

Explaining Russia's Schizophrenic Policy toward the United States

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 501

January 2018

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The weaknesses and inconsistencies of Russia's recent actions toward the United States need to be explained. President Vladimir Putin is often seen as a foreign policy wizard, leading Russia to a string of successes and heightened international influence. But Moscow's interactions with Washington are actually puzzling.

Using information drawn from press and other publicly available sources, this memo will examine four explanations for the situation: (1) Putin's own psychological makeup and biases; (2) the unwillingness of knowledgeable advisors to stand up to Putin; (3) infighting among Putin's advisors; and (4) the possibility that intelligence officers in Russia are acting on their own authority, without real state coordination. These explanations are not mutually exclusive, and we lack evidence to know which might be definitive. But the exercise is useful for thinking about the future trajectory of the Putin government and its foreign policy choices, suggesting that Putin may not be the only figure who matters going forward.

The Puzzle

There are two major inconsistencies in recent Russian policy toward the United States that require explanation. First, Russia seems to have gleaned very accurate data about how to influence U.S. public opinion in the lead-up to the 2016 elections. Moscow both [timed](#) the release of damning Democratic National Committee and other doxed emails, and [targeted fake advertising](#) campaigns on Facebook, with a high degree of sophistication. Yet the Kremlin appears to have been taken completely off guard by the resulting ramp-up of U.S. sanctions against Russia in 2017. This is the case even though the new sanctions followed the same basic political pattern of the [Magnitsky Act](#) of 2012,

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where the president (in that earlier case, Barack Obama) was forced by large bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress to sign and enforce sanctions against Russia that he did not support. How could the Kremlin have had an astonishingly good understanding of one major aspect of U.S. electoral politics, while entirely missing the impact of Congress on foreign policy?

Second, the Kremlin tried to launch a wholesale reset of its relationship with the United States in spring 2017, presenting a detailed and comprehensive [secret document](#) to the White House whose authenticity has been confirmed by both sides. Yet simultaneously Russia continued actions around the world that challenged almost every U.S. core security interest, from its dealings with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and various arms limitation agreements to its interactions with Ukraine, Syria, North Korea, and Venezuela. How could the Kremlin believe that the administration of President Donald Trump could ignore these real challenges, when it was being investigated both by Congress and an independent prosecutor for collusion with Russia?

Explanation One: Putin Succumbed to His Own Ignorance and Biases

This is the [explanation](#) offered by the Brookings Institution's Steven Pifer: "Putin doesn't seem to understand that Trump's powers are not the same as his...The checks and balances, the special prosecutor and congressional investigations have tied Trump's hands in ways that didn't occur to Putin." This explanation fits Putin's [interactions](#) with former U.S. President George W. Bush in the early 2000s, too. For example, Putin asked why Bush couldn't just change the Constitution to allow him to run for a third term in office, and seemed genuinely to believe that Bush was personally responsible for firing Dan Rather, the private-sector CBS journalist who misreported a story about Bush's supposed draft evasion.

Putin spent most of his pre-presidential career inside the Soviet KGB or follow-on Russian FSB. While no one is exactly sure what his work there involved, guesses include that he [dealt](#) with internal dissidents in Leningrad, [collected](#) technical information about NATO military installations while stationed in Dresden, and [ferreted out](#) tax, trade, and other financial information from businesses located in St. Petersburg when he worked there in the office of Mayor Anatoly Sobchak in the early 1990s. There is nothing to suggest that Putin has any expertise in analyzing the U.S. political system, and he may have assumed that all world leaders have the same type of power that he does.

But while this is a reasonable explanation for the outcome, it begs another question: why didn't any of Putin's advisors try to set him straight? There certainly is good analysis available in Russia, including from the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of USA and Canada Studies (ISKRAN), which has in the past done commissioned studies for Russian intelligence agencies and the presidential administration. The cleverness of the

Kremlin's attempts to interfere in the U.S. election campaign process indicates that high-quality information about at least some aspects of U.S. politics was obtained somewhere.

As Dmitry Trenin of the Carnegie Moscow Center has [publicly stated](#), though, and as other top Russian international affairs analysts have lamented more privately, the Kremlin has ignored Russian think tanks for many years. Putin is also believed to have largely [sidelined](#) the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and hence its diplomatic expertise about the United States. The Kremlin may have gotten its information about U.S. public opinion from U.S. contractors. The question then becomes, why were some good sources of information ignored?

Explanation Two: Putin's Advisors Are Afraid to Tell Him the Truth

This has been [suggested](#) by journalist Mikhail Zygar. It fits a pattern observed in dictatorships around the world, where the leader has the power to kill (or at least kill the career of) any messenger who brings bad news.

We know, for example, that this held true for [Saddam Hussein](#) of Iraq. Documents captured during the U.S. war in Iraq and interviews of Saddam's former officials reveal that Saddam insisted that the United States would never dare invade Iraq. He also refused to give up the charade that made it appear to outside inspectors that Iraq was hiding its weapons of mass destruction because he believed this perception was a useful tool to keep his enemies afraid of him. No one contradicted Saddam too loudly because he had a pattern of arresting and executing those who displeased him. While merely disagreeing with Putin has not led to murder in Russia, the Russian president has fired and reassigned officials at will—and in Russia's patronage system, to lose a particular job can end a long gravy train of side benefits.

If Putin is relying on narrow information channels, particular individuals may be able to sway Putin in directions that are favorable to their own interests. Without complete information, the president's agenda can be manipulated by those around him. No one knows for sure who Putin's most influential advisors are. Whenever one or another Russian [pundit](#) tries to analyze the status of various coalition members, other Russians immediately disagree. This leads to the next possibility.

Explanation Three: Inconsistent Foreign Policy Is the Result of Infighting in Putin's Inner Circle

While we cannot know from the outside who influences which decisions, some of Putin's closest colleagues might have strongly differing foreign policy preferences.

For example, Sergei Chemezov is the CEO of Rostec, the state corporation that oversees Russian defense industrial enterprises. (He lived in Putin's building when they were in Dresden together, and probably served alongside Putin in the KGB there.) Rostec has a strong interest in the profitability of Russian arms sales, and of course Chemezov, whose approval is needed for the signing of every contract, has the opportunity to request a bit on the side for himself as well. This gives him a personal stake in favoring military solutions to international problems, like those in Ukraine and Syria—and indeed the pattern of Russian arms sales in recent years reflects a risky approach to Russia's long-term interests. For example, as Alexander Gabuev of Carnegie Moscow has [noted](#), Russia has chosen to sell late-generation weapons to China recently, even though China has an established pattern of replicating Russian weapons designs and then outcompeting Russia as a global supplier of them. Also, much has been made of Russia's recent decision to sell the S-400 ballistic missile defense (BMD) system to Turkey. While this might lure Turkey further into Russia's orbit—and the United States has expressed concern about the S-400's interoperability with NATO systems—if U.S.-Turkish relations improve, NATO might gain an unprecedented firsthand look at the Russian BMD technology that threatens its own defenses in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. Russia seems to be selling arms to any and all takers, for the sake of selling arms.

In contrast, Igor Sechin (who worked with Putin in Sobchak's office in the early 1990s, and is rumored to have served in the Russian military intelligence agency, the GRU, in Mozambique) has somewhat different interests, despite his cordial relationship with Chemezov. Sechin is the CEO of Rosneft, Russia's huge state-owned oil conglomerate, and his own opportunities there have been constrained by U.S. and EU sanctions. In 2014, Rosneft lost a large contract for Arctic oil exploration and development with ExxonMobil, the U.S. private oil company then headed by Rex Tillerson (currently U.S. Secretary of State). Whereas Chemezov might benefit from continuing Russian conflict with the United States and its allies, Sechin would probably like to see the sanctions lifted—and may have hoped that his friend Tillerson, whose firm was responsible for [violating](#) those sanctions in 2014, would concur.

Of course, what Chemezov and Sechin have in common (in addition to their affiliation with Putin) is their connection with Russian intelligence services, and that leads to a possible fourth explanation.

Explanation Four: Disparate Members of Russia's Intelligence Network Are Controlling Foreign Policy, with Negative Consequences for State Interests

The Soviet Union had a long tradition of infighting across its intelligence services, and [no tradition](#) of joint analysis (unlike, for example, the U.S. Joint Intelligence Assessment). Given that Soviet intelligence agencies were renamed but not really restructured or reformed in the post-Soviet era, continuing bureaucratic conflict would

be par for the course. Several additional factors might lead representatives of the Russian intelligence community to step beyond bureaucratic bounds and stake out foreign policy fiefdoms of their own.

First, in any authoritarian system—and this was certainly true of the Soviet Union as well as Russia today—[the ideal norm](#), where intelligence organizations serve the state while staying out of politics, has never been practiced. The KGB always monitored the personal conversations and loyalty of Soviet leaders, and Yuri Andropov epitomized movement back and forth across the intelligence membrane, serving first as Soviet ambassador to Hungary, later joining and eventually heading the KGB, and finally becoming General Secretary of the Communist Party. The distinction between intelligence and political roles is even blurrier in post-Soviet Russia, where many high-ranking officials have had intelligence careers. Second, the distinction between commerce and intelligence broke down in the 1990s. Large numbers of intelligence officers were laid off under President Boris Yeltsin, and those who remained saw their salaries and benefits shrink. This led many to move to (or moonlight in) positions as [security providers](#) for private companies, without giving up their intelligence ties. Third, and directly related to this, individuals and units from the Russian intelligence services have been repeatedly implicated in large-scale business crimes of corruption and violence at home, even as they have hired active cyber criminals to engage in cyber conflict abroad on behalf of the Russian state. Intelligence, business interests, and crime extending beyond Russian borders are interwoven into complex webs, making the real interests of individuals in the Kremlin even harder to parse.

While it is difficult to tease out exactly how unconstrained intelligence representatives might be affecting Russian actions, the controversial Steele Dossier [suggests](#) one clue. (This is the report compiled by a former British intelligence officer about Russian involvement in the U.S. elections, publicly [leaked](#) by *Buzzfeed*.) While the document contains factual errors, reputable and high-ranking former intelligence officials like John Sipher of the CIA [argue](#) that the dossier's basic analysis rings true, and may turn out to have value. The Dossier claims that Sergei Ivanov, who attended KGB training school with Putin and has served him in a variety of roles (including in the FSB) over the past twenty years, was responsible for the decision to “dox” (i.e., release) the Democratic National Committee and other purloined emails to WikiLeaks and DCLeaks. It also suggests that this is why he was let go from his position as Putin's Chief of Staff in August 2016, after the maelstrom in U.S. politics that followed initial accusations of Russian responsibility for the doxing. It may be Ivanov (believed to be a hawk) more than Putin who failed to understand the realities of U.S. politics—and he may have used the active measures he learned as a KGB officer to further his own interests, in contradiction to those of the Russian state as a whole.

Implications for Understanding Russian Foreign Policy

While Putin certainly remains the ultimate “decider” on foreign policy, decision-making in Russia is more complex than is often realized. Putin may not be fully in control of the information he is receiving from his advisors, and those advisors may have their own agendas that deflect Russian policy from a consistent course.

Putin will run in the March 2018 presidential election and win. But he is aging, and enthusiasm for his rule seems to be waning, especially as the Russian economy continues to stagnate amidst high levels of corruption. Many therefore predict that this will be Putin’s last term as leader, and that jockeying for his replacement will soon intensify.

What the analysis here suggests is that Russia’s policy toward the United States will be affected by this growing power struggle. Who is up and who is down in the Kremlin will matter for Moscow’s relations with Washington—and it may be time for old-school Kremlinology, this time without the Communist Party, to emerge as the new fashion in Washington once again.

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