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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Putin's Lies Hide Weakness

For half a millennium, Russia has projected itself as a great power, but its history is less one of enduring strength than of perpetual weakness disguised as might.

From Ivan the Terrible through the Soviet Union, Russia expanded at astonishing speed, seizing an empire that at its peak covered one-sixth of the globe. Yet this expansion concealed a reality: an autocracy propped up by repression, xenophobia, and fear, never by institutions of legitimacy or prosperity.

The Russian state has consistently demanded recognition as a great power, even as it has consistently lacked the material, political, and moral means to sustain one.

This contradiction—ambition outpacing capability—has produced a uniquely Russian style of politics and war. When Russia cannot win by production, innovation, or persuasion, it wins by lying. When it cannot inspire allegiance, it coerces obedience. When it cannot dominate militarily, it turns to hybrid, cognitive, and political warfare.

In every generation, Russian leaders have tried to compensate for inferiority with deception, subversion, and brute violence. Lies are not an accident of the system; they are its foundation.

The inferiority complex

From the Bolshevik revolutionaries to Vladimir Putin, Russia's leaders have exhibited the mentality of professional conspirators: they assume enemies are everywhere, truth is relative, and survival depends on sowing confusion and fear.

The founders of the Soviet state were, in effect, terrorists operating underground. Lenin and Stalin were cover names used to hide from the Tsarist police. When they seized power, they imported the habits of clandestine revolution into government: obsession with regime security over national security, fear of enemies both internal and external, use of state power as terrorism, and the belief that deception is not just useful but essential.

> The bullying masks the inferiority complex; the insistence on imperial glory conceals the fear that without it, the system will collapse

That mentality has endured. Russia makes almost nothing the world wants, offers little as a partner of choice, and cannot build legitimacy through votes. Its leaders know they cannot compete on merit.

Instead, they insist—through threats, propaganda, and violence—that Russia is a great and powerful nation. The bullying masks the inferiority complex; the insistence on imperial glory conceals the fear that without it, the system will collapse.

Warfare on the cheap

Subversion, disinformation, espionage, cyber theft, support for fringe groups, assassination—these are not tools of last resort but the Kremlin's main instruments of statecraft.

Historian Sergey Radchenko notes that where once special operations supported foreign policy, today "special operations are foreign policy." For Putin, trained in the KGB's school of cynicism, the ends justify the means, compromise is only tactical, and truth is irrelevant unless it serves state goals.

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What Russia calls hybrid war or active measures the West often misunderstands. It is not merely the blending of military and non-military tactics but a holistic view of conflict: the desired outcome dictates the means.

If sowing disunity in democracies is the

objective, then propaganda, corruption, cyberattacks, and political agitation become as important as tanks and missiles. Cognitive warfare, rooted in Soviet "reflexive control," seeks to shape how adversaries think, reason, and act.

The goal is not only to confuse but to paralyze, not only to mislead but to weaken the opponent's will. It is warfare on the cheap.

Weaponizing grievance to demand concessions

As Nataliya Bugayova explains in Foreign Policy, Russia's cognitive warfare is born of need. It is weak relative to its goals, so it uses deception to close the gap between what it wants and what it can achieve. The Kremlin cannot defeat NATO militarily, so it fabricates a myth of Western betrayal and NATO "encirclement," weaponizing grievance to demand concessions.

It cannot control Ukraine by attraction or partnership, so it invents a crisis, manufactures lies about genocide and NATO expansion, and then demands negotiation to "de-escalate." It is the strategy of a bully: provoke, threaten, extract something for nothing, and repeat.

> "Whenever avoidance of war is the primary object of a group of powers, the international system has been at the mercy of its most ruthless member" - Henry Kissinger

Sadly, as we have seen since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and over the past decade or more, it has worked. Subsequent American Presidents have misjudged Putin's power, and his willingness to negotiate in good faith.

Former Finnish President Niinisto quoted Henry Kissinger in his New Year's speech to highlight this failure to deal with the Kremlin; "Whenever avoidance of war is the primary object of a group of powers, the international system has been at the mercy of its most ruthless member."

"The lie that will not die"

Putin learned well from his Soviet predecessors. The KGB playbook has long depended on the multiplication of falsehoods.

As Yuri Andropov once put it, "We just need to plant the seeds. Others will harvest and re-plant for us." Useful idiots abroad—politicians, activists, or commentators—spread and legitimize Russian narratives, often unwittingly. Khrushchev sneered that capitalist countries, "stupid and decadent," would cooperate in their own destruction.

> The fiction that NATO promised never to expand eastward remains the central myth justifying Russian aggression

The persistence of these lies is remarkable. The fiction that NATO promised never to expand eastward—despite overwhelming historical evidence to the contrary—remains the central myth justifying Russian aggression.

It is, as one commentator put it, "the lie that will not die." Yet it works, because Western publics and policymakers too often debate the false premise instead of rejecting it outright. In reality, NATO threatens Russia the way a lock threatens a thief.

Failures could plant the seeds of destruction

Ironically, Russia's overreliance on disinformation and cognitive warfare has hollowed out its real power. Putin's invasion of Ukraine was supposed to showcase Russia's strength; instead, it has revealed its profound weaknesses.

Militarily, Putin has failed to achieve his objectives. Politically, it has united NATO rather than fractured it. Economically, it has reduced itself to dependency on China.

The lies may still circulate, but the realities they seek to conceal—corruption, poverty, demographic decline, battlefield failure—are harder to mask. By any realistic measure, Putin's war is a total disaster. He has failed in all his goals.

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As George Kennan warned in his Long Telegram, Russia's persistent weakness and insecurity drive it to aggression as a way of shielding itself from Western ideas and values. But aggression built on lies eventually undermines itself.

The overuse of deception corrodes the state from within: it breeds cynicism, delegitimizes authority, and, as we now see, brings destruction to Russian society itself.

In Russia, the state has become the enemy of the people. Years of repression have taught citizens that apathy is safer than political engagement.

At the same time, however, authoritarian leaders know that illegitimate power is fleeting and that a beaten people can seize upon weakness to challenge the state.

Gaddafi, Honecker, Ceaușescu, Mussolini, and Mubarak all once appeared in total control. Indeed, Putin lived through the death of a superpower. Putin must worry that his failures could plant the seeds of his destruction.

Disinformation is warfare

The United States and its allies must stop treating Russian disinformation as clever statecraft and start treating it as what it is - warfare. That means refusing to accept the premises Moscow wants implanted in our minds.

Russia is not entitled to a sphere of influence. Russia is not destined to win in Ukraine. Negotiations are not pathways to peace but tools of war. Russia is not powerful – we are.

> The moment we stop believing the bully's narrative, the bully loses much of his power

Putin's Russia excels at only two things: death and disinformation. Everything else—the economy, innovation, soft power, legitimacy—remains barren.

Its hybrid warfare is not the strategy of a strong power but of a weak one trying to mask its fragility. We should see it for what it is: not the projection of strength but the confession of weakness.

The West's task is not only to resist Russian lies but to dismantle them, to puncture the illusion of inevitability and expose the insecurity at the heart of the Kremlin's project.

The moment we stop believing the bully's narrative, the bully loses much of his power. Russia has thrived on lies for centuries; its undoing will come when truth proves more powerful than the fictions it desperately spins.

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