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# ‘HACKING’ INTO THE WEST: RUSSIA’S ‘ANTI-HEGEMONIC’ DRIVE AND THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVE OFFENSIVE

James Rogers, Andriy Tyushka

## Abstract

Contrary to the narrative in much of politics and academia, Russia’s alienation from the West did not start in 2014—it is a lasting and inherent phenomenon. Since the mid-1990s, Moscow’s attempts to ‘capture’ the narrative of Europe or even portray itself later on as a ‘better Europe’, transcended in 2014 into a more overt and *antithetical* approach of strategically juxtaposing Russia *versus* Europe, or placing ‘Russia being not (declinist and decadent) Europe’, a part of the likewise allegedly declining ‘West’. Russia’s appeal for European ‘self-denial’ does not only find its supporters in Europe, predominantly populist and radical parties, but also contributes to a more general frustration among Europeans regarding their own self-perception, as well provokes Western ambiguity and uncertainty about its responsibility for regional security affairs, particularly in the European neighbourhood.

This article argues that, by destabilising the immediate vicinity and regional security order, the Russian leadership does not pursue a policy of balancing the Western hegemonic formation, thus strategising a *positive* competing (*counter-hegemonic*) framework. Rather, it engages in an *anti-hegemonic* strategy through a deeply *negative* spoiler offensive. The article conceptualises Russia’s anti-hegemonic drive as a three-pronged strategic narrative offensive that operationally seeks to 1) ‘desynchronise’ political developments in the European Neighbourhood to ‘distort’ European perceptions of reality; 2) ‘de-articulate’ the West, i.e., splitting the Atlantic democracies from the European mainland; and 3) ‘saturate’ the vacuum with false and fictitious narratives, to sow confusion and maintain manageable disorder.

**Keywords:** Russia, Western ‘equivalential chain’, Ukraine, strategic narrative offensive, anti-hegemony, spoiler politics

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*Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it; so that when Men come to be undeceiv'd, it is too late; the Jest is over, and the Tale has had its Effect...*

– Jonathan Swift, 1710

## Introduction: Russia's anti-Western agenda—sketching the minefield

It took the Kremlin two years after the launch of its campaign in Ukraine to extend its operational theatre beyond the post-Soviet space in the pursuit of what it considers a legitimate gambit for justice and respect in international relations. Seeking to undermine one of the main European power centres—which has grown increasingly combative in relation to Russian revisionism—Moscow staged as early as January 2016 a narrative offensive against Chancellor Angela Merkel's government with the notorious 'Our Lisa' disinformation and sabotage operation. Although the forged story was soon proven false, the falsehood flew and the tale had its effect: the damage was done, and, since then, the chancellor has had to divert her attention, to yet another challenge, namely a drop in popular support to a five-year low, including for her favoured migration policy.<sup>1</sup> While not attributing this development to the Kremlin's opportunistic policies *alone*, the sequence, precision, and persistency of Russia's political efforts cannot be ignored. Indeed, Moscow has been active almost everywhere: whether cheerleading for the 'Brexit' campaign; stirring up radical movements and supporting the network of far-rightist and far-leftist anti-establishment forces across Europe; devastating Syria's urban spaces, not least the city of Aleppo (thus facilitating further flows of migrants to Europe to stir up discord); meddling in the United States' (US) electoral process; conducting cyber-attacks on the OSCE; or preparing the ground for the distortion of the upcoming 2017 elections in Germany, France, and the Netherlands, the Kremlin's 'anti-hegemonic' approach has become—since 2014—more overt and detectable. As it has become bolder, Russia's actions are no longer invisible; indeed, a growing number of national and international authorities have started to reveal and condemn them.

The findings of the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT) on the MH17 crash revealed in September 2016 the clear trail from/to Russia of the BUK missile that

<sup>1</sup> Scholz, Kay-Alexander, 'Nationwide German poll: Merkel's popularity dips to five-year low', *Deutsche Welle*, 1 September 2016.

shot down the aeroplane.<sup>2</sup> In its preliminary examination report, the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague dispelled the cosy narrative of a ‘civil war’ in Ukraine—actively nurtured by the Kremlin—and posited that Russia’s engagement in the Crimea and Donbas territories of Ukraine is a ‘crime’ that falls within the court’s jurisdiction.<sup>3</sup> One month later, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly officially recognised Russia as an ‘occupying power’ in Crimea.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the US National Intelligence Agency, in relation to the recent US presidential election, claimed it had credible evidence that ‘the Russian government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from US citizens and institutions, including from US political organisations’ and other information thefts and disclosures that ‘are intended to interfere with the US election process’, which later led to the expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, several indications have been cast, not least from the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (BfV), Germany’s domestic intelligence service, that Russia is now trying to spoil the upcoming German elections, something that looks quite credible given the Kremlin’s earlier cyber-attacks against the *Bundestag* in 2015.<sup>6</sup> Finally, repeated British warnings about Russia’s subtle information warfare, including cyber-attacks, espionage and fake news—just as RT, i.e. *Russia Today*, has extended its service to France in 2017<sup>7</sup>—raise serious concerns regarding the launch of a systemic and truly strategic campaign aiming to ‘spoil’ the very foundation of the liberal democratic order, i.e. free and fair elections. For the Kremlin, the specific outcome of these operations does not necessarily matter: what matters is that the West’s democratic institutions are gradually discredited and dislocated, ultimately depriving it of its claim to normative superiority.

Russia’s agenda has been pursued by stealth. The Kremlin’s offensive has been mainly waged to distract other states’ and actors’ attention and perception of its engagements—from America, past Europe, and on to Syria—to delay and distort an effective response, as well as to consolidate (by false and/or threatening narratives) the established *fait accomplis*. Consequently, Moscow’s international counterparts are frequently left grappling with a *fait accompli* here and there, failing to deter and deny the next one—as the holistic strategic vision would suggest. Russia’s every next escalatory move has been designed to warrant ‘forgiveness’, or blatant acceptance, of the former achievement, ultimately attempting to distract attention from Moscow’s next move. For example, in his infamous ‘Crimea Speech’ in 2014, just after his troops and auxiliaries—the so-called ‘Little Green Men’—annexed Crimea, illegally, from Ukraine, a sovereign European country, Putin appealed to Europeans:

<sup>2</sup> Joint Investigation Team, ‘Presentation of preliminary results of the criminal investigation of MH17 airline crash’, *Nieuwegein, Openbaar Ministerie*, 28 September 2016.

<sup>3</sup> The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, ‘Report on Preliminary Examination Activities (2016)’ (Report No. ICC-CPI-20161114-PR1252), *The Hague*, 14 November 2016.

<sup>4</sup> UN General Assembly Third Committee Resolution No. A/C.3/71/L.26, ‘Situation of Human Rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol (Ukraine)’, 19 December 2016.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Joint DHS and ODNI Election Security Statement’, Washington DC, 7 October 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Applebaum, ‘Russia’s Next Election Operation: Germany’, *The Washington Post*, 12 December 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Papandina, Anastasia, Dmitriy Krykov, Georgiy Makarenko, and Ivan Tkachev, ‘RT poluchit bolee 1 mlrd. Rub. na zapusk kanala na francuzskom jazike’, [RT to receive over 1 bln RUR for the launch of French-language channel service], *RBC.RU*, 7 December 2016.

I believe that the Europeans, first and foremost the Germans, will also understand me. Let me remind you that in the course of political consultations on the unification of East and West Germany... some nations that were then and are now Germany's allies did not support the idea of unification. Our nation, however, unequivocally supported the sincere, unstoppable desire of the Germans for national unity. I am confident that you have not forgotten this, and I expect that the citizens of Germany will also support the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity.<sup>8</sup>

The differences between the peaceful reunification of East and West Germany and the illegal and forceful annexation of Crimea by a foreign power could not be starker, yet many Europeans seem to have accepted the Russian narrative, or alternatively, have failed to come up with their own. Such narratives—‘mutual’ accusation, pledges for dialogue and understanding, virtual-reality construction, up to fact forgeries on the ground—help make Russia's bold and seemingly incontestable political moves a reality. This has left the Russians in the ascendancy, with Moscow directing affairs across increasingly large swathes of the European continent, stoking fear in Eastern Europe, and raising anxieties in Brussels, London, and Washington, as to what the future holds. This outcome is even more astonishing given that the Russian economy is around half the size of France's.<sup>9</sup> So is Mr Putin a master strategist? Or has Russia achieved so much in the Caucasus, Ukraine, and elsewhere because Western politicians are unable to accept that they face opposition, let alone an enemy, instead preferring cosy ideas like dialogue and cooperation or responses that depend on liberal statecraft, instead of hard-nosed strategy?<sup>10</sup>

This article argues that it is a combination of both, namely that the Kremlin's astute strategic thinking and the inability of Westerners to respond, let alone adopt proactive policies to regain the initiative, are intrinsically linked. Already, the West, and Europeans in particular, may be susceptible to a worldview that favours cooperative as opposed to competitive relations, but the Kremlin has enacted a very new and unique approach to compound this situation, bending it to Russia's advantage.<sup>11</sup> Moscow is trying to prevent Europeans from joining the dots and to encourage their deliberate misreading of Russia's (geo)strategic intentions and behaviour both in the

<sup>8</sup> Putin, Vladimir, ‘Address by President of the Russian Federation to State Duma deputies, Federation Council members, heads of Russian regions and civil society representatives in the Kremlin’, Moscow, the Kremlin, 18 March 2014.

<sup>9</sup> According to the International Monetary Fund, Russia's Gross Domestic Product was US\$1.13 trillion in 2016, in comparison with France's US\$2.46 trillion.

<sup>10</sup> Jakóbk, Woiciech, ‘A Return to Business as Usual’, *New Eastern Europe*, 29 October 2015; Windheim, Ivar, ‘EU-Russia Gas Relations: Back to ‘Business as Usual?’, *Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt* [Norwegian Institute of International Affairs], 8 February 2016; Troianovski, Anton, Laurence Norman, and Julian Barnes, ‘Europe Pushes for Diplomatic Solution in Ukraine Amid Calls for Arming Kiev’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 February 2015; Chrétien, Jean, ‘Firmness and Dialogue: How Best to Respond to Russia's Challenges in Ukraine, Europe and the West’, InterAction Council, Chairman's Report on the High-Level Expert Group Meeting, Ottawa, 20 April 2015; Kuchins, Andrew C., ‘Could 2016 See the Normalisation of Russia's Relations with the West?’, *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik*, [German Council on Foreign Relations], Working Paper Series *Forging Western Consensus on Eastern Policy*, 25 February 2016.

<sup>11</sup> For a good take on the differences between European statecraft and Russian strategic thinking, see Milevski, Lukas, ‘Strategy Versus Statecraft in Crimea’, *Parameters* 44, no.2 (Summer 2014): 23-33.

European Neighbourhood—an area Moscow considers to be its *own* ‘near abroad’—and beyond.<sup>12</sup> This encourages the mistaken perception among European leaders that every Russian move, such as the annexation of Crimea in Ukraine, for example, is merely an ‘isolated problem’ or, even more disturbingly, a kind of *Stunde Null* or ‘zero hour’ in Russian belligerence, which will eventually subside. While Russia has purposely sought to frame its interventions in such a way, Ukraine—just like Georgia before it, or the more recent meddling in Germany, Syria, the UK, or the US—is no *Stunde Null*, but part of a wider Russian strategy deliberately designed to ‘freeze’ and ‘unfreeze’ regional conflicts and spread disinformation for geopolitical objectives. Consequently, this article will show why and how Russia’s offensive against the West is a lasting and deeply *negative* foreign policy agenda (*spoiler politics*) within an overall *anti*-hegemonic strategy, which warrants the most serious attention, not least because it is designed to ‘hack’ into and shatter the Western liberal narrative to crack European cohesion and resolve.<sup>13</sup> As such, it will show how Russia’s *anti*-hegemonic drive translates into a three-pronged *strategic narrative offensive* which seeks: *firstly*, to ‘desynchronise’ political developments in the European Neighbourhood to ‘distort’ European perceptions of reality; *secondly*, to ‘de-articulate’ the West, i.e. splitting the Atlantic democracies from the European mainland as well as undermining the very foundational ideas that constitute the Western liberal democratic order; and *finally*, to ‘saturate’ the vacuum with false and fictitious narratives, to sow confusion and maintain manageable disorder.<sup>14</sup> This article will therefore re-appraise recent Western policy, with a concentration on the (inadequate) response to Russia’s *anti*-hegemonic drive.

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<sup>12</sup> By ‘European Neighbourhood’, we mean those countries that form part of the European Union’s Neighbourhood Policy in Eastern Europe, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine.

<sup>13</sup> This article draws on the earlier published study into the nature of Russia’s *anti*-hegemonic strategy by the current authors, cf. Rogers, James and Andriy Tyushka, ‘Russia’s Anti-Hegemonic Offensive: A New Strategy in Action’, *Diplomaatia*, No. 160 (December 2016).

<sup>14</sup> In this article, ‘strategic narratives’ are understood in the framework of the earlier cited Freedman’s original take (2006) and the most recent and comprehensive elaboration by Miskimmon et al. (2013), cf. Miskimmon, Alistair, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013). The latter define ‘strategic narratives’ as ‘representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future to achieve political objectives. Critically, strategic narratives integrate interests and goals—they articulate end states and suggest how to get there’. ‘Strategic’, therefore, does not point to the narratives meta-political nature alone, but encompasses what is regarded as intended, calculated and goal-seeking political action. Hereto, Freedman (2006: 22) denotes that ‘[n]arratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events’, and as such ‘[t]hey are strategic because they do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current’.

## Moscow identifies an enemy: ‘Western’ hegemony

In July 2014, at the Conference of Russian Federation Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives, President Putin hastily declared that:

There is hardly any doubt that the unipolar world order did not come to be. Peoples and countries are raising their voices in favour of self-determination and civilisational and cultural identity, which conflicts with the attempts by certain countries to maintain their domination in the military sphere, in politics, finance, the economy, and in ideology.<sup>15</sup>

In a June 2016 speech to Russian diplomats, he again complained that certain Western states—Russia’s ‘partners’—‘continue stubborn attempts to maintain their monopoly on geopolitical domination.’<sup>16</sup> The notion that Russia should resist Western power—hardly new—has continued to grow as a major theme during Mr Putin’s time as Russia’s leader, to such an extent that it seems to have come to preoccupy Moscow’s mind and drive its revisionist behaviour, both in the European neighbourhood but also, increasingly, in the West itself.

Whereas there are indeed different normative views of hegemony, there is something the various strands of thinking in political theory tend to agree on: hegemony is a historical outcome<sup>17</sup> of a particular political programme.<sup>18</sup> Not least, hegemony is the *positive* result of the success of a particular political narrative, whereby a number of theories, concepts, objects, and practices are articulated together in a ‘*chain of equivalence*’, leading to the repression of alternative perspectives.<sup>19</sup> Since the early eighteenth century the UK (joined later by the US) has formed a hegemonic framework arranged firstly under liberalism, and eventually—once it had acquired geopolitical traction—under the entity of ‘the West’. Constitutional government, representative, multi-party democracy, freedom of association and communication, the maritime economic order—captured and institutionalised in the modern nation-state, but extended through the concept of the international community within the Euro-Atlantic area—and the English language have all been linked together to form a potent ‘equivalential chain’.

<sup>15</sup> Putin, Vladimir, ‘Speech at the Conference of Russian Federation ambassadors and permanent representatives’, Moscow, 1 July 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Putin, Vladimir, ‘Speech at the Meeting of Russian Federation ambassadors and permanent envoys’, Moscow, 30 June 2016.

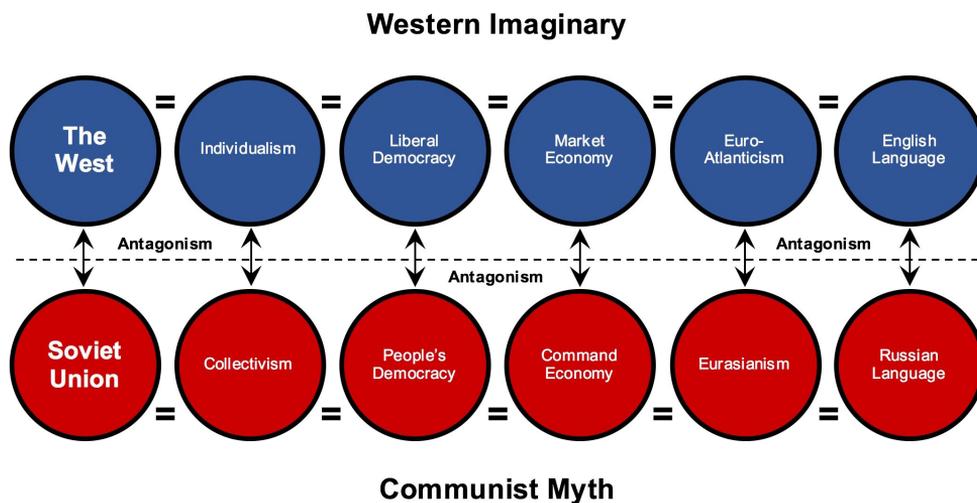
<sup>17</sup> On the once and future hegemonic orders, cf., e.g. Black, Jeremy, *Great Powers and the Quest for Hegemony: The World Order Since 1500*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2008); Keohane, Robert O., *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Agnew, John, *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Order*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); Mazarr, Michael J., ‘The Once and Future Order: What Comes After Hegemony?’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 96 no.1 (January/February 2017), pp. 25-32.

<sup>18</sup> In this article, we adopt the Gramscian perspective on hegemony—by way of Laclau and Mouffe—thus seeing it as a subtle form of international authority and political power that relies not only on coercion, but—more importantly—on consent. Cf., e.g. Fontana, Benedetto, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation between Gramsci and Machiavelli*, (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> This concept is borrowed from the ‘Essex School of discourse analysis’: a ‘chain of equivalence’ is formed when a number of different theories, concepts, objects, and practices are articulated together in a discursive formation. Each component becomes synonymous with the next to the extent that the meaning of all components within the chain are modified in consequence, often leading to political hegemony. See Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 129-132.

The result is a successful hegemonic formation, which provides those countries embracing and practicing it with inordinate power and influence. And insofar as power generates envy and hatred—as Thucydides realised in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*—Western nations have continued to acquire and face down determined opponents. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they were confronted by the *counter-hegemonic* ‘ideologies of the extremes’, in the form of absolutism, fascism, and communism. But these ideologies confronted Western liberalism symmetrically: like the British and Americans with their ‘Western’ ideology, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, and Moscow promised—once realised—the ‘good life’ for their followers, whether in the form of a rational French absolutism or an ethnic German *Großraum* (‘grand area’) lording over continental Europe, a ‘militarist’ Japanese order directing East Asia, or a Russian communist ‘utopia’ stretching from East Berlin to Vladivostok. The extremists each sought to smash the West and replace it with their own peculiar hegemonic formation, either through force of arms and/or through *counter-hegemonic* political warfare (see Figure 1 for the example of Western-Soviet counter-hegemonic warfare).

Figure 1. Counter-hegemonic warfare



Source: Authors' own compilation

Like these former empires, Mr Putin also wants power. He wants power to protect his regime from being overthrown from within *and* from without. However, unlike the French absolutists, the German and Japanese fascists and Soviet communists before them, today's leaders in Russia have nothing 'positive' to project beyond their country to maintain their power. In the ideological vacuum of modern Russia, Mr Putin does not have a universal panacea of potentially mass international appeal or even the desire to articulate such a philosophy around the world.

While Russian ethnic nationalism—which Mr Putin has done much to boost his popularity—may be attractive to many *within* Russia, the Kremlin knows it is hardly an ideology with global application, meaning it will be very hard to promulgate beyond Russia's immediate borders. So, despite Moscow's bluster, Mr Putin and associates are not fools: as a continental country with an economy almost entirely dependent on the export of gas and oil, they know that Russia lacks strategic resources, either material strength or ideological scope, to counter—*comprehensively*—the Western 'equivalential chain'. The Russian state simply lacks the resources and the political architecture for the challenges, namely to confront the West globally.

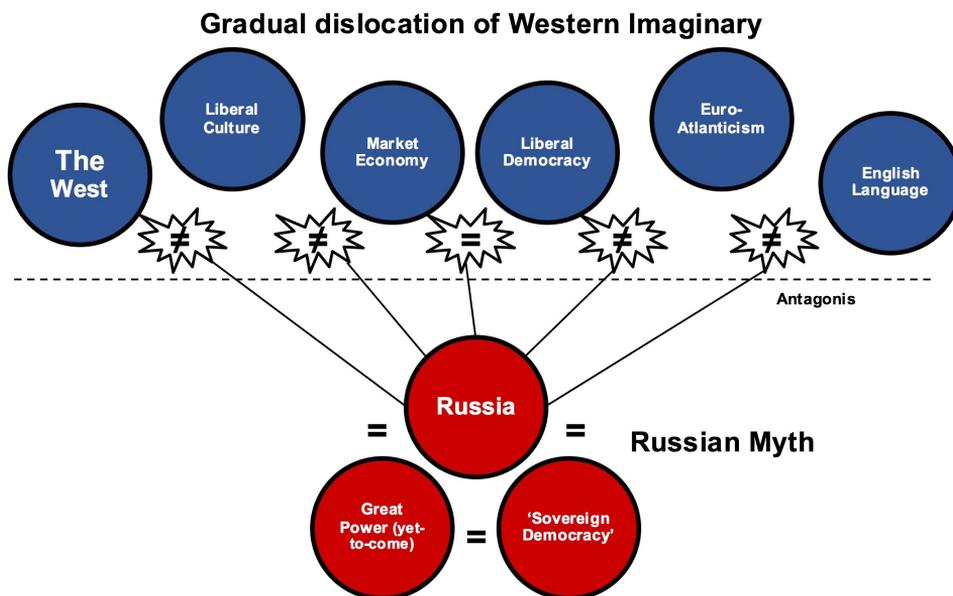
As Figure 2 shows, the Kremlin has therefore invested heavily in a very different strategy, a profoundly *negative anti-hegemonic* strategy, applied in a primarily regional context, where it has the ability to escalate towards dominance, even against the West. This form of political offensive, albeit with a military component,<sup>20</sup> is unique because of its sheer cynicism: while a counter-hegemonic strategy seeks to replace an existing political order with another, an anti-hegemonic approach seeks to 'spoil' or 'ruin', by spreading *negativity* within an existing formation (in this case, the Western hegemonic chain). As such, a counter-hegemonic strategy is still a *positive* strategy, because it seeks only to replace an established order with a new formation, while an anti-hegemonic approach is *negative*, for it seeks to replace the existing order only with disorder.<sup>21</sup> In other words, this kind of strategy aims to break down opposition

<sup>20</sup> Given the size of Russia in relation to the Baltic States in particular, which, collectively, have a smaller population than some of Russia's larger cities, and NATO's potential difficulty or the difficulty of the largest Western powers, such as the US, the UK, and France, to get past Russia's anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) systems in Kaliningrad, Moscow may be able to circumvent Western military power in a regional context. The RAND's recent report on reinforcing deterrence on NATO's eastern flank is exceptionally unequivocal in this matter: Russia has the capabilities 'to reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga in 60 hours' (pg. 1), cf. Shlapak, David A., and Michael Johnson, 'Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics' (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016). Such analyses should not be deemed, however, 'absolute power' assessments dooming the West's impotence against the backdrop of Russian excessive regional military potency. Ultimately, any power assessment is and should be framed in relative terms and tailored to specific situations. On the 'deceptively weak' Russian military in the context of the aforementioned, cf. Bowen, Andrew, 'Russia's Deceptively Weak Military', *The National Interest*, 7 June 2015. Furthermore, in our analysis, we focus only partially on Russia's military warfare capabilities—political and discursive warfare potentials are the centerpiece of our analytical approach. Scoped this way, the article advances the idea of a Russian negative international-political agenda and the various mechanisms of destructive engagement being exactly sourced by Russian self-perceived capability misfit and well-documented inferiority of sorts (soft and hard power inferiority, general country attractiveness and respect as a 'great power', etc.). On these matters, cf., eg. Medvedev, Dmitri, 'Rossiya Vpered! [Russia, Go Ahead!]', *The Kremlin*, 10 September 2009; Tsygankov, Andrei, *Honor in International Relations: Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Nye, Joseph S., 'What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power', *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013; Koshkin, Pavel, 'How Russia's Soft Power Failed Shortly After It Started', *Russia Direct*, 31 July 2015. The opinion polls carried out by the Russian Levada Centre in late April 2015 also show that 60% of the Russian public feels threatened (not sufficiently protected) by the 'West': Levada Centre, "Ugroza dlia Rossii so Storony SSHA [The US Threat to Russia]", 17-20 April 2015 Opinion Poll, 12 May 2015. On the perception-reality gap in Russia's capabilities perception and role expectations, the so-called 'Weimar syndrome', cf. Karaganov, Sergei, 'Evropa: Okonchit' Kholodnuiu Voinu [Time to End the Cold War in Europe]', *Rossia v Globalnoi Politike*, 8 April 2014; 'Pervaia Razvilka: Mirovaia Voina i Kompleks Nepolnotsennosti'. [The First Crossroad: The World War and the Inferiority Complex], *Institut Sovremennoi Rossii*, 3 August 2011; Gudkov, Lev, 'Mechti o Proshlom: Pochemu Krizisy Privodiut k Reanimatsii Sovetskikh Predstavlieni' [Dreams of the Past: Why Crises Lead to the Reanimation of Soviet Perceptions], *Slon.ru*, 19 April 2016; Black, Conrad, 'Russia's Weimar Syndrome', *The National Review*, 9 July 2015.

<sup>21</sup> To be clear, although a counter-hegemonic approach is 'positive', this does not mean it is ethical or moral.

by forcing an opponent into depression, i.e. feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and self-destruction. The Kremlin's objective is simple: to corrupt and undermine the West's hegemonic position by shattering Western, particularly European, self-confidence, removing potential opposition to Mr Putin's regime's standing and durability.<sup>22</sup>

Figure 2. *Anti-hegemonic warfare*



Source: *Authors' own compilation*

This approach was recently revealed by Sergey Lavrov in an article in the Russian periodical, *Russia in Global Affairs*. The Russian Foreign Minister exposes Moscow's ultimate game plan in one—line: 'Not a single cannon in Europe could be fired without our consent.'<sup>23</sup> Put simply, the Kremlin craves Russia's re-establishment as a great power, but only in the sense of being able to defend the Kremlin's interests.

That is to say, Moscow wants a veto over how the European continent is run in order to maintain the power of the Kremlin. To be clear, in light of its own limitations, Russia does not necessarily want to construct a new empire or reorder the continent in such a way that it is linked to Moscow, for this would require a *positive* vision, which would be cost-prohibitive. Rather, what the Kremlin wants is to be able to *prevent* developments that it perceives to be inimical to its own interests, through the construction of a Russian 'near abroad' devoid of outside interference. Moscow must therefore thwart countries surrounding Russia from embracing the values of

<sup>22</sup> Self-trapped in the framework of ideological hollowness, and thus being unable to offer a competing idea to Western ideological hegemony, the Kremlin seems to have nonetheless invented another way to challenge the latter—through all-permeating corruption promotion, a sort of an Ersatz-communism: Whitmore, Brian, 'Corruption is the New Communism', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 12 April 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Lavrov, Sergey, 'Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 30 March 2016.

the Western hegemonic chain and *deny* the further enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Here, there should be no illusions: the kind of geopolitical order Russia seeks to create is entirely antithetical to European values and interests. This is because Russia wants a return to great power politics, where a handful of nations get to decide the European mainland's future, irrespective of the smaller powers located around and between them. This is utterly incompatible with the relatively open, transparent, and consultative system London and Washington have sought to generate since the end of the Second World War, i.e. the component of Western hegemony on the European mainland, where the use of brute force to revise national borders or annex sovereign territory is rendered obsolete.<sup>24</sup> The Atlantic democracies have therefore continued to undergird the security of small and medium-sized countries, actively supporting their integration into institutions like the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union, which are ultimately under Anglo-American nuclear protection. Of course, this strategy is not entirely altruistic: in reality, London and Washington favour it primarily because they know it will prevent the re-emergence of a powerful continental competitor, which would undoubtedly threaten their own interests. But it also suits smaller and medium-sized countries' interests—nations like the Low Countries, France and West Germany during the Cold War, and the Baltic States, Poland, Romania, and the Nordics today—because they know that with the resources and determination of the Atlantic democracies behind them, aggressors will be deterred from changing their systems of government by political pressure or by force of arms.

How has it come to this? After all, in some ways, it is surprising that there is not a meeting of minds between London, Washington, and Moscow. Indeed, given that powerful armies from the European mainland have marched on the Kremlin, laying waste to much of Russia en-route at least three times in the past two centuries, Moscow fears the re-emergence of a European overlord as much as the Atlantic democracies. The only problem is that Russia has come to dread British and American influence—and the Western hegemony they uphold—as much as it fears the re-emergence of a mainland European behemoth, and perhaps more so. This is because the Kremlin fears that Russia could be 'besmirched' from within by liberal values, shattering the authoritarian regime Mr Putin and his henchmen have done so much to construct and install. Indeed, frustrating the ability of Western cultural and research institutions to function in Russia was one of the first things that Mr Putin did after becoming Russia's leader.<sup>25</sup> Attempting to stymie 'colour revolutions' in surrounding countries has also been an ongoing Russian concern, for fear that

<sup>24</sup> This order was strongly alluded to by both President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron in their recent press conference in London in relation to the future role of the United Kingdom in European integration. See 'Barack Obama is right: Britain could lead Europe if it wanted to', *The Economist*, 22 April 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Following up the 2012 'Foreign agents law', on 23 May 2015, Russia adopted its notorious piece of legislation known as 'Russian undesirable organisations law' (Federal Law of 23.05.2015 N 129-FZ 'On amendments of some legislative acts of the Russian Federation') that allows Russian prosecutors to extrajudicially declare foreign and international organisations 'undesirable' in Russia, thus banning their activity. For a comprehensive and updated listing of banned NGOs, see RFE/RL's survey: 'Crackdown on NGOs in Russia', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 April 2016. See also Luhn, Alec, 'Russia bans 'undesirable' international organisations ahead of 2016 elections', *The Guardian*, 19 May 2015.

pro-Western political forces in Russia may be emboldened by their success.<sup>26</sup> And by asserting the concept of ‘sovereign’ or ‘managed’ democracy, the Kremlin has sought not only to seal Russia off from Western influence, but also, and relatedly, to assist in drawing harmful linkages between pro-liberal reformists within Russia and the West.<sup>27</sup>

Moscow has thus come to frame Western hegemony as a decisive *opponent* or even an *enemy*, an adversary with the means to compel the Kremlin into courses of action it might not otherwise take, a development further compounded by the decline in support for liberal principles, itself a consequence of the corruption and failures during Russia’s de-communisation programme during the 1990s. It is for this reason that Russia has been, at first, so indifferent to Western overtures, and later, particularly from the late 2000s, even overtly hostile to them.

### Disentangling Moscow’s anti-hegemonic strategic narrative offensive

Russia’s anti-hegemonic approach is a synthetic mix of Soviet methods (such as ‘*dezinformatsiya*’, or more specifically ‘reflexive control’) and seemingly replicated contemporary toolkits (such as ‘information warfare’, ‘memetic warfare’, ‘narrative warfare’). It seems quite apparent that Russia’s modern *anti-hegemonic* approach involves a significant exercise of ‘*reflexive control*’. This approach is of Soviet vintage, but has been dusted down and re-contextualised in recent years, dressed up to appear modern and revolutionary.<sup>28</sup> In reality, it is predicated on the understanding that it is possible, by modulating the flow and form of information, to deliberately engineer a political situation whereby an opponent can be enticed down a path they might not otherwise take, but in such a way that they opt to take it anyway, *believing it even to be in their own interests*. This approach is being actively exploited by the

<sup>26</sup> The threat from ‘colour revolutions’ has been a recurrent topic in political debates in Russia since the 2000s, and the Kremlin has clearly sought to prevent them, not least in Russia itself. Indeed, President Putin’s order to Russian security and defence institutions was crystal-clear in late 2014: ‘colour revolutions’ will not be tolerated, either around Russia or within. See Oliphant, Roland, ‘Vladimir Putin: We Must Stop a Ukraine-Style ‘Colour Revolution’ in Russia’, *The Telegraph*, 20 November 2014. However, Russia did not formally identify ‘colour revolutions’ as a threat until 2015, where they were inserted into the updated version of the Military Doctrine (late 2014) and Security Strategy (late 2015). In addition to that, following the Chief of the General Staff General Gerasimov’s directive, the Russian Academy of Military Science has been working, since late February 2016, on finding ‘scientific’ solutions to the security challenge allegedly posed to Russia by ‘colour revolutions’, a ‘covert aggression against Russia’ in Kremlin’s ruling elite understanding. On ‘new colours of war’ and the alleged ‘self-prompted chaos’, see Mikriukov, Vasily, ‘Sredstvo ot Nenaviashchivoi Agressii: Rossiya Dolzhna Bit’ Gotova Podavit’ Smutu’, [A Remedy Against Unobtrusive Aggression: Russia Must be Ready to Suppress Turmoil], *Voenna-Promishlenniy Kurier* 7, no.622 (24 February 2016) The Russian Gorchakov Fund has produced a book-long study on the ‘technologies of covert regime change operations by means of “colour revolutions”’. See Griniaev, Serguei N., (ed.), *Irreguliarnie Konfliktiy: ‘Tsvetnie Revolyutsii’. Analiz i Otsenka Form, Priemov i Sposobov Vedenia Operatsiy po Smenie Rezhimov v Suverenikh Gosudarstvakh* [Irregular Conflicts: ‘Colour Revolutions’. Analysis and Evaluation of Forms, Methods and Techniques of Regime Change Operations in Sovereign States] (Moscow: ANO ‘CSOiP’, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> See Okara, Andrei, ‘Sovereign Democracy: A New Russian Idea or a PR Project?’, *Russia in Global Affairs* 5, no.3 (2007): 8-20.

<sup>28</sup> For further explanations of ‘reflexive control’, see Thomas, Timothy L., ‘Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military’, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, no.17 (2004): 237-256; Makhnin, Valery L., ‘Reflexive Processes in Military Art: The Historico-Gnoseological Aspect’, *Military Thought* 22, no.1 (2013): 31-46; Snegovaya, Maria, ‘Putin’s Information Warfare in Ukraine’, *Institute for the Study of War*, Washington, DC, September 2015

Russian regime, and to considerable effect. At the operational level, this is pursued through an integrated three-layered movement (*strategic narrative offensive*): firstly, to ‘desynchronise’ political developments in the European Neighbourhood to ‘distort’ European perceptions of reality; secondly, to ‘de-articulate’ the West, i.e. splitting the Atlantic democracies from the European mainland; and finally, to ‘saturate’ the vacuum with false and fictitious narratives, to sow confusion and maintain disorder. This approach is deliberately calibrated to mute the West entirely and render it ineffective as a geopolitical actor.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Kremlin is afforded the opportunity to act with impunity within the European Neighbourhood. Critically, as a form of political warfare, this three-pronged anti-hegemonic approach is predicated on dislocating the Western ‘equivalential chain’ *from within*.

### **‘Zero hour’: Desynchronising events and distorting (the perception of) reality**

To be successful, an anti-hegemonic drive requires, no less than a counter-hegemonic strategy, or even a military offensive, the will and ability to seize the initiative and modulate the frequency of force. Time, after all, is politics<sup>30</sup>—as are narrative, discourse, and other forms of non-visible agency in pursuit of state policies. The temporalisation of politics does not only allow for the generation of time-specific insights and retrospective understandings, but it also enables the pursuit of a future-oriented ideational (re)construction—all seeking to generate meanings, legitimise or delegitimise the agency and action in question. Therefore, controlling the reference point, or ‘zero hour’, within the context of a conflict is central to success. But Russia has sought to do this in a new and *negative* way: by *desynchronising* events and political timing, to prevent the enemy—the West—from establishing its own points of reference from which to form its own understanding of the situation. Whether in Georgia in 2008, or in Ukraine in 2014, Russia framed its approach not as a military offensive but as ‘transient moments’ in its own neighbourhood.<sup>31</sup> The aim was to deny the major European powers the time and ability to see the conflicts for what they were and to encourage them to adopt disjointed and tactical approaches to the crisis.<sup>32</sup> In sending mixed messages about past and present, substituting legality with legitimacy—not least in the context of the widely used ‘historical justice’ argument—Moscow has attempted to confuse Europeans and *distort* their perception of both the sequence of events and the time available for articulating an effective response.

<sup>29</sup> On how such a ‘self-imposed powerlessness’ of the West looks like, see Dempsey, Judy, ‘The West’s Self-Imposed Powerlessness’, *Carnegie Europe*, 15 February 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Hom, Andrew, Christopher McIntosh, Alasdair McKay, and Liam Stockdale, (eds.), *Time, Temporality and Global Politics* (Bristol: e-IR Publishing, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Portraying both the 2008 war against Georgia as an abrupt ‘response’ to supposedly unmotivated Georgian provocations and the 2014 ‘crisis in Ukraine’ as yet another unplanned ‘response’ to the West-provoked domestic Ukrainian crisis or even a ‘civil war’, Russia masked its deliberate direct interventions with R2P ‘obligations’ vis-a-vis compatriots abroad, thereby denying its actual involvement just as a preceding decades-long policy of negative assertiveness in the region. See Samolovov, Ivan, ‘Responsibility to Protect and Russia: From Georgia to Crimea’, *Intersection*, 2 July 2015; Allison, Roy, ‘Russian ‘deniable’ intervention in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules’, *International Affairs* 90, no.6 (2014): 1255-1297.

<sup>32</sup> On how the Kremlin uses deception as ‘a tactics to delay and distract’ both Kyiv’s response actions and the Western perception of developments in Ukraine, see NATO StratCom COE, ‘Analysis of Russia’s Information Campaign Against Ukraine: Examining Non-Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine from a Strategic Communications Perspective’, *NATO StratCom COE Report*, 12 July 2015, pp. 27-28.

This is particularly important as it allows Russia to seize the point of reference in the assessment of political developments and frame responses to these (both in a temporal and substantial scope). In this sense, '[n]arratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events'.<sup>33</sup> The distortion of reality thus shapes Europeans' time and event perception, forcing them onto the defensive.

Unfortunately, many Europeans were hoodwinked into accepting Russia's aggression in Ukraine exactly as the Kremlin wanted: as a 'zero hour'. In reality, the Russian offensive revealed *continuity* rather than *change* in the Kremlin's approach towards neighbouring countries.<sup>34</sup> Aside from the fact that the tools are always the same—energy cut-offs and trade wars; the covert capture of business and political elites; economic, information and cyber warfare; as well as the subversion of Russian-speaking minorities; and military attack. Moscow's tactics have also been the same, namely generating 'manageable chaos' in surrounding nations.<sup>35</sup> From Moldova, Georgia and, more recently, in Ukraine and Azerbaijan, the objective has remained to maintain territorial disputes in those countries, ultimately denying them access ('anti-access') to the Euro-Atlantic structures, insofar as territorial contiguity is a prerequisite for accession. A more recent development—revealed in Syria—is to exacerbate 'cross-sector' threats such as migrant flows, organised crime, and extremism, which the Russians know will cause pandemonium in the wealthy European democracies, forcing Western governments to concentrate on mitigating the symptoms of those conflicts, instead of the causes.<sup>36</sup> Moscow's reinforcement of its information warfare capabilities and military modernisation programmes have contributed immeasurably to its effort by consolidating its existing footing, as well as establishing new strategic footholds—no matter what it takes.

Insofar as Russia cannot fight the West symmetrically, what it takes is 'modulated warfare', that is, an offensive involving conventional and unconventional means and overt and covert methods across different frequencies, combined with 'reflexive control'.<sup>37</sup> Moscow has sought deliberately to *modulate* its political and military instruments in response to the West's own indifference or opposition to its geopolitical designs. Here, Vladimir Lenin's ghost walks in the Kremlin.

<sup>33</sup> Freedman, Lawrence, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (London: Routledge, 2006), pg. 22.

<sup>34</sup> On the continuity of Russia's negative drive in the European Neighbourhood, as well as the pitfalls of diffusing such power projection beyond the so-called 'near abroad', see Tyushka, Andriy, 'Russia's Resurgence and 'Coarse Power': An Evolution in 'Near Abroad' Policy or a Revolution in Power Politics?', Paper presented at the BASEES 2016 Annual Conference, 2-4 April 2016, Fitzwilliam College—Churchill College, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

<sup>35</sup> For more on 'manageable chaos', see Rogers, James and Andra Martinescu, 'After Crimea: Time for a New British Geostrategy for Eastern Europe?', *The Henry Jackson Society*, September 2015.

<sup>36</sup> 'NATO Commander: Russia Uses Syrian Refugees as 'Weapon' Against West', *Deutsche Welle*, 2 March 2016. Higgins, Andrew, 'EU Suspects Russian Agenda in Migrants' Shifting Arctic Route', *The New York Times*, 2 April 2016; de Carbonnel, Alissa, 'A (Very) Cold War on the Russia-Norway Border', *Foreign Policy*, 20 November 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Many terms have been used to capture the essence of Russia's approach, including 'hybrid', 'multi-modal', and 'non-linear' warfare. For a discussion of these terms and their applicability, see Rogers, James and Andra Martinescu, op. cit., pp. 14-15 and Thomas, Timothy, 'Russia's Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric—and Putin-Led', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no.3 (2015): 445-461.

As the old Bolshevik infamously declared: ‘Probe with a bayonet: if you meet steel, stop. If you meet mush, then push.’ When the West is pre-occupied with other issues, or has lost interest, the Russians thrust the bayonet firmly in, seeking to maximise any window of opportunity they are afforded. When the attitudes of certain European elites towards Russia begin to harden in response, the Russians pull their bayonet out again and seek a more deferential stance. This tactic has been used to substantial effect in all Moscow’s ‘anti-access’ geopolitical struggles, such as in Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. By pulling back, Moscow’s aim is to give those European countries favouring a more deferential policy towards Russia ammunition to use to frustrate those advocating a firmer and more permanent response to Russia, thus ‘short-circuiting’ the Euro-Atlantic structures’ ability to respond.

Since the 2014 Russian dismemberment of Ukraine, the major European powers have finally begun to wake up to this threat,<sup>38</sup> even as they have indulged in political platitudes about its undesirability.<sup>39</sup> What is surprising is that they only recognised Russia’s generation of ‘manageable chaos’ and ‘modulated warfare’ once Moscow had begun—both figuratively and literally—to ‘bomb its way’ to a ‘new normal’ in international relations with an unbounded use of force, something that the Western democracies have found hard to comprehend. Unfortunately, several European capitals are *still* hesitant to accept the full implications of being identified as an enemy by Moscow. The increasingly vocal calls from certain European chancelleries for ‘avoiding a new cold war’ appear at best to point to *asynchronicity in political timing*, if not self-deluded blindness (or *Lebenslüge*) and thus self-imposed powerlessness in the face of a destructive offensive waged by another party.<sup>40</sup> Here, the old military adage that ‘you may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you’, becomes pertinent.

The comments of Russia’s Prime Minister, Dmitri Medvedev, should act as a wake-up call to those who continue, stubbornly, if not naively, to refuse to accept that Moscow is fully engaging in political warfare against the West. He clarified his government’s intent—mentioning ‘war’ twelve times in his speech—during this year’s Munich Security Conference, stating that ‘the first cold war ended 25 years ago. [...] Speaking bluntly, we are rapidly rolling into a period of a new cold war’.<sup>41</sup> A re-inspired focus on warfare has actually fed the development of Russian security and military strategy since Mr Putin’s second term as president. Moreover, within Russia’s domestic political discourse, the theme of ‘war’ completely saturates popular and strategic communications. Not only has the Soviet victory in the Second World War been revamped and re-glorified—ignoring the brutality meted out to countries like the Baltic States during the Soviet occupation, it has also become a cornerstone of the new Russian ‘patriotism’, particularly since the *Valdai Discussion Club’s* 11<sup>th</sup> session in 2014. This helps Mr Putin to dampen domestic disquiet and maintain his regime’s own power.

<sup>38</sup> Soros, George, ‘Putin is a bigger threat to Europe’s existence than ISIS’, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2016.

<sup>39</sup> On the plausibility versus platitude in the debates on ‘deep-rooted evil of the Russo-Western antagonism’, see Tyushka, Andriy, ‘Trust, Truth and Truce Trapped in Hybridity of Modern Inter-State Conflicts: An Early Assessment of the Russo-Western Proxy War in Ukraine’, *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies* 1, no.7 (2015): 7-29.

<sup>40</sup> Monaghan, Andrew, ‘The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare’’, *Parameters* 45, no.4 (Winter 2015-16): 65-74.

<sup>41</sup> Medvedev, Dmitry, ‘Speech at the Munich Security Conference 2016 Panel Discussion’, Munich Security Conference, Munich, 13 February 2016.

A richly conspired, political, and especially public debate in Russia about the ‘fascist West’ and ‘liberationist Russia’ carries the waters of the Kremlin’s mainstream narrative even further. Thus popular, political, and strategic cultures in Russia are overwhelmingly saturated with ‘warfare narratives’ that further help Moscow secure internal obedience while mobilising support for military adventurism abroad. And, they simultaneously cow short-term ‘war-shy’ and reality-denying Europe into accepting Moscow’s remit.<sup>42</sup>

### De-articulating the Western hegemonic chain: Spoiler narratives and politics

Unlike counter-hegemonic operations, like those waged by the Soviet Union, an anti-hegemonic offensive, based on pure *negativity*, has the reverse aim—to de-articulate an adversary’s narrative, muting or silencing them and rendering them a disorientated confusion. Russia’s *negative* offensive hinges on its ability to shatter positive European and/or Western narratives. The easiest way to disarm an opponent’s ideological arsenal is to deny them the advantage of accessing their own arsenal, while simultaneously ensuring continuous and unimpeded access to it yourself. This is reminiscent of the aim of contemporary cyber warfare. Both Russia’s direct and/or proxy anti-hegemonic action is to be thought of in this context, with the latter meaning essentially the establishment of, or lending support to, local ‘spoilers’ on the ground. These spoilers can take the form of marginalised radical right and left parties but also corrupt and captured business and political elites as well as ‘expert’ communities (e.g. the *Russlandversteher* [‘Russia understanders’] in Germany, or ‘useful idiots’ elsewhere in the Euro-Atlantic area), thus helping proxy spoilers exploit local discontents. More aggressive forms of anti-hegemonic offensive include official anti-narratives in Russia’s domestic and international political discourses, and covert strategic communication means, such as ‘hybrid trolling’, i.e. the use of online spoilers to generate *negative* narratives to pollute an adversary’s own hegemonic chain.<sup>43</sup> Russia’s ‘anti-Helsinki narrative’—propagated in distinct international forums focusing on human rights and freedoms, especially those held to be sacrosanct by Europeans, like the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe,

<sup>42</sup> Although both deeply rooted in historical experiences, European and Russian perceptions of war and the use of force in foreign policy drastically differ, with Europe’s tabooed approach to the issue and Russia’s explicitly ‘normal’ treatment of war as a continuation of policy, much in the Clausewitzian sense. By contrast to Russia’s domestic and international discourses that flourish with the theme, European discourses shyly hesitate using the term ‘war’ even in blatantly evident circumstances, like Russia’s (political, but as well military!) aggression in Ukraine. A single official attempt to break the silence and ‘name the beast’ when speaking of Russian belligerent involvement in Ukraine was made by the Press Attaché of the European Union’s Delegation in Ukraine, David Stulik, back in August 2014. This effort was however promptly reverted and refuted by Brussels’ official message—its press attaché would apparently have been expressing ‘a personal opinion’, cf.: UNIAN, ‘ES nazval zayalenie svoego spikera o rossiyskom vtorzhenii v Ukrainu ego lichnym mneniem’, [EU called the statement on Russian invasion of Ukraine a personal opinion of its speaker], UNIAN, 28 August 2014. At the same time, Russian political-military and academic elites overtly refer to the Kremlin’s seizure of Crimea as a war campaign—a ‘war with no expiry date’, as put in Army General Gareev’s 2015 piece in Russian ‘Military-Industrial Courier’: Makhmut Gareev, ‘Voyna bez Sroka Davnosti: Opyt Velikoi Otechestvennoi Pomog v Vozvrashchenii Kryma’, [A War with No Expiry Date: The Experience of the Great Patriotic War Helping to Get Crimea Back], *Voенно-Promishlenniy Kurier*, 17, no.583, 13 May 2015.

<sup>43</sup> The term ‘hybrid trolling’ is defined by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (COE) as aggressive and anonymous strategic communication supporting the agenda of the Russian leadership. Its operational goal is diminishing the value of the truth and faking reality, thereby negating the image of the West, rather than building up positively the image of Russia. See: NATO StratCom COE, ‘Internet trolling as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare: The Case of Latvia’, NATO Strategic Communications COE, 25 January 2016.

or the Council of Europe—can be understood in this regard. Such narratives seek to undermine the validity of universal human rights. Further compounding the confusion, the Kremlin has consistently advocated ‘traditional’ or ‘spiritual values’ (*dukhovnie skrepy*), or ‘managed democracy’ and ‘managed values’, which are simply articulated with no other purpose than to capture, confuse and corrupt the Western ‘equivalential chain’.<sup>44</sup>

Like *Ersatz*-communism, deception has also become part of Russia’s anti-hegemonic toolkit. The main operational goal of such ‘weapons of mass deception’ is not to improve or justify Russia’s own image, but simply to diminish or destroy the West’s. Everything feeds this narrative, from eternal ‘strategic encirclement’ and Russophobia to international interventions, not least in Iraq, Libya, or Syria. ‘Nothing is true...’ and ‘everyone lies’ reads the slogan of Russia’s mass deception campaign. ‘Panamagate’ in April 2016 is the epitome of the entire movement: a couple of days after the investigative report on Putin’s deeply-rooted and large-scale corruption was published, another ‘lucky’ moment lent itself to ‘unsay’ the story: the leakage of colossal data on international money-laundering through corporate offshore services, the ‘Panama Papers’.<sup>45</sup> Surprisingly (or not...), the 11.5 million confidential documents’ leak revealed ‘universal corruption’, thus transcending the narrative of Putin’s own corruption and facilitating the state of *uravnilovka* (a sort of moral-political egalitarianism, an effort to devalue the West’s image and to valourise the Kremlin’s own).

By disarming Europeans through a complex of such anti-hegemonic *negativity*, Russia has sought to corner and coerce the West into strategic silence, by propelling it into thinking it is faulty and powerless.<sup>46</sup> In such a shaped environment, *negative* Russian narratives furthermore amplify spoiler politics (the politics of ‘undoing’, of ‘de-articulation’), which, following the same logic, transcend discursive spaces and saturate policymaking realms in the form of multi-dimensional destructive engagements. In the words of Russian Chief of the General Staff, it is a kind of ‘21<sup>st</sup> century *Blitzkrieg*’, which Russia successfully tested in Ukraine and Syria.<sup>47</sup> Both interventions involve a ‘Four D’ approach that builds on *distorting* facts, *distracting* from the key point, *disorienting* the audience, and *dismissing* critics. In fact, Russia’s broader anti-hegemonic strategy involves many more D-components, deftly tailored to regional and national audiences.

<sup>44</sup> For the first time, President Putin’s appeal for a comprehensive domestic and international policy of Russia’s ‘traditional values’ [*dukhovnie skrepy*] promotion was voiced in his 2012 annual address to the Federal Assembly, cf. Putin, Vladimir, ‘Poslanie Prezidenta Federalnomu Sobraniyu’ [President’s Address to the Federal Assembly], Moscow, the Kremlin, 12 December 2012.

<sup>45</sup> On the possibility of Russian involvement in leaking ‘Panama Papers’, see a quite reasoned opinion by Taylor, Adam, ‘The Not-Completely-Crazy Theory that Russia Leaked the Panama Papers’, *The Independent*, 10 April 2016.

<sup>46</sup> In the context of the West’s self-imposed faultiness and powerlessness thesis, Lilia Shevtsova makes an excellent case in explaining why the West is so easily trapped—Russia’s ‘Weimar Syndrome’, told through the story of ‘strategic encirclement’, is actually promoted and justified by some of the Western pundits themselves. In a way, such nearly jibing ‘Western-grown’ narratives amplify the Kremlin’s strategic narrative offensive, cf. Shevtsova, Lilia, ‘Humiliation as a Tool of Blackmail’, *The Brookings Institution*, 2 June 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Gerasimov, Valery, ‘Po Opytu Sirii...’ [Based on the Experience of Syria...], *Voenno-Promyshlenniy Kurier*, 9, no.624, 8 March 2016.

These include:

- The *denial* of the sovereignty and autonomy of countries surrounding Russia
- The *detachment* of the European Neighbourhood from the West
- The *discrediting* of neighbouring governments (and Western elites and their democratisation efforts, but also collective defence assurances)
- The *disconnection* of the Atlantic democracies—Canada, the United Kingdom and United States—from mainland European countries
- The *disintegration* of the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance, both from one another and from within
- The *disorientation* and *demotivation* of both American and European political elite
- The *devaluation* of the current international order, as well as the norms and values that underpin it
- The *denial* of Russia's involvement and *deflection* from Russia's own responsibility in destroying the fundamentals of international relations on the European mainland since 1945

There have been many instances where the effects of this 'multi-D' anti-hegemonic approach have been apparent: from the lacking European response to the Ukraine crisis to the Russian intervention in support of Mr Assad's decrepit tyranny in Syria. In this way, Moscow's negative strategy attempts to deny, or deprive, the West access to its own positive narratives, many of which get partially or fully 'de-articulated'—and thus deactivated—forming a momentary vacuum.

### **Saturating the silence: Sowing false and fictitious narratives**

Cleansing the West's competing narrative space, not least through the most recent 'Panamisation' of international politics (i.e. representing corruption as an all-permeating and normal rather than a phenomenon typical only of the Kremlin), opens up for Moscow a moment of European strategic silence and feelings of powerlessness. Having cultivated European discontent with official Western narratives, Russia's efforts turn to 'saturating' the momentary strategic silence with false and fictitious narratives, first and foremost the 'narrative of faultiness'. The ability to capture 'zero hour' during any conflict is central to this point. Hardwired in Russia's own domestic popular and political culture, two questions, put in Herzen-Chernyshevsky style, shape the 'zero hour' story: '*Kto vinovat i chto delat?*' [Who is at fault and what should be done?]. Russia's articulation of the 'expansionism' of, at first the Atlantic Alliance, and later, the European Union, points to the 'faulty powers'—the Western countries—and not Russian intransigence and paranoia as Moscow's preferred reference points. Much of these waters are carried subtly and indirectly, through the loose but powerful network of local proxy spoilers, such as

the *Russlandversther* and ‘useful idiots’ as well as more pragmatic actors involved in what has been called ‘reputation laundering’.<sup>48</sup> These more pragmatic actors include Western lobbying firms, Public Relations agencies, and other ‘reputation launderers’ (including individual representatives of Western political elites) that have been hired by the Kremlin in a semi-clandestine manner.

Thus, by playing on European anxieties and traumas, especially exploiting the European inclination towards self-reflection and deliberation, the Kremlin’s anti-hegemonic offensive also seeks to saturate the Euro-Atlantic space with self-deluding ‘faultiness by expansion’ (in the case of the Atlantic Alliance) or ‘faultiness by association’ (in the case of the European Union), which amplifies Europeans’ self-imposed powerlessness. That some Europeans continue to lend an ear to Russia’s appeals to ‘historical justice’ as it attempts to transform the European Neighbourhood into a ‘sphere of geopolitical denial’ is evidence of European reflexivity, particularly as Russia’s ‘historical justice’ fits uneasily with the fact that the sovereignty of the countries within Moscow’s prospective sphere would be greatly impeded. Deludedly, the Kremlin’s Syrian and alleged anti-terrorist gambits help construct fictitious narratives of Russia, not as the troublemaker it actually is, but as a problem-solver. Meanwhile, the West is depicted as ‘faulty’, ‘decadent’, ‘hypocritical’, ‘incrementally nationalist and xenophobic (read: Russophobic)’, and ‘neo-fascist’ to name just a few fictitious roles that have been attributed to European nations. The moment of Western liberal self-reflection, and the strategic silence that it stirs up, is then skilfully filled with false and fictitious stories, including the stories on the ‘proper democracies’ as allegedly embodied by illiberal states—contrary to the ‘failing democracies’ of the liberal West.<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, the strategic displacement of the genuinely epiphenomenal unity and narrative of European integration occurs through falsely shaped radicalism and chauvinism and similar weaponised stories.<sup>50</sup> The Dutch—at the centre of the European project—recently revealed just how potent Russia’s ‘multi-D spoiler strategy’ and leverage in Europe has become, and how it deftly saturates reality perception with false and fictitious narratives.<sup>51</sup> In the Dutch referendum held on the Ukrainian association deal in April 2016, public distortion and dismay were skilfully orchestrated from the Kremlin to deceptively link a range of issues, thus ‘guiding’ Dutch voters to incorrectly connect rising security threats, immigration,

<sup>48</sup> On *Russlandversther*, see Umland, Andreas’ ‘Was die Putinversther missverstehen’, *Zeit Online*, 27 December 2015. On ‘useful idiots’, see Sierakowski, Slawomir, ‘Putin’s Useful Idiots’, *The New York Times*, 28 April 2014; Pomerantsev, Peter, ‘We’re All Putin’s ‘Useful Idiots’’, *Politico*, 22 July 2015. On ‘reputation laundering’, see Van Herpen, Marcel H., *Putin’s Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (Lanham, Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pg. 47.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Authoritarians Explain Democracy’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 20 October 2016.

<sup>50</sup> In her 2016 piece in *Foreign Policy*, Alina Polyakova puts it bluntly: ‘The Kremlin’s Support for Right-Wing Parties is No Game. It’s Trying to Subvert the European Idea’. Cf. Polyakova, Alina, ‘Why Europe is Right to Fear Putin’s Useful Idiots’, *Foreign Policy*, 23 February 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Applebaum, Anne, ‘The Dutch Just Showed the World How Russia Influences Western Elections’, *The Washington Post*, 8 April 2016. For a broader perspective on Russia’s leverage on European elections beyond Netherlands (as e.g. in Germany, France, UK), see Delfs, Arne, and Henry Meyer, ‘Putin’s Propaganda Machine is Meddling with European Elections’, *Bloomberg*, 20 April 2016.

and unemployment in the European Union with a commercial treaty with Ukraine, in no way antithetical to Dutch interests, and with an aspiring European country.

Ultimately, the Kremlin's political warfare and framing and linking tactics, emboldened by the favourable moment of growing irredentism in international politics, attempts to construct a situation whereby Europeans are left with a limited choice between bad and worse options only. It, moreover, effectively constructs a deceptive image of Russia as a 'problem-solver' in those political moments that have essentially occurred due to Russian troublemaking. Indeed, the Kremlin's anti-hegemonic 'spoiler effort'—be it to target Ukraine's westward move<sup>52</sup> or discredit and deny Western power elsewhere<sup>53</sup>—seeks to communicate a simple but brutal strategic axiom, namely that the only option for the West is to co-exist with Russia. For decades to come nothing can be achieved *without* Russia, but nothing can be achieved *with* the country either. Self-evidently, the European Union and the rest of the collective West are being outplayed as they jump into *predictable* and, to Russia, both politically and strategically *desirable* (re)actions. The Kremlin's nuclear threats, invoked all too cavalierly since the start of its anti-hegemonic campaign, compounds Europeans' frustration and confusion, thus leaving Russia in an increasingly commanding position, particularly in the European Neighbourhood. By shaping Europeans' perception of reality, Moscow's anti-hegemonic drive against the West not only amplifies Russia's ability to deny the West access to the European Neighbourhood, but incrementally seeks to challenge and then alter the very unity, cohesion, and even the existence of an integrated Euro-Atlantic region. Thus, it would be hard to disagree with the contention that '[t]he best way for Russia to avoid collapse is by making the EU implode first'.<sup>54</sup>

### Europeans: Facing Russia without Clausewitz?

The Kremlin's successes may go further still, not only because of its ability to 'undo' the West, but also because European politicians have 'forgotten' the character of the political. In reality, it is not that European leaders misunderstand political dynamics; witness the ruthlessness with which they deal with their domestic opponents. What Europeans are unable to comprehend is they they—and the West—are now face increasingly determined opposition, which denies the West's own legitimacy to act, function, and/or even exist. In this sense, European politicians have misunderstood the teachings of Carl von Clausewitz. The dead Prussian is often cited as having said that war 'is the continuation of politics *by* other means'.<sup>55</sup> This statement is all the more enticing because it chimes well with modern moral sensibilities. For many European statesmen, war—understood as the application of *military* power to compel an opponent into an alternative, and preferentially, more conducive course of action—is seen at best as a tool of last resort, even the antithesis of the modern

<sup>52</sup> Delcour, Laure and Kataryna Wolczuk, 'Spoiler or Facilitator of Democratisation? Russia's Role in Georgia and Ukraine', *Democratisation* 22, no.3 (2015): 459-478.

<sup>53</sup> Baev, Pavel K., 'Russia as Opportunist or Spoiler in the Middle East?', *The International Spectator* 50, no.2 (2015): 8-21.

<sup>54</sup> Soros, George, op. cit. Fn.22.

<sup>55</sup> Holmes, James R., 'Everything You Know About Clausewitz is Wrong', *The Diplomat*, 14 November 2014.

European order.<sup>56</sup> Even though he deployed British forces more times than any other British Prime Minister in recent history, Tony Blair underlined this fact in 1999 when he declared during his famous ‘Doctrine of the International Community’ speech: ‘Have we exhausted all diplomatic options? We should always give peace every chance’.<sup>57</sup> The idea being that war – or the application of military force – should only be threatened once all other means have been exhausted. Therefore, dissimilarly to the Russian conception, war, or military force, is thought to be part of a *continuum*, following other forms of ostensibly ‘peaceful’ action applied occasionally by European countries to achieve their political aims.

Yet the dead Prussian’s actual statement was very different: ‘War is the continuation of politics *with* other means.’<sup>58</sup> This distinction transforms the meaning of Clausewitz’s point, namely that every national instrument of power, particularly for the purposes of deterring and dissuading opponents, should be applied *simultaneously*, and that the military is just part of a wider political warfare, which is perpetual, ostensibly against an opponent. Back in the twentieth century, Western statesmen eventually came to realise this fact when dealing with the counter-hegemonic ideologies of the extremes. Once a number of alternatives—such as isolation and appeasement—had been tried and exhausted, and once the level of threat was apparent, London and Washington hit back at their opponents with *overwhelming* force, utilising a fully *comprehensive* package, which harmonised geographic, military, diplomatic, economic, and ideological components. In the same vein, until Europeans identify Russia as the opponent it actually is, and until European intellectual resources are fully mobilised to confront the Kremlin’s *negativity*, Moscow’s anti-hegemonic drive will bear further fruit. This will continue to caste misery and chaos in its wake, prevent the reunification of Europe from being realised, and hobble the West as a *positive* geopolitical actor. Which is precisely what the Russian leadership wants.

## Conclusion

As Moscow knows it cannot match the West’s overwhelming material and ideological capabilities, its efforts are increasingly taking the form of ‘*bolsbaia spetsoveratsiia*’, in other words, a grand and special operation. Russia has embarked on what might be described as an *anti*-hegemonic political offensive. If left misunderstood, this approach will have profound consequences both for Western political ideology and European countries alike. Consequently, this article has tried to reveal that the Russian leadership does not want to *counter* the Western hegemonic formation with a *positive* competing message. Rather, it wants to engage in an anti-hegemonic strategy through a deeply *negative* spoiler agenda. Prompting the West into a distorted self-perception and ‘self-denial’ while stealthily desynchronising political developments in regional and global frameworks, the Kremlin’s anti-hegemonic strategy aims for the ultimate *de-articulation* of the West. This is to be understood as a double-spoiler effort to: 1) ‘dissect’ the West by detaching

<sup>56</sup> See van Ham, Peter, ‘The Power of War—Why Europe Needs It’, Clingendael—Netherlands Institute of International Relations, December 2008.

<sup>57</sup> Blair, Tony, ‘The Blair Doctrine’, PBS Newshour, 22 April 1999.

<sup>58</sup> Holmes, James R., op. cit. Fn.38.

the Atlantic democracies (i.e. the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States) from the European mainland and 2) ‘disintegrate’ the European Union. In this sense, Moscow began by trying to ‘capture’ the narrative of Europe, fabricating a *competing* idea of Russia as ‘another Europe’, even portraying it as a ‘better Europe’, to divide the continent by stealth. This approach was transcended in 2014 with the launch of a more overt and *antithetical* strategy: positioning Russia *versus* Europe, placing ‘Russia being not (declinist and decadent) Europe’. Russia’s appeal for European ‘self-denial’ does not only find its supporters in Europe, i.e. predominantly populist and radical parties, but also contributes to a more general frustration among Europeans regarding their own self-perception, thus damaging the credibility of many underlying Euro-Atlantic values and norms. No less important in this regard is provoking Western ambiguity and uncertainty about its responsibility towards the European Neighbourhood, i.e. by nurturing the perception of ‘faultiness’ for pushing too far into Russia’s ‘near abroad’.

Indeed, Russian strategy and ‘warcraft’ are now predicated on ruining the entire Western-backed geopolitical architecture. This entails ‘fighting neo-fascism’ in Ukraine; nurturing the notion of ‘Russophobia as state policy’ on Baltic terrains; or promoting the idea of Euro-Atlantic ‘decadence’. Russia’s anti-hegemonic strategy is not only penetrating European socio-political spaces unhindered but is also finding, not least through funding, its way to capture Western business and political elites. As such, the Western narrative itself gets captured, riling European anxieties, traumas, and political phobias. Consequently, what the Russian anti-hegemonic offensive meets on the European mainland is ‘strategic silence’ that denies the reality of war and encourages a deeply damaging European self-reflexivity, which places blame on the West rather than on Russia for the geopolitical situation. A deep feeling of frustration and paralysis is what Western societies feel when facing Russia’s well-oiled anti-hegemonic machine. The internal erosion of European readiness, political will, and values, rather than physical destruction in an open war, is what constitutes the foundation of Russia’s anti-hegemonic drive against the West today. Unless Europeans regain the initiative, understand they now face an *opponent*, and ditch “‘dialogue” with Russia’ for an integrated strategy to constrain and open Mr Putin’s *negativity*, their Neighbourhood—especially to the East—will be steadily and permanently poisoned, while their ability to realise their own interests will be progressively paralysed, as their values slide into a perverted void.

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