

## Countering Color Revolutions

### RUSSIA'S NEW SECURITY STRATEGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

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The May 2014 Moscow Conference on International Security (MCIS), sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Defense, was focused on the role of popular protest, and specifically color revolutions, in international security. The speakers, which included top Russian military and diplomatic officials such as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, argued that color revolutions are a new form of warfare invented by Western governments seeking to remove independently-minded national governments in favor of ones controlled by the West. They argued that this was part of a global strategy to force foreign values on a range of nations around the world that refuse to accept U.S. hegemony and that Russia was a particular target of this strategy.

While the West considers color revolutions to be peaceful expressions of popular will opposing repressive authoritarian regimes, Russian officials argue that military force is an integral part of all aspects of color revolutions. Western governments start by using non-military tactics to change opposing governments through color revolutions that utilize the protest potential of the population to engineer peaceful regime change. But military force is concealed behind this effort. If the protest potential turns out to be insufficient, military force is then used openly to ensure regime change. This includes the use of external pressure on the regime in question to prevent the use of force to restore order, followed by the provision of military and economic assistance to rebel forces. If these measures are not sufficient, Western states organize a military operation to defeat government forces and allow the rebels to take power. Russian officials at the MCIS conference described color revolutions as a new technique of aggression pioneered by the United States and geared toward destroying a state from within by dividing its population. The advantage of this technique, compared to military intervention, is that it requires a relatively low expenditure of resources to achieve its goals.

Shoigu argued that this scheme has been used in a wide range of cases, including Serbia, Libya, and Syria—all cases where political interference by the West transitioned into military action. In 2014, the same scheme was followed in Ukraine, where anti-regime protests over several months transformed into a civil war, and in Venezuela, where the so-called democratic opposition is supposedly organized by the United States. While Western readers may find the lumping together of uprisings as disparate as those in Serbia in 2000, Syria in 2011, and Venezuela in 2014 hard to swallow, from the Russian point of view, they all share the common thread of occurring in countries that had governments that were opposed to the United States. Although uprisings in countries whose governments were close to the United States, such as Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Egypt and Bahrain in 2011, are harder to explain, such inconsistencies do not appear to trouble the Russian government.

Furthermore, while Russian discussion of the destabilizing role of color revolutions usually portrays U.S. actions as taking place around the world, there is a clear perception that Russia is one of the main targets. This drives fear that unrest in the post-Soviet region may be a wedge for the United States to force regime change in Russia itself.

### Russia's Counter-Strategy

This perspective appears to be at the core of a new national security strategy that Russia is developing. Although the Russian government has not produced any kind of document summarizing this new strategy, the key aspects can be gleaned from an analysis of Russian leaders' statements and Russian actions in recent months. The counter-strategy combines political and military actions.

On the political side, Russia has stepped up its efforts to make alliances with other authoritarian regimes that are similarly concerned about the possibility of a popular uprising that could lead to their loss of power. This strategy has been used by Russia to some extent throughout Vladimir Putin's presidency, with efforts to develop ties with former Soviet allies in the Middle East and Asia. The MCIS conference highlighted a renewed emphasis in this direction. The presence of the Iranian defense minister, the Egyptian deputy defense minister, the chief of defense from Myanmar, and deputy chiefs of defense from Vietnam, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as a large delegation from China, all indicate the primary focus of attention for Russian military engagement this year. The absence of official representatives from NATO member states particularly highlighted the shift in emphasis of Russian military cooperation. By comparison, the 2013 MCIS had no representatives from Middle Eastern or Asian countries outside of post-Soviet Eurasia, while senior officials from most NATO member states were in attendance.

The second part of Russia's political strategy is to damage the unity of the Western alliance. This effort has been pursued for several years through the development of political alliances with right-wing parties throughout Europe and in the United States. As described by Marlene Laruelle and Mitchell Orenstein, among others, Russia has supported European nationalists' anti-EU and anti-immigrant positions.<sup>1</sup> The core of Russia's alliance with the European far right has been a shared opposition to increased ties between the EU and its eastern neighbors. The European right has also been sympathetic to Russia's positions on issues such as the role of religion in society, same-sex marriage, and gay rights generally. These positions have also gained Russia some unlikely supporters among the Christian right in the United States, where Russian support for anti-abortion and anti-gay rights views has, in turn, been reciprocated by what would be otherwise surprising sympathy for Russian foreign policy positions on issues such as human rights and democracy promotion.

On the military side, Russia has determined that the best way to counter the perceived U.S. strategy is through a combination of strong support for existing authoritarian regimes around the world. This support has included military and economic assistance, as well as public support for actions taken against protesters, who are often conflated in Russian rhetoric with terrorists or supporters of radical ideologies such as radical Islam or fascism.

In circumstances where this proves insufficient and the situation is in an area deemed crucial to Russian national interests, Russia has shown that it is willing to go further by providing direct support to forces opposed to those supported by the West. This support may include the simulation of popular uprisings, support for local insurgents, and the threat of direct military force to protect co-ethnics.

Russia claims to reserve the right to protect Russians living abroad. Given the large numbers of Russians living throughout post-Soviet Eurasia, this claim has the potential to provide Russia with an excuse for intervention anywhere in the region. Furthermore, it may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, by which governments of other post-Soviet states come to distrust their ethnic Russian populations, leading to discrimination that creates the conditions for a potential Russian intervention.

### **The Russian Strategy in Ukraine**

The actions that Russia has been undertaking in Ukraine in recent months are based on this strategy and closely parallel Russian officials' perceptions of how the U.S. color revolutions strategy works. Russian officials provided the Yanukovych government with advice on how to deal with anti-government protesters. This advice appears to

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<sup>1</sup> Laruelle, "Beyond Anti-Westernism: The Kremlin's Narrative about Russia's European Identity and Mission," PONARS Eurasia [Policy Memo No. 326](#), August 2014; Orenstein, "Putin's Western Allies: Why Europe's Far Right Is on the Kremlin's Side," *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2014.

have involved encouragement to use repressive measures, though the government appeared to lack either the capacity or willpower to carry it out to the end. Officials from Russian security services met regularly with Ukrainian government officials, with FSB Colonel General Sergei Beseda present in Kyiv on Feb 20-21 as the Yanukovych government collapsed.

At the same time, the Russian government provided economic assistance to Ukraine, including a \$15 billion aid package and an agreement to lower the price Ukraine paid for 1,000 cubic meters of natural gas from \$400 to \$268. This assistance was canceled after the change of government in Ukraine.

When Russian assistance proved inadequate to maintain the Yanukovych government in power, Russia took immediate steps to weaken the new anti-Russian government that was being formed in Kyiv. It seems highly likely that Russian agents were involved in organizing counter-protests in eastern Ukraine and Crimea after Viktor Yanukovych's departure from Ukraine.

From the start of the conflict, Russia repeatedly used the threat of force to try to influence the actions of the new Ukrainian government, both by making statements reserving the right to intervene in the conflict and by staging several military exercises on the Ukrainian border. The statements initially focused on the right of the Russian government to protect its co-ethnics abroad, though as the conflict accelerated over the summer they have shifted to the need to protect civilians in general from a humanitarian disaster. This parallels past Western statements that use the doctrine of the international responsibility to protect civilians to justify interventions in internal conflicts.

Finally, Russia has engaged in covert military action in Crimea and, at a minimum, provided military and financial assistance to separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. The quick Russian intervention in Crimea was made possible by the presence of a relatively large contingent of Russian troops (approximately 14,000) who were already based in Crimea and the strong antipathy of the local population to the new Ukrainian government. The Russian naval infantry based in Sevastopol were augmented by special forces troops from Russian military intelligence, who occupied key locations on the peninsula, including government buildings and the isthmus connecting Crimea to the rest of Ukraine, and surrounded Ukrainian military bases in the region. Many of these actions paralleled Russian military exercises that had taken place a year earlier in the Black Sea region.

Russian actions in eastern Ukraine have escalated more gradually, as the conflict has dragged on in recent months. Initially, Russian support consisted of a mass media propaganda campaign in opposition to the "fascist junta" that had taken power in Kyiv and in support of the actions being taken by protesters in the Donbas. As the conflict

became more violent in April and May 2014, volunteers from Russia joined in the fighting. Many of these volunteers were recruited (unofficially) through military recruitment offices in Russia. While no conclusive evidence has surfaced, there is a strong likelihood that agents from Russian security services were involved in coordinating protests in eastern and southern Ukraine from their earliest stages.

Russia's role in the conflict has increased over time, especially after the separatist forces began to lose territory in late June 2014. Early on, local protest leaders were sidelined by Russian citizens, some of whom had a background working for Russian security services. Beginning in June, Russia began to provide heavy weaponry to the separatist forces, including multiple rocket launchers and air defense weapons. Beginning in July, Russian forces have shelled Ukrainian forces from Russian territory in order to prevent Ukraine from sealing off the border and ending the provision of military assistance to separatist forces. In August, the Russian government responded to continued Ukrainian victories by sending in a limited contingent of Russian troops and opening a new front in territory previously under the firm control of government forces, near Novoazovsk and Mariupol in southern Donetsk region. This escalation in Russian military assistance caused a major shift in the path of the conflict, with Ukrainian forces taking heavy casualties throughout the Donbas and losing control of approximately half the territory they had gained over the summer.

Russian actions in Ukraine appear to mirror the actions Russian leaders believe the United States has been taking in its efforts to eliminate unfriendly governments around the world. While the increase in military support for separatist forces during the summer of 2014 appeared to have been largely improvised, the earlier actions to destabilize Ukraine in the aftermath of Yanukovych's flight from Kyiv seem to have been based on existing contingency plans. It is possible that Russian leaders believe that the United States actively seeks to destabilize opposing regimes because such activities are a standard part of their own policy toolkit.

### **Impact on U.S. Policy and Recommendations**

There has been a continuing debate on whether domestic or international factors are primary in Russia's current foreign policy. In reality, it appears that both are working together. Russian foreign policy appears to be based on a combination of fears of popular protest and opposition to U.S. world hegemony, both of which are seen as threatening the Putin regime.

Russia's current policies in Ukraine have little to do with geopolitical calculations about Ukraine's economic ties with the EU versus the Eurasian Union or even its potential NATO membership. Similarly, the annexation of Crimea was not about ensuring the security of the Black Sea Fleet. Instead, the main goal has been to strengthen the Putin regime domestically by increasing patriotic attitudes among the Russian population.

Patriotism is the means by which the Russian government inoculates the Russian population against anti-regime and/or pro-Western attitudes. This goal explains the obsessive focus on building an anti-Ukrainian and anti-American media narrative from an early stage in the Ukraine conflict.

In this environment, it is not worth spending time trying to convince the current Russian leadership to pursue more cooperative policies. If they truly believe that the United States is seeking to force them out of power and is simply waiting for an opportune moment to strike, then Russian policies will remain committed to ensuring that the United States does not get such an opportunity.

The U.S. response to such a position needs to focus on a combination of reassuring steps to show that the United States is not planning to overthrow the Putin regime and a restatement of the core U.S. position that the citizens of each country deserve the right to determine their own government without external interference (from either Russia or the United States).

In practical terms, the U.S. government should encourage the Ukrainian government to pursue policies of reconciliation in the Donbas. While the conflict has been greatly exacerbated by Russian actions, it has an internal component that cannot be solved by military action alone. In an ideal world, Russia and the United States would work together to encourage this reconciliation, though I doubt that the current Russian government is genuinely interested in peace in eastern Ukraine. Instead, it prefers to keep eastern Ukraine unstable as an object lesson to its own population of the dangers of popular protest leading to the overthrow of even a relatively unpopular regime.