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The Evolution of Russian Political Tactics in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

The conflict in Donbas has distracted attention from broader patterns of interaction between Russia and Ukraine. Russia continues to use a variety of tactics, apart from military force, to influence Ukraine. Among the key tactics are coercion in the gas sector, naval blockade, “passport colonialism,” attempts to sway Ukrainian elections, support for the pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk, and promotion of religious influence through the Russian Orthodox Church. None of these tactics is novel, but each is evolving along with circumstances. Regardless of what happens in Donbas, Ukraine will continue to feel multifaceted pressure from Russia.

Introduction

While the conflict in Donbas is the most important means by which Russia seeks to shape Ukrainian politics and foreign policy, it is far from the only one. A broader array of Russian tactics existed before 2014 and has persisted in complement with the military conflict. It is important, therefore, to examine the Russia–Ukraine conflict in the broader context of all these interactions. This article asks three related questions. First, what tactics is Russia using to influence Ukraine beyond the conflict in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea? Second, how have these tactics changed since 2014? Third, what do these tactics tell us about Russia’s aims? The main body of the paper addresses the first two questions. We return to the third in the conclusion.¹

The importance of these questions was demonstrated on January 25, 2020, when supervision of Russia’s policy toward Ukraine was shifted from Vladislav Surkov to Dmitry Kozak. Given Surkov’s notoriety as an architect of the doctrine of “sovereign democracy,” and his reputation as a sower of chaos, his removal led to speculation that Vladimir Putin was initiating a change in policy toward Ukraine. The hope is that Kozak, who appears to be more concerned with the economic cost of the ongoing conflict, will be amenable to a more flexible interpretation of the Minsk agreements (Stanovaya 2019).

This raises the question of just what Russia’s policy toward Ukraine is. If a change is underway, is it a change of goals, of strategy, or of tactics? Before we can address such questions, we need to more clearly understand Russia’s policies in Ukraine in recent years. Russia has deployed a range of methods for shaping both the options open to Ukrainian leaders and the choices they make. Some of these, such as using Ukraine’s energy dependence, have a history going back to the early post-Soviet years, but are now changing. Others,

such as restricting navigation in the Sea of Azov, have increased dramatically since 2014. In the sections that follow, we address six tactics in particular: coercion using energy supplies; seizing control of maritime approaches to Ukraine; extending Russian passports and citizenship to Ukrainian citizens; influencing elections; promoting the pro-Russian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk; and deploying the Russian Orthodox Church to promote Russian–Ukrainian unity. We stress that this list is not exhaustive. Russia engages in a variety of “active measures,” many of which are designed to make attribution difficult. Without denying the importance of these tactics, this article focuses on some actions that, because of their lower intensity, may escape attention, even though they are pervasive. (Abrams 2016; Kuzio and D’Anieri 2018; Radin, Demus, and Marcinek 2020)

For a variety of reasons, Russia seeks to control Ukraine (D’Anieri 2019; Shevtsova 2014). However, even the most pro-Russian Ukrainian presidents, Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014) and Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004), resisted Russia’s integration proposals. Moreover, since 2014, Ukrainian ruling elites have pursued only Western-oriented integration projects. In December 2014, Ukraine’s Verkhovna Rada (parliament) abolished Ukraine’s nonaligned status. In February 2019, the Rada amended Ukraine’s constitution to make European Union (EU) and NATO membership official goals. (Zminy do Konstytutsii pro kurs Ukrainy na YeS i NATO nabuly chynnosti 2019)

Meanwhile, in November 2016, Vladimir Putin approved the current Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, which advocates the deployment of “soft power.” “In addition to traditional methods of diplomacy, ‘soft power’ has become an integral part of efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives.

administration threatened long-term Russian goals in Ukraine, even as Russia gained control of Crimea and developed a powerful lever in the form of a conflict that it could escalate at any time. While that conflict, and the potential for resolving it, has received immense attention, Russia has maintained and refined an array of tactics that largely predate the events of 2014. Among the key tactics Russia has continued to deploy are coercion in the gas sector, naval blockade of the Azov coast, “passport colonialism,” attempts to sway Ukrainian elections, promotion of the pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk, and the use of the Russian Orthodox Church to influence Ukrainians. None of these tactics is novel, but each is evolving along with circumstances, and an important question for the future is how effective these tools will be and how Russia might further modify them.

What do these tactics tell us about Russia’s goals and strategies in Ukraine? Four conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, Russia is not satisfied with the current status quo, but rather seeks to further expand its influence in Ukraine and over the Ukrainian government. Second, the tactics on display are consistent with a range of Russian goals, from the somewhat limited to the very extensive. Third, while these tactics may represent a coherent strategy, they might also represent an approach that is more opportunistic. Finally, based on the exposition of tactics in this article, there is not much sign of a change in either strategy or tactics since Putin’s appointment of Dmitry Kozak.

Much of the discussion about the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and about possible solutions, has concerned Russia’s aims. This is a crucial question, because many proposed Western policies depend on assumptions about Russian goals. If Russia’s goals are entirely defensive, then making concessions in Ukraine might usher in an era of stability. If its goals are more expansive, then concessions are less likely to solve the problem.⁷

What outcomes would Russia be satisfied with? Judging by the tactics analyzed in this article, Russia’s aims are not as minimalist and defensive as some analysts have suggested (e.g. just keeping Ukraine out of NATO). Instead, it appears that Russia continues to seek, at a minimum, a dominant relationship with Ukraine, and perhaps reintegration on Russian terms. This is evidenced not only by Putin’s oft-repeated statements about the unity of the two peoples and the claims of the Russian Orthodox Church, but also by the fact that the replacement of the pro-Western Petro Poroshenko by the much more balanced Vladimir Zelensky did not significantly alter Russia’s behavior. Rather than being satisfied with the looming victory of Zelensky’s “Sluha Narodu” party in the parliamentary elections, Russia promoted the new party formed by the ardently pro-Russian Viktor Medvedchuk.

While the evidence indicates that Russia’s motives are not minimal, it does not show clearly how far they reach. Would Russia be satisfied with a rejection of the EU Association Agreement? With Ukrainian neutrality or “Finlandization”? With Ukraine agreeing to economically integrate with Russia? Or does Russia seek further territorial aggrandizement in Ukraine? The tactics we have documented do not resolve these questions.

When we examine the tactics Russia has deployed since 2014, apart from the conflict in Donbas, two things stand out. The first is continuity over time. With the exception of Russia’s actions in the Sea of Azov, which had less precedent, the other behaviors described here resemble efforts Russia has pursued in Ukraine and elsewhere throughout the post-Soviet era. Gas cutoffs and the promise of cheap gas in return for political concessions emerged in the early 1990s, as did claims that Russia had the right to intervene on behalf of Russian citizens in other countries, issuing passports to other countries’ citizens, promotion of pro-Russian politicians, and the broader narrative that the separation of Ukraine from Russia was artificial. Similarly, the deployment of Orthodoxy to legitimize Russian territorial claims has a long history.

A second defining feature is the wide range of tactics being used, which include economics, religion, elections, and media, as well as various blends, all backed by the threat or use of force. The strategy, therefore, seems to be to apply as much pressure across as many fronts as possible. Rather than being based on the idea that any individual tactic will lead to clearly predictable results, the approach seems to be that applying broad pressure patiently over time is bound to lead to positive results.

It may well be that Russia’s ultimate goals in Ukraine are not clearly defined, and that the tactics we see have endured over time because they are flexible, low-cost means of increasing Russia’s influence, regardless of the ultimate goal. In this interpretation, Russia is sensitive to costs and will be opportunistic, rather than pursuing clearly defined objectives without regard to cost. This is consistent with an interpretation of the events of 2014 that sees Russia acting as it did because the chaos created by the Revolution of Dignity allowed it to seize Crimea and much of Donbas at low cost.

At the outset, we raised the question of whether the appointment of new leadership over Russia’s operations in Ukraine might lead to tactical or strategic change. So far, there is little sign of either changing markedly. As the six issues we have covered indicate, there is considerable continuity in Russia’s nonmilitary tactics prior to and since 2014. Nor is there much sign that Russia’s ultimate goals in Ukraine have changed, even acknowledging that there is no agreement on what those goals are. What then does the replacement of Vladislav Surkov by Dmitry Kozak signify? It is not clear. One possible interpretation is that the change represents the hope of getting the intended results without dramatically changing tactics. Perhaps more skilled use of the same tools will lead to better results. Alternatively, one might argue that the change represents a desire to tinker with the tactics, but not to change them dramatically.

This analysis highlights the pressure that Russia continues to put on Ukraine. Even if the conflict in Donbas were somehow stabilized, Ukraine will still face increasing challenges. Two that loom especially large, based on this analysis, are the local elections in Ukraine scheduled for October 25, 2020, and future gas transshipment issues. While local elections in Ukraine gain less attention than national ones, their significance is growing due to the decentralization that has resulted in part from Russian intervention. We can expect Russian interference in these elections to be widespread and systematic.

Moreover, the long-running saga of energy coercion will change dramatically in Russia's favor if and when the pipelines circumventing Ukraine finally come on line. This will disrupt the correlation of energy forces that has been more or less consistent since 1991. Ukraine will lose both a major source of hard currency earnings and its most powerful lever against Russian energy coercion. For all these reasons, understanding Ukraine's relations with Russia requires focusing on issues well beyond the conflicts over Crimea and Donbas.

Notes

1. Many studies of Russian foreign policy focus on the concept of "soft power" to describe nonmilitary means of influence. We find that coercion, attraction, and subversion are so thoroughly intertwined that trying to label them as "soft" or "hard" would cause as many problems as it resolves. For a nuanced discussion of "soft power" in the Russia-Ukraine relationship, see Feklyunina (2016).
2. Igor Guzhva is a Ukrainian pro-Russian journalist who has lived in Russia for some time, and has at various times been the editor-in-chief of the political expert network of the Kremlin.org project and the editor-in-chief of *Moscow News*.
3. Fifty percent of ZIK's shares are owned by Russia's Gazprom.
4. Quoted in Ukraine Election Task Force, "Foreign Interference in Ukraine's Democracy," 3.
5. Ukraine Election Task Force, "Foreign Interference in Ukraine's Democracy," 6.
6. The Opposition Bloc had been formed to run in the 2014 parliamentary elections as a successor to the Party of Regions. It split in 2018, with a faction under Oleksandr Vilkul retaining the "Opposition Bloc" name and fielding its own candidates.
7. The relationship between Russia's motives, policy solutions, and variants of realist international relations theories is explored in Paul D'Anieri, "Magical Realism: Assumptions, Evidence and Prescriptions in the Ukraine Conflict," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 60, 1 (2019): 97-117.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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