



Center for
European Policy
Analysis

CHAOS AS A STRATEGY

Putin's "Promethean" Gamble

Findings and Recommendations

Donald N. Jensen
Peter B. Doran

November 2018



Center *for*
European Policy
Analysis

All opinions are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position or views of the institutions they represent or the Center for European Policy Analysis.

About CEPA

The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) is a 501(c)(3), non-profit, non-partisan, public policy research institute. Our mission is to promote an economically vibrant, strategically secure, and politically free Europe with close and enduring ties to the United States. Our analytical team consists of the world's leading experts on Central-East Europe, Russia, and its neighbors. Through cutting-edge research, analysis, and programs we provide fresh insight on energy, security, and defense to government officials and agencies; we help transatlantic businesses navigate changing strategic landscapes; and we build networks of future Atlanticist leaders.

© 2018 by the Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington, DC. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without permission in writing from the Center for European Policy Analysis, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in news articles, critical articles or reviews.

Center for European Policy Analysis
1275 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20004
E-mail: info@cepa.org
www.cepa.org

Cover image: Russian President Vladimir Putin with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov at Vostok 2018. Credit: kremlin.ru.

CHAOS AS A STRATEGY

Findings and Recommendations

Donald N. Jensen
Peter B. Doran

November 2018



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings

- ⦿ Kremlin leaders regard themselves as players in a great-power competition with the United States and Europe.
- ⦿ In order to compensate for Russia's long-term internal decline, the Kremlin increasingly is willing to take risks—sometimes recklessly—to balance its relative weakness against the West's relative strength.
- ⦿ The Kremlin is attempting to offset its weakness by committing to a competitive strategy in which the side that copes best with disorder will win.
- ⦿ In order to facilitate this strategy, Russia is seeding chaos in the West via asymmetrical means—i.e. disinformation, subversion, and “political warfare” operations.
- ⦿ The strategy combines both old and new. It combines a 20th century concept for asymmetrical competition popularized by Poland's famed statesman Józef Piłsudski with Russian General Valery Gerasimov's concepts for conducting 21st century warfare.
- ⦿ The result is a nonlinear means of competing against the West only in areas where Russia has advantages.
- ⦿ A central element of this strategy is information warfare. This has become one of the main battlegrounds between Russia and the West and a prime vector where the Kremlin has implemented its “Promethean” strategy.

- ⦿ Russia's authoritarian system enjoys strengths and weaknesses when executing its strategy. A chief strength is Russia's authoritarian system—granting the Kremlin a partial competitive advantage in managing the psychology and politics of disorder. A primary weakness is blowback—efforts at sowing instability abroad can have a ricochet effect.
- ⦿ Given the success of Putin's “Promethean” gamble—and the Kremlin's sustained reliance on it—Russian leaders are likely undervaluing the inherent risks of their strategy. This can be exploited.

Recommendations

Dangers that we can see are easier to admire than those that we do not understand. In particular, U.S. leaders must consider how the concept of a bloodless “disordering of the far frontier” has figured in past Russian political-military strategy. Likewise, the Kremlin's chaos-seeding strategy shows us what its leaders fear: Western power. To date the West has not fully considered how its power can be brought to bear against the Kremlin's vulnerabilities. Every strategy has a weakness—even chaos.

In combatting the threat of Russia's chaos strategy, the United States and Western democracies have not fully considered how their full toolkits of national power can be brought to bear against Kremlin vulnerabilities. We can begin by removing the predictable and permissive conditions that enabled Russia's chaos strategy in the first place; and work toward a sustainable end state in which Russia returns to “normal” strategic behavior patterns. We can begin to accomplish this in four steps:

- ⦿ First, realize that Russia sees the international system very differently than we do, even

though our interests on specific issues may coincide (for example, counter-terrorism).

- ④ Second, approach our dealings with Moscow with the understanding that its use of terms like “international law” and state “sovereignty” is primarily instrumental. Kremlin leaders evoke these concepts for *ad hoc* advantage—not as ends in themselves.
- ④ Third, understand that Russia’s use of information warfare has a purpose: reflexive control. (Such control is achieved by subtly convincing Russia’s opponents that they are acting in their own interests, when in fact they are following Moscow’s playbook.)
- ④ Fourth, prioritize the sequencing of the “carrots and sticks” offered to the Kremlin. Sticks first. This means initially increasing the penalties imposed on Russia for continued revisionist behavior and the sowing of chaos. We can start with tougher sanctions, wider travel bans, greater restrictions on access to the global financial system, and financial snap exercises. Presently, some of these tools are used—but they are underutilized in most cases. This needs to change.

Particularly, in the domain of information warfare, the West must hit back harder. Although the EU’s East StratCom, NATO’s StratCom, and the newly established national StratComs in Europe can be effective tools, they still lack resources, coherence, and full coordination to stop Russia’s malicious activities. We are in a technological contest with Russia. We should aim to win it. The Western response must be superior in impact and sophistication.

Russia relies on harnessing bursts of “sharp power” to succeed in its competition with the West. In response, Western leaders must set as a collective goal their intention to outmaneuver, outplay, and contain the damage of Russia’s strategy with our overwhelming diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power. This response must include media outlets, the tech and private sectors, and civil society. Experience shows that an independent message is more credible and effective, and people are ultimately more receptive when these messages come from non-state actors. Investing more in these non-state vectors holds a great deal of untapped potential in the West. Finally, these measures must all go hand-in-hand with coordinated economic sanctions and be backed up with Western military power.

Unfortunately, we in the West—particularly in the United States—have been too predictable, too linear. We would do well to consider ourselves the underdog in this contest and push back in nonlinear ways. Perhaps the only thing that Kremlin leaders fear more than Western power is the rejection of their rule by Russia’s own people. While our final goal should be to ensure that Moscow becomes a constructive member of the Euro-Atlantic security community, our responses for now should serve the shorter-term goal of forcing Russia to play more defense and less offense against the West. For this purpose, we should lessen our preoccupation with “provoking” the Kremlin. It is hardly a basis of sound policy to prioritize Putin’s peace of mind. The Russian government will work with the West if that path suits its goals. Otherwise, it will not. We should do the same.



Center *for*
European Policy
Analysis