The Diversity of Russia’s Military Power

Five Perspectives

PROJECT DIRECTOR
Heather A. Conley

EDITORS
Mark F. Cancian
Cyrus Newlin

AUTHORS
Robert Person
Jim Golby
Gil Barndollar
Jade McGlynn
Joseph Robbins

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Introduction

More than a decade ago, the Russian government began to modernize its military forces and recalibrate its strategic doctrines following its invasion and occupation of Georgia in 2008. By 2014, the United States and Europe were witnessing first-hand the tactical and strategic effects of this modernization both near Russia’s borders, in Moscow’s illegal annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine, as well as farther afield, in Russia’s military deployments in Syria, election interference and use of chemical agents in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, and deployment of contractors and advisers to Venezuela, Africa, and elsewhere. Russia’s development of new hypersonic weapons, anti-satellite capabilities, and unmanned undersea capabilities, as well as Moscow’s growing military and economic cooperation with China have further heightened the geostrategic stakes for U.S. national security.

While Western governments have revitalized their analytical attention concerning Russia’s military strength and hybrid tactics, analysts have tended to isolate one dimension of Russia’s tactics and draw quick conclusions about a broader range of Russian actions and behaviors: Russia is merely a tactical opportunist or is pursuing a global revisionist agenda that extends to Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. This has complicated our ability to objectively diagnose and respond to Russian behavior. After all, do Russia’s military pursuits pose a critical threat to U.S. national security, or do they represent the last rally of a power that has already begun to decline? Can it be both simultaneously?

It is with this in mind that CSIS embarked on a five-day professional development program to explore all elements of Russian military power: its composition and future prospects, its social and historical foundations, its doctrine, and current operations and place it in that broader context. CSIS sought to foster an interdisciplinary community of experts that would continue after the program and sharpen the U.S. and allied countries’ understanding of the Russian military.

The Understanding the Russian Military Today program consisted of interactive seminars and hands-on simulation exercises and convened top defense and security experts from CSIS, other think tanks, and the larger academic community to examine, for example, Russian military strategy and the structure of its military forces, Russian disinformation campaigns, and emerging competition in the Arctic. But participants, selected based on a competitive process, also learned from one another: think tank analysts, academics, security specialists, and government officials came together to question one another’s research and analysis and develop new interdisciplinary analyses and approaches.
Following this intensive and interactive course, 29 participants were tasked with developing short, independent research papers that explored one of four major themes: Russian society, strategy, and history; elements of Russian military power; recent uses of Russian military power; and resources behind Russian military power. CSIS selected five of these papers for publication in a dedicated compendium.

This compendium begins with a framing paper by Dr. Robert Person, associate professor of international relations at the United States Military Academy in West Point (“Four Myths About Russian Grand Strategy”), who provides a cogent essay dispelling common misinterpretations of Russia’s global tactics and aims. In reviewing Russian military hardware and its manpower, Dr. Jim Golby, senior fellow at the Clements Center for National Security at The University of Texas at Austin (“Rearming Arms Control Should Start with New START Extension”), takes stock of the arms control landscape and of Russia’s non-strategic nuclear systems, offering a fresh argument for why the United States should extend the New START treaty in 2021. Dr. Gil Barndollar, senior fellow at Defense Priorities and at the Catholic University of America’s Center for the Study of Statesmanship (“The Best or Worst of Both Worlds?: Russia’s Mixed Military Manpower System”), likewise conducts a clear-eyed strategic cost analysis behind Russia’s mixed military manpower system that combines conscripts and contract soldiers.

The compendium then turns to how Russia exerts power through client relationships and instrumentalizes military history, with Dr. Jade McGlynn, a researcher and lecturer at the University of Oxford (“Constructing Memory Alliances: How Russia Uses History to Bolster its Influence and Undermine Rivals Abroad”), examining Russia’s “memory alliance” with Serbia that was built on shared trauma and a common narrative of past military campaigns. And finally, Dr. Joseph Robbins, associate professor and department head of political science at Valdosta State University (“Countering Russian Disinformation”), assesses what NATO allies can learn from the successful experience of the Czech Republic and Estonia in stymieing the efficacy of Russian disinformation campaigns.

Taken together, these papers expand our understanding of the many dimensions of Russian military power and its overarching strategies while developing and growing a diverse community of Russian military and security experts.
Four Myths about Russian Grand Strategy

ROBERT PERSON

Introduction

After spending most of the 1990s and early 2000s rebuilding their state, regime, economy, and military after the traumatic Soviet collapse, Russia's return to a central—and often disruptive—place in world politics has laid bare the folly of many scholars and policymakers who ignored Russia during those years or dismissively argued that the country was irrelevant in a post-9/11 world focused on counterterrorism and sectarian violence in the Middle East.\(^1\) Perhaps owing to this neglect, Russia's resurgence in the twenty-first century has resulted in a large number of misconceptions about its objectives in international politics. This paper seeks to clear up some of those misconceptions by identifying and dispelling four common myths about Russian grand strategy.\(^2\)

Myth #1: Russia's Grand Strategy Is Driven by Ideology

One common misconception is that Russia's leaders—and Putin in particular—are driven by ideological motivations in their pursuit of Russia's grand strategic objectives. Oftentimes, this motivating ideology is identified as a general illiberal conservatism. This view is supported by claims from Putin himself, as in 2019 when he told the Financial Times that “the liberal idea presupposes that nothing needs to be done. The migrants can kill, plunder, and rape with impunity because their rights as migrants must be protected . . . So, the liberal idea has become obsolete.”\(^3\) Further evidence of a conservative ideological bent to Russia’s grand strategy can also arguably be found in Russia’s well-documented ties to far-right political movements in Europe.\(^4\)

1. In fact, the author was advised in 2003 by a well-meaning professor of international relations to switch his area of concentration if he wanted a career in political science because, as the advisor declared, “nobody cares about Russia anymore—Russia is finished.”
2. Portions of this paper are excerpted from Robert Person, *Russia’s Grand Strategy in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2022). I define grand strategy as an iterative process whereby states seek to identify their core national interests; articulate key strategic objectives that, if achieved, will fulfill those interests; mobilize resources to be applied in pursuit of strategic objectives; develop comprehensive and effective methods that make efficient use of constrained resources; and apply those methods through coordinated policy and action in order to achieve strategic objectives. Grand strategy is thus a state’s attempt to optimally allocate scarce resources (means) toward the methods (ways) that are best suited for achieving the state’s highest goals (ends), all while responding and adapting to opportunities and constraints posed by other strategic actors, structures, and events in the international system.
There is no doubt that Putin adheres to conservative social values and illiberal political principles, but their place in Russian strategy is more instrumental than ideological: they are useful tools for sowing discord and division in adversaries, thereby advancing Russia’s realpolitik interests in the political sphere. Additionally, such beliefs cannot account for the full range of objectives and methods that Russia employs in pursuit of national security. While these beliefs may shape Putin’s domestic rule, they do not motivate his strategic vision for Russia’s place in the world.

Others have suggested that Russia’s strategic worldview is heavily influenced by the Eurasianist ideology, which has its roots in Russian nineteenth-century political philosophy and which bestows upon the Russian nation an inspired—or even divine—destiny to unite the Russian and non-Russian peoples who share common cultures across the territories of the former Russian empire. In recent years, Eurasianist ideology has been most closely identified with Russian political thinker Alexander Dugin, who was described once in Foreign Affairs as “Putin’s Brain.” However, there is little evidence to suggest Dugin holds any direct ideological influence over Putin, nor do Putin’s policies or statements reflect a complete embrace of Dugin’s Eurasianist ideas. Rather, Eurasianist ideology is just one strand of nationalist thought with which certain—but not all—Kremlin policies are consistent.

Rather than ideology, the foundations of Russia’s grand strategy can be found in the more universal, if mundane, condition of geopolitical insecurity that informs the realist school of thought. Russia’s worldview and grand strategic objectives are the product of a deep and enduring sense of geopolitical insecurity that has conditioned its relationship to the outside world for centuries. This “persistent sense of vulnerability that never lies far beneath the surface in the consciousness of Russia’s rulers” is born of a geography that is difficult to defend from external invasion, a close proximity to other great powers, and—as much as any other factor—Russia’s own expansionist tendencies, which throughout history have frequently reduced security rather than bolster it. Ironically, much of Russia’s historical security dilemma has been self-induced, as Kotkin notes:

Russia simultaneously abutted Europe, the Near East, and the Far East. Such a circumstance should have argued for caution in foreign policy. But Russia had tended to be expansionist precisely in the name of vulnerability: even as forces loyal to the tsar had seized territory, they imagined they were preempting attacks [by other great powers]. And once Russia had forcibly acquired a region, its officials invariably insisted they had to acquire the next one over, too, in order to be able to defend their original gains. A sense of destiny and insecurity combined in a heady mix.

The resulting “besieged fortress mentality” that runs through Russian grand strategy can be found throughout Russian strategic documents and rhetoric, as in Putin’s March 2014 speech announcing the annexation of Crimea. In that address, he declared defiantly:

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We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. But there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line.\(^{11}\)

If this argument is correct—that Russia’s strategic worldview is driven by a deep sense of insecurity and a threat of encirclement rather than the ideology of its current leaders—we must acknowledge an uncomfortable reality about the future. One day, Russia’s current leaders—Putin included—will no longer rule the country. But Russia’s geography and geopolitical realities will remain unchanged and, if history is any guide, its grand strategic objectives will also endure long after a new generation of Russian rulers occupy the Kremlin.

**Myth #2: Russia Seeks to Reconstruct the Soviet Union or Russian Empire**

In the wake of Russian military offensives against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014, which resulted in the annexation of Crimea, claims that Russia seeks to reconstruct an empire on the territory of the former Soviet Union or Russian Empire have been common in many Western policy circles.\(^{12}\) But rather than restoring traditional imperial rule, Russia in the twenty-first century prefers to pursue what analyst Bobo Lo terms a “postmodern empire”: “This type is characterized by indirect control rather than direct rule, and prefers to employ economic and cultural means instead of blunter military instruments . . . It aims for the best of all worlds: enduring influence and power, but with a minimum of responsibility.”\(^{13}\)

Instead of a formal territorial empire under direct rule, Russia endeavors to establish a privileged and exclusive sphere of influence across former Soviet territory.\(^{14}\) Within its asserted sphere, Russia seeks privileged status that gives Moscow a seat at the table in the capital of every post-Soviet country. It even claims the right to intervene when necessary in the domestic affairs of states within its sphere—for, in Putin’s view, only great powers like Russia are truly sovereign.\(^{15}\) Should a state in Russia’s supposed sphere take a decision that threatens Russian interests—such as a Ukrainian attempt to join

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the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the European Union—Moscow is prepared to exert the necessary levers of influence to veto that choice.

Furthermore, because Russia believes it is the only great power that can enjoy such a privileged pursuit of its political interests in the region, it views U.S. efforts to develop bilateral and multilateral ties with post-Soviet states as a zero-sum competition. Moscow is particularly sensitive to U.S. support for protest, democratization, and opposition movements in the post-Soviet space, seeing it as an attempt to enhance U.S. influence at Russia’s expense. It is worth pointing out that, while Moscow has been far more tolerant of expanding Chinese economic influence in Central Asia, even this remains a source of anxiety for the Kremlin. One can imagine rising friction in the region should Beijing’s overtures extend into the political and military realms.

This sphere of privileged and exclusive influence is a crucial element of Russia’s strategic solution to its security dilemma. It establishes a buffer zone between Russia and its key strategic adversary: the United States (as represented by NATO). Furthermore, it seeks to guarantee that the buffer states will not take sovereign actions that threaten Russia’s security. Finally, it aspires to eliminate what Moscow sees as destabilizing foreign meddling in its neighbors (especially the Colored Revolutions and Maidan Revolution) that is usually to the detriment of Russian interests. One need only recall Moscow’s forceful interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014 to appreciate the lengths to which the Kremlin is willing to go to defend its interests in the region.

Myth #3: Russia Seeks to Restore a Bygone World Order

Russia’s pursuit of spheres of influence in the post-Soviet space has led many analysts to draw historical parallels to previous eras of world order-making, attributing to Russia a desire to resurrect a bygone system of global order, such as the post-World War II “Yalta system.”

For the sake of historical accuracy—and contrary to popular belief—it should be noted that the concept of spheres of influence was not formally discussed at the Yalta Conference in 1945, although the tensely-negotiated fate of postwar Poland ensured that Moscow would consolidate its domination of Eastern Europe. In fact, it was in October 1944 that Stalin and Churchill famously agreed in Moscow to varying percentages of “influence” across Eastern Europe. And it was at Potsdam, not Yalta, that Truman—lacking Roosevelt’s principled objections to spheres of influence—agreed to what amounted to a division of Europe into two spheres. Nevertheless, “Yalta” has become synonymous with the Soviet sphere of influence after the war, an image that appears time and again in Western and Russian discourse alike.

The other historical precedent sometimes offered as an analogy for Russia’s twenty-first-century grand strategy is the Concert of Europe system established after the Napoleonic Wars. As with Yalta, there is a grain of truth in this analogy. As it did then, Russia’s grand strategy still seeks to establish

19. Ibid., 146.
20. Ibid., 387.
concerts of the world’s great powers, through which it can exercise influence in world affairs beyond the post-Soviet region. As such, Russia sees the “concert” and its own participation in it as the main guarantor of international order and stability. Combining both formal elements (such as the United Nations Security Council, where Russia holds a veto) and informal elements like ad-hoc consultation forums, the overarching objective of Russia’s participation in twenty-first-century “concerts” is to allow Moscow a decisive say in settling the world’s problems in ways that conform to its interests. Equally important is how concerts may help ensure that great powers respect one another’s interests—and, where necessary, deconflict.

That the images of Yalta and the Concert of Europe have gained prominence in accounts of Russian strategy is no accident: Putin himself has spoken on many occasions about both systems, lauding the peace, stability, and harmony they supposedly brought to world politics. In 2013, for example, he told participants of the Valdai Discussion Forum:

I want to remind you that the Congress of Vienna of 1815 and the agreements made at Yalta in 1945, taken with Russia’s very active participation, secured a lasting peace. Russia’s strength, the strength of a winning nation at those critical junctures, manifested itself as generosity and justice. And let us remember [the Treaty of] Versailles, concluded without Russia’s participation. Many experts, and I absolutely agree with them, believe that Versailles laid the foundation for the Second World War.

However, the myths of a “golden age” of great power cooperation, be it Yalta or the post-Napoleonic Congress system are just that: myths. The reality is that neither settlement produced global stability or even lasting cooperation among the victors. After all, it was only one year after Yalta that Churchill delivered his famous “Iron Curtain” speech, marking the onset of the Cold War and clearly signaling that any cooperation among the USSR and the West was dead. Similarly, the Congress system was relatively short-lived and functionally dead by the end of 1825. However, these historical facts have not stopped present-day Russian elites from idealizing these systems and Russia’s place in them, nor have they prevented speculation that Putin aspires to be a “modern Metternich.”

The reality is that the world order Russia seeks to establish—a multipolar system where great powers manage the rest of the world and coordinate to guarantee their own national interests—cannot be restored because it has never existed. As Putin no doubt recognizes, however, myths of resurrection can regardless be powerful propaganda tools.

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21. Dmitri Trenin, “Russian Foreign Policy as Exercise in Nation Building,” in Russia’s Foreign Policy, ed. Cadier and Light, 41.
22. Mankoff, Russian Foreign Policy, 12.
24. Plokhy, Yalta, 391.
Myth #4: Putin Is an Opportunist, Not a Strategist

It is common to hear commentators question the very existence of a Russian grand strategy by asserting that Vladimir Putin is an opportunist, not a strategist.\(^{27}\) Thus do Stephen Benedict Dyson and Matthew J. Parent declare that Putin is not “a great chess player with a consistently pursued grand design. Instead, he is more of a shameless opportunist.”\(^{28}\) The assumption that strategy and opportunism are mutually exclusive is overly simplistic: regardless of who initiated action in round one, by round two of a strategic interaction, both states will be responding to the other. Strategic interactions are, as scholars of strategic choice theory recognize, iterated games rather than ephemeral single-shot interactions.\(^{29}\) Contrary to the myth that opportunism is a sign of poor or absent strategy, a certain degree of flexibility is essential for a state’s successful achievement of its strategic objectives.\(^{30}\)

No strategist—be it a general plotting the battlefield or the grand strategist contemplating the globe—can anticipate and plan for all the unexpected obstacles and opportunities that will arise between where they are and their strategic objectives. But the good strategist will have strong command of the tactical toolkit, knowing when to advance, backtrack, detour, or seize an opportunity to move toward the larger objective.\(^{31}\) Good strategy is not incompatible with opportunistic behavior—it depends on it.

Consider, in this light, Putin’s Crimean gambit. It is unrealistic to believe he was in control of, or even anticipated, the long string of events leading to Ukraine’s 2014 political earthquake: the European Union’s “take it or leave it” association agreement with Kyiv; the Maidan protests sparked by Yanukovych’s choice to “leave it”; the collapse of the power transition agreement of February 21, 2014; Yanukovych’s subsequent flight from Ukraine; and the nationalist policies, implemented by the interim government, which alienated many of Ukraine’s ethnic Russians in the south and east of the country. This is not to say that Russia had no hand in influencing these events. Obviously, the Crimean invasion was deftly executed, indicating significant planning.

But the collapse of political order in Ukraine presented Putin with both a risk and an opportunity. The risk was that the Maidan Revolution, like the Colored Revolution before it, threatened to pull Ukraine from Russia’s sphere of influence, perhaps forever. The opportunity, however, was that Russia was in a position to rapidly and unexpectedly intervene to achieve two major strategic victories: reclaiming the formerly Russian Crimean Peninsula and securing control of the Black Sea Fleet’s headquarters in Sevastopol, putting to rest a longstanding dispute between Kyiv and Moscow.

That Putin’s skilled opportunism makes him an effective strategist does not mean he is infallible. The equally pervasive myth that Putin is a master strategist, a chess grandmaster of global politics, is also untrue: Russia has made strategic mistakes in the last several years, including its military intervention

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in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, where it has largely failed to achieve its political objectives six years on. All that is left is a simmering semi-frozen conflict from which Moscow appears unable to extract itself. For Western policymakers, this means we should neither minimize nor mythologize Putin’s strategic abilities. Rather, we should recognize that he is a strategic opportunist: he will continue to seize unexpected opportunities to advance Russia’s national interests when and where they arise. We must therefore expect the unexpected and be equally ready to respond flexibly and rapidly to ensure Russian actions do not create “facts on the ground” that harm long-term U.S. interests.

**Conclusion**

Developing an effective response to Russia’s grand strategy requires a clear understanding of what that strategy is—and what it is not. This paper has sought to contribute to that discussion by identifying common myths about Russia’s pursuit of its core national security interests in the twenty-first century.

There is little doubt that Russia has a grand strategy, regardless of whether it is reflected in foundational national security documents. In analyzing Russia’s words and deeds, it seems clear it has well-developed strategic objectives and that Moscow coordinates a wide range of resources and methods to pursue them. In other words, Russia behaves strategically.

But does Russia have a successful grand strategy? Over the last few years, Russia has achieved several key steps toward its grand strategic objectives, all while encountering and adapting to unexpected challenges and opportunities. They are closer to achieving their objectives than they were 5, 10, or 20 years ago. By this metric, Russia has notched some notable strategic successes. And yet one could rightly ask whether their asymmetric toolkit of disruptive tactics—no matter how effectively wielded against the United States—is truly up to the task of bringing about the kind of multipolar world order Russia seeks. Putin has proven adept at playing a weak hand to maximum effect. But does Russia have the means to bring about a fundamental reordering of the international system?

It is likely it does not: it is one thing to needle your opponent and chip away at the edges of their power; it is quite another to bring down the whole system and rebuild something in its place. If Russia’s vision of a multipolar world order dominated by a club of great powers with special privileges comes to pass, it will have less to do with Russia’s efforts and more to do with the United States’ abdication of leadership and China’s rise into the void. And yet, as the Kremlin’s machinations in recent years have shown, Moscow can cause a great deal of trouble along the way.

*Robert Person* is an associate professor of international relations at the United States Military Academy and director of West Point’s curriculum in International Affairs. His current book project, Russia’s Grand Strategy in the 21st Century, will be published by the Brookings Institution Press in 2022.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the official policy or position of the United States Military Academy, United States Army, or Department of Defense.

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Rearming Arms Control Should Start with New START Extension

JIM GOLBY

The Trump administration has articulated a bold vision for arms control, but it has chosen the wrong time and approach to achieve its ambitious goals. China's growing nuclear arsenal, its intermediate-range missiles, and Russia's exotic nuclear systems and treaty violations are real threats to U.S. national interests, and arms control agreements can—and should—be important tools in addressing these developments.

Of course, Trump's abandonment of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) and Open Skies treaties and other agreements raises questions about his commitment to arms control (and multilateral cooperation more broadly), but there is at least a thin veneer of strategic logic in these actions: Russia was cheating and bilateral limitations potentially place the United States at a strategic disadvantage in its strategic competition with both Russia and China. Since arms control is a means to advancing U.S. interests rather than an end in itself, the United States is better off freeing itself of these unilateral constraints.33

Despite lingering concerns about whether the logic behind withdrawal from previous agreements will, in fact, create more favorable conditions for the United States,34 the pressing question going forward is whether and how to use arms control agreements to advance U.S. interests and—in particular—whether to extend the New START nuclear agreement for five additional years. So far, Trump's gambit to bring Russia and China to the negotiation table to discuss trilateral arms control has failed to achieve any concrete results. Moreover, with New START set to expire in February 2021, there's not enough time to reach a complicated agreement.35

The best course of action for the administration now, however, is clear: it should extend New START immediately and without preconditions. Trump should not take this step because he accepts China’s growing arsenal or Russia’s novel nuclear programs. He should take the step because New START extension will buy the time needed for the United States to place itself in a more advantageous strategic position to influence Russian, Chinese, and NATO allies’ behavior in the future.

**Strategy and Arms Control**

It is unwise to consider arms control outside the broader context of U.S. strategic interaction and national security objectives. At least since Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin penned their classic, *Strategy and Arms Control*, arms control has been a key component of U.S. military policy and strategic competition.\(^{36}\) Arms control deals were a critical aspect of U.S. success during the Cold War, helping to slow the development and deployment of Soviet missiles and allowing the United States time to develop more competitive military technologies and concepts.\(^{37}\)

Despite Schelling and Halperin’s admonition that “the aims of arms control and the aims of national military strategy should be substantially the same,” U.S. arms control discussions sometimes pit arms control agreements against military tools or, more commonly, limit the scope of U.S. arms control policy to only the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship. To the extent that Russia’s nuclear arsenal constituted the greatest potential threat to U.S. interests, such an approach had much wisdom. Even if such a simplifying assumption once made sense, however, growing Chinese power and ambition made the need to account for broader strategic goals more vital to discussions of strategy and arms control.\(^{39}\)

To say arms control is a tool of strategy is not to say that this tool is being used strategically. Strategy is an “interactive process of influencing other actors or groups to advance one’s priorities.”\(^{40}\) In order to advance a nation’s priorities, a strategic plan requires a theory of influence, the flexibility to anticipate and react to the behavior of other strategic actors, and a clear sequencing to guide its approach.\(^{42}\) Although the Trump administration has wisely broadened the aims of his arms control agenda to include Chinese advances and Russian violations, its current strategic plan fails on all three counts.

Early in the administration, there may have been an argument for testing whether the threat of New START expiration might provide additional leverage for Russian cooperation in bringing China to the negotiating table. Now that it is clear this attempt has failed, the administration is attempting new bilateral negotiations with Russia. A close examination reveals that the Trump administration has

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failed to articulate a clear vision for its new talks with Russians, overestimated the ways in which New START expiration would limit future military flexibility, and risked ceding precious years during which the United States could develop a more competitive approach. As I describe below, renewing New START now would help mitigate these concerns.

**Russia: Distrust and Verify**

The U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship is in a much more difficult position today than it was when the New START treaty was first negotiated in 2010. Russia is actively working to undermine international rules and U.S. interests. It has violated its neighbors’ sovereignty and attempted to change borders with force in Ukraine. It is actively working to destabilize the United States and NATO allies through disinformation, cyberattacks, assassinations, and corruption designed to weaken and discredit democratic institutions. Russia has also violated both the INF and Open Skies treaties.\(^{43}\)

Can the United States trust Russia to be a reliable partner in arms control? No, and it never could. Much has been made of President Ronald Reagan’s 1986 quote that it would be necessary to “trust, but verify” arms control agreements with the Soviet Union. However, his statement of “trust” had more to do with disarming domestic political opponents and signaling to the Soviets he would enter negotiations in good faith than it did with expressing confidence in Soviet compliance.\(^{44}\) In reality, arms control based on trust with a reliable partner would require no verification or agreement at all.

Despite clear violations of the INF and Open Skies treaties, even Trump’s own Department of State categorizes Russia’s consistent compliance with strategic arms treaties, and New START in particular, as a “success story.”\(^ {45}\) In part, Russia’s compliance is due to the treaty’s robust verification regime: U.S. military and intelligence officials consistently have praised New START as a useful tool for assessing Russia’s arsenal and verifying its strategic nuclear behavior. Without New START verification measures, the United States would have less insight into Russian nuclear forces. As the deputy commander of U.S. Strategic Command has noted about the verification regime, “If we were to lose that for any reason in the future, we would have to go look for other ways to fill in the gaps for the things we get from those verifications.”\(^ {46}\) Although the United States may be able to fill in some—though not all—intelligence gaps, it would do so at higher cost and with less certainty. The end of New START would lead to increased demands for intelligence collection and require the reallocation of national technical means and analysts from other collection priorities such as China, Iran, or North Korea.\(^ {47}\) As a result, verification would be more costly and less certain, and the United States would face more significant opportunity costs and intelligence collection challenges.


The Trump administration has, however, raised valid concerns about the novel and non-strategic nuclear systems that Russia has developed that are not covered by the parameters of New START. Russia has repeatedly stated that negotiations about these systems will stay off the table until the United States is willing to discuss its own missile defense systems, a compromise no U.S. administration has been yet willing to make due to concerns about Iranian and North Korean ballistic missile programs. Nevertheless, no exotic Russian systems are likely to be fully operational until after 2026 when New START would expire for good, and the Trump administration has not explained how or why the treaty’s expiration would curtail Russian development of these exotic systems or why Russia would continue to abide by New START provisions.48

One possibility is that Russia would continue to abide by the provisions of New START as a way to avoid triggering an expensive arms race. However, there are compelling reasons why Russia might choose to break out of the treaty limits despite budgetary constraints. Due to procurement timelines and modernization cycles, Russia is far better positioned to take advantage of already hot production lines to initiate a nuclear arms race than the United States, where Pentagon procurement processes are slowly lurching toward a massive but long-term nuclear modernization that will require decades to complete.49 Moreover, the U.S. technological and industrial base currently is not prepared to rapidly ramp up for this type of competition, potentially placing the United States at an arms disadvantage vis-à-vis Russia for at least the next five to ten years.

On top of these factors, a future Trump or Biden administration could find itself facing severe political and budgetary constraints that would make engaging in an arms race with the Russians—or the Chinese—more difficult.50 Even the current political consensus in favor of the nuclear modernization program rests on a fragile deal to proceed with arms control negotiations and nuclear modernization simultaneously. As a result, the death of New START in 2021 might allow Russia a head start in a potential arms race—and could make future attempts to achieve national security objectives, through arms control or military strategy, more difficult. Ironically, allowing New START to expire in 2021 would give the United States less flexibility to adapt to the strategic environment—not more. It would remove the stringent verification regime, cede the short-term advantage to Russia in a potential arms race, upset the fragile domestic political consensus in favor of nuclear modernization, and reduce the number of strategic choices available to U.S. leaders.

Is Time on China’s Side?

With a nuclear arsenal less than one-tenth the size of either the United States or Russia, China at present has little incentive to come to the table. Last year, Fu Cong—the director-general of the Department of Arms Control in China’s Foreign Ministry—stated that future negotiations must require the United States to agree to “reduce its arsenal to China’s level” or allow China to “raise its arsenal to the U.S. level.”51 Moreover, despite wishful thinking by the Trump administration, Russia has not taken

48. Ibid.
any significant steps to pressure China to cooperate and Russian leaders have been clear they view Chinese participation as a U.S. problem.\textsuperscript{52} Any successful effort to advance trilateral arms control in the current environment will require a longer-term approach.

China has taken advantage of its position outside the extant arms control regime to improve and expand its nuclear capabilities and to develop new land-based missiles. On its current trajectory, the number of Chinese nuclear warheads is set to at least double within the next decade—while including weak or nonexistent transparency measures. Additionally, China has produced more than 2,200 mid- and long-range land-based missiles that the United States and Russia have been, until recently, prohibited from developing or deploying under the INF treaty.\textsuperscript{53}

Although it is unclear whether China could accelerate expansion of its nuclear and missile programs, a renewed bilateral arms race between the United States and Russia over the next five years could add fuel to Chinese desires to ramp up production to close the nuclear gap—at the same time that U.S. military and intelligence agencies would be struggling to compensate for intelligence gaps created by the loss of the New START verification regime.

Regardless of whether the Trump administration or a future Biden administration extends New START for five years in February 2021, New START will expire no later than 2026. If the United States is serious about creating a more expansive arms control regime that includes China, it would be in a much more favorable position to do so by extending New START immediately and using the next five years to take the necessary steps to compete in a post-New START environment. At a minimum, this time would allow the United States to make progress on modernization and recapitalization of nuclear infrastructure as well as developing additional technical means and analysts to offset intelligence collection that could be necessary beyond 2026. More importantly, however, it would allow the United States to develop a more coherent long-term strategic plan to influence China to agree to transparency and verification measures. Such a plan likely would involve not only investments in U.S. military capabilities that could offset some of China's growing tactical military advantages in the Asia-Pacific region, but also efforts to build on the New START regime to further lower the number of total and deployed U.S. and Russian nuclear warheads. It would also require sustained diplomatic engagement and pressure with NATO allies and U.S. allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region.

\textit{Stronger with Allies}

Although the Trump administration's goal is a grand, trilateral arms control agreement, success in such an endeavor will likely depend on cooperation from a much broader cast of nations. As a result, the United States must consider how it will influence allies and partners to support these global efforts.

According to Bob Bell, the former defense adviser at the United States Mission to NATO, a United States commitment to nuclear arms control—and to New START, in particular—was essential to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{52} "Russia Won't Force China to Join Nuclear Arms Talks – Russian Envoy," TASS, June 20, 2020, https://tass.com/politics/1170045.
\end{itemize}
garnering consensus around NATO’s common security approach at the 2018 Brussels Summit. It is true the Trump administration has largely been able to bring allies on board in support of its decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty. However, a post-New START political and strategic environment in Europe could look far different.

There are significant—and sometimes vocal—domestic constituencies in Belgium, Germany, and other allies’ capitals who oppose NATO’s approach to nuclear burden-sharing. If it looks like the United States has failed to put forward serious proposals to manage nuclear risk and either Russian or U.S. nuclear arsenals begin to grow, this domestic opposition is likely to increase and constrain political leaders. Even in the current environment, gaining allied agreement about U.S. strategic force modernization and NATO’s nuclear strategy and posture is challenging. Increased discord is likely to only make future consensus on arms control agreements even more contentious—and less likely to succeed.

Moreover, failure to extend New START in 2021 or to replace it in 2026 would mark a major setback for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)—perhaps the largest such setback since the NPT was signed in 1970. While there is legitimate debate about whether and how much the NPT itself has constrained nuclear proliferation, there is little doubt nonnuclear nations are already frustrated with the pace of nuclear arms reductions by Russia and the United States that is required under the NPT. Without some action on arms control, these nations would further question U.S. moral leadership on arms control, making security competition and future nonproliferation efforts more challenging.

**Conclusion**

As the Trump administration contemplates whether to extend the New START treaty, the United States finds itself in a challenging strategic position—with Russia and China both exploiting U.S. vulnerabilities in some areas and closing the gap between their capabilities and U.S. capabilities in others. Yet these challenges are exactly why the United States must renew the New START treaty. While it has limitations and there are legitimate arms control concerns not covered by its terms, extension of New START is a necessary first step to regaining the U.S. strategic advantage that has been lost through years of distraction in the Middle East and North Africa.

New START extension alone is not sufficient for the United States to compete successfully with Russia and China. Nevertheless, it can provide the time and conditions for the United States to develop a realistic and coherent strategic plan to advance U.S. interests in 2026 and beyond. Bringing China into a trilateral arms control deal—and even keeping Russia in, and in compliance with, a long-term strategic arms control agreement—will not be easy. But if the United States uses the next five years wisely, it can put itself in a much more favorable position to engage in great power competition with Russia and China.

The Trump administration should immediately extend New START until 2026, not in spite of the agreement’s failures to account for exotic Russian nuclear systems and China’s growing nuclear and missile arsenals, but because New START will help the United States set the pace and timing of strategic competition to deal with them. Arms control is a tool of strategy, not an end in itself.


55. Ibid.
But there should be little doubt: arms control—in the form of New START extension—is the right tool to use now so the United States and its allies will be best positioned to carry out the Trump administration’s ambitious agenda for great power competition with Russia and China.

Jim Golby is a senior fellow at the Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas at Austin, the co-host of the “Thank You For Your Service” podcast, and an adjunct senior fellow at CNAS and the U.S. Studies Centre.
The Best or Worst of Both Worlds?: Russia’s Mixed Military Manpower System

GIL BARNDOLLAR

Thirty years after the Cold War ended, conscription is making a comeback in Europe. Sweden reinstated selective conscription in 2018, joining the rest of the Nordic nations. Lithuania returned to a military draft in 2015, following Baltic ally Estonia, which has maintained mandatory military service since independence in 1991. France has begun trialing a limited national service program for teenagers, and even Germany is rolling out a voluntary national service program next year. For the prospective enemy of these new draftees, conscription never left. Since the fall of the USSR, Russia has continued to man its armed forces with conscripts. However, the days of mass mobilization and a behemoth draftee army are gone.

Since the commencement of the Serdyukov and Shoigu reforms in 2008, Russia has reduced its conscription term from 24 months to 12 and instituted the large-scale use of professional enlisted soldiers. Russia currently fields an active-duty military of just under 1 million men. Of this force, approximately 260,000 are conscripts and 410,000 are contract soldiers (kontraktniki). The shortened 12-month conscript term provides at most five months of utilization time for these servicemen. Conscripts remain about a quarter of the force even in elite commando (spetsnaz) units.

The reformed and revitalized Russian military is increasingly powerful and proficient, with small elements deployed in successful combat operations in Ukraine and Syria. However, Russia remains suspended between the large but limited mass army of its past and the expensive but proficient Western professional military model. Does this mixed manpower system give Russia the best or the worst of both worlds?


57. Interview with Michael Kofman, Senior Research Scientist, CNA, August 13, 2020. The remaining 230,000 servicemen are officers, to include warrant officers.

NCO Corps

Conscript armies usually lack the long-service, professional noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps that is considered the bedrock of a modern Western military. Instead, junior officers and warrant officers fill most roles that NCOs perform in volunteer militaries. Since World War II, the USSR and now Russia have mostly done without NCOs in practice if not in name. As U.S. Army Lieutenant General William Odom noted of Soviet NCOs: “They found themselves formally in charge of stariki [second-year conscript] privates. In reality, the stariki were in charge. A new sergeant might have a ded [senior conscript] who was formally his subordinate. Yet he could hardly give orders to his ded.”

Almost all militaries will have some servicemembers wearing corporal or sergeant’s stripes: the question is whether these soldiers are given the authority and autonomy to be true small unit leaders. Properly trained and empowered NCOs enable a unit to react more quickly in a dynamic combat environment. NCOs are key to the doctrine of initiative and decentralized command that the U.S. Army calls “Mission Command.”

A functional NCO corps is also a prerequisite for conquering one of the Russian military’s most persistent problems: hazing. In the Red Army, brutal hazing—dedovshchina—was systemic. Originating in the gulags, dedovshchina’s rigid, seniority-based caste system came to dominate every aspect of conscript life. Senior soldiers subjugated, robbed, and brutalized junior draftees while officers looked the other way.

Hazing destroys two of the keys to military performance, cohesion and retention. One of the era’s samizdat memoirs, by a mid-1970s draftee named Kyril Podrabinek, was appropriately titled The Unfortunates. Podrabinek wrote that in his regiment, “if combat action began, one half of the company might shoot the other.” That never seems to have actually happened, but hazing almost certainly contributed to Russia’s defeat in Afghanistan. And despite considerable inducements, only about 1 percent of Soviet draftees reenlisted in the Red Army.

Dedovshchina intensified in the early post-Soviet period. Political officers (zampolit) were removed, and junior officers, who might at least be tempted to intervene in extreme cases of hazing, were focused on keeping their jobs, if not also moonlighting in another occupation just to survive. One report, quoted by the BBC in 2002, even alleged that senior soldiers were selling their juniors into prostitution. At least 15 soldiers died due to hazing in the first quarter of 2004, while the Russian Ministry of Defense’s own data listed suicide (much of it likely a result of hazing) as the cause of 40 percent of all military fatalities in 2006.

63. Ibid., 41.
65. Ibid., 620.
Halving the conscription term and the broader injection of money into the Russian military appears to have lessened the breadth and severity of dedovshchina. Meaningful data, though, is hard to come by. In 2015, President Putin signed a decree making information on military losses in peacetime a state secret. One Russian news website claims that in 2018 more than 1,100 Russian servicemembers were convicted of abuse of power and 372 for charges of violence toward their comrades. Anecdotal accounts also speak to the stubborn persistence of extreme hazing. In October 2019, a 20-year-old conscript gunned down eight of his fellow soldiers in the town of Gorny in Russia’s Far East, saying he had no choice after they had made his life “hell.”

Russia has been working to create a proper NCO system, but this remains a largely unrealized project. Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov cut 180,000 officers by 2010 in order to both reduce costs and free up space for NCOs. But without an effective NCO in place, 70,000 were recommissioned the following year. Since 2009, a dedicated NCO academy at the Ryazan Higher Airborne School has put candidates through a 34-month course designed to produce enlisted leaders. But with just 2,000 graduates annually, this program is only slowly changing the culture of the Russian army.

**Reserves and Mobilization**

Like NCOs, an operational reserve remains a mostly unrealized goal of the 2008 reforms. Russia’s mass mobilization army died not long after the USSR. The focus since then has been on reforming and revitalizing the active-duty military, with a general bias for capability over capacity and a prioritization of air and rocket forces over the army. Given the parlous state of the active-duty military until fairly recently, a functional reserve has resided firmly in the category of “nice to have.”

There are ample stores of weapons and vehicles to outfit reserve units; manpower and readiness are the impediments to a Russian operational reserve. Though there are over 900,000 recent veterans who could potentially be recalled to service, Russia can currently summon an active reserve force of just 4,000 to 5,000 troops. Fewer than 10 percent of conscripted soldiers carry out any refresher training in the five years after they end their active service. The Ministry of Defense admitted in 2015 that the whereabouts of ex-soldiers are not effectively tracked, making targeted mobilization impractical.

Two territorial defense battalions were formed in 2016 with the mission of protecting key infrastructure and thus freeing up more active-duty troops to fight. This force has only grown modestly in the years since its formation.

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69. Ibid., 199.

70. Galeotti, The Modern Russian Army, 43.


73. Ibid.
Money remains the firm constraint on the reserves. The Duma planned expenditures of just 279.4 million rubles ($3.7 million) in 2014, 288.3 million in 2015 and 324.9 million in 2016 for reserve mobilization exercises. President Putin has repeatedly tasked the military to prioritize reservist mobilization, issuing orders to that effect in 2013, 2014, and 2015. He appears to be making limited headway with his own generals.

This may be a result of skepticism about major land warfare within the upper echelons of the military and Ministry of Defense. Former Russian senior officials and analysts interviewed by the RAND Corporation in 2017 unanimously dismissed the idea of orienting the Russian military on fighting major land wars with peer competitors. The decade of reform and modernization has enabled the military to capably conduct limited expeditionary operations, while modernization at the other end of the spectrum has secured Russia’s strategic nuclear forces on land, in the air, and in naval bastions. Russia’s military leaders seem to think the prospect of a major conventional war with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is highly unlikely.

U.S. defense analysts and commentators have occasionally raised concerns about America’s inability to fight a long war. Yet without an operational reserve, Russia’s forces would actually be more brittle than NATO’s in a sustained conflict. Should Russia find itself in a major conventional war, it will fight with the military it has on hand. The Red Army’s “hordes” are long gone and the current manpower system has not yet fashioned a credible replacement.

Cost

The cost of manpower is also a key reason for the maintenance of conscription. The Russians rightly refer to their professional servicemen as “contract soldiers,” not the more idealistic “volunteers.” Those contracts require money. The average monthly military salary for a contract soldier is over 62,000 rubles (roughly $1,102). This is coupled with an attractive benefits and pension package. Conscripts, by comparison, receive a monthly stipend of no more than 2,000 rubles.

The money and human resources Russia spend to market its military and recruit contract soldiers is unknown but likely high. The U.S. Army, by comparison, has the equivalent of a brigade worth of high-performing NCOs and officers dedicated to meeting its recruiting goal (roughly double that of Russia’s annual contract soldier intake). Even with a partial conscription system, personnel accounted for the

75. Radin et al., The Future of the Russian Military, 16.
largest share of Russian defense spending from 2000 to 2016, making up 46 percent of all spending on average.\(^7^9\) In constant 2014 dollars, personnel costs rose from $4 billion in 2000 to $30 billion in 2013.\(^8^0\) Cost, more than any other factor, likely explains the stalled growth in *kontraktniki*. After initially growing swiftly as a share of military manpower, contract soldier numbers have flatlined at around 400,000 for the past several years. A goal of 499,000 contract soldiers by 2020 was quietly extended and reduced to 475,600 by the end of 2025, according to TASS.\(^8^1\) The specter of service in Ukraine or Syria also may have dampened enthusiasm for enlisting, though tours in both theaters are short and casualties have been low.

Contrary to some facile analyses, demographics are not a major impediment to the maintenance and even growth of Russia’s military forces. Russia is currently only drafting about 5 percent of a year group, fewer men than in even the selective service systems of Norway and Sweden.\(^8^2\) Russia’s birth rate dropped precipitously in the 1990s but has slowly recovered since 2000. One Russian military expert predicts that Russia’s military manpower pool (ages 18 to 27) will slowly increase until 2033.\(^8^3\) Despite the catastrophic demographic impacts of the 1990s, Russia has already demonstrated the ability to slowly but steadily grow its armed forces. Rubles, not birth rates, are the key constraint going forward.

### The Military and Society

Finally, Russian military leaders believe that maintaining even a limited conscription system provides one critical strategic advantage: it instills patriotism in the young and binds society to the military.

Due mainly to *dedovshchina*, conscription was widely hated in the USSR and avoided by any means possible. Deferments and outright bribes kept more and more men out of uniform as the Soviet system entered its final years. The situation only worsened in the 1990s. By 2001, 88 percent of eligible men had some form of deferment or exemption from military service.\(^8^4\)

Modernization, major pay increases, operational experience, and partial success in overcoming *dedovshchina* all contributed to a major shift in Russians’ view of their military. Though only about 1 in 20 eligible young men have to serve, there has been a crackdown on both deferments and on outright evasion of military service. Conscripts are not allowed to serve abroad, and contracted soldiers are not treated like cannon fodder. Both Russia’s society and military are far more casualty-conscious than they once were (though casualties among private military contractors such as the Wagner Group are a different matter). As a result of these reforms, the Russian military is now broadly embraced by Russian society, to an extent unprecedented in the past half century. The military is now one of the country’s most trusted institutions and a source of pride to most Russians.

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\(^8^0\) Crane, Oliker, and Nichiporuk, *Trends in Russia’s Armed Forces*, 12.


\(^8^4\) Herpspring, "Dedovshchina in the Russian Army," 619.
This pride appears to have firmed up Russian support for conscription. In 2011, Russians polled by the independent Levada Center were roughly split on whether they favored continued conscription or a fully contracted military. By 2017, polling found that 58 percent of Russians support the preservation of conscription. Russia can look to its potential competitors and enemies to see the impact of conscription on a society's will to fight. Finland, which embraces a concept of "total defense" and has had universal male conscription for its entire history, boasts by far the highest "will to fight" in Europe. Seventy-four percent of Finns told Gallup pollsters in 2015 that they would take up arms to defend their country. In Western Europe, where virtually all nations have consigned conscription to the history books, fewer than a third say they would fight for their country. In the United States, nearing 50 years since the end of conscription, the will to fight is under 50 percent and the propensity of young men to serve is just 18 percent, well under half of what it was in the 1980s.

**Conclusion**

There are certainly lingering personnel problems for the Russian military after the past decade's shift to a majority-professional force. The continuing lack of a capable NCO corps and the inability to stand up a real operational reserve are foremost among these issues. The former inhibits tactical proficiency while the latter is an important indicator that Russia is not seriously preparing for a major war with NATO.

Nonetheless, Russia's current manpower system is a net positive for the Russian military. Conscription saves a significant amount of money for a force with global ambitions and enormous borders to protect. It also provides a trained pool of veterans who could man a large reserve if such a system was suitably organized and funded. Most importantly, even a partial conscription system helps to bind the Russian people to their military and prevent a potentially destabilizing civil-military divide. Russia's combination of conscripts and kontraktniki may not yet provide the best of both worlds—but it has the potential to do so.

*Gil Barndollar* is a senior fellow at Defense Priorities and at the Catholic University of America's Center for the Study of Statesmanship. He served as a U.S. Marine infantry officer from 2009 to 2016. The views expressed above are his alone.

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Constructing Memory Alliances: How Russia Uses History to Bolster Its Influence and Undermine Rivals Abroad

JADE McGILYNN

Introduction

Russian state, media, and diplomatic actors are exporting a militaristic conception of memory to bolster its influence abroad—and undermine that of its rivals. Through media and diplomatic institutions, Russia is using its levers of influence and public diplomacy to create memory alliances with target foreign audiences.89 “Memory alliances” can be defined as informal or formal associations formed on the basis of a shared narrative of the past. This more constructive approach to history differentiates memory alliances from memory wars, a staple tactic in the Kremlin’s foreign policy, as seen in the recent dispute with the Czech Republic over the removal of the Marshall Konev statue or the diplomatic spat with Poland in 2019 over who started World War II. If memory wars see Russia (and other countries) instrumentalize history to sow enmity, then memory alliances are part of constructing partnerships and soft power, or at least that is how it appears at first.

Appearances, as ever, can be deceptive: while Russia does use this more constructive approach to history and memory to improving its image, it often does so while simultaneously using that same history to fuel internal divisions and polarizing voices in target countries. In promoting certain historical episodes (World War II, the Yugoslav Wars, Soviet achievements), the aim is not only to bolster Russia’s image but also to undermine that of geopolitical rivals by contrasting their historical actions with Russia’s. Moreover, the historical narratives selected ostensibly as points of unity are often adapted to amplify and encourage extremist and polarizing voices in the target countries, a tactic seen in various analyses of Russian influence operations.90 Serbia, a country where polls show a

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89. In this paper, the term “Russia” will be used as a shorthand to refer to Russian state actors in the diplomatic and media spheres, including those working for Sputnik, Russian embassies, and Rossotrudnichestvo around the world.

majority have positive views of Russia and Putin but where Russia must tussle for influence with the European Union and the United States, provides an illustrative case study of Russian memory alliance promotion and construction.91

The Domestic Context

While Russia has begun to instrumentalize history in service of its foreign policy aims, this tactic originated at home. Since 2012, the Russian government has invested heavily in promoting history as the unifying feature of Russian identity around which its various nationalities could unite, while still reserving a leadership role for ethnic Russians.92 Russian state-aligned media and politicians presented those who disagreed with their view as traitors and foreign agents, rendering history a geopolitical struggle. Memory was militarized, with journalists and politicians employing bellicose language to describe the formation of “brigades” that would battle alleged falsifiers of history.93

This militarization of historical interpretation also featured in the Russian information warfare doctrine released at the end of December 2016. The doctrine explicitly connected supposed historical falsifications of Russian military history with current defense policy, describing as its main aim:

The neutralization of hostile activities in the information and psychological realms, including those aimed at tearing apart the historical foundations and patriotic traditions linked to defending the Fatherland.94

The text implied that an assault on the Russian state’s historical narrative was an assault on the very foundations of the nation. In this way, Russian politicians converted dissent from the official historical line into an existential threat. In his 2015 address to the Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin cited Russian citizens’ willingness to defend their “national interests, their history,” as if they were the same thing.95 Moreover, the government spent billions of rubles creating new historical initiatives, military history clubs, camps, and festivals focused particularly on recreating military and patriotic history.96 The purpose was to provide a sanitized version of history around which everyone could unify, bolstering patriotism while also heightening anti-Western sentiment by recalling past conflicts.

**Distant Memories**

Having had success with these tactics at home, Russia has begun to export elements of this approach as part of the more assertive foreign policy that emerged during Vladimir Putin’s third presential term. The tactics used to promote memory alliances are similar to the domestic uses of history described above and involve using selective history to bolster Russia’s image (often by emphasizing shared history or alliances), as well as to undermine opponents. However, if in Russia the narrative is broadly unifying, Russia’s memory alliances abroad have aimed to inflame existing divisions and polarization. This tactic has found some success in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), where Russia has a shared history with and an aggressive compatriot policy in many countries. But Serbia provides a different type of case study of how Russia creates memory alliances with target audiences who are not compatriots and do not form part of the former Soviet Union.

**How to (Try to) Build a Memory Alliance**

In Serbia, Russia’s promotion of memory alliances has leaned heavily on Russian state-affiliated media and diplomatic channels. Memory alliance narratives can be identified as references to a historical event that presents either the target audience or Russia in a positive light as heroes or victims and which is targeted at a Serbian audience, rather than Russian expats. A content analysis of 51 YouTube videos produced by Sputnik (the Serbian language arm of the Russian state-funded news agency) and analyzed on July 28, 2020 shows that 27 of them included a historical narrative that stressed Russo-Serbian unity by emphasizing that Russia supported prominent Serbian interpretations of history (e.g., of Kosovo) or by promoting a heroic episode of Russian history, or way of commemorating this, to Serbian audiences. The scale of findings was similar for the Facebook account for the Russian embassy in Serbia, where 21 out of the 49 posts in June used history to promote Russo-Serbian cooperation. Evidently, memory alliance construction is a prominent and multichannel tactic in the Kremlin’s influence operations tool kit in Serbia.

Two historical events surfaced repeatedly and were used to promote simple messages conducive to Russo-Serbian memory alliances:

- **Historical event: the Yugoslav wars, especially the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia and the Kosovo crisis**
  - Message 1: Russia supported Serbia/Yugoslavia during the 1990s.
  - Message 2: Europe and the United States attacked Serbia during the 1990s.

- **Historical event: World War II, Soviet liberation of parts of Serbia**
  - Message 1: The USSR—led by Russia—liberated Belgrade and heroically defeated the Nazis.
  - Message 2: Serbia also fought bravely, and Russia respects and defends the memory of this bravery.

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Message 3: European countries deliberately ignore Serbia’s suffering in WWII, especially at the hands of the Nazi-supporting Croatian Ustaše government.

These two tragic and emotional events were selected to bolster Russia’s image and denigrate that of the United States and European countries (often specifically Germany)—one front in Russia’s tussle for influence in Serbia with the European Union, with Aleksandar Vučić’s increasingly authoritarian government ostensibly still on a pathway to EU membership.98

Russian references to the history of the Yugoslav wars and NATO bombing play on existing cleavages by employing a revisionist and highly selective narrative popular among Serbian nationalists and apologists for the Bosnian Serb war criminals. This version of history downplays Serb atrocities or ignores them entirely, instead placing the suffering of Serbs center stage but removing any context. In this way, the Russian message feeds into a nationalist narrative that crimes against Serbs go unpunished or are deliberately ignored, while Serbs are punished for ostensibly lesser or concocted crimes against Bosniaks or Croats.99 Russian sources focus heavily on Operation Storm, a NATO-backed Croat offensive to ethnically cleanse Croatian regions of Serbs, as well as the NATO bombing of Serbia in response to its treatment of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The framing of these narratives also builds on existing tendencies in Serbia to conflate the 1990s Yugoslav wars with World War II, especially by claiming that supporters of Croatian independence in the 1990s were merely reincarnated Ustaše fighters planning to restart their 1940s genocidal campaign against Serbs.100

Furthermore, Russian state-affiliated actors manipulated and invoked these Serbian cultural memories to bolster Russia’s own image as a potential ally and remind Serbs of those times when Russia’s rivals had attacked them. For example, the message that Russia supported Serbia while NATO (confated with the European Union and United States) bombed the Serbs was a mainstay in a 78-day series created by Sputnik in 2019 and encompassed videos, interviews, and reportage, including a special section on their website.101 In a subseries entitled “20 Years after NATO Aggression,” Sputnik described the 1999 bombing of Serbia in highly emotive terms, focusing on injured children and conspiracies as to why NATO bombed Serbia.102 Another popular video blamed George Soros for U.S. involvement in the Yugoslav wars. At no point was there any mention of NATO’s openly stated justification of the bombing campaign. Language from the series description assured viewers:

We will remember the innocent victims and the heroes, known and unknown. We will show the grimacing faces and bloodcurdling phrases pronounced by NATO commanders and the leaders of countries in the Western alliance. We will dissect NATO crimes from 1999 from all angles.\textsuperscript{103}

This translated quotation typifies the narrative structure of Russian memory alliance promotion in Serbia and elsewhere: an initial emphasis on shared pain and connection through memory of historical victims and heroes quickly morphs into a geopolitical commentary. Similar approaches could be found across various content engaging not only with the 1990s but also World War II.

The embassy’s Facebook content at times advanced similar messages to Sputnik, but on the whole, Russia’s digital diplomacy in Serbia has tended to balance content between a critique of NATO and celebration of Russian history/historical allyship with Serbia. This was evident in posts published on June 16 and 18, 2020 on Facebook that criticized the West for destroying Yugoslavia, attacking Serbia, and ignoring Serb grievances but also firmly underlined Russian support—then and now—for Serbia’s grievances.\textsuperscript{104} Rather than accusing NATO of all manner of crimes, this more toned-down approach argues instead that the NATO campaign, Kosovo independence, and various other events related to the 1990s wars were illegal and unjust—a narrative that appeals directly to extremist views in Serbia, including those of nationalists critical of President Vučić for his willingness to compromise on Kosovo, which, if it happened, would reduce Russia’s influence over Serbia as one of the few major powers supporting its claims there. Thus, an important element of Russia’s appeal is in providing succor to these ostensibly unfairly ignored “historical truths” in Serbia.

A similar message is reproduced through Russkii (the Belgrade branch of Rossotrudnichestvo, Russia’s main cultural organization abroad, which has been accused of conducting illicit influence operations in Serbia) which emphasizes a general narrative of Russia’s doomed efforts to protect Serbia in the 1990s. This serves to underline the need for a strong Russia which can come to its ally’s assistance. One of the best examples of this was a 2019 event to mark the unveiling of a bust of Evgenii Primakov, former foreign minister of Russia during the 1990s, who famously ordered his Washington-bound flight to be turned around in mid-air when he was alerted onboard to the beginning of NATO’s bombing campaign.\textsuperscript{105} That the seemingly inconsequential act of the “U-Turn over the Atlantic” should justify a bust reflects the paucity of Russian support to Serbia, as well as the great efforts being made to find evidence of memory alliances. There was considerable engagement from the Serbian side, with President Vučić, the Serbian prime minister, defense minister, and other politicians all in attendance for the Russkii Dom unveiling. Interestingly, it is Evgenii Primakov’s grandson and namesake who recently took over as head of Rossotrudnichestvo. In an interview he gave soon after taking the post, Primakov’s grandson suggested a rebrand and new name to focus the organization more on improving Russia’s image and soft power beyond the so-called russkii mir, including, presumably, tactics such as these.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
Other Rosssotrudnichestvo’s events in Serbia relate to World War II. Some of these are commemorative events focused on Russian sacrifice and shared Russo-Serbian remembering. This has involved the export of Russian practices, including the Saint George Ribbon and the Immortal Regiment procession, which have been adopted with enthusiasm by Serbian elites, who wear them during parades. The orange-and-black Saint George Ribbon is now a mainstay of Serbian Victory Day celebrations, despite being a recent implant, and Sputnik has been instrumental in promoting the ribbon, which is described as not only a mark of commemoration but also of Russia and Serbia’s historical alliance. This friendship reaches back into the imperial times, thereby reflecting the ribbon’s roots in the eighteenth century, and was reinvented as a commemorative symbol in 2005. The ribbon’s novelty has allowed it to assume different meanings; for example, in Russia since 2014, it has been used simultaneously to express support for Russian-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine, a signification that has not mentioned in promotional materials in Serbia. The Immortal Regiment is another newly invented tradition exported to Serbia and around the world. The regiment is a procession of family members holding portraits of relatives who fought in or contributed to the war effort. The regiment was originally set up as a grassroots organization by three independent journalists in Tomsk in 2012. However, in an interview with the author in August 2018, Sergei Lapenkov, the spokesman and a founding member of the regiment, explained how the movement was taken over in 2015 by United Russia-affiliated politicians who cajoled and bullied regional organizers into joining the new government version. The regiment’s hitherto apolitical approach was dropped, and the movement was subordinated to the Kremlin’s needs and preferences. These invented traditions and their export to Serbia shows once more the relevance of the domestic Russian domestic context to how the government adapts and appropriates historical narratives abroad, in this case through the Kremlin’s energetic appropriation of grassroots and personal memories for political ends.

**Target Audiences and Reach**

When all the results are taken together, the World War II and Yugoslav war narratives were used almost equally (54 and 46 percent, respectively). However, when separated according to channel, the Yugoslav narrative was more prominent on Sputnik YouTube (58 percent of all topics), while the World War II narrative was more prominent in the digital and traditional diplomatic channels (over 70 percent in both cases). In part, this would have been linked to differences in audience type. Based on analysis of their profiles, samples of users who engaged with the embassy’s Facebook compared to Sputnik YouTube tended to be older with more conservative views, whereas the latter tended to be younger with a range of left-wing and right-wing views that were highly conspiratorial, anti-American, and anti-establishment. Given the relatively recent nature of the 1990s wars and its continued relevance, the Yugoslav wars narrative is better tailored to younger audiences, who may have less of an emotional connection to World War II. Moreover, this narrative lends itself easily to anti-Americanism in a way that World War II does not.


108. It is always difficult to assess the extent to which people are engaging with this narrative because it raises important considerations of bots, inflated numbers, how to measure engagement and so on. Bearing these caveats in mind, the qualitative nature of this sampling of Facebook and Sputnik users who engaged with memory alliance content should be stressed.
Most of Rossotrudnichestvo’s initiatives (but not events) are especially targeted at the young. Boris Malagurski, one of Sputnik’s YouTube stars popular with young people, can boast videos on memory alliances with hundreds of thousands of views. As well as intersecting with young audiences, Sputnik in Serbia targets extreme political views by hosting polarizing interpretations of history, especially anti-EU voices, and reiterating Europe and Germany’s responsibility for dead Serb children and their roles supporting Croatia in World War II and 1990s, as in the “20 Years after NATOAggression” series.

While catering especially generously to these target audiences, Sputnik remains a prominent news source in Serbia for a larger audience, producing serious content and enjoying popularity among young and old through its radio service, YouTube presence, and website. Given the multichannel nature of the Russian government’s approach, it is clear that, in the Serbian context, memory alliances are targeted at a mass audience. Elite promotion and attendance of Russkii dom events, combined with Facebook and Sputnik engagement, also suggest that Russia’s alliance narratives are reaching a consequential section of Serbian society. Although the level of engagement is a different question, this reach, combined with the consistency of the efforts and the multichannel amplification, shows that memory alliance narratives are more than a drop in the information bucket and reflect a larger Russian influence tactic—one that extends beyond Serbia.

Finding Memory Allies beyond Serbia

While Russian memory alliance promotion in Serbia may be especially active for various historical reasons, this type of influence operation is not unique to Serbia. Russian agencies employed similar tactics, albeit less intensively and targeted more narrowly, in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. On Sputnik UK’s main YouTube page, the pinned video is entitled “Soyuz-Apollo: 45 Years After the Handshake in Space That Put an End to the Space Race.”109 The video downplays the confrontational aspect of the Cold War, making Russian history appear less threatening while still bolstering Soviet achievements. On the whole, the UK Sputnik YouTube page, like the news site, is less serious than in Serbia (and other countries), featuring cute animal videos and clips designed to go viral. Amid this context, the decision to pin such a substantive video, conveying a more positive historical image of the USSR, is rather remarkable. The focus on the video also reflects a change in approach to memory alliance construction in the United Kingdom (compared to Serbia), where Russian actors need to create a more positive historical narrative and tap into existing cultural memory to bolster its influence and trust among a largely skeptical population.

One of the ways this has been done in the United Kingdom is through engaging with British historical narratives and cultural memory, especially of World War II. The case of Captain Tom Moore is a good example; in April 2020 then 99-year-old veteran raised £32 million for the National Health Service during the Covid-19 lockdown by walking around his garden. Rossotrudnichestvo, Russian media in the United Kingdom, and Russian embassy social media then publicized the story of a 97-year-old Russian Stalingrad veteran knitting Captain Moore socks for his 100th birthday and raising money for Russian hospitals after being inspired by him, thus trying to involve themselves in the story to remind audiences of the Russo-British wartime alliance and the positive memories associated therewith.110

110. “From Russia with Love, Captain Tom Moore,” YouTube video, posted by RT UK, May 6, 2020, 0:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJGvSDyj-gQ.
Likewise, there is also an active campaign led by the Russian embassy in the United Kingdom on social media to publicize Russian medals for the Arctic Convoys veterans, with one in every five tweets from the embassy’s Twitter account in May 2020 related to this issue. It is perhaps unsurprising then that the embassy responded angrily to accusations by the military historian Antony Beevor that Russia ignores the United States and United Kingdom’s input into the Allied victory. The tweet was accompanied by images of Vladimir Putin meeting UK World War II veterans. Efforts such as these demonstrate how Russia is adapting to the local memory culture and seeking to build bridges with mainstream opinion.

However, alongside these efforts to appeal to mass or mainstream cultural memory of World War II, there is also sub-targeting of segments of UK political fringe groups, including those segments of the left traditionally sympathetic to the USSR. This is exemplified by an interesting case in 2017 relating to the Saint George Ribbon and picked up by The Times newspaper. As in other countries, Rossotrudnichestvo organizes employees and volunteers in the United Kingdom to hand out Saint George’s Ribbons to people and organizations around Victory Day, on May 8 and 9 each year. This is a way to promote Russia’s view of the war and to use it to connect with British people, for whom the war also plays an important role in national and memory culture. In 2019, it emerged that members of the populist left Momentum group within the British Labour Party were wearing the ribbons and tweeting images of the ribbons draped around a gun as symbols of their alliance with Russia in anti-fascism. Members of this group were aligned to former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who was criticized for blaming the West for Russia’s annexation of Crimea and for his tepid response to the poisoning of the Skripals.

This tactic of creating memory alliances with polarizing voices can also be seen in France. The French Sputnik YouTube page is very different to the United Kingdom’s, with a pseudo-intellectual tone and featuring long interviews with polemicians across the spectrum, from the Christian right to the far left. Some of the most interesting content included a video interview with Michel Collon detailing French history in Algeria, which, alongside other content, suggested Sputnik was targeting the large section of the population of North African descent, aligning itself with their memory cultures to build on the Soviet anti-imperial legacy and to exacerbate already heightened divisions along such lines in France. Similar tactics could be observed in Germany’s Sputnik, where in 2019 there was a mass campaign to mark 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, similar in scope to the one used to mark 20 years after NATO aggression in Serbia. In this series, the Sputnik YouTube and website promoted a highly revisionist narrative that depicted the East German state in rosy hues, playing on the disappointments and trials following reunification that has fueled a sense of Ostalgie—nostalgia for aspects of life in East Germany. This is an example of how Russian state actors identify a minority memory and then overtly support it to show that Russia is a “memory ally” but also to exacerbate divisions over history in the target countries, at least partly by amplifying polarizing views.

Conclusion

In conclusion, analysis of Russian memory alliance promotion in Serbia shows that the former uses diplomatic, digital, and media channels to spread historical narratives that bolster Russia’s image while simultaneously undermining its rivals. These narratives also appear to be selected to encourage polarizing voices, as noted not only in the Serbia case study but also in the initial analysis of memory alliance promotion in France and Germany. While these findings point to a prominent and under-researched Russian influence tactic, much more research is required to develop a thorough and critical understanding beyond the level of discursive construction of memory alliances. This would help explain whether and how local target audiences are co-constructing these alliances and what impact, if any, this is having on current events and perceptions of Russia. This would also involve looking at more case studies to understand adaptation and varying levels of engagement in Europe and beyond.

To do so requires a line of inquiry into Russian influence operations that is grounded in the domestic context as well as local narratives of history and is open-minded to the idea that Russia can use soft power constructively, even if it is often used to exploit divisions and undermine rivals.

Jade McGlynn is a researcher and lecturer at the University of Oxford. Her research interests relate to political uses of history in Russian domestic and foreign policy, as well as memory studies and patriotic formation more broadly.
Countering Russian Disinformation

JOSEPH W. ROBBINS

Executive Summary

Disinformation is a tool commonly used by a number of states to sow discord, undermine faith in governing institutions, stoke fear and anxiety, and ultimately achieve certain policy goals. Over the past several years, Russia, its government agencies, and affiliated groups have used a combination of social media savvy and disinformation strategies to further Russian influence largely by weakening its foes. This use of disinformation to weaken the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), cast doubt on the European Union, and undermine countries throughout the world has prompted countries to develop countermeasures to stymie these efforts. The Czech Republic and Estonia are two such countries that have developed amalgamated approaches to stifle Russian subversive attempts. The Czech and Estonian responses are explored and offered as robust solutions to this growing threat.

Introduction

Russian disinformation operations are currently a cornerstone of the country’s efforts to wield influence worldwide. Whether trying to weaken the European Union, NATO, individual countries, or other groups, Russian operations perpetrated by cyberespionage groups such as Cozy Bear or Fancy Bear have fostered much anxiety, fear, and division throughout the world. Disinformation efforts have their roots in “active measures” or propaganda efforts orchestrated by the Soviet Union. Yet, the key difference here is that contemporary Russian efforts have been more successful than any Soviet operation could have ever imagined due to rethinking communication strategies (elaborated below) and the use of social media technology. Indeed, Russian disinformation operations were credited with sowing discontent in the United States and curtailing Hillary Clinton’s electoral support in 2016, boosting support for far-right Italian political parties among those consuming alternative news stories in 2018, and prompting a decline in Spanish leaders’ ability to influence public opinion during the 2017 Catalan crisis.115

Modern Russian propaganda efforts have led to policy responses from multilateral organizations.

National governments, social groups, and corporations. A number of these approaches have been adopted by the Czech Republic and Estonia. The extent to which they will be successful over time is unclear, particularly given the Czech Republic President Miloš Zeman’s pro-Russia inclinations along with Estonia’s burgeoning populist presence, both of which play right into Moscow’s hands. Nonetheless, these approaches show a determination to combat disinformation threats that is rarely seen elsewhere. For example, in the United States, the response to disinformation currently largely rests on corporate policies set by Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. In places like the Czech Republic and Estonia, moving beyond dependence on corporate response alone is thus far proving to be a more effective response to thwart Russian efforts.

**Russian Disinformation Strategies**

Internet-aided Russian disinformation strategies have been a hallmark of the country’s destabilization efforts for the past several years. Disinformation, for the purposes of this article, refers to the creation or spreading of information that is misleading or false with the intention to manipulate a given audience. Democracies, anchored in the embrace of a free press, are particularly vulnerable to disinformation, although this tactic has been used in many different settings. To date, Moscow has used these tools to target Ukraine, Germany, Italy, Syria, Spain, the United Kingdom, NATO, the European Union, and the United States.

The playbook used in these countries contains a variety of actions undertaken by various actors—not all governmental entities. Research by Watts and by Weisburd, Watts, and Berger summarizes the complex approach well.116 The overall approach unfolds in multiple stages and begins by actors infiltrating an audience then influencing it, followed by using kompromat to drive damaging narratives against certain politicians, movements, or organizations. These stages are administered through a combination of media actors (e.g., Russia Today [RT], Sputnik, and the country’s Internet Research Agency [IRA]), intelligence agencies (GRU, FSB, and SVR), along with “troll factories,” hackers, and “honeypots.” As Weisburd, Watts, and Berger explain, these groups work hand-in-hand such that “trolls sow doubt, the honeypots win trust, and hackers . . . exploit clicks on dubious links sent out by the first two.”117 Mark Galeotti lays out a helpful schematic of the various forces and actors involved in Russian disinformation campaigns, each relating to the Kremlin in a different way.118 The end result of Russia’s technological “active measures” is a multichanneled, highly active, relentless propaganda machine that has pumped out a tremendous amount of damaging information in multiple contexts.

Russian disinformation has proven to be effective in large part because it is motivated by a fundamental shift in communication strategies. Russian disinformation efforts have been influential because they seek to form an early narrative, repeat the narrative, and employ a wide range of outlets, channels, and users to parrot this narrative.119 Because these Kremlin-engineered narratives


117. Weisburd, Watts, and Berger, “Trolling for Trump.”


are often the first of their kind (although some sources are indigenous in the target country, which the Kremlin then amplifies), the target audience has no frame in place to counter or challenge this new information. Likewise, the narratives are repeated and echoed by numerous actors, giving them the appearance of credible information. Indeed, from the public’s perspective, multiple actors with different perspectives reaching the same conclusion gives a narrative the veneer of truth.120 With Russian troll farms operating 24 hours a day, it is easy to see how these campaigns author new narratives and disseminate them widely and frequently. This approach essentially overwhelms the social media user with the amount of repetition and leads them to either accept the disinformation as fact or to fall back on their own baseline biases.

Responding to these disinformation campaigns is very difficult, particularly in democracies that are buoyed by the free press. There has been great variance in how democracies and organizations like the European Union have responded to these efforts, with varying degrees of success.121 This article examines the approaches used by the Czech Republic and Estonia along with multilateral responses from both the European Union and NATO. The approaches discussed here are still evolving but it is increasingly clear that to have success against Russian disinformation and this complex propaganda machine, a multifaceted approach is vitally important.

Czech Responses

The Czech Republic is one of Europe’s leaders in combatting Russian disinformation. The country’s government agencies are leveraged to respond to these attacks, including a specifically designed agency, the Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (CTHT). Its work is enhanced by the Czech Security Information Service (Bezpečnostní informační služba, or BIS), civil society group mobilization, and research from think tanks.

The Czech Republic’s efforts are notable in their ingenuity but also because they have been in place despite strong political headwinds: Czech political leaders feature some notable pro-Russian political officials.122 President Milos Zeman is often viewed as one of the Kremlin’s most visible allies in Europe. Zeman has supported terminating Russian sanctions, is friends with oligarch Vladimir Yakunin, and has advisors with reportedly close ties to Russian interests. Then there is the legislature, where Russian support includes forces on the left and the right. The Czech Chamber of Deputies 2017 election witnessed over 20 percent of the vote going to parties often espousing stances in line with Russian narratives (e.g., anti-NATO, Euroskepticism) such as the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD, which received 11 percent) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM, which received 8 percent).

Despite this political landscape, the country’s government has put in place a multifaceted strategy to respond to these external threats. The country’s overall orientation stems from its insistence that

120. Ibid.
Russia, like other countries, respect international law and the territorial integrity of other states. This stance was naturally insufficient to discourage Russia’s efforts to spy on, hack, and sow discord in the Czech Republic. Consequently, the country’s Security Information Service has been at the forefront of monitoring state-sponsored propaganda targeting Czech society. Intelligence agencies have sought to name and shame attackers and to raise awareness of cyberattacks. The government also created the CTHT, an analytical body within the Ministry of the Interior with access to classified information that is charged with reviewing disinformation, preparing policy proposals, and working with other government agencies and outside organizations to raise awareness of the agency’s findings and collaborate to resist these intrusions. The CTHT is also focused on proactive measures, such as planning for election-related attacks and mitigating vulnerabilities.

The Czech government closely studied the communication strategy undergirding Russian disinformation efforts to develop the country’s response. Czech think tanks and civil society have played an important role in countering frequent repetition of various narratives or the seemingly widespread embrace of these stances. Russian messaging on domestic policy often embraces Islamophobic, anti-immigration, corruption allegations, or certain Czech leaders’ purported ties with the Secret Police, while foreign policy messaging often advances claims that the United States is out to control the world or that the European Union and NATO are the aggressors throughout Europe. Czech civil society has engaged in both fact-checking to identify false or unfounded claims and investigative journalism, which can “out” or counter trolls online and counter chain emails that are commonplace in the Czech Republic. These efforts are buttressed by direct action via People in Need’s One World program, which promotes critical thinking, information literacy, and curriculum in primary and secondary schools to foster a more resilient and news- and digitally-literate population. The educational front is supported by efforts from researchers and curriculum through Masaryk University and Charles University.

Think tanks have been active participants in the struggle against disinformation as well. The European Values Center (EVC) and the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) have been at the forefront of this movement. The EVC established its Kremlin Watch Program in 2015, which highlights disinformation campaigns throughout Europe. It also reviews countermeasures used across the continent and evaluates their effectiveness. The EVC works with Czech agencies involved in combatting subversive Russian influence (e.g., Ministry of the Interior). Similarly, the PSSI has sought to spread the word on tactics used by the Kremlin and to develop policy proposals to help Prague better respond to these external threats. While this organization focuses on an array of security threats, such as economic, space, energy, and transnational, its work in the realm of cyber threats is particularly notable as it has orchestrated initiatives to focus on disinformation targeting parliamentary and

124. Ibid.
125. Ibid., 12.
presidential elections. For example, PSSI has partnered with the International Republican Institute (IRI) to carefully analyze election-related news stories posted on disinformation sites.128

Estonian Responses
Estonia's political space—and society in general—is markedly different from the Czech Republic's. Estonia's ethnically Russian population is much larger (nearly 25 percent of the population) than the Czech Republic's (estimated at around less than 1 percent). President Kersti Kaljulaid has a style and political leanings that stand in stark contrast to Milos Zeman's. Although Prime Minister Jüri Ratas's Center Party (Eesti Keskerakond) is the preferred party among Russian-speaking Estonians, the center-right Reform Party (Eesti Reformierakond) became the largest party after the 2019 Riigikogu elections, winning 29 percent of the vote. Nevertheless, after the Reform Party's coalition bid fell short of the necessary votes, Ratas's Center Party obtained the votes necessary to secure a coalition with the Conservative People's Party (a far-right populist party) and Isamaa (a Christian Democratic, center-right party). Yet Estonia's leadership has adopted a determined stance vis-à-vis Russia. Ratas's government has pushed to maintain sanctions on Russia, insisted on a return of Crimea to Ukraine, and supported EU accession for Ukraine.129 Estonia also embraces multilateralism and strong alliances; given the Baltic nation's technological advancement, which invites some vulnerabilities, its support of international organizations and diplomatic partnerships is understandable.

Estonian fears of Russia are well-founded. The 2007 row over Tallinn's decision to move a Soviet-era statue was a flashpoint between the two countries that has led to an array of Russian attacks. Russia's “Compatriot Policy,” which was used to legitimize invasions into Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ukraine, still casts a shadow over Estonia given its sizeable ethnic Russian population. In addition, NATO's Strategic Communications Center (STRATCOM) reported in 2018 that Russian-language “bots” were responsible for “55 percent of all Russian-language messages about NATO in Baltic States” and that Estonia was the most frequent target of Russian bots.130 Naturally, then, Baltic exposure to Russian hybrid warfare (an amalgamation of political, cyber, and conventional warfare) has led countries like Estonia to search for an array of countermeasures.

Estonia's Defense League (EDL, or Kaitseliit) is a key player in the country's countermeasure efforts. This voluntary security force, which operates under the Ministry of Defense's umbrella, has a wide range of responsibilities including physical defense, cyber defense, and even educating the public about national defense.131 Outside of these efforts, the EDL is more directly involved with cyber defense. In 2020, it joined public and private organizations from across Europe to participate in a

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cyberattack simulation. EDL activity reflects Estonia’s prioritization of joint solutions to cyber threats. The Defense League also plays a vital role in the country’s fight against disinformation. It runs an anti-propaganda blog, Propastop.org, whose focus is not only on countering harmful narratives, but also on highlighting corporate practices related to social media, outing individuals and posts designed to further disinformation (e.g., “naming and shaming”), and advocating media literacy.

Estonia’s response to disinformation is shaped by the country’s heavy reliance on digitization along with its sizable Russian population. The response is fortified by a mix of government-sanctioned measures and volunteer efforts. For example, the country created its own Russian-language channel back in 2015 as a way to counter messaging orchestrated by the Kremlin. This government channel allows the broadcast of programming that is more neutral though still of interest to the Russian minority in Estonia. At the same time, the country’s military leadership refuses to participate in interviews with Russian outlets to avoid having their statements misconstrued or manipulated. The country’s official foreign news service, Välisluureamet, produces an annual report that chronicles the threats facing Estonia and is largely focused on unearthing Russian subversive measures. These efforts are laudable but often do little to counter the torrent of disinformation shared via social media.

To remedy this shortcoming, Estonian and other Baltic countries rely on citizen mobilization to counter Russian disinformation. Volunteers are supporting the EDL’s response to disinformation: the so-called “Baltic Elves,” an internet activist group, are involved through their work to counter Russian “trolls.” The “Baltic Elves” report bots, monitor news article message boards, and counter-narratives across the Baltic states. These virtual volunteers are estimated to number in the thousands and even assist Debunk.eu, which coordinates with the “elves” and Western foreign services to analyze over 20,000 articles a day to identify and counter disinformation activity.

Estonia, like other Baltic countries, fears Russian threats more directly than other countries given its past Soviet occupation, the proximity to Moscow, its digital inclination, and its large Russian minority. Consequently, the country has a multifaceted approach to respond to these threats but also relies heavily on multilateralism to fend off Russian belligerence. The Baltic Cyber Defense group along with NATO’s Cooperative Cyber Defense Commission and the European Union’s European Extreme Action Service are much needed allies in this fight.

**Multilateral Responses**

Russian foreign policy has long aimed to undermine NATO and the European Union; the weaponization of disinformation has simply given the Kremlin a new way to pursue old aims. Recently, Russia has...
} Furthermore, the Kremlin’s tactics are gaining in sophistication, marrying established practices (dissemination through IRA, RT, and Sputnik and using bots to proliferate narratives) with aggressive hacking whereby false or misleading stories are posted through legitimate and credible accounts.\footnote{Dan Sabbagh, “Russia-aligned hackers running anti-Nato fake news campaign – report,” The Guardian, July 20, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jul/30/russia-aligned-hackers-running-anti-nato-fake-news-campaign-report-poland-lithuania.}

Recognizing this threat, in 2018 the European Council endorsed a plan to counter Russian cyber threats, which included the creation of the Rapid Alert System.\footnote{“Rapid Alert System,” European Union EXTERNAL ACTION, March 15, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/59644/Factsheet:%20Rapid%20Alert%20System.} It serves as a clearinghouse of sorts for member states to share information and concerns regarding suspected disinformation campaigns and to discuss “best practices” in responding to these malicious campaigns. The RAS then shares authoritative accounts in response to false or misleading messaging that can be disseminated by the EU member states, civil society groups, and social media companies. This mechanism has been used against Covid-19 disinformation campaigns that have spread harmful information regarding the pandemic and dangerous or unproven remedies to the disease.\footnote{Samuel Stolton, “EU Rapid Alert System used amid coronavirus disinformation campaign,” EURACTIV, March 4, 2020, https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/eu-alert-triggered-after-coronavirus-disinformation-campaign/.} As a multilateral, multilevel organization, the RAS has great potential to help counter Russian disinformation campaigns but it has been hampered by inconsistent participation by members, uneven real-time responses to threats, and concerns over ideologically motivated responses.\footnote{Matt Apuzzo, “Europe Built a System to Fight Russian Meddling. It’s Struggling.” New York Times, July 6, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/06/world/europe/europe-russian-disinformation-propaganda-elections.html.}

NATO has also been targeted by Russian disinformation, as the Kremlin looks to sow discord and fuel animus toward the organization amid the Covid-19 pandemic.\footnote{“NATO's approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19,” NATO, July 17, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm.} False stories were spread regarding NATO’s intent to withdraw troops from Lithuania, Canadian troops allegedly exposing Latvia to the virus, and a Polish military official reportedly criticizing U.S. military forces. These stories aim to undermine NATO’s legitimacy and support as well as weaken individual member states.

Back in 2008, Estonia led a NATO effort to create the Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence (CCDCOE) following Russia’s 2007 massive cyberattack on the Baltic nation. The CCDCOE consists of 28 member states, including the Czech Republic and Estonia, and supports a comprehensive strategy to counter cyber threats. The CCDCOE supports its mission through interdisciplinary methods to study, train, and organize exercises to fortify cyber defense. Its Locked Shields exercise is one such example of how it promotes cyber defense across teams to ensure that experts and decisionmakers are working together on these threats.\footnote{“Locked Shields,” CCDCOE, https://ccdcoe.org/exercises/locked-shields/.} These efforts extend beyond disinformation alone but can contribute to ongoing efforts to curtail this influence.
NATO has employed other efforts to counter disinformation. In addition to CCDCOE’s work, STRATCOM aims to raise awareness of information operations and refute misleading or false claims. Its analytical reports summarize tactics, messaging, and targets of Russian disinformation.\textsuperscript{144} The organization mobilized in earnest in the wake of the Crimean annexation and since 2014 has expanded its efforts to help NATO members identify false or misleading narratives, recognize networked or coordinated Russian media activity, and increase audience resilience when targeted by the Kremlin.\textsuperscript{145} STRATCOM’s coordinated efforts are vitally important to enhance the collective security of its member states and to counter disinformation efforts levied against NATO as a whole.

\textbf{Conclusion}

This article underscores a few effective methods to counter disinformation operations at both the national and international levels. Estonia’s use of real-time volunteer forces along with the Czech Republic’s BIS and think tanks are useful in naming and shaming Russia’s digital active measures. Meanwhile, Estonia’s use of government-sanctioned programming can help shape the broadcast conversation, thus countering channels like RT, which further harmful narratives.

The NATO and EU responses to Russia’s ongoing efforts to sow discord offer some useful suggestions for moving forward. These organizations have created task forces and organizations that, collectively, reveal a holistic framework that can help uncover subversive efforts, coordinate a cogent response, and promote multilateral collaboration. With additional buy-in from EU and NATO members, these efforts will evolve and strengthen the response to disinformation operations.

\textbf{Joseph Robbins} (PhD, Texas Tech University) is the political science department head at Valdosta State University. His research examines Post-Communist party system development and, more recently, the consequences of terrorist attacks; his research has been published in journals such as Armed Forces & Society; Comparative Politics; Comparative Political Studies; Conflict, Security, and Development; Electoral Studies; Global Policy; the Journal of East European and Asian Studies; the Journal of Peace Research; Legislative Studies Quarterly; Party Politics; and Terrorism & Political Violence.

\textsuperscript{144} The NATO Strategic Communications Center for Excellence, \textit{Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment} (Latvia: Nato Stratcom Center Of Excellence, 2018), \url{https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russias-footprint-nordic-baltic-information-environment-0}.

About the Project Director, Editors, and Authors

Heather A. Conley is senior vice president for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic and director of the Europe Program at CSIS. Prior to joining CSIS as a senior fellow and director for Europe in 2009, Conley served four years as executive director of the Office of the Chairman of the Board at the American National Red Cross. From 2001 to 2005, she was deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs with responsibilities for U.S. bilateral relations with the countries of Northern and Central Europe. From 1994 to 2001, she was a senior associate with an international consulting firm led by former U.S. deputy secretary of state Richard L. Armitage. Ms. Conley began her career in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. She was selected to serve as special assistant to the coordinator of U.S. assistance to the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, and she has received two State Department Meritorious Honor Awards. Ms. Conley is frequently featured as a foreign policy analyst and Europe expert on CNN, MSNBC, BBC, NPR, and PBS, among other prominent media outlets. She received her BA in international studies from West Virginia Wesleyan College and her MA in international relations from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

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Mark F. Cancian (Colonel, USMCR, ret.) is a senior adviser with the CSIS International Security Program. He joined CSIS in April 2015 from the Office of Management and Budget, where he spent more than seven years as chief of the Force Structure and Investment Division, working on issues such as Department of Defense budget strategy, war funding, and procurement programs, as well as nuclear weapons development and nonproliferation activities in the Department of Energy. Previously, he worked on force structure and acquisition issues in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and ran research and executive programs at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. In the military, Colonel Cancian spent over three decades in the U.S. Marine Corps, active and reserve, serving as an infantry, artillery, and civil affairs officer and on overseas tours in Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Iraq (twice). Since 2000, he has been an adjunct faculty member at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, where he teaches a course on the connection between policy and analysis. A prolific author, he has published over 40 articles on military operations, acquisition, budgets, and strategy and received numerous writing awards. He graduated with high honors (magna cum laude) from Harvard College and with highest honors (Baker scholar) from Harvard Business School.
Cyrus Newlin is an associate fellow with the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program, where he oversees work on Russian domestic politics and political economy as well as U.S.-Russia relations. From 2019-2020, he lived and worked in Moscow as an Alfa Fellow with Bank of America, analyzing geopolitical risk in the Commonwealth of Independent States region as part of an award-winning team of equity and fixed income analysts. From 2017-2019, he was research associate and program manager with the Russia and Eurasia Program. Cyrus received his BA in political science and Russian studies from Swarthmore College, where he graduated Phi Beta Kappa.

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Robert Person is an associate professor of international relations at the United States Military Academy (West Point) and director of Curriculum for West Point’s International Affairs Program. He is also a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Dr. Person holds a PhD in political science from Yale University and an MA in Russian, East European, and Eurasian studies from Stanford University. His research and teaching focus on the foreign and domestic politics of Russia and the post-Soviet states, political economy, nationalism and identity, and mass regime support in nondemocratic countries. His current book project, *Russia's Grand Strategy in the 21st Century* will be published by the Brookings Institution Press in 2022. Follow his work on Twitter @RTPerson3.

Jim Golby is a senior fellow at the Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas at Austin and a lecturer in the Department of Government. Jim is also the co-host of the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ “Thank You for Your Service” podcast, a non-resident senior fellow with the Center for a New American Security, a non-resident senior fellow with the United States Studies Centre in Sydney, Australia, and a member of the editorial board for the inter-disciplinary journal, *Armed Forces & Society*. Jim served 20 years in the United States Army. He previously served as a defense policy advisor at the United States Mission to NATO, as a special adviser to two vice presidents of the United States, as a special assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and as an assistant professor of American Politics, Policy, and Strategy at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Jim’s research focuses on civil-military relations, military strategy, domestic sources of foreign policy, and American national security policy. He is a contributing editor at *War On The Rocks*, and his research and commentary have appeared in numerous outlets, including *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Atlantic*, the *Economist*, and the *Washington Post*. Jim is currently working on two main research projects: a book project, with Dr. Peter Feaver, that examines the determinants of public confidence in the U.S. military and another project that explores how political polarization shapes American civil-military relations. Jim received his PhD in political science from Stanford University and a BS in American Government from the United States Military Academy.

Gil Barndollar is a senior fellow at Defense Priorities and at the Catholic University of America’s Center for the Study of Statesmanship (CSS). His writing has appeared in publications including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *National Interest*, *USA Today*, the *American Conservative*, and *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*. He provides frequent commentary on foreign policy to national and international media and has appeared on CNN, Fox News, the Fox Business Network, and the BBC World Service. From 2009-2016, Barndollar served as an infantry officer in the United States Marine Corps. He deployed twice to Afghanistan, as a light armored reconnaissance platoon commander and as a combat advisor with the Georgian Army. He also led a Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team platoon during deployments to Guantanamo Bay and the Persian Gulf. He continues
to serve in the Army National Guard. Barndollar holds an AB in history from Bowdoin College and MPhil and PhD degrees in history from the University of Cambridge. At CSS he is working on a book examining America’s all-volunteer force, conscription, and modern war.

Jade McGlynn is currently a researcher and lecturer at the University of Oxford, where she also gained her DPhil and BA. She also holds an MA in research from the University of Birmingham. Her DPhil thesis examined the Russian government and media’s politicization and securitization of history during Vladimir Putin’s third presidential term. Her current research interests include political uses of history in Russian foreign and domestic policy. She has published articles on Russian politics and media in leading academic journals and presented on these topics at conferences in the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, and Germany. Before commencing PhD studies, she lived in Russia for four years and has travelled extensively through Russia and the CIS, including extended periods living and working in Moscow, St Petersburg, Voronezh, Pskov, and Sochi.

Joseph Robbins earned his BA and MA in political science and public administration from Eastern Illinois University (2002, 2003) and his PhD in political science from Texas Tech University (2008). His research examines the underlying factors behind, and consequences of, party system development in Russia, East Europe, and throughout the world. Robbins also studies the factors leading to, and consequences of, terrorist attacks, as well interstate conflict. His research has been published in journals such as Armed Forces & Society; Comparative Politics; Comparative Political Studies; Conflict, Security, and Development; Electoral Studies; Global Policy; the Journal of East European and Asian Studies; the Journal of Peace Research; Legislative Studies Quarterly; Party Politics; and Terrorism & Political Violence. In addition, he has secured grant funding from state and national agencies such as various universities, the Department of Defense, and West Virginia's Online Education Consortium. Robbins also has served as a peer reviewer for many of the leading political science journals and has been a paid reviewer for Quality Matters (online course reviewer) and for publishers such as Pearson, Cengage, and Sage. As well, Robbins’ work in post-communist states includes delivering a series of lectures for the U.S. State Department in Azerbaijan (November 2014) and his recent work forging a partnership between Valdosta State University and the University of West Bohemia in the Czech Republic.