



Russian-American Relations Since the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

PONARS Eurasia Policy Perspectives

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Russian-American Relations Since the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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POLICY PERSPECTIVES
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Foreword

Marlene Laruelle

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On the one-year anniversary of Donald Trump's election as U.S. president, PONARS Eurasia and the New York University's Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia hosted a joint conference that brought together leading scholars to discuss the state of U.S.-Russian/Eurasian relations. The papers in this volume are drawn from this event. **Joshua Tucker**, director of the Jordan Center, opened the conference and asked two key questions: Have U.S.-Russian relations changed one year into Trump's presidency? How are relations between the two nations expected to develop in the future?

In the first section of this collection, **Arkady Moshes**, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, **Mikhail Alexseev**, San Diego University, and **Adam Stulberg**, Georgia Institute of Technology, discuss recent U.S. and Russian foreign and domestic policies and their impacts on the bilateral relationship. In his paper, Moshes describes the "sober" foreign policy viewpoints held by the Russian establishment and states that the 2016-17 euphoria about a quick fix to Russian-Western relations on Moscow's terms appears to have faded away. Alexseev posits that Trump's inclinations to improve U.S.-Russian relations hit congressional resistance and that the body even showed its own capacity to have a role in U.S. foreign policymaking. Stulberg analyzes the interdependent energy and gas networks within the fold of Western energy sanctions on Russia. He asserts that if policymakers in Washington, Brussels, and Moscow can get a grip on the downward spiral in political relations, the "energy equation" has the most potential to re-ground strategic ties.

The second part focuses on Ukraine and Syria and consists of papers by **Olexiy Haran**, University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and **Petro Burkovsky**, National Institute for Strategic Studies, **Ekaterina Stepanova**, Institute of the World Economy and International Relations (Russia), and **Pavel Baev**, Peace Research Institute Oslo. Haran and Burkovsky claim that the Donbas peace process has not worked and that a new approach involving the supply of U.S. lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine could create conditions that prompt Russian forces to back down and stabilization to take hold in Donbas. Stepanova writes that Russia seeks to diminish its ownership of the "Syria problem" while keeping and expanding its multiple partnerships in the broader Middle East. Baev states that there is incompatibility in the political agendas on counterterrorism of the West and Russia and that Putin's actions rather than his words mean that Russia would be a poor ally in the complex struggle against terrorism.

The third group of papers is by **Ivan Kurilla**, European University at St. Petersburg, **Sergei Golunov**, Kyushu University, **Marlene Laruelle**, George Washington University, and **Alexandra Yatsyk**, Kazan Federal University. Kurilla reflects on the history of U.S.-Russian relations and reminds us that “Red Scares” have happened in the United States before, just as it is now – a key element to comprehend the domestic U.S. political underpinnings of surges in anti-Russian sentiments. Golunov addresses the rise of conspiracy theories in the United States and Russia, saying that both sides take great strides to discount the other when their relations are highly contentious, with the conspiralogical realm not spared. Laruelle contends that Russia’s soft power in the United States and its links with the U.S. far right demonstrate a confluence of interests rather than an influence on U.S. public opinion. Yatsyk explores patriotic themes in Russian pop culture with a close look at the stage shows put on by the infamous Russian Night Wolves biker club. She highlights the show’s anti-American propaganda and reveals how they function as calls to bring on board Russian patriots in the Kremlin’s fight against the West.

I. US-Russia Relations at the Interplay of Foreign and Domestic Policies

What Will Replace Russia's Dwindling Trump-Euphoria?

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY VIEWPOINTS TODAY

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 506

February 2018

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One year into Donald Trump's presidency is a good time to scrutinize the views held by the mainstream parts of the Russian foreign policy establishment. In a nutshell, they are highly skeptical about the immediate future of relations between Russia and the West, optimistic about Russia's turn to Asia despite the impediments, and are not satisfied about the Russia-centered reintegration of the post-Soviet space. Displaying a considerable degree of realism, they have identified the limitations underlying Russia's foreign policy actions, with the foremost factor being the weakness of the Russian economy. However, the Putin administration appears to have settled on an almost no-compromise agenda and it is not possible to know to what extent the opinions of Russia's leading analysts are shared by high-level Russian decision-makers. What we do know is that the prospects for settling the Russia-West strife on Russia's terms have disappeared. After a time of sanguinity, Russian foreign policy experts have now found themselves back at the drawing board. In many ways, this must speak to the indeterminate policy course of Vladimir Putin's next presidential term.

A New U.S. President, a New Hope

Donald Trump's election as U.S. president boosted Moscow's foreign policy self-confidence. In January 2017, Sergei Karaganov, a prominent Russian political observer and currently the Dean of Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, [concluded](#) that Russia had "persevered" and was "winning practically in all directions, qualitatively strengthening its international positions." He credited this result to "will, unity between the majority of the people and the elites, strategic foresight and skillful diplomacy." According to Karaganov, the forces that wanted to defeat Russia, to destroy its economy and to bring about regime change were in retreat, the U.S. globalist and "ideology-driven" elites had lost power and its "European branches" were losing in "one European country after another."

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Expectations quickly rose in Russia and in certain quarters of Europe that some kind of "deal" would soon be made between Moscow and Washington. There was anticipation that the "Ukrainian page" would be turned, Western sanctions on Russia would be eased, and relations between Russia and the West would normalize.

Reality proved these expectations illusory. Within the first months of Trump's inauguration, it became clear that Washington's position on Ukraine was hardly any more compromising than that of the Obama administration. A U.S. missile strike on Syria's governmental forces in April 2017 demonstrated that the new U.S. administration was not inclined to negotiate its policies and actions in the Middle East with Moscow. It took an embarrassing half year after Trump's inauguration before he held his first meeting with Putin, which took place on the margins of the G20 summit in Hamburg. Their meeting (and whatever they discussed) was quickly overshadowed by new U.S. Congressional sanctions on Russia and then a scandalous situation with the Russian demand to cut U.S. embassy staff and the ensuing reciprocal closure of diplomatic facilities. Although various official Russian spokespersons continuously blame the bilateral relationship crisis on the Obama administration and/or Trump's domestic opponents (thus keeping the option of normalization open for the U.S. president personally), and despite the fact that Putin [publicly denies](#) that Trump has been a disappointment to him, it stands to reason beyond any doubt that a year ago Moscow was hoping for a far better outcome. Adding to the mix, the election victories of Emmanuel Macron in France and Angela Merkel in Germany suggested continuity rather than change in Europe's approach toward Russia.

"The Western Front" – A Frontline Forever?

In Russia, there is a consensus now that the potential to create a comprehensive Russian-Western partnership has been exhausted, if it has ever truly existed. Russia claims the failure is due to the United States trying to establish global hegemony (with a Brussels-centered sub-model in Europe) while concurrently denying Russia any privileged role in contributing rules for the Western-centric international game.

We have seen these lines of reasoning before. The assessment that the West views Russia "doctrinally" as one of its main security challenges and a primary source of problems has been present in Russian analytical discourses for some time. What is fairly new is the assumption that the Russian factor will be exploited by the West to solve the West's own "internal crisis." Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of *Russian in Global Affairs*, and Alexei Miller, professor at the European University at St. Petersburg, both well-established authors of several major reports dealing with Russian-Western relations, [formulate](#) this very clearly when they say that "having an external enemy is very useful for ... internal consolidation, and so far, this role has been undoubtedly allocated to Russia." They go on to say that, "demonization of Putin and Russia to a relatively little extent depends on

specific disagreements on international relations. Those have become an ideological factor of the domestic political struggle [in the West].”

Consequently, in line with the perception of the West as not being interested in partnering with Russia, Russian analysts expect that the former will continue putting pressure on the latter. The response to this is very straightforward. As Dmitry Trenin from the Moscow Carnegie Center [indicates](#), “the Kremlin has no intention of stepping back or reconciling itself with the West through concessions and promises of improved behavior.” In practice, above of all, this implies that: the Crimean question should not even be discussed; the conflict in Donbas should be resolved on terms that would guarantee long-term Russian control over Ukraine’s foreign policy (or that the situation should be frozen); the whole Ukraine issue should not be treated as a central stumbling block between Russia and the West; and EU and NATO enlargement should be ruled out.

These analyses do not even raise a question of whether Russia can withstand the Western pressure it is facing at the present time. Its resources are implicitly or explicitly viewed as sufficient for that. However, there is a clear recognition that in the long run a confrontation with the West would take a heavy toll on Russia’s future. Furthermore, trade with Europe will remain very important for Russia and so will its cultural proximity. A preferred outcome would therefore be a transactional relationship involving ad hoc cooperation—example areas include the Arctic, Middle East, terrorism, energy, and stabilizing various situations in Eurasia. Once again, however, to move forward in cooperation, Russia would like to be recognized by the West as a global player with certain exclusive rights.

In the current mutually hostile circumstances, it is actually seen as positive that Russia and the West are managing (or muddling through) sticky issues rather than engaging in open confrontation. At the same time, it is clear that for the mainstream part of the Russian foreign policy community, the goal of bringing Russia closer to the West in general or integrating it with Europe is irretrievably withdrawn at the present time. One implication of this is that any pleas from Europe along the lines of “we need Russia” will have no analogous responses from Moscow.

Greater Eurasia: Are Things Really so Great?

The logic of Russia’s ongoing efforts to “pivot to Asia” is not new. During his election campaign in 2011, Putin [urged](#) Russian policymakers to catch “China’s winds” in the “sails” of the Russian economy. In 2012, Russia hosted an APEC summit in Vladivostok. The Russian-Chinese rapprochement started long before these years but it accelerated as a consequence of the Ukraine crisis. But now the Asian vision is becoming more ambitious, placing Russia at the center of Greater Eurasia and as a key actor in the space between Tokyo/Shanghai and Lisbon. This vision foresees a well-functioning

relationship between Moscow and Beijing, with Russia not as a junior partner. It sees not only the successful harmonization between Russian and Chinese initiatives – such as on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) – but Russia being a key player on the continent above and beyond just being a territory that connects Asia and Europe. In accordance with this approach, Moscow should be able to play a role in managing tensions between China and India, India and Pakistan, and Pakistan and Afghanistan. At the same time, it should achieve a breakthrough in relations with Japan and South Korea and solidify economic cooperation with ASEAN countries.

Russian experts have also discussed the realistic constraints on Russia's reorientation toward Asia. Trenin [writes](#), "for myriad reasons, China was not interested in a close alliance with Russia, even one it would clearly dominate." First, enjoying the current state of relations and receiving much of what it wants from Moscow in terms of energy and military cooperation, Beijing, as Trenin observes, is not interested in Russia obtaining great power status. Second, there is a realization that China will not take Russia's side in its conflict with Washington. Lukyanov and Miller [admit](#) that China "will not take any risks in its relations with the United States, linked with Russian-American tensions, and will not support Russian actions on putting pressure on America." Third, when it comes to economics, Russian experts acknowledge that Beijing is rather cautious about further involvement with Russia. The "low-hanging fruit" of politically-driven rapprochement has been reaped, while Russia, facing global competition for Chinese investment, should [not expect](#) any "easy money" coming from China. Finding promising projects to implement with the same harmonization between the BRI and EEU may be quite problematic under the circumstances. There is no way of denying that the state of the Russian economy hardly provides a solid underpinning for it playing a key role in the region-at-large, particularly in the context of Asia's ongoing economic and technological development.

Post-Soviet Space: No longer a Key Priority?

Analysis of the post-Soviet space is an area where expert opinion openly differs from official positions. Russian officials are full of hopes and plans about a Russia-centered reintegration process, but analysts feel that there are lost prospects and that only some bilateral relationships remain important. Furthermore, a [joint report](#) by the Russian International Affairs Council and Moscow-based Center for Strategic Research explicitly suggests abandoning the secluded post-Soviet paradigm and acquiring a new momentum by means of cooperation with non-regional partners. Potentially, the idea of "opening up" the post-Soviet space may become an important novelty in Russian foreign policy thinking. Although this would primarily mean simply coming to terms with reality (all post-Soviet countries have been trying for a long time to balance and hedge against Russian dominance), acceptance of this approach would challenge views about isolationism and/or spheres of privileged interest.

All in all, Russian foreign policy experts appear to have reached three major conclusions. First, and this is where Ukraine's centrality inadvertently returns, there is a clear realization that Russia has lost Ukraine as a partner and this will be the case for the foreseeable future. Without prospects for some kind of reintegration with Ukraine, quite a few projects in the post-Soviet space lack critical mass and would therefore yield only minor economic effects. Second, there is an acknowledgment that the EEU cannot be a vehicle of political reintegration and that its supranational governing mechanisms are and will remain limited. Partly, this is a result of growing concerns among Russia's partners in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. However, it would be fair to observe that the resolve to protect national sovereignty was strongly present in the behavior of these states before 2014. Third, the need to go beyond exclusive post-Soviet formats logically follows the decision to harmonize regional policies with China, which, in turn, is the result of the understanding that Russia simply cannot resist or even slow down Chinese penetration into Central Asia.

Conclusions

The on-going debate among Russian experts is a serious attempt to take stock of what happened in the country's relations with the outside world in recent years. Many conclusions are quite sober. Whether the stated goals are realistic and sufficiently resourced could be debated further, but a consolidated vision of a non-compromising, even if largely non-confrontational, stance toward the West, alongside pursuing openings with Asia, has been messaged to the world. The problem is that this view will not necessarily become a conceptual basis of Russian state policy. Putin may well continue positioning himself as the commandant of a besieged fortress, which has served him well in domestic politics. The militarization and securitization of Russian economic policy is at full swing and would be difficult to stop, and the inertia of previous approaches is strong, especially toward the post-Soviet neighborhood. If we accept these notions, the West should have little hope that Putin's next presidential term will bring about easier cooperation with Russia. The euphoria about a quick fix to Russian-Western relations on Russian terms may have faded away, but the Kremlin is still playing a "zero-sum game" and any opportunity to exploit Western weaknesses will not be missed.

Why Trump's Bid to Improve U.S.-Russian Relations Backfired in Congress

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 507
February 2018

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One of Donald Trump's 2016 keynote foreign policy pledges was to improve relations with Russia. Few would have predicted that after a year in office, his plan would not only stall or fizzle out, as campaign promises often do, but that it would backfire. Toward the end of July 2017, near unanimous votes in both houses of Congress forced Trump to sign legislation that reaffirmed all sanctions on Russia. Furthermore, the part of the bill titled "Russia Sanctions Review Act of 2017" made all of the Russia sanctions significantly harder for any U.S. President to modify or lift. In stunned disappointment, Trump issued a fulminating [statement](#) during the signing, berating Congress for displacing "the President's exclusive constitutional authority."

During a time of high political polarization, this Congressional convergence de facto stripped Trump of powers to use recognition of Russia's sovereignty over any previously annexed territories as a foreign policy tool. Congress essentially validated its own institutional independence as well as its capacity to have a say in U.S. foreign policymaking. Three factors are particularly relevant to the understanding of when and how Congress may become a more active and influential actor shaping foreign policy in the Trump era: issue nature, elite opinion, and executive volatility.

Defying Polarization and Party Realignment

The passing of Russia sanctions into law in 2017 confounds much of the conventional wisdom about U.S. politics. Surely, the importance of getting votes to stay in office has not diminished, nor has partisan and ideological [polarization](#). But since Trump started his presidential campaign, partisan polarization has increased, particularly regarding American public views on Russia, Putin, sanctions, and election meddling:

- In views of Russia as an adversary of the United States, Pew Research Center [surveys](#) found that Democrats and Republicans traded places after Trump's election. In January 2016, Russia was named as an adversary by 27 percent of

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Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats, and in January 2017 by 20 percent Republicans and 38 percent of Democrats, amounting to a 25 percent swing across party lines.

- In Gallup [polls](#), the number of self-identified Republicans who held favorable views of Russian President Vladimir Putin rose from 12 percent in February 2015 to 32 percent in February 2017. The number of self-identified Democrats who held favorable views of Putin meanwhile dropped from 15 percent to just 10 percent.
- Views of Trump's involvement with Russian officials in 2016 as "illegal" were held by 43 percent of Democrats but only by 6 percent of Republicans in an early August 2017 Gallup [poll](#). In the same survey, 69 percent of Republicans but only 4 percent of Democrats said Trump's involvement with Russia was "nothing wrong." This angle also put the Russia issue center stage on the domestic political agenda, increasing the putative significance of public opinion for policy.

Partisan polarization has also been evident on the Russia sanctions issue:

- Among respondents in an early January 2017 Gallup poll who heard allegations that Russia hacked the Clinton campaign, only 17 percent of Republicans, but 37 percent of Democrats said the U.S. response with sanctions did not go far enough. At the same time, 35 percent among Republicans, but only 7 percent among Democrats said the sanctions went too far.

Given this polarization and with the plurality in both parties (39 percent among Republicans and 51 percent among Democrats) saying that the existing sanctions were about right, public pressure or electoral expectations could hardly give the incentive for a Republican-controlled Congress to strengthen the sanctions.

Why would legislation vigorously resisted by a newly elected president win bipartisan support in Congress and be enacted into law despite enduring partisan and ideological polarization – which, if anything, Trump's rise to presidency not only signified, but also only enhanced? Though no systematic quantitative studies addressed this specific question of bipartisan *opposition* to the president on foreign policy (most research examines bipartisan *support* for the president), some analyses offer plausible insights that shed light on the 2017 Russia sanctions surprise. Three factors are particularly relevant to understanding when and how the Congress may become a more active and influential actor shaping U.S. foreign policy under Trump: issue nature, elite opinion, and executive volatility.

For Sanctions, the “Issue” Matters

Constitutional design casts a long shadow on American politics. On foreign policy, it sets the stage for institutional cleavages prevailing over ideological and partisan ones. The U.S. Constitution confers certain powers on the president and certain powers on the House and the Senate to conduct foreign affairs. The crucial point is that there are no additional guidelines. As historian Edward Corwin [wrote](#), “Which of these organs shall have the decisive and final voice in determining the course of the American nation is left for events to resolve.” This means “the issue at stake” matters strongly, if not decisively, in the executive-legislative interactions on foreign policy.

In-depth case studies further and strongly suggest that international sanctions are exactly an issue that makes U.S. lawmakers see their institutional affiliation as more important than their party affiliation. In this sense, the 2017 Russia sanctions legislation is not new and it is consistent with the Congressional dynamics on, for example, China currency sanctions, Iran non-proliferation sanctions, and Russia human rights sanctions. Political scientist Jordan Tama, drawing on an analysis of *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* articles that mentioned the word “sanctions” as well as on other records, [presented](#) the following findings in 2015:

- A significant common denominator in all cases was “a common Congressional worldview that is distinct from the president’s” (p. 6). This is specifically in regard to the institutional incentives that makes Congress emphasize punitive actions while the president emphasizes diplomacy.
- Looking at the Congressional-executive politics on Iran and China sanctions during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, institutional cleavage between U.S. government branches is crucial “regardless of who occupies the White House or which party holds a Congressional majority” (p. 28).
- Interest groups also mattered, particularly in the case of sanctions vis-a-vis corporations that stood to incur economic losses. However, corporate influence was conditional on the degree of economic interdependence with the country targeted by the sanctions. Thus, corporate lobbying influenced decisions on China sanctions, but not on Iran and Russia.

Given these findings, Trump’s proposed pivot from acting through international institutions to bilateral deals as a basis for foreign policy signaled that, if successful, such an approach would undermine the institutional advantages of Congress on foreign policy. And Trump’s positive views of Putin and insistence that improving relations with Russia would be a good thing implied that such improvement, which would entail a review of sanctions, would threaten Congressional authority on foreign policy. In other words, Trump’s arrival in power meant not just a change in political

conversations, but a potential reassessment of the role Congress has as an institution. These developments set the stage for the convergence of partisan elite views on Russia, with the sanctions issue becoming a battleground where those elites could not only assert their views, but defend their institutional turf.

Elite Opinion: The Shifting “Water’s Edge”

Systematically examining roll calls in Congress from 1975 to 1996, political scientists Mark Souva and David Rohde [found](#) the convergence of views among partisan elites to be a stronger predictor of bipartisan voting on foreign policy than perception of international-level threats and presidential priorities. This was particularly the case following the Vietnam War and the end of the Cold War (although the balance again shifted in the president’s favor after 9/11). These findings undermined realist arguments that politics ended “at water’s edge” and that Congress would putatively support presidents almost unconditionally on key foreign policy issues, particularly those dealing with national security. However, they did not necessarily suggest that the elites would not use security arguments to build bipartisan consensus.

The convergence of elite Congressional opinion across party lines indeed paved the way for the passage of the late July 2017 Congressional Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions [Act](#) (Senate: 98-2, House: 419-3), and it was putatively reinforced by the growing sense of national security threats posed by Russia. Yet, it is also clear that it was not the external threat somehow affecting all members of Congress in a uniform fashion, but the merging of the threat issue with the imperative to present a united institutional position vis-à-vis the new administration. In important ways, this elite convergence was “intermestic,” with the Republican elites asserting their traditionally more hawkish and Russia-wary views on international security and with the Democrats energized into action by the sense that Russia could have played a role in the stunning defeat of their presidential candidate. The institutional turf defense on the sanctions issue offered a common platform for these views.

Senior Republicans, such as Senator John McCain, Senator Mitch McConnell, Speaker Paul Ryan, and former presidential candidate Mitt Romney, upheld the assessment of Russia as the main geopolitical threat to the United States. Ryan [said](#) in early January 2017, “I agree with your basic assessment of Russia. I think Russia is a global menace led by a man who is menacing. Vladimir Putin does not share our interests, he frustrates our interests.” Showing the limitations of corporate lobbying, he dismissed concerns that Russia sanctions could harm U.S. energy companies, [saying](#), “There are some policy issues with respect to making sure that we don't actually inadvertently help Russian oligarchs and oil firms.” He [added](#), “There's no secret here – Russia tried to meddle with our elections. This is why I'm a fan of the sanctions. This is why I'm a Russia hawk and a Russia skeptic.”

Democrat and Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer agreed to allow Republicans to take credit for his proposal requiring any easing of sanctions on Russia to undergo Congressional review. Schumer collaborated behind the scenes with key Republican senators (McCain, Graham, McConnell) to craft bipartisan legislation that could win broad approval among legislators and which would not be “tainted” by perceived collaboration with leading Democrats. He [eschewed](#) interactions with the White House. Meanwhile, in numerous statements, Democrat lawmakers combined appeals for Congressional unity with references to Russia's interference in the 2016 election and the question of whether Trump and/or his staff illegally colluded with Russia. For example, Senator Chris Van Hollen [argued](#) that Russia's cyberattacks on the United States threatened to “undermine public faith in the democratic process” and therefore it was necessary to work “across the aisle” and “put patriotism over partisanship.” Representative Jackson Lee, serving since 1995, linked reports of Trump's advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner's previously undisclosed meetings with Russian officials with the [call](#) to: “Sanction the KGB, sanction Mr. Putin, sanction Russia. They are, in fact, here to demolish the democracy of this Nation.”

Finally, to solidify their common institutional stand, party leaders in Congress agreed to combine in one bill sanctions involving different issue areas: Russia (involving Ukraine, Syria, and the U.S. 2016 election) plus Iran and North Korea. This geographic and issue consolidation made the legislation—and with it the Congressional authority on sanctions in general—harder for the White House to challenge.

The Great Power of Risk Aversion: Confronting Executive Volatility

The volatility of Trump's views on issues and governing, as evidenced by his pre-dawn Twittering and frequent arguments with Republican Party leaders and notables, introduced a significant incentive for Congressional leaders of both parties to mobilize around the sanctions issue. Two considerations appear of paramount importance.

First, Trump's volatility—and particularly his ideas diverging from those of the dominant neoconservatives—undermined the incentives for Republicans to stake out positions closer to their party's ideological center. (The latter, earlier studies showed, has been a strong driver of polarization, reducing incentives to seek common ideological positions with the other party). The arrival of Trump made it less clear what that center meant. In terms of foreign policy, Trump's vehemently articulated preferences for executive flexibility and for deal making on a case-by-case basis meant that he discounted consistent ideological stances. Where would then a party member hang his or her ideological hat?

Second, the arrival of Trump in office made Congressional leaders realize that their institutional authority on sanctions could be challenged in two ways. On the one hand, Trump signaled he may relax Russia sanctions as part of his deal making. On the other

hand, Trump's key foreign policy appointees, the Secretaries of State and Defense, suggested in their Congressional testimony that not only did they take a harder line than Trump on Russia, but that they favored the increasing use of military power over economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool. Both Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson supported providing lethal weapons to Ukraine as a more effective tool to stave off Russian intervention than economic sanctions. Either the growing use of deal-making diplomacy or military power projection, would undermine the usefulness of sanctions as a policy tool, and with it an important source of Congressional influence on foreign policy.

As Tama's research showed in relation to the Magnitsky Act, when Congress considers enacting sanctions into law, external threats of retaliation (from the White House, but particularly from other countries) only cements their resolve and encourages bipartisanship.

Conclusion

The Trump–Congress battle over the 2017 Russia sanctions act has implications that go beyond conventional interpretations of foreign policy dynamics in Washington. There is more to the passing of the sanctions law than preventing, as Transatlantico.info founder Andrew Spannaus [wrote](#), “an apparently bumbling, self-absorbed and ineffective president” from “implementing a major change in U.S. foreign policy.” Rather, both parties saw risks and took action. Some felt that the president might actually turn out to be more effective than they would like. Many saw the loss of policymaking turf through Trump's use of diplomacy and/or bolder projection of U.S. military power. In short, the 2017 sanctions can be seen as a “Goldilocks” solution—neither too hard, nor too soft—that appealed to Congressional opinion leaders across the aisle. From the broader view, the emergent big picture is that the post-9/11 anti-terrorism consensus in Washington is wearing thin. It indicates that U.S. presidents will be finding it increasingly hard to push their foreign policy agenda through Congress by claiming that it would help in the “war on terrorism”—including against militant Islamist terrorism, which was Trump's key stated rationale for improving U.S.-Russian relations.

One should not interpret Congressional support for Russia sanctions as a side effect of the multi-faceted Russiagate scandal. As we have seen, public opinion polarization about Putin, Russia, election meddling, and the sanctions produced no additional action on the part of Republicans (who dominate Congress). If Russiagate contributed to anti-Trump bipartisanship on sanctions it was through the incentivizing of Democrats—who in fact had generally been softer on Russia than the Republicans prior to the 2016 elections—to toughen their stand and to combine it with the drive to thoroughly investigate Russia's putative role in Trump's victory. Still, Congress showed it could turn around politics “beyond the water's edge” and perform a check on presidential authority. It has also shown that despite the fragmentation of news consumption along

ideological divides, U.S. legislators are capable of forming consistent positions on national security threats and finding the inputs of the U.S. intelligence officers valuable. Above and beyond, the ongoing executive-legislative sagas demonstrate that the U.S. Constitution is alive and well and that Congressional decision-making implications are worth analyzing thoroughly if the course of U.S. foreign policy is to be assessed presciently.

Escaping the Energy Sanctions Tangle

GAS NETWORKS & OFF-RAMPS FROM ESCALATION IN US-EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 498

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Energy Sanctions and statecraft are mainstays of Western policy toward Russia and this looks unlikely to change. The passage of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) by a veto-proof majority in the U.S. Congress specifically targeted broad new prohibitions on energy sector loans with maturity longer than 60 days and new partnerships in the oil sector (off-shore, deep-water, Arctic, and shale) outside of Russia. Yet, for all of the excitement about tightening pressure on the Kremlin and imposing bipartisan restraint on the White House's friendly overtures to Russian President Vladimir Putin, successive rounds of U.S. and EU sanctions since 2014 have failed to compel Moscow to withdraw from Crimea, cooperate fully to implement the Minsk II accords, or come clean on its foreign electoral intrusions. Prospects for indirect and long-term effects of Western sanctions also are dwindling, given the upward swing in global oil prices, signs of stabilization across the Russian economy, and widening internal divisions among American and European stakeholders in energy relations with Russia.

What can be done to navigate these rocky political shoals? The first step is for all parties to accept that sanctions will not be lifted anytime soon; mutual interests rest with demonstrating resolve to sustain sanctions while maintaining flexibility to reassure that future de-escalatory gestures will be reciprocated. Second, policymakers on all sides must recognize that the regional gas landscape is changing, but in more ways than shifts in unconventional supply and demand. The rise of LNG, interconnection of the transmission infrastructure, and entrenched corporate strategic partnerships, in particular, are converging to effect dense, interdependent, and multidimensional gas networks. These, in turn, are displacing the salience of point-to-point pipeline politics or the crude exercise of market power, generating new forms of leverage. If policymakers in the three capitals have the courage of leadership to arrest the downward spiral in political relations, this network transformation of the energy equation offers opportunity

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to ease the sanctions tangle, if not re-ground strategic ties across the former East-West divide.

Sanctions Upon Us!

CAATSA empowered the U.S. president to sanction individuals and firms (both U.S. and non-U.S.) involved in the construction of Russian oil and gas export pipelines, as well as inserted Congress directly into the mandated review process. Although President Donald Trump begrudgingly signed the new Russian sanctions into law, he too doubled down on wielding America's newfound "energy dominance," featuring prospects for U.S. LNG exports to cut into Moscow's established European markets. While leaders across Europe questioned U.S. motives, as well as maintained an aversion to restricting interdependent gas ties with Russia, Brussels nonetheless renewed its current sanctions regime and its determination to liberalize the EU common energy space.

Ironically, the default to sanctions between the West and Russia is becoming more entrenched as the tangible effects seem more negligible, if not detrimental. In the energy sector alone, Russia hit post-Soviet highs in oil production by 2016 and its gas footprint in Europe expanded, all with Western sanctions in place. Although success is often elusive, contemporary U.S. and EU sanctions on Russia founder at multiple levels.

Specifically, successive rounds of sanctions are flagging due to unclear and open-ended objectives. While formally aimed at altering different elements of Russia's foreign behavior, Western decisionmakers remain divided over a focus on coercing reversal in Moscow's policy, deterring escalation, exacting economic versus political punishment, signaling protest, or imposing placeholders for more aggressive future action—each with different (and at times cross-cutting) requirements for success. Smart sanctions targeted at specific sectors, firms, and individuals lack clear metrics, as well as leave ambiguous the vulnerability of extra-territorial Russian entities. They also rest on conflicting assumptions about Kremlin politics and decisionmaking, thus are out of sync with the compensation and circulation of targeted Russian elites. Moreover, there is little incentive for the Russian leadership to comply, let alone overcome "Jackson-Vanik paranoia," as the Congressionally imposed sanctions do not specify pathways for relief or self-restraint on changing goal posts.

Moscow also has demonstrated remarkable dexterity at offsetting the financial and technological restrictions to maintain "business as usual." By practicing fiscal discipline, allowing the ruble to float, leveraging accumulated foreign capital, attracting foreign investment in non-strategic sectors, and curbing the outflow of capital, the Kremlin succeeded at riding out the combined pressures of sanctions and oil price shocks initially to stave off acute macroeconomic crisis and then to register modest growth projected through 2018. Rising oil prices offer additional relief, albeit at the costs of

perpetuating corruption and neglecting long-term productivity. Energy firms have adapted to the higher costs and restrictions on technology imports—selling off assets, soliciting available financing and capital from Russian Banks and investors in China and India, as well as exploiting marginal cost advantages to land more gas and preserve market share in Europe.

Western sanctions likewise produce collateral damage. By some calculations, U.S. and EU sanctions cost targeted Russian firms about one-third of their revenue and employees, and half of their asset value compared to non-sanctioned firms. But they carry reciprocal negative consequences for exchange rates, as well as for key European energy firms and strategic sectors. Protracted use also risks amplifying fundamental incompatibilities between American and EU approaches to the design and implementation of energy sanctions. As a recent RUSI [report](#) underscores, the unilateral imposition of U.S. secondary sanctions on European energy firms would put Washington on a collision course with the EU's strict interpretation of sanctions and grandfathering provisions that protect projects underway with Russian partners. Similarly, Timothy Frye [demonstrates](#) that although there is little evidence the sanctions have had a discrete rally around the flag effect in Russia—due to preexisting support for the annexation of Crimea—the Russian population tends to be more forgiving of the Kremlin's poor economic performance and harbors greater antipathy toward the United States and the EU in the face of Western sanctions. Accordingly, further extension of sanctions will likely perversely incite “de-risking” among American and foreign energy firms intent on reducing exposure to U.S. sanctions, while bolstering the Kremlin's political resilience.

Yet, sanctions persist. Irrespective of mounting limitations, U.S. policymakers perceive them as integral to demonstrating resolve. Despite complaints about Washington's high handedness, Brussels has few other viable tools to protest, if not challenge, Moscow's assault on Europe's common interests and values. The Kremlin, too, has little short-term incentive to relax reciprocal sanctions. It can rely on infusions from the sovereign wealth fund, obscure the costs of policies in Ukraine, and selectively target government-spending cuts as oil prices rise. The threat of tougher Western sanctions also generates incentives to accelerate construction of both Nord Stream II and Turkish Stream (notwithstanding uncertainty over final landfall in Europe), lay claim to contested reserves in the Black Sea, diversify contracts with EU companies, and invite non-Western investment in upstream development.

Networks & Social Capital in the Eurasian Gas Ecosystem

Often overlooked in the sanctions calculus are emerging network forms of interaction among mature and new gas hubs across Europe. The integration of these hubs—which receive piped gas from Russia and other suppliers; import, store, and distribute LNG; and concentrate vertical integration with other power and transportation sectors—

effectively alters the prominence and prestige of respective actors within the network. The changing centrality of these emerging hubs—measured in terms of their position between pairs of important hubs or other prominent supply networks—adds resilience, optionality, and indirect effects to intra-European and external markets. These structural features open up opportunities for alternative supply both to and within EU sub-regional markets that carry different implications for diffusing extra-commercial power, vulnerability, and influence across the European-Eurasian gas network.

As elucidated elsewhere, the emergence of satellite hubs within the EU creates incremental competition with Russian imports. The Baltic States and Poland, for example, constitute a north-central European hub with development of related LNG facilities and interconnectors southward. Notwithstanding the 10%+ premium Lithuania is projected to pay for purchasing LNG from Norway, the opening of floating storage and regasification units, development of interconnectors with the other Baltic States and Finland, and promise of re-exports are estimated to reduce import requirements from Russia by one third, thus strengthening the sub-region's bargaining position vis-à-vis Gazprom. Similarly, as Hungarian cross-border points are tied into Ukrainian, Central European, and Italian gas systems, they offer critical links for diffusing flow from multiple directions across the sub-region. This stands to reinforce development of the Southern Gas Corridor—complementing transit flows through Turkey—that otherwise can augment non-Russian deliveries from Azerbaijan (and possibly Turkmenistan, Iraq, and Iran) with connections to Greece, Albania, and the Adriatic Sea.

Deep and cross-cutting corporate strategic alliances complement these infrastructure networks. They constitute the grist for building trust and securing access to energy markets and resources across the network that transcend contracted flows of gas, spot trading, varying ownership types, and regulatory voids at the national and EU levels. The increasing quality of corporate relationships, reflected in the depth of foreign investment, can elevate the transfer of firm-specific assets while reducing exit mobility that strengthen inter-firm commitments. These new corporate hubs and clusters of exchange dampen incentives for coercive behavior and arbitrary disruption of established transnational business ties. As international tensions mounted and sanctions were imposed following the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict, some of the largest multinational energy stakeholders increased gas investments, staved off more stringent restrictions on existing projects, and forged closer business alliances with Gazprom. These social networks effectively constrain Russia's market power while preserving its salience as a valued commercial partner.

Several trends stand out in this regard. Gazprom's social capital across both northern and southern sub-regions of the EU gas market has steadily increased since 2006, notwithstanding successive gas wars and sanctions. But the quality of these ties varies significantly. Gazprom enjoys very strong corporate ties with leading German and Finish gas companies that jibe with the high volume of contracted bilateral gas trade.

Given that Germany is not import-dependent on Russia, the strong social ties may better account for the continued partnership and outspoken political support for sustaining ties with Gazprom by senior executives from respective German companies. Yet, Gazprom lacks trusted corporate relationships with the gas sectors across the Baltic States and Czech Republic, despite its market power and large contracted volumes of deliveries. Not surprisingly, reverse flow and threats of marginal imports of LNG into this sub-region curtailed Gazprom's bargaining leverage and compelled it to reduce the price of contracted deliveries to Lithuania by 23% since 2015.

Within the southern sub-region, Gazprom also enjoys very strong ties with the Italian firm ENI and Hungary's MOL that allow it to project influence indirectly over numerous smaller European entities. But here Gazprom's social capital is not unrivaled. Irrespective of the relatively small volumes of gas projected for delivery into the EU's Southern Gas Corridor from Azerbaijan, SOCAR's corporate affiliations are situated at the center of the sub-regional network, with especially trustworthy relationships emerging with prominent Italian firms. Furthermore, Gazprom does not enjoy rich corporate alliances with Turkish gas firms, notwithstanding the significant volumes of gas sold to Turkey. This effectively reduces the transaction costs for Ankara's pursuit of incremental non-Russian options.

Strategic Implications

The United States, EU, and Russia now confront interlocking dilemmas with energy sanctions and statecraft that, if not deftly managed, can readily accelerate the downturn in strategic relations. For the Trump Administration, the main challenge rests with using discretion over enforcement of sanctions to sustain discriminating pressure on Russia, amid growing dissonance among allies with greater direct energy stakes with Moscow and mounting suspicions of the White House's leadership; all while signaling flexibility (mostly by omission) to reassure the Kremlin when it is ready to compromise. From a European policy perspective, the dilemma rests with maintaining a united front to leverage the institutional power and commercial allure of the single EU energy market to sustain pressure on the Kremlin—forging convergence across distinct energy security agendas among member states and the United States—while proffering policy “carrots” to embolden multiple stakeholders in Russia best served by participating in diverse, commercially competitive ventures. The Kremlin, in turn, faces daunting challenges of averting uncontrolled escalation of the current transatlantic stand-off, preserving the stature of Russian energy in established markets, and containing liquidity problems that can compound structural deficiencies in the economy, while upholding national security requirements and saving political face for its earlier foreign incursions. All parties must walk this tightrope as U.S. Congressional and Russian presidential elections heat up over 2018.

The changing gas landscape, however, may offer opportunities to “square these circles.” A key to averting sanctions fatigue rests with aligning Western national security and market incentives. One way to do so is by targeting political interventions to accentuate the density of emerging EU gas infrastructure networks, rather than by favoring specific gas supply routes. Promoting transparency and market reforms, as well as introducing targeted tax breaks and preferential lending terms/guarantees, should be the guiding principles. This could facilitate price correlation across European hubs that the ongoing recession and market itself may be slow to deliver. Such policies could “incentivize” flexible supply options to constrain Gazprom’s non-commercial exploits, while directing investment to bolster the resilience of critical hubs across the north-south and southern energy corridors, as well as the integration of the Ukrainian gas infrastructure. Although these actions could potentially create additional surplus capacity, they can strengthen the resolve behind Western sanctions in the face of Moscow’s opportunistic probing. Because they will not threaten Gazprom’s market share head on, they also can signal restraint to Russia, reassurance to EU allies, and a commitment to liberalization to Ukraine that politically directed U.S. LNG exports do not.

At the same time, policymakers should appreciate that corporate ties continue to bind, even across politically stark East-West borders. Accordingly, Western policymakers would be wise to realize that the challenges are not so much to rise above narrow commercial interests with their energy statecraft, as they are to recognize the boomerang effects of disrupting strategic corporate ties, and to make it clear that the door will be open for engaging commercially competitive Russian gas interests as tensions ease. Down the road as the Europe-Eurasian network gets built out, this can include working closer with Russia’s rising gas independents to extend reciprocal influence forged out of historical relationships working with Moscow. Different Russian firms and their local partners/subsidiaries could be invited to join in the development of diversity via new LNG and storage facilities, Southern Corridor, decoupled pricing, access to transmission lines, and shale exploration. Such broadening and deepening of social capital could limit Gazprom’s room to maneuver while elevating the stature of new Russian stakeholders in gas-on-gas competition. It also could facilitate, on the margins, the tough decisions needed in Moscow to reinvigorate liberalization of the gas industry at home. Ironically, these different facets of network diplomacy could take us “back to the future,” where the natural gas infrastructure and related ties constituted the bulwark for détente among “Cold War” Europe’s main rival camps.

II. Points of Contention: Ukraine and Syria

How the US and EU Can Make the Kremlin Rethink Its Options in Ukraine's Donbas

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Before Donald Trump's ascension to power, Washington, Berlin, and Paris were essentially on the same policy page toward pacifying the conflict in Donbas. The broad aim was to contain the violence and facilitate direct talks between Moscow and Kyiv. The Trump administration's track toward Russia and Donbas has been disjointed, but lately it appears to involve more sanctions as well as arming Ukraine. Top advisors and members of the new U.S. administration, such as Henry Kissinger and Kurt Volker, have advocated ideas from giving Russia leeway to being far more assertive. Key European leaders have mixed views about these tactics. What is clear is that the peace process to date has not been a success and the floated plan for allowing local elections in Donbas under UN peacekeepers does not look viable at the present time. As Washington continues to formulate its stratagems toward Russia and Ukraine, Western solidarity is the most potent feature that would make Moscow (re)consider its options in Donbas, and the wealth of knowledge that European negotiators have about the particulars of the Donbas situation should not be discounted.

Low-Cost Donbas Damage Fixing Has Not Worked

In 2014-2016, there was consensus among Euro-Atlantic partners about Ukraine's ability to survive its confrontation with Russia. The Obama Administration did not believe that supplying weapons to Ukraine was productive. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was also skeptical about it and French President Francois Hollande [stated](#) plainly that the only alternative to negotiations would be war with Russia. In short, the major efforts of the American-Franco-German diplomacy were applied to limiting the impact of Russian aggression. This required accepting Russian military predominance in Donbas while being diffident about Russian demands to place a special status on the territories

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controlled by its proxies. After the Minsk II agreements, two failed attempts at terminating the hostilities by making political compromises with Russia confirmed that aiming for solutions without proper leverage is ineffectual.

Initially, in 2015, a group of negotiators headed by former French Ambassador Pierre Morel developed a detailed plan of reintegrating the separatist-controlled territories into Ukraine. The “Morel plan” suggested holding immediate local elections in the occupied territories of Donbas under an OSCE monitoring mission. This plan failed after Russia’s representatives refused to compromise with the Ukrainian government on election process mechanisms and compatibility with the Ukrainian Constitution. A year later, in 2016, German mediators proposed the so-called “Steinmeier formula” that would grant special status to areas of Donbas if the OSCE monitoring mission concluded that local elections there can be consistent with European/OSCE standards. However, numerous cases of hostile actions by the separatists toward OSCE monitoring officers and the absence of a holding ceasefire proved that genuine election monitoring would be quite impossible without security measures.

The real problem behind these failed attempts was the Russian position. From the time of the Minsk I protocols, Russia made it very clear that Ukraine must recognize the separatists as a legitimate side in any peace talks and negotiate the implementation of agreement terms directly with them. The weak progress of the Minsk (and Normandy) formats proved that Russia saw no other guarantees to advance its agenda except for the use of force in the conflict zone. Keeping the status quo—permanent low intensity clashes in Donbas while maintaining the readiness to launch and support massive separatist offensives on short notice—gives Moscow confidence that it will remain in a strong(er) negotiation position for years to come. All of the concerted Western diplomatic actions have had little effect on the belligerents and on resolving the conflict. Because Ukraine has held its ground militarily and Russia has managed (more or less) to “absorb” Western sanctions, the conflict in Donbas is set to continue and there are still no safeguards against a full-scale war.

The “Art of Dealing” with Donbas after 2017

After Donald Trump’s election victory, members of his team sent confusing messages about Washington’s relations with Russia and about the conflict in Donbas. On the one hand, a lead advisor to the Trump campaign, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, [suggested](#) “to try to make Russia a partner in a solution.” On the other hand, Rex Tillerson, during his confirmation hearing for Secretary of State, [said](#) that the U.S. response to Russian aggression in Crimea and eastern Ukraine should have included the supply of U.S. weapons as well as offers of aerial surveillance. Beneath the varied viewpoints there is a commonality: the United States wants to act according to its own, developing, vision of security in Europe within the framework of its national interests.

Although President Trump [underscored](#) the importance of NATO when he was in Europe, he had reason to be skeptical about its value for American interests since the Europeans, [according](#) to U.S. field commanders, are not prepared to handle a real military crisis. Unsurprisingly, some members of the Trump team openly viewed the Euro-Atlantic alliance as more of a burden than a strategic asset in U.S. relations with rival powers. Back in 2011, Kurt Volker, former U.S. ambassador to NATO and currently U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine, [expressed](#) his worries about caveats in NATO member-state actions, saying that after the Afghanistan and Libya operations, NATO “solidarity has gone out of the window.” Spectacularly, in March 2017, during a session of the NATO-Ukraine Commission, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [stressed](#) that “clear demonstration of NATO’s political support for Ukraine” would be tangible only if it was alongside “maintaining solidarity on sanctions.”

U.S. officials appeared to be somewhat right in their doubts about Western unity when some high-ranking elements in the EU fiercely reacted to the 2017 U.S. Congressional bill that imposed new sanctions on Russia. The concern was that some of the sanctions would impact joint projects by European and Russian companies in the energy sector, including those in the large Nord Stream II initiative. Washington agreed to consult with Brussels before adding new sanctions. The situation was a reminder of the [debacle](#) involving German manufacturing giant Siemens when it failed to adhere to sanctions on Russia regarding high-tech exports to Crimea even though it had [pledged](#) to cooperate. If some key European actors question and undermine Western solidarity by seeking separate economic or security benefits with external powers, then it is reasonable for the United States to outpace them by proposing other deals.

When it comes to grand deals, Kissinger diplomatically [advocated](#) in 2016 for Russia to be included in “a world order which leaves scope for cooperation.” He felt that progress could be achieved in Donbas if Russia drops its aspiration to make Ukraine a satellite state while at the same time Ukraine decides to become a neutral state, like Austria or Finland, which would then remove it from the NATO accession path. Excluding Ukraine from the European economic and security structures was also considered a desirable outcome at the time by the core EU states and mainstay NATO contributors (Germany, France, Italy, and Netherlands). This approach was openly reflected upon in the European Council [conclusions](#) of December 2016 (in an annex about the conditions of implementing the Ukraine Association Agreement). EU representatives also refused to include the words “European aspirations” in their joint statement after the EU-Ukraine summit in the summer of 2017.

From one perspective, keeping Ukraine in limbo between a weakened EU and a resurgent Russia may serve U.S. long-term interests of having a decisive voice in Eastern European affairs. One of the first steps in this direction was determined by Trump’s [support](#) in July 2017 for the fairly new Three Seas Initiative that is aimed at energy supplies to Europe and modernizing the armed forces of Central European countries

(with technical assistance from U.S. firms). These foreign policy points were also part of direct talks between the presidents of Ukraine and the United States. However, that initiative, and even more so any possible deal on Donbas, is challenged by the Moscow-Washington relationship. They do not trust each other, support competing power centers inside Ukraine, and have no common approach toward developing actual details of a sustainable Donbas peace plan.

The Trump administration [slowed down](#) the implementation of Congressional sanctions and [indicated](#) that rejecting or obstructing certain deals on Ukraine would lead Russia into complete isolation. Still, in the wake of meeting with Putin's advisor Vladislav Surkov, who was a key communicator between Russia and the Obama administration, Volker [insisted](#), in August 2017, that the armed conflict in Donbas was the result of Russian interference and imminent military presence. He argued that delivering more advanced weapons to Ukraine would change Russia's calculations about the costs of continuing its hostilities. Volker's statements came ahead of one of the joint communiqués made by German and French leaders that called for both Russia and Ukraine to support a ceasefire and provide OSCE observers with safe access to areas within the battle zones. These various approaches added to the sense of non-alignment between the sponsors of the Minsk peace process.

However, when the U.S. Defense and State departments confirmed that Trump was going to authorize the transfer of lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine (as a way to give Kyiv more power in negotiations), the Russian leadership suddenly changed its mind about blocking the Donbas peacekeeping mission and presented its own UN Security Council draft resolution on the issue. This revealed that Russia, the aggressor in the conflict, could deescalate the situation under certain conditions, in this case when a key sponsor of the peace process (the United States) overtly resorted to unilateral threats of arming Ukrainian troops.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel [appeared](#) to be favorable to the Russian initiative of deploying U.N. peacekeepers, even if at the expense of U.S. conceptions. Germany and France may have felt that if the United States became more involved in the conflict, it would be difficult for them to keep their standing at the negotiation table and prevent possible increased global confrontations that would hurt Europe's economy and security. If Trump manages to find a solution for the crisis and normalize relations with Russia separately from Europe, he would position the United States as aloof to Europe's concerns, which would be consequential for a number of more important and long-term Euro-Atlantic issues.

In December 2017, the U.S. State Department [confirmed](#) the decision to supply new weapons to Ukraine. In late January 2018, Volker, in an exclusive [interview](#) to Ukraine's Radio Freedom station, before his meeting with Surkov in Dubai, admitted that U.S. Javelin weapons would not be allowed for use at the frontline but would serve as

deterrents against escalation. At the same time, Volker was [confident](#) that “the Minsk agreements contain all the elements necessary for this to be resolved.”

It appears that the Trump administration may be trying to accomplish either of two things, or maybe even both at once. First, to use weapon deliveries to Ukraine as a lever to persuade the Ukrainian government to back a potential peace deal with Russia, which would entail Ukraine making painful political concessions about the special status of Donbas. Second, to advance a more assertive position about defending Ukraine’s sovereignty along with the [threat](#) of increasing sanctions on Russia as a way to get the message across to the Kremlin that, at a minimum, its prolonged military intervention in Donbas cannot expand into more Ukrainian territory.

Conclusion

After three years of faltering peace processes, conflict resolution in Donbas remains in jeopardy. Sending UN peacekeepers to Donbas (right up to the Russian-Ukrainian border) and supplying U.S. lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine could create conditions that would prompt Russian forces to back down and Donbas to begin to be stabilized. A major consideration, however, is that Russia is known to strongly oppose granting any entity access to the border areas. And, in a twist, the scope of the required UN forces directly contradicts the Trump administration’s plans to cut funds for UN peacekeeping.

The French and German leaders spent years of mostly fruitless shuttle diplomacy between Kyiv and Moscow developing and redrafting numerous failed incremental action plans and road maps for de-escalation. But they gained invaluable information and they comprehend the interests, weaknesses, and favorite instruments of both the Russians and Ukrainians. This value should not be overlooked. The Europeans, with their negative experiences in the Minsk (and Normandy) discussions, are able to explain to their American partners certain risks and stumbling blocks. One significant risk is that the idea of granting a special status to Donbas and holding local elections under international monitoring can still be used by Russia to heighten and legitimize the power of its proxies. One significant stumbling block is that Ukrainian society [does not](#) appear to favor a special status for Donbas. In a recent move that may or may not be helpful, the Ukrainian government enacted a [law on reintegration](#) in February 2018 that, among other measures, declared that Russia was the “aggressor” and clearly defined the non-Kyiv-controlled territories as “occupied.”

Thus, at the present time, pushing the political part of the Minsk agreements further would probably only result in waves of civil turmoil and Russian aggression. European leaders may be wise to consider accepting the notion that perhaps only military assistance to Ukraine – and clear-cut Western solidarity on sanctions – would make the Kremlin rethink its options in Donbas.

Russia's Syria Policy

THE HARD PATH OF MILITARY DISENGAGEMENT

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On December 11, 2017, two and a half years after the start of Russia's military campaign in Syria, President Vladimir Putin, speaking at the Hmeimim Air Base in Syria, declared that the main mission was accomplished and [ordered](#) home the significant part of Russia's military forces. There is still unfinished business for Russia on the military/counterterrorism front, such as providing air support to the Syrian army against the jihadist coalition "Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham" in the Idlib province. However, the critical vector of Russia's Syria policy is now shaped by:

- Regionalization – a shift from a Western-centered to an increasingly region-centered approach, best reflected by, but not confined to, the Astana ceasefire process.
- Trying to make the most out of progress on both military/counterterrorist and ceasefire paths to move Syria toward a political solution through a UN-led process.

Through a combination of these approaches, Russia intends to diminish its direct engagement in and ownership of the Syria problem, while keeping and expanding its multiple regional partnerships in the broader Middle East.

The Astana Process

In 2017 and early 2018, as part of its regionalization strategy toward Syria, Russia engaged with a variety of regional actors involved in the Syrian conflict. These can be grouped into three tiers.

The first tier is the Russia-Turkey-Iran-brokered Astana ceasefire format. The Astana process was meant to solve three problems that had impeded progress in the UN-managed political negotiations in Geneva:

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- (1) lack of involvement of key actors of the Syrian armed opposition on the ground;
- (2) not being based on a lasting ceasefire; and
- (3) not accounting for major regional powers' interests.

Before these tasks could be solved, two military conditions had to be met:

- (1) a correction of the military balance on the ground in favor of the government (achieved through Russia's direct military engagement in 2015–17); and
- (2) intensified pressure on the more radical transnational jihadists (ISIS and al-Qaeda linked groups) through parallel campaigns by Russian-led and US-led coalitions.

Once these military requirements were met, the regionally brokered ceasefire process could start. The eight rounds of Astana discussions in 2017 directly addressed the three deficiencies mentioned above.* The Astana talks involved the most serious non-jihadist armed opposition groups, produced a ceasefire that held well relative to previous ones, and introduced four de-escalation zones. It also ensured delineation between Turkish-backed and Iranian-backed forces on the ground.

The second tier includes Egypt, which provided a platform in Cairo for consultations on the Homs and Ghouta de-escalation zones. The realities on the ground in southwest Syria produced the separate "Amman process," which involved Jordan, Israel, Russia, and the United States—with the latter's mediating role [described](#) by Putin as a "significant contribution" and "influencing behind the scenes" overall "in a more positive than negative way." Jordan, the United States, and Egypt also became observers to the Astana discussions.

Despite previous Russian rifts with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar over Syria (and despite the rift between Riyadh and Doha since 2017), Russia stepped up dialogue with both, forming a looser third tier. This happened as Saudi Arabia's role, in particular, evolved from that of a lead funder of the armed struggle against the Assad regime to that of a lead contributor to efforts to unite the fragmented Syrian opposition as a necessary precondition for the UN peace talks.

The truce consolidation process is far from complete. It is haunted by a tense interplay between military force and negotiation (an unavoidable background for most conflict-to-peace transitions). It also suffers from a good deal of spoiling by actors on both sides—by Assad's forces and pro-government militias and by domestic and foreign anti-government actors alike. Much of this spoiling is spotty and limited, and cannot fundamentally alter the balance of forces on the ground, critically undermine the Astana process, or stop the expanding "local ceasefire" phenomenon at the inter-communal level. However, lack of progress on humanitarian issues (in areas ranging from Raqqa,

* The next round is planned for March 2018.

liberated from ISIS, to East Ghouta) and emerging complications (such as the Turkish military operation against the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Afrin or escalation of the Israeli-Syrian border tensions in early 2018) already require going above and beyond the Astana format. The Astana ceasefire process does not prioritize humanitarian issues, let alone address key incompatibilities between the parties or other political issues at dispute (such as the Kurdish or the foreign Shia militias issue). In fact, the Astana format might have reached the limit of how much it can contribute to a negotiated solution.

While Astana has been a *sine qua non* stage to improve security conditions and prepare the technical grounds for the Geneva talks to restart in earnest, it cannot replace the UN-level process seeking a negotiated political resolution to the conflict.

Track 2 Diplomacy: the Sochi Congress

Moscow's initiative to go beyond the Astana format and enter into substantive political talks led it to initiate and host the "Syrian Congress on National Dialogue" in Sochi on January 29-30, 2018. This was an attempt at having more representative and public preliminary consultations among Syrians on issues such as constitutional reforms and elections. It involved inviting stakeholder groups based in Damascus, Cairo, Istanbul, and Riyadh, and sought to engage the Kurds and other minorities such as the tribal and non-militant groups not represented so far.

The misconception about Russia's initiative to organize the Sochi congress was mistaking its Track 2 format (non-governmental dialogue) for the more formal negotiations involving official government and opposition delegations, such as the Astana ceasefire talks or the UN-led peace talks (Track 1 diplomacy). This was probably due to political bias or lack of information. In line with this view, the Western media, parts of the regional media, and various expert and political circles tried to present Sochi as an attempt by Moscow to sideline the UN-backed peace process—a function that a Track 2 dialogue falls short of by default (even so, such negotiations can be included in the broad range of "peace process" activities).

The Sochi congress had the same co-organizers as the Astana talks (now acting more as observers than brokers) and would have been unthinkable had the Astana ceasefire process not held (despite violations by both sides). Facilitating a Track 2 forum for Syrians was the Astana co-brokers' input into the more substantive Track 1 peace talks under UN auspices. The main direct links to the Geneva track were the participation of UN Special Envoy on Syria Staffan de Mistura, and the Sochi congress' practical output was the election of a Constitutional Committee that was to be handed over to the UN teams (complemented by including members of opposition groups that were absent in Sochi but embedded in the peace process). The presence of UN delegates as well as regional brokers legitimized the forum as part of the broader peace process framework rather than it being purely "Russia's show." The regional brokers at the congress

included a Turkish delegation to which part of the Turkey-backed opposition-minded invitees delegated representation of their interests.

As a Track 2 gathering, the Sochi congress did not involve official delegations from the Syrian government or the opposition. Russia's idea of launching a dialogue spanning the broader socio-political spectrum of Syrians had initially received a cold reaction from Damascus although it ultimately conceded to it.

On the one hand, government loyalists or delegates from areas under government control dominated the number of participants,* while the Kurds and the "real opposition,"† who attended in a personal capacity, were underrepresented. On the other hand, there was, for the first time, a sizeable presence of tribal and other "local ceasefire" actors who presented unity in forwarding a sustained, resilient and expanding dimension of de-escalation and peace-building on the ground, with close links to, and tangible benefits for, local civilian populations in many areas.

Also, claims about the Sochi congress being a staged event can hardly explain the amount of turmoil, disagreement, emotion, and extemporizing by many of the attendees, and the stiff competition between many of them to be included in the Constitutional Committee. The [final communique](#) from Sochi, inter alia, did not mention Bashar al-Assad. It called for determining the country's future by democratic means (through the ballot box), supporting the national army to act "in accordance with the constitution," and for "intelligence and security institutions" to be "subject to the rule of law."

Even though the outcomes could have been larger, the Sochi congress was not a waste of time. It offered specifics on the dynamics and management of the political peace process on Syria, including:

- The apparent futility of attempts to delink Sochi from Geneva, Track 2 from Track 1 (similar to ineffectual attempts to delink Russia from Geneva);
- The demonstrated need for continued and expanded dialogue among Syrians on basic political issues and the direction for national development (such as the form of republican governance, guidelines for decentralization/federalism, the role of the security and armed forces, etc.). The strong sense was that more of these discussions should take place, including in a Track 2-type framework (or as an intermediate "Track 1.5") that includes the presence of some officials (in personal

* They comprised about 1,200 out of 1,392 delegates at the plenary (with 250 more linked to the "internal" opposition, also known as the regime's "pocket" opposition).

† Sixty participants who represented the "real opposition" included one third of the members of the opposition's main, Riyadh-based High Negotiations Committee, which had earlier considered to attend and had paid a preparatory visit to Moscow, but at the last minute, while partaking in the failed round of the UN talks, they voted by majority not to attend.

capacities). Adding to the need for further talks is that the Constitutional Committee, even when complemented by Riyadh-based and other opposition delegates, is insufficient as there has been nowhere near enough intra-societal dialogue on issues to claim that it was a Syria-owned process.

Moscow's "Plan B"

For Russia, Sochi was a genuine attempt to contribute to conflict resolution. It built on the Astana ceasefire process, launched substantive dialogue on key issues in dispute, and it reactivated the stalled UN process—even if it was only at a Track 2 diplomacy level. Pro-governmental/pro-regional brokers' bias was perhaps unavoidable in view of the background of Russia's engagement in Syria and of the continuing changes in situations on the ground in favor of the government. However, these same limitations made this attempted extension of Syria dialogue a no-lose game in view of the broader range of Russia's exit options. Moscow fully supports the UN peace process on Syria but also keeps under consideration a "Plan B" should that process remain stalled for an indefinite time or fail.

Consolidation and slow expansion of core areas under control of the central government (headed by Assad for a while or in some successor form in the future), with support by Iran and Turkey's "neutrality," is often mistaken for Russia's original "design" for Syria. However, while this has long been the preferred option for Damascus and Iran, this has not been Russia's (nor, for instance, Turkey's) *idée fixe*. Moscow might tacitly accept this course of events as a "Plan B" basis, for example if there is no progress in the UN talks or if there is persistent sabotage by both sides on the ground and/or the West.

Failure to understand this nuance is based on misconceptions about Russia's interests in Syria and overestimation of its strategic importance to Moscow. Russia's interests in Syria have evolved over two and half years since the start of its military campaign. Russia's goals at the start of its campaign included antiterrorism, using Syria as a showcase for preventing Western regime change, and as a trump card to restart dialogue with the West, particularly in the midst of the worst post-Cold War Russia-West rift due to the Ukraine situation. An added bonus for Moscow, if the rest worked out, was the possible upgrade of Russia's standing in the broader Middle East. By now, however, Moscow is firmly set to diminish its ownership of the Syria problem and has no intention to keep a large-scale, formal, military role in Syria for the long term. This is why Russia cannot afford to indefinitely support any persistently failing effort to find a way out and will choose the type of arrangement that will best ensure a gradual, even if not complete, disengagement in practice, even if it implies tactical and reputational costs.

Conclusion

Russia would have preferred to gradually disown the Syria problem “on good terms,” to make an “honorable exit,” preferably through a negotiated peace solution under the UN framework (leading to a more pluralistic and representative system in Syria involving a degree of genuine power-sharing), to be followed by UN peace-support and peace-building efforts. This would have been a face-saving option not just for Russia but for most other regional and non-regional actors and would undoubtedly be better for Syria, especially in humanitarian, reconciliation, reconstruction, and development terms. However, at the UN-brokered talks, not even direct negotiations, let alone political compromise, between the government and the opposition are in sight. Lack of progress in Geneva de facto gives extra breathing space for the Damascus regime to advance its own preferred solution.

The situation on the ground has been slowly and steadily becoming more unfavorable for the Syrian opposition, which further weakens its negotiation positions (no external support can compensate for a lack of control on the ground). The United States, France, and other Western powers continue to overestimate the real weight of opposition groups and fuel their false hopes to dictate conditions at peace talks. Russia, for its part, can only exercise a certain degree of pressure on Assad on political-military and humanitarian issues. Furthermore, Moscow has no intention to spoil its relations with its two main regional partners, Turkey and Iran, by radically intensifying political pressure on any of them regarding Syria.

As long as Russia still hopes to achieve a negotiated power-sharing solution in Syria through a UN-led process in the foreseeable future, it will genuinely play this game. If Russia loses this hope, it will turn to “Plan B,” although this does not necessarily imply that Russia will drop its UN-centered rhetoric or diplomatic calls for peace. “Plan B” was not Moscow’s preferred option in the first place and, even now, there is still no full consensus about “solving Syria” in Russia’s foreign and security policymaking circles. “Plan B” will certainly have reputational costs for Moscow, especially on the humanitarian, reconstruction, and human rights counts. However, for Russia, which does not have vital interests at stake in Syria, the costs of “Plan B” could be offset by the following:

- It allows Moscow to keep the main political-military dividends from its military engagement—from keeping two bases in Syria to repositioning itself as a global player and an influential actor in the broader Middle East—while at the same time gradually diminishing its direct engagement (a version of an exit strategy that is short of full disengagement).

- It places a heavier burden on Damascus and Tehran, which play their own games and whose interests in conflict management are not identical to, and may even partly be in conflict with, Russia's priorities. Because the absence of a proper negotiated settlement radically constrains prospects for international humanitarian and reconstruction aid to Syria, these two may actually end up finding the humanitarian and reconstruction burden to be too heavy for them. Thus, they might start to behave in a more adequate way of integrating core oppositional factions, undertaking political reforms, ensuring a degree of real decentralization/federalization, and improving relations with other regional powers and key international donors.
- It removes the main Syria-related irritators from Russia's relationship with Turkey (strategically important for reasons far beyond Syria), while at the same time, due to the decrease in Russia's direct role in Syria, delinking it from the Turkish-Kurdish confrontation.
- It nullifies the chances for the United States in particular and for the West in general to strengthen their strategic and reputational positions in and on Syria.

Why Russia Is Failing the “Syria Test” for Counterterrorism Cooperation with the West

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As the confrontation between the West and Russia matures, the proposition that the West should combine military containment with engagement in areas of mutual interest has been gaining wider popularity than have *Putinverstehers* calls for empathy with Russia.[†] Cooperation in the fight against terrorism is typically identified as one of the most obvious areas of mutual interest. The rationale for this cooperative exemption from the pattern of confrontation appears impeccable, and many experts are [eager](#) to elaborate on it. It was indeed one of the topics that Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin found easy to [agree](#) upon during their only and rather unconventional meeting at the G20 summit in Hamburg. It was [discussed](#) again in a recent telephone conversation between them (when Trump famously overruled his advisors’ “do not congratulate” advice). In Europe, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and [argued](#) for the removal of “artificial barriers” that hamper the partnership and noted with great satisfaction “the resumption of our dialogue on counterterrorism after a long pause.” However, this analysis suggests that the real state of affairs is exactly the opposite. The incompatibility of political agendas between the West and Russia is deep and profound, while the prospects for cooperation in counterterrorism are poor and artificially amplified.

Vladimir Putin’s Track Record

The fight against terrorism is Putin’s trademark policy, which, for all intents and purposes, delivered him into the position of supreme power back in September 1999 when he executed a brutal response to explosions that destroyed two apartment buildings in Moscow. That response was a massive military intervention in Chechnya that flattened Grozny. While over the years the content of Moscow’s counterterrorism policies has evolved, it has a static core, which is presently revealed by Russia’s military intervention in Syria. The main aim of the Kremlin’s loosely defined struggle against

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† Those in the West who excessively sympathize with Russia and defend Putin’s policies are sometimes called *Putinverstehers*. Coined in Germany, it is now a widely accepted word in the English vocabulary.

terrorism has involved defeating armed separatist rebellions in Chechnya, suppressing extremist networks in the North Caucasus, and turning back the tide of color revolutions. The first wave of these revolutions, which hit Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Moldova in 2003-2006, was successfully [broken](#) by Russia with a combination of economic pressure, political intrigue, and limited use of military force culminating in the August 2008 war with Georgia. The second wave, which started with the sudden arrival of the Arab Spring in 2011, turned out to be even more dangerous from the Kremlin’s perspective when unexpected street protests in Moscow resonated with the victorious Euromaidan in Kyiv in early 2014. The annexation of Crimea was, in Putin’s strategy, a direct response to this eruption of Ukrainian “extremism,” which is treated the same way as terrorism.

Putin has good reasons to see his struggle against the specter of terrorism as consistently successful: Chechnya is under the control of his loyal henchman Ramzan Kadyrov, the North Caucasus is largely pacified, Georgia is dismembered, Ukraine struggles under severe pressure maintained by manipulating the war in Donbas, and Assad’s regime in Syria is secured. Each entry in this list of “victories” is, in fact, a big problem because every Russian projection of power has turned into a self-made trap demanding allocation of more and more financial and military resources in order to sustain the suppressive status quo. The resource base of this policy is shrinking—the 2018-2020 Russian state budget envisages significant cuts in defense [expenditures](#) while increasing allocations for internal security.

In the autumnal phase of Putin’s regime, as Russia proceeds along its track of [decline](#), the strengthening of protest-suppression instruments is being prioritized by the Kremlin. Putin’s beefing up of the National Guard exemplifies this trend. The effectiveness of this hodgepodge “praetorian” structure, which was established in the spring of 2016 and entrusted to Victor Zolotov, the former chief of the Presidential Security Service, is rather uncertain and its [loyalty](#) cannot be taken for granted. What is certain is there is deep mistrust among other regime “guardians” in the National Guard, including its reputedly arrogant commander. This mistrust is cherished even by the mighty FSB, which continues to control the workings of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAC). Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu needs to uphold his hard-earned respect in the officer corps by securing priority in resource allocation, and that means resisting the redistribution of funding in favor of the privileged National Guard. Overstretch is therefore exacerbated by inter-service rivalries (not to mention corruption) and aggravated by poor leadership, as Putin insists on the irreversibility of his “victories” and remains [in denial](#) of the arrival of new terrorist threats, one manifestation of which was the St. Petersburg metro bombing on April 3, 2017.

The “Victorious” Syrian Quagmire

The preamble for the Russian intervention in Syria was Putin’s address to the UN General Assembly in September 2015 in which he called for the [building](#) of a “broad anti-terrorist coalition,” although he knew full well that nothing of this sort was going to happen. There were indeed no takers for his plan on making the Assad regime the fulcrum of a coalition. His public proposition, nevertheless, provided a useful pretext for the beginning of Russian battles against rebels of various persuasions. In Syria, the targets included some ISIS positions, but the Russian priority was to demolish groupings engaged in intense clashes with Assad’s forces. During Russia’s first year in Syria, some setbacks happened, like the crisis in relations with Turkey [caused](#) by a Turkish F-16 fighter downing a Russian Su-24M bomber. Russia had several public relations disasters, particularly with [strikes on](#) humanitarian aid convoys. Only the capture of Aleppo in December 2016 – the focal point of the Russian campaign – helped Moscow turn the war’s tide and gave it the role of a key maker of the region’s post-war order.

A “peace-making” format, often referred to as the “Astana process,” was established by Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran in early 2017. It produced a series of [agreements](#) on “de-escalation zones,” which helped Assad’s forces consolidate control over all major urban centers. Characteristically, the fight against ISIS was downplayed in these plans, so battles, such as for Raqqa in Syria (and Mosul in Iraq) were left for the U.S.-led coalition to wage. Moscow emphasized instead that groupings affiliated with al-Qaeda had to be exterminated, which was a reasonable argument, but the [accusations](#) advanced by Lavrov that the United States “spared” *Jabhat al-Nusra* (renamed as *Jabhat Fateh al-Sham*) in order to use it to overthrow the Assad regime turned a sound proposition into an exercise in dirty propaganda. The Idlib province, which is designated as the largest “de-escalation zone” and is effectively under control of the *Tahrir al-Sham* coalition (led by *al-Nusra*), constitutes the main “black hole” in the Russian [design](#) for localizing the civil war in Syria and is a [target](#) of Assad offensives.

At the start of 2018, however, the main task was set on preventing the capture of the oil-rich areas in eastern Syria by the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), building on the success of Assad’s forces lifting the ISIS blockade on Deir ez-Zor. Russia delivered special equipment and deployed engineers for [constructing](#) a bridge across the Euphrates so that the offensive could proceed into SDF-controlled territories. The risks were clearly underestimated, and General Valery Asapov, who was [seconded](#) to the Syrian army to command this operation, and Colonel Valery Fedyanin, the [commander](#) of the Northern Fleet marine brigade who directed the crossing of the Euphrates, were both killed in action. Moscow tried to [blame](#) U.S. “hypocrisy” and its collusion with ISIS for this setback and proceeded to test U.S. resolve on the ground. The outcome was no less than devastating. The attempt by a battalion-size band of mercenaries (Russia’s Wagner group) and local fighters to capture the area was met by [airstrikes](#) of such

overwhelming power that only a few survivors managed to escape. Both Moscow and Washington opted to downplay the clash. Only in April 2018 did U.S. officials [confirm](#) that “a couple of hundred” of Russian mercenaries were indeed killed in what Trump [described](#) as a “very, very severe fight.”

Even the April 2018 U.S. missile strike on the Syrian chemical bases did not bring Moscow to acknowledge the vulnerabilities within its “winning” strategy, which is supposed to guarantee the elimination of chemical weapons from Assad’s hands. It cannot, however, fail to see that the effectiveness of operations by the government army can only be achieved by ongoing deployments of Russian advisers, special forces, military police, Chechen para-militaries, and private security contractors. Costs and casualties for Russia are mounting accordingly. Moscow is not prepared to sustain this engagement but cannot find a way out.

What is clear beyond doubt is that in the post-ISIS phase of the Syrian civil war, the emphasis on counterterrorism can help neither in cultivating cooperation with the West nor in holding the Russia-led, pro-Assad, quasi-coalition together. Turkey disapproves of Russian strikes on rebels in the Idlib province while supporting U.S. air strikes and insisting on treating the forces of the Syrian Kurds (YPG) as terrorists. Russia has [given](#) the “green light” for Turkish offensives in the Afrin enclave but refuses to add the YPG or the Turkish PKK to its list of terrorist organizations, while including on the list the Muslim Brotherhood, which Ankara embraces. An indispensable party to the quasi-coalition is Iran, which [aims](#) primarily at strengthening Hezbollah and various Shia militia and taking control over [some units](#) of the Assad military. Meanwhile, many developments are unacceptable for Israel, which has increased its bombing campaign against Iranian forces in Syria and keeps trying to dissuade Russia from alliance-building with Iran. The Trump administration may have nothing resembling a [strategy](#) for stabilizing Syria, but the proposition for granting Iran a role in post-war power-sharing is definitely a non-starter.

Moscow needs a closure in Syria that would justify phasing down its high-risk intervention and grant it a position of influence with minimal costs. Its expanded support for the Assad regime in defiance of U.S. and Western criticism cannot, however, deliver anything resembling an honorable outcome.

Three Non-Options for Cooperation

While denouncing the West for its failure to cooperate with Russia on counterterrorism, Moscow typically makes Syria the key case presenting itself as a champion in the fight against terrorist groups. The two are, however, entirely different matters, and the good reasons for condemning Russia’s intervention in Syria may not apply to the broader counterterrorist agenda. Indeed, Moscow has deliberately excluded the West from the “Astana process,” while expecting that the United States would opt for withdrawing its

forces from Syria and that the EU would cover large parts of the bill for the post-war reconstruction of devastated Syria. Western policymakers must make sure that these expectations are frustrated, but at the same time, there is certainly more to the hugely important problem of countering terrorism, even if we bracket out Afghanistan, where Moscow is not exactly helpful. Three possible areas for cooperation could be identified and examined to supplement the Syrian test.

The first one is to engage in joint efforts to uncover and undo the networks of radicalized migrants originating in Russia and its neighborhood. For many years, it was the Chechen diaspora that generated the most risks, particularly considering that Kadyrov was [dispatching](#) hitmen to Vienna and Istanbul to assassinate malcontents. The 2013 Boston marathon bombing proved the danger of radicalization spreading through these networks, but the U.S. attempts at expanding cooperation with Russian special services [were](#) fruitless. Moscow knew full well the capacity of these networks for transforming discontent into terrorism, as demonstrated yet again by the 2013 Volgograd bombings, but the FSB was not just reluctant but firmly opposed to sharing any data with Western agencies. Presently, new kinds of networks uniting migrants from Central Asia are turning into conduits of radicalization and terrorism, as proven by attacks in Istanbul, Stockholm, and St. Petersburg. Russian authorities have been showing surprise by these mutations of long-known social [problems](#), and their haphazard responses cannot address the root causes of these risks, which increases further their aversion to cooperation.

The second area is the disruption of funding channels that support the growth of terrorist networks. International cooperation is crucial for sustaining the effectiveness of this work. Moscow may fail to become an international financial center, but it concentrates significant flows of money from the North Caucasus as well as [remittances](#) to Central Asia. What makes cooperation in this area all but impossible is that the EU has recognized the Russian export of corruption as a security challenge. The U.K. is [investigating](#) the origins of Russian fortunes parked in tax havens and Germany continues to [investigate](#) the laundering of enormous amounts of dirty money originating in Russia. The enforcement in April 2018 of new U.S. sanctions on Russia targets the connections between Russian interference in the U.S. election and the corruption proliferated by such notorious oligarchs as [Oleg Deripaska](#). As an asymmetric response, Moscow may resort to directly sabotaging international efforts aimed at interdicting terrorist financing.

The third area is joint efforts in countering propaganda that incites radicalization, with a high priority on blocking the channels of ISIS propaganda. Russia makes much effort in this direction, and besides the [list](#) of terrorist organizations compiled by NAC (which currently has 27 entries of which 23 are Sunni Islamic), there is a long list of “extremist materials” compiled by the Russian Ministry of Justice. The problem is that many entries in this “extremist” list pertain to publications or websites critical of various Russian state

policies. This reflects the Kremlin strategy of de-legitimizing the political opposition as “extremist.” The execution of this strategy has indeed become quite extreme, such as the ban on activities by Jehovah’s Witnesses, ban on the Linked-In job-seeking social network, pressure on Open Society activists, and attempts to block the Telegram digital messenger service, to name a few. A further problem is that NATO duly treats Russian propaganda as part and parcel of Russia’s “hybrid war” strategy, and the U.S. State Department has a unit that [deals](#) with countering *both* Russian and ISIS propaganda. No stretch of imagination can justify a joint Western-Russian venture that operates in the contemporary info-war scene.

Conclusion: Forestalling a Spoiler Act

It is still politically useful for Moscow to advocate for cooperation in counterterrorism, despite the obvious lack of answers to this call and the exposure of it as merely a cover-up for Russia’s own unwillingness and inability to contribute to this international struggle. Trump actually finds himself in the minority on this issue, defying the deepening consensus that Russia makes at best a “[terrible ally](#)” in the complex struggle against terrorism and quite possibly is a big part of the problem. The question is whether Russia might find it more useful in the near future to act as a spoiler against Western efforts aimed at suppressing any new post-al Qaeda/post-ISIS terrorist threats. If Moscow can officially blame the United States for collusion with ISIS, what would dissuade it from accusing Western special services of, say, planning and executing terrorist attacks in Russia aimed at disrupting the start of Putin’s new term? If this kind of blame game is enacted, would the Kremlin feel justified in following up with proactive steps aimed at sabotaging Western counterterrorism policies? The USSR had few scruples funding and harboring various dark elements, and today it is noteworthy that the Kremlin feels perfectly at ease being in a brotherhood-in-arms with Islamist Hezbollah. In order for these hard questions to remain hypothetical, it is essential to engage in preventative dissuasions, explaining in greater detail than a flow of Twitter messages can carry that every spoiler act in the ever-changing and never-ending fight against terrorism comes at a price that cancels out the joy of scoring a fleeting, low-cost point.

III. Mutual Perceptions and Mirror Games

The Anti-Russia Surge in U.S. Politics

FINDING CONTEXT

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Donald Trump's triumph in the 2016 presidential election discharged an unprecedented political and media movement linking his victory to Russian interference in the U.S. political system. The president's defenders called this a "witch hunt" but they frequently became cornered by the significant amount of U.S. public and Congressional opinion that wanted Washington to curtail any possible amelioration in Russian-U.S. relations. Just recently, for example, the Democratic Party [filed](#) a lawsuit against Trump, Russia, and WikiLeaks for allegedly conspiring in the 2016 campaign.

There are two major explanations for this anti-Russia movement. The first is that Americans were shocked to discover that the U.S. political system can be vulnerable to foreign interference. This led to coordinated attempts to fix election-related security holes, with one of these being, in the eyes of many, the president himself and his administration. The second explanation sees that regardless of what Russia did in the 2016 election, the anti-Russia movement is essentially an anti-Trump campaign. This explanation involves the use of a "foreign threat" narrative as a tool to limit the political capacity of an unpopular president. Examining the history of U.S.-Russian relations from a "constructivist" perspective substantiates this second explanation over the first, with the implication that U.S.-Russian relations fell further victim to U.S. domestic politics. My hypothesis is not aimed to counter the assessments of U.S. intelligence experts on Russia's "meddling" but rather to deconstruct the reasons for the public's intense reaction to the situation.

Suspicious and Accusations

Wikipedia now has an entry titled "Timeline of Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections" that lists a multitude of events directly or indirectly linked to the alleged Russian interference. Among the major accusations is a U.S. Department of Homeland Security report that says Russian hackers penetrated U.S. voter-registration systems and were responsible for the DNC email leaks. There is also the [joint claim](#) by

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the FBI, CIA, and NSA that states: “President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election. Russia’s goals were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency.” The claim continues: “We further assess Putin and the Russian Government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump.” This line echoes Hillary Clinton, who during the third presidential debate on October 19, 2016, blamed Russia for the DNC email leaks and [accused](#) Trump of being a “puppet” of Putin. Public interest began to focus on any possible links between Trump’s team and Russian citizens, with suspicions being cast, for example, on meetings between Trump’s associates and Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. At the peak of the movement (which has ongoing peaks), some journalists and politicians discussed whether Trump was an actual Russian agent.

The official investigations into the matter are ongoing. They have already produced some proof of Russian meddling and a list of suspects involved. However, the nature of parts of the investigations, gravity of charges, and sufficiency of evidence is heavily linked to party affiliations. A segment of the American public tends to believe intelligence agency claims that Russia meddled, influenced the election results, and there was probable collusion between Trump’s team and Moscow’s officials. Another segment tends to downplay the significance of Russia’s interference and reject any hint of collusion. For example, in March 2018, House Republicans “[prematurely closed](#)” their Trump-Russia probe without interviewing key witnesses such as Michael Flynn, Paul Manafort, and Rick Gates. Because hard facts are hard to come by, I suggest looking at several examples from the past to better understand the current U.S. domestic perceptions.

Russia as a Traditional “Constitutive Other” of the United States

The core of constructivism, a prominent theory of international relations, is the notion that any given society needs an external peer, a “Constitutive Other,” in its domestic struggle for self-identification. This foreign nation becomes an indispensable part of domestic political identity discourses. Often, and for different purposes, this Other is portrayed as a model, threat, or pupil. For more than a century, Russia and the United States were “Constitutive Others” of each other.

The first known debate in the United States that directly involved Russia took place in 1813 when critics of President James Madison, who signed the U.S. declaration of war against England, framed their anti-war demonstrations as banquets to celebrate the Russian victories over Napoleon.* This led politicians and pundits from multiple U.S. political camps at the time to immerse themselves in a debate about the “real values” of

* U.S. politicians opposed to U.S. involvement in the War of 1812 deridingly called it “Mr. Madison’s war.” Technically, the Americans who fought against Great Britain were on the same side as Napoleonic France.

Russia. Those who organized the banquets praised Russia for being Europe's liberator from Napoleonic tyranny, while others demonized Russia as a barbaric country whose victories should not be celebrated. Their discussions were not really about the merits of Russia—Americans in 1813 had very little interest in the distant Russian empire—rather they were a vehicle through which to discuss the policies of the Madison administration. These debates laid the foundation for U.S. domestic discussions about Russia.

Later, the Bolshevik revolution triggered the first U.S. "Red Scare" in the United States. The rise of Communism during and after World War II generated the second Red Scare. During the second one, a fake [pamphlet](#) was widely circulated titled "Communist Rules for Revolution" that listed threats to the American way of life. The pamphlet was first published in 1946 and widely circulated at the peak of McCarthyism when Florida Chief Attorney George Brautigam declared that it was a genuine document. This pamphlet's short list of "rules" created huge conspiracy theories. It had points such as: "Corrupt the young, get them away from religion. Get them interested in sex. Make them superficial. Destroy their ruggedness" and "Cause the registration of all firearms on some pretext, with a view to confiscating them and leaving the populace helpless." During this time, everything that American conservatives considered dangerous was ascribed to communist influences (the pamphlet probably originated from a conservative flank of U.S. society). Even though *The New York Times* published an article in 1970 proving the pamphlet was not authentic, many members of Congress continued to receive copies of it from alarmed constituents and it was even inserted into the Congressional Record. Of note, during the perestroika era, Russian conservatives produced their own variant of a demonic Western plot against Russia called the "Dulles plan."

The Cold War was a period when deep ideological differences between the United States and the USSR acquired the dimension of state-to-state competition. From the late 1940s to the late 1980s, the repertoire of mutual demonization became enriched and propagandized by both countries. However, the two superpowers avoided direct collisions, thus the Cold War can be considered more as a discursive phenomenon than a direct military confrontation. Battles were waged by proxies in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, but they did not alter bilateral relations (the Vietnam War even overlapped with the détente era). The 1990s seemingly put an end to the Cold War's narratives, but the rhetorical repertoire of describing the Other as "the enemy to blame" was only on standby.

In 2011-2012, a new freezing rain began in the bilateral U.S.-Russian relationship (on top of domestic cracks appearing in both countries). In Russia, a wave of anti-government protests reactivated the Kremlin's struggle to identify an enemy. The Russian government needed to alienate anti-regime groups and individuals, and did so by [portraying](#) them as Washington's pawns. The rhetoric demonized the United States for meddling in Russian politics, for planning regime change, and for using oppositionists as puppets.

On the U.S. side, Russia, too, again became a point of contention. For instance in 2012, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney told voters that Russia was America's number one geopolitical foe. He was not trying to degrade Russia per se, but rather undermine and cast doubt on his rival's policies, namely President Barack Obama's "reset" with Moscow. Romney's aim was to cut down Obama's foreign policy achievements by playing on the shadows of U.S. anti-Russian stigmas.

From late 2016, this narrative format—a familiar scenario of linking political opponents to a foreign country while simultaneously demonizing that country—came back into play. Trump's victory caught Americans, especially the U.S. establishment and the Democratic Party electorate, as a surprise. His very appearance, his biography, and his beliefs looked so alien to the American political elite and much of the public that their immediate temptation was to call him "un-American." In the Cold War years, "un-American" was partially synonymous with being "Russian" or "communist." To many anti-Trumpers, including U.S. propagandists, he was seen as "Russia's president," a "Russian implant," and "Putin's puppet." During the Women's Marches the day after Trump's inauguration on January 21, many posters and slogans satirized old-fashioned masculinity and depicted Trump as a sinister stooge of Putin (see the [PONARS Eurasia blog post with images](#)). The broader scenario was a habitual cultural turn that uses a foreign Other as a scapegoat for domestic disorder. The Trump election was a critical juncture in U.S. history when American identity was put into question. Who are Americans? Are we liberal democrats or, as Clinton [said](#) about Trump's base, a "basket of deplorables?"

The Consequences for Russian-U.S. Relations

It is not clear what the final outcomes of the current "Russiagate" in domestic U.S. politics will be. What is obvious is that the anti-Russian mania adds to the disruption of U.S.-Russian relations. In the short-term, public and elite biases will not permit Trump to make any moves that improve U.S.-Russian relations or negotiate any compromise with Russia on pressing issues. The medium- and long-term consequences may include the further demonization of Russia as threatening to the U.S. political system, sentiments of vulnerability and weakness of U.S. democracy vis-à-vis an authoritarian challenger, and the refusal to understand Russia's concerns even when they are legitimate. The image of Russia as a threat will probably hinder the future of bilateral relations long after Trump and Putin are out of office, the same way as Cold War ghosts have appeared over the past decade in the public debates and political speeches in both Washington and Moscow.

One important result of the escalated tensions between Russia and the United States is the further weakening of the position of Russia's liberals. Historically, the periods of U.S.-Russian cooperation were also times of domestic liberalization in Russia, while periods of hostility coincided with the Kremlin's clampdown on liberal elements in

society. The ongoing “Russiagate” in the United States helps the Russian government label its opponents as pro-American figures working for the interests of a threatening foreign power. By excessively paralleling the comportment of the Trump and Putin regimes and by replicating Russia’s obsession over its “Constitutive Other,” the United States is not helping all those in Russia who see the West and democracy as a model to emulate.

External Interference Narratives in Russian and U.S. Politics

CONSPIRACY THEORIZING MEETS WHATABOUTISM

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 512

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Conspiracy theories about covert external interference play significant roles in the political discourses of many countries worldwide. In Russia, conspiracy theorizing about U.S. clandestine interference is a long-time, long-term political trend currently being used to increase the legitimacy of President Vladimir Putin. In the United States, conspiracy theorizing framing Russia as a threat has been marginal throughout most of the post-Cold War period. However, since the recent U.S. presidential election, opponents of President Donald Trump have been framing Russian interference as a threat to the U.S. political system.

There is a danger of analysts and researchers being affected by political bias when sorting conspiracy theories into those that are justifiable (“good/warranted”) and those that are unsound (“bad/unwarranted”). I suggest that a better scholarly method is to distinguish between “short-term/tactical” and “long-term/strategic” conspiracies, especially when it comes to the many theories being peddled across the fraught U.S.-Russian relationship. In this regard, it is more likely that Russia might have made a recent *tactical* conspiratorial effort against the United States (to favor a preferred presidential candidate) than that it engaged in an outsized *strategic* conspiracy (to control the U.S. government).

The Study and Importance of Conspiracy Theories

A conspiracy theory is typically defined as a non-conformist, non-mainstream [explanation](#) of an event referring to some secret actions of conspirators who, as a general rule, pursue illegal, criminal, and evil purposes. While conspiracy theorizing is usually represented as a flawed kind of thinking (a socially harmful activity), real conspiracies do periodically happen, and almost everybody occasionally resorts to some kind of conspiracy theorizing depending on the situation. Even the logic of some scholarly studies resembles conspiracy theories, such as pursuing hidden [linkages](#) between isolated events and then making argument selections in favor of preferred explanations.

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Taking these considerations into account, some Conspiracy Studies scholars try to distinguish between “acceptable” and “bad” conspiracy theorizing. This can be done, for example, by [highlighting](#) the phenomenon of “conspiracism,” which is the belief in the key and omnipresent role of conspiracies in the historical process. However, researchers can be estranged from the political views of the conspiracy theorists themselves, presenting an initial and inherent bias when the cases are collected and analyzed.

Resorting to conspiracy theories can play a range of important social functions. In times of political or economic troubles – when a situation goes out of control – they can help people make sense of reality by [providing](#) simple explanations for complex experiences and problems. In the context of a rivalry between a political regime and its opponents, conspiracy theorizing can empower regimes by mobilizing loyalists, and serve to disempower, marginalize, and scapegoat opponents. The other way also holds true, whereby the opposition can spread conspiratorial narratives to smear political parties and leaders. Finally, it is worth noting that conspiracy theory narratives can serve as a means of entertainment [provided](#) by the media and fiction writers.

Russian/Soviet and U.S. Comparative Historical Trends

Conspiracy theorizing is deeply rooted in both Russian and U.S. social thought traditions, though the Russian tradition is longer and more pervasive. Indeed, Russian conspiracy theorizing was influenced by isolationist sentiments to a much greater extent than America’s. During the Soviet Union, conspiracy theorizing was used as a powerful tool by the regime, serving not only to marginalize its opponents but also for the legitimization and mobilization of its supporters. Under Stalin’s rule, ungrounded accusations of spying for foreign intelligence services took or ruined the lives of a huge number of Soviet citizens. In the United States, shortly after the 1917 Russian Revolution, some influential U.S. politicians became suspicious about possible subversive Communist influences on domestic politics. This period, from 1917 to 1920, became known as the First Red Scare and a Second Red Scare occurred around 1947 and continued during the Cold War decades. These campaigns led to numerous dismissals, deportations, and public denigrations of alleged sympathizers of the Soviet Union. It should be noted that after the Stalinist period in the USSR and after the Second Red Scare in the United States, mutual conspiracist suspicions in both countries started to decline gradually, although suspicions and [whataboutist](#) sentiments continued from time to time.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, anti-US conspiracism was marginalized for some time but remained an accepted practice among influential Russian politicians and security service officers. In the Putin era, anti-American conspiracy theorizing increasingly became an important device for regime legitimization, mobilization of

supporters, and marginalization of opponents.* In the United States, conspiracy peddlers put aside anti-Russianisms in favor of alleged interference by others, including Jews (so-called Zionist Occupation Government theory) and globalists (so-called World Government theory, which supposes that the United Nations “occupies” the United States).

Russian Elections and Allegations about U.S. Interference

In 2011, Putin’s decision to run for a third presidential term after a four-year break triggered a large-scale, heterogeneous protest movement. It was directed against the pervasive corruption of top officials and the long-lasting monopolization of political power by Putin and his supporters. This protest movement led to numerous rallies and it decreased voting numbers for United Russia and Putin in both the parliamentary and presidential elections.

The Kremlin reacted to this movement by framing it as an attempt by the United States to orchestrate political outcomes in Russia (just as it did, the Kremlin alleges, in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan during the color revolutions). Washington was accused of using social media technologies to spur anti-governmental mass mobilizations and protest leaders were portrayed as paid U.S. puppets. NGOs that received foreign funding for any type of political purposes (election monitoring, human rights activities, etc.) became targets and were ultimately branded (legally) as foreign agents. After that election cycle, anti-Western conspiracy accusations were made by Putin’s regime to discredit its active opponents, legitimize itself as the only power able to resist foreign conspiracies, and rally supporters to be more active in backing their leader.

While trying to substantiate the government allegations during that 2011-12 election cycle, pro-Russian governmental sources emphasized mainly two points: 1) there was U.S. funding for NGOs in Russia that severely criticized the regime during the electoral campaigns (USAID and the NDI were [particularly mentioned](#) in this context) and 2) there were meetings between U.S. officials and Russian opposition figures [in Moscow](#) and in the United States (at the organizers’ expense). However, there is no convincing proof that the United States provided guidance to Russian oppositionists or that any direct funding of opposition figures, if it occurred, made a significant difference in the electoral campaign.

Allegations about the U.S. “behind-the-scenes” role in the 2014 Ukrainian Euromaidan movement was linked by Moscow to the methods and goals that the United States supposedly implemented in its work with the Russian opposition in 2011-12. The widely

* Also see: Serghei Golunov, “[The ‘Hidden Hand’ of External Enemies: The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Putin’s Regime](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 192, 2012; Serghei Golunov, “[What Should Students Know about Russia’s Enemies? Conspiracy Theories in Russian Geopolitical Textbooks](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No 358, 2015.

cited [leak](#) of then Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland's phone call with former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt contributed to the narrative put forward by Russian pro-governmental sources that the United States supported the Euromaidan and controlled who was eligible to join the new, negotiated, Ukrainian government. Indeed, framing the Russian liberal opposition and protesting Ukrainians as elements fully controlled by Washington made for a good cross-fit.

In the last few years, the United States has been systematically accused by Russian officials and state-sponsored media of interference in both Russia's domestic affairs and on the [international](#) scene. In December 2017, some unidentified senior U.S. administration officials were [told](#) that Moscow offered Washington a deal on mutual non-interference in internal affairs and elections, which, interestingly, would indirectly imply that Russia was involved in the 2016 U.S. elections. Perhaps two aspects were in play, that either Russia interfered as a form of Kremlin retaliation, or it did so as a way to halt supposed U.S. interference plans vis-a-vis the upcoming Russian presidential election of March 2018.

2016 U.S. Presidential Elections: Return of the "Russian Threat"

After languishing in the backyards of U.S. conspiracy theorizing discourses for a long time, the "Russian threat" became topical again as Trump rose to power. The range of accusations varied from mere pontificating to far-reaching assumptions that Russia managed to make the U.S. president their [puppet](#). There were (and are) narratives that Moscow is [trying](#) to demolish U.S. democracy and [subvert](#) U.S. sovereignty. Such conspiracy theorizing rhetoric—most often used by Democrats, though there are some Republicans who have spoken along these lines—likely has had a delegitimizing effect on Trump and his inner circle. There has certainly been an "explanatory" aroma in many of these narratives (seeking simple and self-justifying reasons for the perceived political catastrophe) rather than them serving self-legitimizing and mobilizing functions.

The key specific accusations concerning Russian interference included cyberattacks, massive online trolling, social media advertisements, online forum discussions meant to sway public opinion, and actual contacts between members of Trump's team and Russian officials and intermediaries. The accusations of Russia having organized cyberattacks on the Democratic National Committee and on state voter registration systems seem to be the most serious and grounded. Nevertheless, there is a lack of convincing evidence that any of these attacks shaped the outcome of the elections. While justifiably denouncing Russian cyberattacks as illegal and immoral, it should be born in mind that hacking itself is not an unusual kind of governmental operation. Over the last decade, it has been used by many states, including by the United States, which reportedly did it even [against](#) its own allies.

Employing internet trolls and ramping up social media influence campaigns is practiced by many actors worldwide, and such practices are not clearly prohibited in most countries, especially in those that protect free speech and a diverse media landscape. On a related note, there were strong conspiratorial insinuations in 2016-17 in the United States that the Russian media companies RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik were undermining U.S. democracy. However, this would indirectly imply that the U.S. media machines and political communication institutions were stunningly inefficient in the face of foreign narratives.

The argument about Russian connections with Trump's team is probably more vulnerable to whataboutist criticisms than the Russian cyber hacks. As mentioned above, during previous Russian electoral campaigns, U.S. officials in Moscow periodically tried to establish contacts with Russian opposition figures and some Russian NGOs involved in political activities were funded from U.S. sources. When the United States accused Russia of meddling, Putin made [whataboutist counter-accusations](#) saying that the United States has meddled in international politics in a similar way:

“Now, if this page is turned around, I'll tell you something that you should probably know... everywhere in the world, the United States actively interferes in the electoral campaigns of other countries. Do you not know this?”

It seems clear that more convincing evidence is needed to ascertain the facts of both the U.S. and Russian “political activities” in each other's countries.

Suggestions for Further Scholarship

As one way for researchers to handle conspiracy theories, particularly when discussing Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election, it would make sense to distinguish between “tactical” conspiracy theories (implying short-term goals) and “strategic” conspiracy theories (implying long-term, highly ambitious goals). While strategic conspiracies—for example that South Korea and the United States are working to overthrow the North Korean regime—could really be on the agenda, most strategic conspiracy theories should be downplayed because they tend to be extremely overambitious in character. While tactical conspiracy theorizing can be both trustworthy and not trustworthy, strategic conspiracy theorizing is rarely trustworthy.

This approach differs slightly from the happenstance method of sorting conspiracy theories into those that are justifiable (“good/warranted”) and those that are unsound (“bad/unwarranted”), mostly because, again, this route has political bias attached. When applying this new type of dividing line to the matter at hand, one could say that the alleged Russian conspiracies/interferences can be viewed as tactical rather than strategic, which gives it a touch more legitimacy. More weight could be given to the idea

that Russia might have made a tactical conspiratorial effort with the limited goal of supporting a preferable U.S. candidate rather than to the idea that it engaged in strategic conspiratorial efforts to control the U.S. government and undermine U.S. democracy.

Hacking, propaganda, and secret contacts with state adversaries to win an election are relatively plausible conspiracy theories. Even if they are substantiated, the true extent of those activities may never be known, and, most importantly, if they took place, it may remain unknown if they affected the outcomes. How does one measure this last point? What is to be done about the whataboutisms when it comes to brushing off theories? International politics is full of cases when a targeted state resorts to the same conspiracy techniques by which it felt victimized. Finally, it goes without saying that the study of conspiracy theories is hard because even though they can be categorized to some extent, nobody really knows the true nature and extent of any of the clandestine state activities on which geopolitical conspiracy theories tend to feed.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories do not play equivalent roles in U.S. and Russian politics. In both countries, conspiracy theorizing has strong historical roots and is often used to delegitimize political opponents. In Russia, these functions are more prominent—conspiracy theorizing about U.S. clandestine involvement in domestic affairs is heavily used by the Russian regime and its media outlets. In terms of structure, there are some important differences between Russian and U.S. conspiracy narratives. Russian narratives emphasize alleged American subversive networking activities and financial support for oppositionists and NGOs. In the United States, theories focus on Trump-Russia connections, hacking attacks, and social media information warfare. Both countries have made similar accusations, that each has conducted types of digital and psychological warfare on the other.

Future comparative research on conspiracy theorizing in Russia and the United States could separate the mutual accusations of context-specific espionage and hacking (related directly to election cycles) from those that position the opposite party as executing nefarious long-term plans meant to subdue an adversary.

Russian and American Far Right Connections

CONFLUENCE, NOT INFLUENCE

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 516

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The current U.S. debate on Russia is shaped by conspiratorial narratives that see Russia meddling in almost every issue of U.S. political life. This frenzy is reinforced by the fact that Republicans and Democrats now share a relatively similar anti-Russia agenda that is inspired by Cold War “Red Scare” rhetoric. One conspiratorial narrative revolves around connections between Russia and part of the American far right. This topic became highly relevant with the election of Donald Trump, who designated Steve Bannon, then editor of the far right news portal Breitbart, as White House Chief Strategist (he was fired in August 2017). Trump’s election also polarized U.S. public opinion regarding its racist past, epitomized by the Charlottesville riots and multiple polemics about taking down statues of Confederate heroes.

That Russia finds itself enmeshed in issues deeply linked to America’s own past encapsulates the current panic in the United States about Moscow’s alleged ability to influence U.S. domestic public opinion. This memo demystifies the Russian-U.S. far right links that U.S. politicians and media generally overestimate, showing that they are much more limited than portrayed. Further, based on Joseph Nye’s notion of “soft power” and the idea of “strategic narratives” elaborated by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, it is important to distinguish between two critical forms of exercising soft power: (1) shaping another country’s public opinion by shifting its perceptions and values; and (2) moving with the current *Zeitgeist* to promote one’s own agenda. Here, I contend that Russia’s soft power in the United States and its links with the U.S. far right demonstrate a *confluence* of interests rather than an *influence* on U.S. public opinion.

Deconstructing Dominant Narratives

There are several layers to be deconstructed in the conventional punditry on Russian-American far right connections.

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Two conservative presidents being in power does not mean the far right is in power

In both Russia and the United States, liberal pundits tend to frame the rise of the “conservative values” agenda as a victory for the far right. Even if there are links between the far right and conservatives, the two realms are clearly distinct in terms of their influence over policy decisions. The notion of “far right” does not constitute a closed realm with easily identifiable boundaries; it contains “niches” that are part of a broader continuum and can retract or expand depending on evolving political contexts and framing. In the Russian context, the far right benefited from the “conservative turn” of Vladimir Putin’s third presidential term, but has not gained any new access to decision-making circles and remains dissociated from the government. The Kremlin’s negative reaction to street violence organized by Russian Orthodox radicals in [their fight](#) against the film *Matilda* confirms how much the two realms can oppose each other. In the United States, marginal neo-Nazi groups and the historic Ku Klux Klan are connected to a broader political trend that gathers around the right side of the Republican Party, but they cannot be conflated with it, and did not gain any policy-making positions after Donald Trump’s election—except for the rapid rise and fall of Bannon.

Mutual admiration but limited mutual influence

One of the most vocal components of the American far right is the Alt-Right (alternative right) movement. This term refers to a loose realm of white supremacist movements that promote their ideology as an alternative to the Republicans’ more classical conservatism. The Alt-Right movement is embodied by websites such as Breitbart News and AlternativeRight.com, which have become the intellectual centers revamping white supremacy theories using more politically correct terms. Richard Spencer, one of the main figures of the Alt-Right, is at the forefront of this “identitarian” movement. The term comes from the French movement Les Identitaires that posits that identity is the crux of any political, religious, or political movement. Spencer leads the National Policy Institute (NPI), an organization launched in 2005 and [described](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a “suit-and-tie version of the white supremacists of old.” Trump’s victory in the 2016 elections put wind in the sails of the Alt-Right, but Bannon’s resignation signaled a turn by the White House toward a more classical Republican framing of domestic and foreign policy issues.

Many Alt-Right figures are [big fans](#) of Putin, whom they see as a beacon of the white world. They are attracted to his rejection of so-called decadent U.S. liberalism and multiculturalism, his hard line against Islamic radicalism, his upholding of Christian values, his criticism of Western political correctness, and his support for the idea that global elites conspire against ordinary people. On the Russian side, many nationalists favored Trump over Hillary Clinton. Duma members [expressed](#) their hope for a change with the Trump agenda while denouncing Clinton’s outlook as being too ideologized

against Russia. The provocative Russian political figure Vladimir Zhirinovskiy [invited](#) U.S. citizens to vote for Trump or face the risk of nuclear war. And, as expected, the neofascist and Eurasianist geopolitician Alexander Dugin was among the most vocal in expressing support for the new U.S. president, going so far as to call on him to take the lead in a [“Nuremberg Trial for Liberalism.”](#)

Yet, the honeymoon between the two far rights is far from total. Bannon had referred to Dugin and Putin positively, but he considers Putin’s regime to be kleptocratic and Dugin to be too open to the Islamic world. He has [distanced](#) himself from them more than have some other Alt-Right figures. Indeed, only a few individuals in the Russian and U.S. far right are interested in developing a genuine bilateral partnership. Only a small section of the U.S. far right, inspired by the American political philosopher Francis Parker Yockey (1917–1960) and his magnum opus, *Imperium: The Philosophy of History and Politics* (1948), fervently believes in a pan-white unity encompassing the United States, Europe, and Russia-Eurasia.

For the more traditional U.S. far right, the geopolitical enmity with Russia constitutes an impassable boundary and the connections with Moscow make sense only through the European New Right; it is mostly by reading their European counterparts that the U.S. far right became interested in what has been happening in Russia. More importantly, for the part of the population in both countries that displays sympathy for far right ideas, the relationship between Russia and the United States remains a distant topic that is unable to compete with their foci on domestic political issues. A shared agenda of advancing so-called Christian conservative values and defending “whites” against the “migrant invasion” does not offer enough ground for bolstering actual transnational cooperation. Russia’s far right interactions with some of its European counterparts are much deeper and regular.

More loose than structured connections

Mutual admiration and shared worldviews are not enough to demonstrate any kind of concrete interactions, and still less any kind of Russian influence over U.S. far right public opinion. Indeed, when one looks in detail at the documented connections between the Alt-Right movement and Russia, they are not simply thin, but largely confined to anecdotal evidence.

Several far right websites—such as Open Revolt, Green Star, New Resistance, and Spencer’s AlternativeRight.com—regularly publish Dugin’s main texts in English for American audiences. This is the biggest outreach into the United States that a Russian far right thinker can hope for. Spencer’s Russian wife, Nina Koupryanova (the two are separated), who publishes under the nom de plume Nina Byzantina, has translated Dugin’s two books on German philosopher Martin Heidegger into English and published a blog on “meta and geopolitics” inspired by him. She is an apologist of

Putin's regime (and the Novorossiya project) but she has [distanced herself](#) from her husband's racist theories.

The U.S. white supremacist activist Preston Wiginton, who has been developing contacts with Russian skinheads since the 2000s with the help of former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, [invited](#) Dugin to give a Skype lecture at Texas A&M University in 2015, but very few people showed up. Another example is Matthew Heimbach, the leader of the self-proclaimed Traditionalist Worker Party who originated the social media hashtags such as #HailPutin and #PutinForTsar, is said to have [converted](#) to Orthodoxy, and [broadcast](#) a video from Dugin at a conference in California that exalted their common struggle. Jared Taylor, another big name in the white supremacy movement who oversees the American Renaissance website, attended the 2015 Russian International Conservative Forum in St Petersburg. Dugin was also [interviewed](#) by American conspiracist Alex Jones for his website Infowars in February 2017, just a few months after Dugin [interviewed](#) Jones. The ultraconservative Internet television channel Tsargrad, funded by the Orthodox businessman Konstantin Malofeev, one of the main funders of the Donbas insurrection, [employs](#) former FOX News producer Jack Hanick (who converted to Orthodoxy). And Lee Stranahan, a former journalist at Breitbart, began [working](#) for Sputnik's Washington, D.C., bureau in early 2017. A last example is Charles Bausman, the editor of *Russia Insider* that was launched in 2014 during the Ukraine crisis, who is close to some pro-Church and pro-abortion networks in Russia. He recently [published](#) an anti-Semitic manifesto accusing Jews of funding hostility toward Russia, an ideological move that attracted to him the sympathies of the Alt-Right.

As one may notice, these are relatively minor personal connections and they have not led to larger structured or institutionalized associations.

More influential than the Alt-Right: the Christian Right

If there are better-connected ideological relationships between the United States and Russia, they are to be found in the realm of the U.S. Christian right and the Russian Orthodox Church. For the past decade, U.S. radical Christian wings have been promoting reconciliation with Russia in the name of common Christian values. Indeed, the combination of Putin's framing of Russia as a bastion of "traditional values" and the growing recognition of LGBT rights in the United States spurred the U.S. Christian right to see Moscow as a new ally in the fight against what they interpret as decadent values. Several senior officials from the Russian Orthodox Church have met with representatives of different U.S. evangelical and Presbyterian churches, while pro-life associations have [loudly praised](#) Putin for his stance on "family values" and called on the United States to follow his example.

However, these elements are obviously not enough to reconcile hardline Republicans with Russia, especially considering the crises in Ukraine and Syria, and, significantly, the allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The Kremlin, however, is betting on the religious-connection angle to keep pro-Russian voices in American politics over the long term. These Christian connections are structured at a higher and more institutionalized level than the Alt-Right ones and they predate Trump's election. Hence, while significant, they cannot be added to the conspiracy framework around Trump's personality, his links to the far right, and his team's Russia connections.

No "grand design" from the Kremlin

Any far right U.S.-Russian connections tend to be analyzed as part of an alleged Machiavellian "grand strategy" elaborated by the Kremlin to destabilize the United States. There are several reasons why these connections are not as substantive as may be claimed.

First, the Kremlin supports the European and U.S. far right for lack of better friends. It would prefer to build alliances with mainstream conservative parties and be supported by large firms that could effectively lobby for Russia's interests. Second, on the Russian side, there is no centralizing force that coordinates all outreach efforts to far right groups in the West. The topic is highly divisive and many high-level figures in the Russian establishment have criticized such attempts. The peak of the pro-far right "policy" in Russia was probably reached with Marine Le Pen's defeat in the French elections of May 2017 and as reflected by United Russia's August 2017 [statement](#) that it should "avoid ties with right-wing marginals" in the West. Obviously, the rise into government levels of some far right parties such as the FPÖ in Austria allows the Kremlin to maintain links with them (a form of bilateral relations). Ties with Americans are more limited: Russian presidential advisor Sergey Glazyev's early friendship with Lyndon LaRouche had no impact on any U.S. circles except the LaRouchians; Dugin's connections do not go beyond fringe Alt-Right groups; and the Moscow Patriarchate's relationship with the Christian right has been unable to transform the Christian values agenda into a genuine American pro-Russia policy.

If there are authentic strategies to reshape U.S. decision-making in Russia's favor, they appear as shadow business ties and pro-Russian lobbying by big firms with assets in Russia rather than through the distorted lens of marginal far right groups.

Conclusion

It is important not to conflate influence with confluence. The whole issue of assessing Russia's soft power in the West mixes two interpretations of what soft power means. The spectrum of persuasion by other means than military coercion is wide: a thin

definition is to convince actors to behave in a particular way, a thicker one is to follow the trend of what is “commonsensical.” Russia’s positioning as the savior of Christian values belongs more to the thick than to the thin definition of soft power: Moscow does not have such an impact that it would shift public opinion in the United States or Europe and change citizens’ priorities and values.

If the awakening of the American alt-right is undisputable, the reasons are deeply domestic and embedded in the U.S. social fabric. Russia is not responsible for U.S. race relations and social ills. Russia plays a third-tier role, taking advantage of this new voice, consorting with it, often trying to amplify it, but it never originated the homegrown dynamics and has no realistic influence over it. The Kremlin is a beneficiary of a confluence of narratives and visions and it would not be able to do anything if they began to disappear. Russia acts not as a societal transformer but as an echo chamber of European and American societies’ own doubts and transformations.

Russia's Anti-American Propaganda in the Euromaidan Era

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Most experts [recognize](#) anti-Americanism as a pillar of the patriotic discourse that has risen during Vladimir Putin's third term as president. One of the main reasons for this high level of anti-Americanism (and its periodic sharp spikes) is that the Russian government has made available, if not absolutely encouraged, ideological scripts that are echoes of the Cold War era. Performances organized by the Russian hyper-patriotic biker club Night Wolves stand as prime examples of the Kremlin's new take on old propaganda efforts. Their spectacles tend to display the full gamut of the Kremlin's imagery and messaging, from the evil of the United States and Ukrainians to the glorification of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian military.

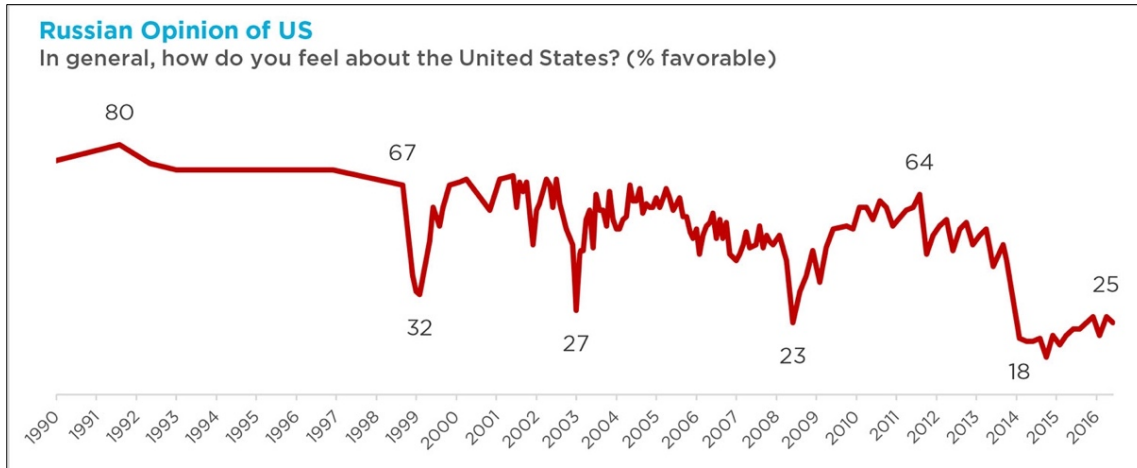
An analysis of Night Wolves spectacles reveals how the Kremlin's *agent provocateurs* make use of the fuzzy lines between patriotism, pro-Putinism, Russian Orthodoxy, civic/national duty, and militarism. The purposes of these anti-American scripts are many, not least of which is to garner psychological and physical support for the motherland one way or the other, especially during the Euromaidan era, but also to create a sense of Russian identity, which has been vacuous since the early 1990s. The alarming aspect is that these types of fantastical attractions can transform patriotic attendees into actual networks of gun-toting Russian combatants, which may be part of the government's objective.

Exploiting Anti-Americanism

According to a [poll](#) by the Moscow-based Levada Center, anti-American feelings in Russian society tend to peak when the government perceives negative geopolitical changes in Europe and when Russia's interests in its near abroad are challenged. As **Table 1** [shows](#), the lowest levels of friendly attitudes toward the United States were registered in 1999 during the NATO campaign against Serbia in Kosovo, in 2003 during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, in 2008 during the Russia-Georgia war in August, and in 2014 during the Euromaidan in Ukraine and ensuing conflict.

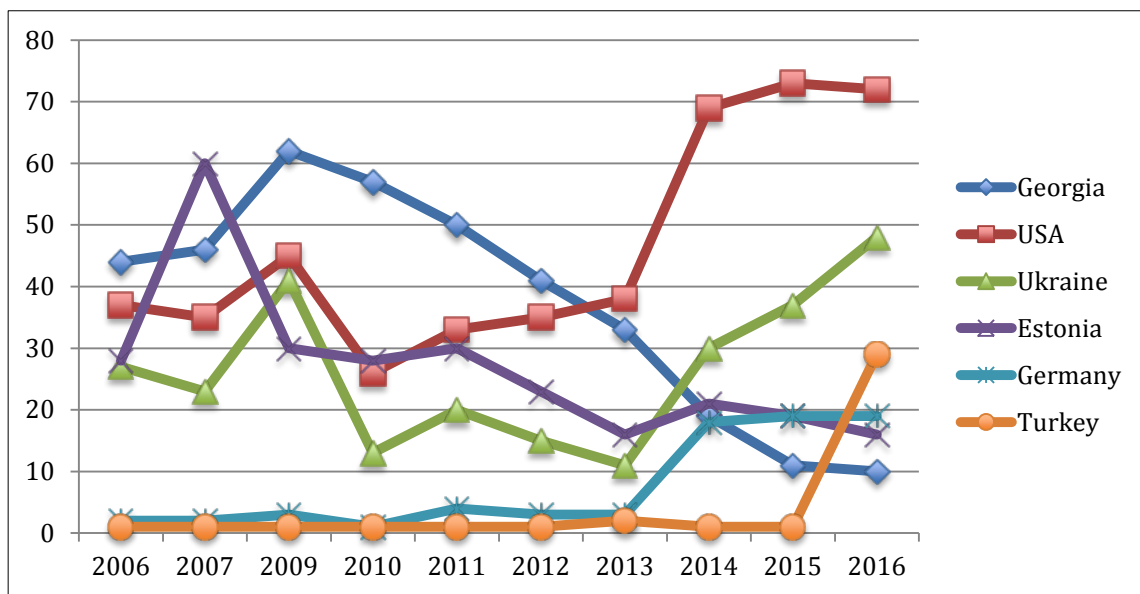
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Table 1. Russian Opinion of the United States



Russians tend to [blame](#) the United States for a range of troubles, both domestic and international. Public opinion polls show that Russians consistently tend to accuse the West of fomenting so-called color revolutions in post-Soviet states and of causing the current [split](#) between Russia and Ukraine. Certainly, successful Russian state-controlled propaganda campaigns have influenced domestic perceptions about a range of international actors. In May 2016, the Levada Center conducted a [survey](#) that demonstrated a correlation between major international events (from Russia's perspective) and public distrust toward the countries involved (see **Table 2**). Clear examples of times of high Russian public negativity toward other states were during the Euromaidan protests, the Russian-Georgian war, and the relocation of a World War II monument in Estonia (the "Bronze soldier affair").

Table 2. Top Five Most Unfriendly/Hostile Countries (Ranked by Russians, May 2016)



For many Russians, the apparent irrationality of the military conflict in Donbas can only be explained through the external factor of pernicious U.S. influence in Ukraine. A leading piece of evidence that showed up frequently in pro-Kremlin newspapers, blogs, and television shows consisted of photos of former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland distributing snacks to Euromaidan activists in February 2014 (see [image](#)). This type of imagery has been repeatedly reproduced in Russian popular culture in recent years with the aim and effect of vigorously crystallizing phantasms and stereotypes of the national consciousness.



The Night Wolves and the “Dangerous” Rock Band

Homegrown images and events can also be highly serviceable for the Russian state's national idea. The large-scale historical-patriotic performances by the Kremlin-patronized Night Wolves bikers club since 2010 perhaps best reflect all of the permutations of the state narratives. The club has been supported by multimillion-ruble grants from the Presidential Administration (until 2017). Their spectacles often have focal points involving state-sanctioned geopolitical imagery and have been broadcast on state television channels. The ideological scripts that undergird their performances are apparently derived from Aleksandr Dugin's Eurasianist and Russian messianic conceptions. The shows are lavishly garnished with Russian Orthodox themes and nostalgia for former imperial glories (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. A Scene from the Night Wolves' “Forge of Victory” Show (2015)



A performer holds up a modified state emblem of the Soviet Union in which the hammer and sickle are replaced by the two-headed eagle referencing the Russian Empire. There is a large Christian cross in the background. (Source: [YouTube](#))

A good example of anti-American imagery can be seen in the Night Wolves' 2014 show "Redemption" where the United States is portrayed as the world's evil puppet-master manipulating the strings of nations and geopolitical events. In the show, gigantic hands loom threateningly over everyone (seen **Figure 2**). Other segments show Ukraine bleeding, which is a flashback to the familiar Soviet-era cliché about the "sticky fingers of capitalism" (*"zagrebushchie lapy kapitalizma"*).

Figure 2. A Scene from the Night Wolves' "Redemption" Biker Show (2014)



(Source: [YouTube](#))

However, despite all of the alluring emotional attributes of the shows, the prominence of Cold War-style anti-American elements actually speaks of the profound absence of ideological alternatives to the West as Russia's archenemy.

The imagery can obviously no longer rest on the binary communism-capitalism contest because Russia has been well on the path of free-market capitalism since 1991. In this regard, the heavy use of Cold War-era "stock" narratives should not confuse us into thinking that these efforts are somehow aimed at reviving Soviet ideology. Instead, this conceptual shallowness manifests itself in the use of the corporeal language in which categories of the geopolitical order are described. An example would be in gender relations, where there is clear emphasis on Russia having a masculine, hegemonic position. As seen from this perspective, and as captured in the performance of the songs "Amerika," "Maidan," and "Betrayal" by the Russian patriotic band "Dangerous" (*"Opasnye"*), the United States is represented, in one Night Wolves skit, as a woman in a bikini top that is made out of NATO armor and whose irrational behavior is due to "menstrual hysteria." She (the United States) is portrayed as a loser who desperately wants to be cool and capable.

The leader of Dangerous, Gleb Kornilov (see **Figure 3**), is a regular participant at Night Wolves shows. He was also the force behind the "Save Donbas" charity fund and was one of the main supporters among Russian musicians of the (unsuccessful) Russian "Novorossiia" project in eastern Ukraine.

Figure 3: Gleb Kornilov, Leader of Dangerous, Performs at the 2015 Biker Show



Kornilov's shirt says "Columbus Shut Down America." (Source: [YouTube](#))

Kornilov's lyrics provide examples of the anti-Western outlook spread through Russian pop culture. Here is an excerpt from his song "Betrayal":

Europe and America / You've probably rushed / To take history's mantle / From Russia's shoulder / You can't forgive us / That our land is vast / The Russian spirit married / To the Russian landmass! / And burning in envy / You decided to become us / But Gagarin's flight / Exposed your weakness / And you won't rewrite / The year 1945! / And while you breathe angrily down our necks / We march forward.

In just this small passage of lyrics, some of the main aspects of Russia's self-aggrandizement are apparent. Recurring themes include Russia's incredibly vast territory, military victory over the Nazis in World War II, and pioneering of space exploration. The merits of this genre are generally funneled to demonstrate Russian superiority over the United States.

Despite the Soviet Union's collapse, the propaganda employed in the Night Wolves shows uses Soviet-era discursive schemes in which Russia is again pitted against the West. Often Soviet ideology is replaced by Russian Orthodox values, which is usually

juxtaposed against the West's decadence – a narrative that replaces Moscow's Cold War-era clichés about “rotten capitalism.”

A persistent problem is that despite years of narratives and imagery, it is still unclear what the current Russian national idea is. This representational trap in Russia's national geopolitical consciousness could be explained in psychoanalytical terms as attempts to attain a perceived lack of identity. Seen from this perspective, the situations in Crimea, Ukraine, and Donbas all function, as French intellectual Jacques Lacan [would say](#), as objects whose recapturing promises restoration of an imaginary full identity of the Russian nation. In this context, the construction of new fantasies becomes an inevitable component of popular “cultural” geopolitics. One of the main aims of this is to stabilize Russians' mainstream worldviews through dramatic oversimplification and emotional delivery.

Conclusion

The anti-Americanisms in the Night Wolves' shows and songs by Dangerous represent compelling examples of how Moscow's policymakers use culture as hybrid policy tools. Putin personally patronized this biker club for many years, which in the Russian political context, is more than a green light to continue doing what they do. The shows and songs focus on delivering patriotic messages to domestic audiences and include imagery and commentary on Russia's relations with the United States and key orbital countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, United Kingdom, and Germany.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the Night Wolves is that some of their members participated in the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. This blurs the line between propaganda – and a highly exaggerated one at that in terms of rock concerts – and actual military activity. In this way, the Night Wolves are a product of the Kremlin's “political technologies.” Through these types of cultural phenomena, Russia's leadership seeks to boost patriotism, provide the foundation for a new genus of Russian identity, and, in a subtle way, shorten the distance between enjoying entertainment to being recruited into combat-defense roles of the motherland.