appropriated territories in the past. Other republics and territories in the North Caucasus, Middle Volga, Siberia, and the Far East could become fully independent states and forge bilateral relations with China, Japan, the US, and Europe.

## Russia's Escalating Failures

Russia is infected with terminal maladies that will have widespread domestic reverberations and impact on US and Allied interests from Europe to East Asia. Instead of assuming that Russia will transform itself into a stable and internationally constructive polity, it is time to acknowledge that the Russian Federation has failed to develop into a national state with a binding ethnic or civic identity and into a regional power without neo-imperial ambitions. Under the Putinist system, Russia has become a brittle centralized federation that will only become post-imperial through its dissolution.

Neglecting Russia's impending fragmentation may prove more damaging to Western interests than making preparations to manage its international repercussions. To avoid sudden geopolitical jolts and possible military confrontations, Washington and its European allies need to monitor and encourage a peaceful rupture and establish links with the entities that emerge from Russia's convulsions. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union should serve as a lesson that far-reaching transformations occur regardless of the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns or the West's shortsighted adherence to a transient status quo.

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### Endnotes

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According to the CIA factbook, 78% of the population is estimated to be ethnic Russian, although that proportion is steadily declining. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>

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