



THE BIG CHILL: The Battle for Central Europe

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THE BIG CHILL

The Battle for Central Europe

Peter Pomerantsev

After most Central European states joined the EU and NATO, it seemed that the last page of Cold War history had been turned. But reports of the death of conflict in the region turned out to have been greatly exaggerated. Russia is on the move again, aiming to show the world that NATO has feet of clay, that the EU is a geopolitical weak sister and the transatlantic alliance a myth. The US might be slowly waking up to the challenge of Vladimir Putin's evermore expansionist Russia, but it still considers the issue a "regional" problem. The Kremlin's objective is not to send tanks into Tallinn, however, but to compromise the White House.

The Kremlin knows it is weak and must rely on the jujitsu of an "asymmetric" approach in which it uses the West's own openness as a weapon. Nowhere is the new approach felt more keenly than the Baltic states, where large ethnic Russian populations are courted by Kremlin-funded compatriot NGOs while being fed a diet of propaganda by Russian television. In Estonia, for instance, the "Russian" part of the population lives in a different reality from the rest of the nation—a reality manufactured by Moscow and filled with hostility. While most ethnic Estonians (and all historians) recognize that Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940,

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Russian media and NGOs claim Estonia “voluntarily” joined the USSR, a thesis that fifty-six percent of the Russian population in Estonia agrees with. In April 2007, when a Soviet memorial statue, the *Bronze Soldier*, was

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relocated from a city square to a cemetery, there were street riots by local Russians who were organized, according to Estonian officials, by Russian compatriot NGOs run by the Russian secret services. It’s not an unlikely thesis. Back in 2004, Konstantin Kosachev, then chairman of the Russian Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, stated: “[Russia] cannot explain the purpose of its presence in the post-Soviet Union... The West is doing this under the banner of democratization, and one gets the impression we are doing it only for the sake of ourselves... Our activeness is following too openly Russian interests. This is patriotic but not competitive.” Soon after,

the Kremlin began creating its own “banners,” such as *Russkiy Mir*—an organization “aimed at forming the Russian World” for Russians in the near abroad. According to Alexander Chepurin, then head of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Department for Compatriots Abroad, “the Russian diaspora abroad provides social and humanitarian support for the implementation of the interests of the Russian Federation in post-Soviet countries.” If the Western conception of “soft power” is based on making democratic societies attractive, the Russian vision sees it, in Putin’s own description, as “a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence.”

“It is hard to guess what Russia is trying to achieve when it publicly threatens us or violates our air and sea space,” said Iivi Anna Masso, an adviser to Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, at an October meeting on “The Kremlin’s Challenge” convened in Tallinn by the World Affairs Institute (publisher of this journal). “Does it really plan to invade? Or is it just trying to demoralize us? The scare tactics could have economic consequences—it might affect our investment climate when international journalists constantly write about how Russia is threatening to invade, or how ‘Narva is next.’” One of Tallinn’s fears is a small-scale Russian “encroachment” to “protect” Russian-language groups in Estonia: an incursion small enough to have NATO members bickering about whether it deserves to be called an “invasion” requiring a response. If NATO is discredited in such a way, then why should anyone in the world take the West, and the US in particular, seriously? Since the crisis in Ukraine started, NATO has somewhat ramped up its rhetoric vis-à-vis Russia and even held some military exercises in the Baltics. But as long as the countermeasures are as halfhearted as they have been, the Kremlin will be happy. It is win-win for Moscow: its actions reveal NATO’s weakness, yet when NATO postures in response, it helps the Kremlin sell a story to the Russian public that the motherland is under attack from an aggressive US-EU alliance.

Of all the Baltic republics, Latvia has the highest percentage of Russian diaspora, and faces many similar problems to those Estonia now tries to deal with. The Russian-language PBK network, which is sold programs and news by Russia at low rates, is the second most watched channel in the country. Latvia’s role as a center for money laundering also makes it highly dependent on financial flows from Russia: half of the country’s investment comes from foreign depositors, largely from former Soviet states. In the words of the *Guardian*’s Luke Harding, Latvia has become “a playground for Russian interests: business, political and, above all, criminal... The Kremlin’s agenda in Latvia is to slowly reverse the country’s strategic direction from pro-west to pro-Moscow.” And in this it has had some success. “I’m afraid of all this Russian capital,” Valeri Belokon, an important Latvian banker, told Harding. “Capital is influence... The danger for a small country is that we become dependent on Russia. We definitely have to defend ourselves.”

In Estonia, the Kremlin uses the openness of Western culture and information as part of its subversive techniques; in Latvia, it uses the openness of markets to achieve the same goals.

Further south, in Bulgaria, which the former Russian ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov, has referred to as Russia's "Trojan Horse" inside the EU, Russian influence grows steadily. The German secret services have expressed concern about the fact that Moscow controls about one-third of Bulgaria's output, and that the country's ruling coalition is closely aligned with Moscow and contains, in the words of one *Der Spiegel* report, "former Communist Party members, intelligence service workers, and Bulgarian oligarchs who do business with... Putin's minions." Even in the Czech Republic, parties on both the left and the right are funded by Russian state companies, while Czech shell companies formed by the Russian energy giant Gazprom control large portions of the energy sector. The Kremlin is "undermining the last twenty years of hard-won post-communist history," as Gregory Feifer and Brian Whitmore have argued in the *New Republic*, and, "more than twenty years after the end of communism, over four decades after the Red Army extinguished the Prague Spring, the Czech Republic is again in danger of falling under Moscow's shadow."

Gazprom's South Stream pipeline project, designed to connect Russian energy directly with the Balkans and Central Europe, has been the key theater of struggle for securing influence in the southern part of Eastern Europe. South Stream would disrupt the EU's preferred Nabucco line, running through Turkey and Austria, which is designed to diminish Russian energy blackmail in Europe. In opposing South Stream, the European Union argued that it countered the EU's stated aim of "reducing energy dependence on Russia, following Russia's annexation of Crimea." Denied by Brussels, Russia circumvented the EU by making bilateral deals with the countries through which South Stream will pass. "The aim of South Stream is not just economic, it's a political 'divide and conquer' mechanism that rewards pliant states in the region and punishes stubborn ones," argued Katarzyna Pisarska, director of the European Academy of Diplomacy in Warsaw, at the October meeting in Tallinn. And South Stream also dovetails with the Kremlin's new courting of right-wing political movements in the region. As Anton Shekhovtsov of University College London has shown, countries involved in South Stream "have either a pro-Russian government or a far-right party represented in parliament and openly pro-Kremlin: Bulgaria (pro-Russian government), Serbia (pro-Russian government), Hungary (Jobbik), Austria (FPÖ, BZÖ), Greece (Golden Dawn), Italy (Lega Nord). Given the cooperation between the Kremlin and the European extreme right, it is no wonder that, for example,

Jobbik prefers the South Stream pipeline to Nabucco, another planned gas pipeline aimed at reducing the EU's dependence on Russian energy."

In June 2014, Putin arrived in Vienna for the triumphant final approval on South Stream, praising Austria as a "reliable and stable partner," and leaving the US Embassy there to comment that transatlantic unity "has been essential in discouraging further Russian aggression" and that the Austrians "should consider carefully whether today's events contribute to that effort." In December, the Kremlin suddenly said it wouldn't pursue the project after all. The economic downturn has made it unaffordable, but Putin will surely keep looking for ways to spin Southern and Central Europe.

"The world order post 1989, and the resultant international strength of the US, is based on the supposed successful transition of Central Europe," argues Pisarska. "If Central Europe's transition can be reversed, then the US is left discredited globally."

But instead of becoming more aware of this challenge, the US has been drifting away from the region. A defining point came in 2008, when President Obama decided to suddenly reverse his predecessor's decision to place a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. Whether the missile defense system was a good idea was less important than the brusque way the reversal happened. Eastern European intellectuals and leaders like Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel saw the meaning of the cancellation and in 2009 authored a letter appealing to the US to re-ignite its interest in Central Europe: "As the new Obama administration sets its foreign-policy priorities, our region is one part of the world that Americans have largely stopped worrying about. . . . That view is premature. All is not well either in our region or in the transatlantic relationship."

The letter, whose description of Russia as pursuing nineteenth-century goals with twenty-first-century means, seems prescient now, but when it was delivered to Washington it was ignored. The result has been a sense among elites in the region that they have been abandoned to deal with Russia on their own. Some, like Poland, retreat into a confrontational pose; others, like Hungary, seek accommodation. But overall the damage was clear when a host of countries in Central Europe opposed sanctions against Russia in the conflict over Ukraine.

So, how to go about strengthening the Euro-Atlantic bond in the region, while addressing the other vulnerabilities the Kremlin is exploiting?

Clearly, the Central and Eastern European states themselves must take the lead. Pisarska, for example, proposes creating a regional security and foreign policy bloc that would examine border control issues and develop a common energy strategy. Though functioning inside EU rules allowing for enhanced cooperation within the framework of common EU foreign policy, such a bloc would be strengthened by a show of US involvement and support. “The US was strong in supporting shale gas development in Poland,” Pisarska says. “It could also put its weight behind developing an LNG [liquefied natural gas] infrastructure network for the region. Symbolism is important.”

In addition, engaging Russian-language diasporas in the Baltics and beyond (there is a 3.5 million-strong population in Germany) has to be seen as a priority not just for regional states but also Brussels and Washington. The role of media in the current dilemma should also be acknowledged. If the creation of a channel to directly counter Russia’s isn’t possible, investment should be made in production companies that can win ratings by delivering cutting-edge programs via existing networks that directly appeal to and engage the Russian-speaking populations.

People-to-people contact needs to be strengthened too: It was an illusion to think that Central Europe was filled with young Havel, armed against the psychological legacy of decades of accommodation with Moscow. To strengthen transatlantic communication, exchange programs for students and young professionals are needed between Central Europe and the US, while the expert community needs to re-engage by providing answers for questions about Russia’s geopolitical ambitions and local fears about the erosion of national cultures and traditions. Russia has successfully created the Valdai International Discussion Club to present its side of things. A Central European anti-Valdai forum could expose the reality of Russia’s involvement in the politics, culture, and economy of Europe.

But the most important, most sensitive question has to do with greater military engagement.

As President Ilves noted at the October meeting in Tallinn, the text of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations promised that the Atlantic Alliance would not have “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” in the region, but only in “the current and

foreseeable security environment.” Indeed, there are many explicit pre-conditions, assumptions, and expectations with regard to domestic and international behavior incorporated in the act, and virtually all of them have been defied by the Putin regime. The environment in Central Europe has been changed fundamentally by the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine, and the stationing of a permanent NATO force in Central and Eastern Europe should at least be put on the table. But even as this happens, it would be vitally important to appreciate that the Kremlin’s aim is unlikely to be an overt invasion, but the sort of limited but symbolically powerful provocation that would show NATO’s Article 5 is impossible to enforce, and that any American promise of defense is therefore meaningless. We are not dealing with a new Cold War but rather an info-centric struggle of feints and symbols—more *House of Cards* than James Bond—and we need new institutions to monitor and rapidly respond to the Kremlin’s weaponization of money, culture, and information. ●