THE KREMLIN’S HYBRID AGGRESSION

ANALYTICAL REVIEW
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The reason for this lies in Vladimir Putin’s way of seeing the geopolitical picture of the world. A KGB «graduate,» he long has been and still remains a person with Cold War-era mentality. Per Putin’s logic, the planet should be divided into spheres of influence between the largest states – above all, the USA and Russia.

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One of Yanukovych’s key campaign promises was the intention to integrate Ukraine into the Single Economic Space – the precursor of today’s Eurasian Customs Union (in essence the plan was to bring Ukraine into the domain of the Kremlin’s political and economic influence). The opponent of Yanukovych was Viktor Yushchenko, a candidate from the Democratic Coalition, who declared that his intended direction was towards the European integration of Ukraine.

Support of the Yanukovych election campaign was both organizational and political in nature. As confirmed by Andrey Illarionov who was at that time advisor to the President of Russia, the Kremlin «seriously invested» into Viktor Yanukovych. Many Russian specialists, political experts, and consultants worked at the candidate’s election headquarters. Russian musicians toured all over Ukraine in support of Yanukovych – every region held concerts in which Filipp Kirkorov, Iosif Kobzon, Nadezhda Babkina, Nikolay Baskov, and other stars performed. One of the key specialists from the «Moscow team» that was formed for the occasion, political consultant Sergey Markov frankly admits, «We have always worked for the Russian administration and we have stated that. And in Ukraine we always spoke of that: our chief client, our top boss was Administration of the President of Russia.» On the eve of the elections, Putin personally traveled to Ukraine seven times to support Yanukovych.

The elections were marked by large-scale electoral fraud to benefit Yanukovych, which was recorded by multiple election monitors. The fraud techniques were very primitive: convoys of buses traveled across the country taking around people who voted several times each using fake absentee ballots. In spite of this, Yanukovych failed to win the first round.

During the run-offs Yanukovych was declared winner; however, the Coalition
headed by Viktor Yushchenko refused to accept the election results, instead declaring them fraudulent. Hundreds of thousands of protesters marched the streets of Kiev and other Ukrainian cities.

«Putin did not have the desire for Yushchenko to come to power,» says former President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma. Vladimir Putin visited Kuchma and discussed with him «how to achieve such election results that would have protected the Kremlin's interests.» According to Kuchma, Russia’s leader «hinted» at using force to disperse the protesters. «Putin is a stern man. There were hints made. This is not a secret,» says he.

Bloodshed was avoided that time. The Central Election Commission yielded to the protesters’ pressure: the Commission admitted fraud and resolved to hold the run-off vote again. By the result of that election, Viktor Yushchenko became President of Ukraine. Those events became known in Ukraine’s history as the «Orange revolution.»

The defeat of a pro-Kremlin candidate in the Ukrainian presidential elections disappointed Putin greatly. According to Andrey Illarionov, it «led to a drastic turnaround of Vladimir Putin’s state of mind, his view of the world on the international arena.»

However at the next elections the Kremlin managed to strike back. The schism within the pro-European coalition that had come to power, the Ukrainians’ disappointment in it, and the sharp decline in Yushchenko’s popularity allowed Yanukovych to reign victorious after the presidential elections of 2010.

The Kremlin’s influence on Ukrainian politics noticeably increased thanks to a Kremlin-loyal president coming to power. An important moment was the signing in April 2010 of the so-called «Kharkiv Accords.» The document provided for the extension of the term the Russian Black Sea Fleet could remain on the Ukrainian territory for an additional 25 years starting on May 28, 2017, with subsequent automatic five-year renewal options. The Kremlin, in its turn, provided Ukraine with a discount on the cost of natural gas in the amount of $100 per 1000 m³.

In the opinion of the opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, the «Kharkiv Accords» were in essence reduced down to Putin buying Ukrainian military and political loyalty with money. «I believe that when a military-political issue is traded for money it is a disgusting precedent. Disgusting because it perverts both sides. Everything is being bought and sold. For many Ukrainian citizens it is a question of national humiliation,» stated Nemtsov.

Dmitry Medvedev, who was President of Russia at the time, after signing the Accords promised that the fleet would never participate in military aggression. «Will Russia use the Black sea fleet to attack adjacent states? No, it will not. Guarantees of that are the system of international relations, our obligations within the UN in accordance with international conventions.» However, it was that very Black sea fleet naval base that in 2014 served as the staging area for the military and technical operations which provided for the annexation of the Crimean peninsula to the territory of Russia. In the course of those operations, contrary to Medvedev’s guarantees, a whole series of Russia’s international obligations was violated including, in particular, those framed by the «Budapest Memorandum» and the «Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between the Russian Federation and Ukraine.»

Besides, the Kremlin was actively drawing Ukraine into the Customs Union and, naturally, blocking the processes of the European integration started by the previous president Viktor Yushchenko. However,
many Ukrainians strived to see their country become closer with Europe. It was difficult for the government to ignore that.

In 2007 the European Commission started talks with Kiev regarding a base agreement «on the EU - Ukraine Association.» 2008 saw the beginning of negotiations to develop a document regarding a deeper-reaching and more comprehensive free trade zone as part of this agreement. Aiming to solidify his popularity, Yanukovych, who had by then assumed office, caught on the pro-West rhetoric and the ongoing inert foreign political processes. In November 2011 the association agreement text was approved. The next year it was initialed. For its final ratification the Ukrainian parliament, the majority of which was controlled by the President’s administration, had to adopt a packet of «Euro-integration» laws. However, that didn’t happen.

THE REVOLUTION OF DIGNITY

On November 21, 2013, the Cabinet of Ministers announced that Ukraine was suspending the preparation for the association with the EU. One week later the document was not signed at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, which the Ukrainian President attended. According to the Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaite, European leaders could not convince Viktor Yanukovych that it was necessary to execute the association agreement; no arguments could convince the Ukrainian President.

Based on the information held by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden Carl Bildt, the reason for Yanukovych’s refusal to sign a previously agreed-upon document was pressure from the Kremlin.10

The refusal of the Ukrainian President to take course on European integration provoked mass street protests in Kiev and multiple regions in Ukraine. The authorities reacted harshly: on November 30 Special Forces of the police dispersed the protesters on Maidan Nezalezhnosti. The protesters at that moment were mostly students. That event became the turning point after which the situation got out of control of President Yanukovych and his handlers from the Kremlin. The very next day a new demonstration in Kiev brought together more than 15,000 people. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) head Vitaliy Zakharchenko apologized for the excessive brutality of his subordinates11, but ten days later he undertook a second attempt to use force to disperse a protesters’ campground – this time unsuccessfully.

The Maidan demonstration became a continuous event. Along with pro-European slogans the protest leaders used increasingly
more anti-Putin rhetoric and called on the country to pull out from under the Kremlin’s influence. Among the demands, for example, was for Ukraine to refuse joining the Customs Union with Russia.

Vladimir Putin tried using economic measures to break down the growing anti-Kremlin sentiments. On December 17, 2013, Yanukovych met in Moscow with the Russian president and negotiated a 30% discount on Russian natural gas, which the Kiev officials had been unable to achieve for a number of years. Furthermore, Putin agreed to provide the Ukrainian government with a $15 billion USD loan from the Russian National Welfare Fund (however, Yanukovych managed to receive just the first transfer of $3 billion USD).

Opponents of Putin and Yanukovych saw in those agreements signs of political corruption. One of the protesting Ukrainians’ leaders, parliamentary Arseniy Yatsenyuk openly called the loan extended to the Ukrainian government a «political bribe.» The Novaya Gazeta newspaper reporter Yulia Latynina stated that Putin «[was] trying to buy Ukraine by paying Yanukovych.»

«Step number one: threaten the Ukrainian economy with such sanctions that Yanukovych will be forced to refuse from alignment with the EU. Step number two: support Yanukovych with a loan which he will never be able to repay. Step number three: in exchange for the writing off or restructuring the loan finally grab a hold of Ukrainian businesses. By hook or by crook,» wrote Latynina to describe the Kremlin’s plan for Ukraine.

However, Putin’s plan did not work: the discount on natural gas and the generous loans did not calm down the Ukrainian opposition, and the mass protests downtown Kiev were gaining force. In order to rein in the protesters, the parliamentary majority loyal to Yanukovych by manual vote passed a legislative package aimed at suppressing the protests. The laws were partially based on Russian practice and, for example, introduced the concepts of «extremist activity» and «foreign agents.» Former Minister of Justice of Ukraine Serhiy Holovaty openly said that this package was «the Russian FSB think tanks’ work product.»

The Ukrainian public was outraged by that new oppressive legislation, and three days later about half a million protesters gathered downtown Kiev demanding resignation of the Ukrainian President. Two months of standoff between the protesters and the government ended in tragic bloodshed: the protesters were fired upon with live ammunition, and in the course of two days more than 50 people were killed.

Following an investigation, Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine found President Yanukovych liable for the shooting of the protesters; according to the Office, he gave the order to use weapons to his administration and the Ministry of Internal Affairs brass. Head of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) Valentyn Nalyvaichenko added that the plan of the violent suppression of the demonstrations was developed by Russian special services, and Russian FSB operatives were directly involved in its implementation.
PUTIN’S REVENGE

Contrary to the expectations of those who instigated the bloody Maidan suppression, death of the people did not stop the protests but rather radicalized them. Fearing being arrested, the country’s top leadership including President Yanukovych fled the country. Representatives of the pro-European opposition in Kiev formed a temporary transitional government.

Having lost its ability to affect the situation in Kiev, the Kremlin started to implement its Plan B aimed at breaking off southern and eastern regions of Ukraine.

As early as February 21 – the day Yanukovych fled – the hotbed of tension moved from Kiev to Crimea. First in Simferopol and later in Sevastopol local pro-Kremlin parties organized rallies demanding the secession of Crimea from Ukraine. Soon armed people in Russian military uniforms (but without insignia) appeared on the territory of the peninsula, gained control over the primary infrastructure sites and blocked off Ukrainian military bases. With those forces’ support the so-called «Crimean Independence Referendum» was held on March 16, and already on March 18 Russia officially announced that the peninsula was now its part.

The Russian authorities initially claimed that they had nothing to do with the actions of the armed people in Crimea. For example, on March 4 Vladimir Putin, answering the question asked by an American journalist, stated that «they were local self-defense forces.»

Soon, however, Putin exposed his own lie. In his interview for the documentary «Crimea: The Way Home» – shown on the state-run Rossiya TV channel – the Russian president openly admitted to have personally directed the actions of the Russian armed forces in Crimea. He also spoke about how and under what circumstances he gave the order to commence the annexation.

Here are Putin’s three key quotes:

«It was the night of February 22 – 23rd; [we] finished [the meeting] about 7 AM, I let everyone go and went to sleep at 7 AM. And, saying goodbye, I must admit, saying goodbye, before everyone left, I told all my colleagues – and there were four of them – that the situation in Ukraine has developed in such a way that we were forced to start working on returning Crimea to Russia.»

«In order to block off and disarm 20,000 people – well armed people – a certain composition of personnel is necessary – not just quantity-wise, but also quality. Specialists who knew how to do that were needed. Therefore, I issued instructions and directives to the Ministry of Defense, I must admit, to deploy Special Forces units of the Main Intelligence Directorate and Marines under the guise of fortifying the defense of our military sites in Crimea.»

«Our advantage -- you know what it was? It was me handling that [operation] personally. Not because I did everything right, but because when top state officials do it, it’s easier for the executives to work.»

After the takeover of Crimea separatist actions were organized in a number of Ukrainian regions. Armed people started seizing administrative buildings in Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Mariupol. In April, by the Kremlin’s script, People’s Republics were proclaimed in Donetsk and Luhansk regions declaring their independence.

«Why does Putin want foreign lands? Who needs that? Why make an enemy out of the friendly Ukrainian nation? Putin is avenging Ukraine for Maidan. Most likely, he is scared mad that Maidan may take place in Russia as well,» stated the Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov in March 2014.

A de facto war broke out between Russia and Ukraine. Since spring of 2014
Of Ukraine and did not recognize the legitimacy of attaching Crimea to Russia. On December 19, 2016, the UN Assembly General adopted one more resolution, according to which Russia, “occupying Crimea, violates and abuses human rights by imposing on the Ukrainian peninsula its [Russia’s] legal system.”

The world community interprets Putin’s actions as aggression against Ukraine. On March 27, 2014, after the annexation of Crimea to Russia, the Assembly General of the United Nations adopted a resolution by which it supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and did not recognize the legitimacy of attaching Crimea to Russia. On December 19, 2016, the UN Assembly General adopted one more resolution, according to which Russia, “occupying Crimea, violates and abuses human rights by imposing on the Ukrainian peninsula its [Russia’s] legal system.”

The resolution talks about murders, kidnappings, politically motivated criminal prosecution, as well as oppression of the freedoms of opinion, faith, and beliefs.

At the same time, the conflict in eastern Ukraine remains in a “frozen” phase, which is used by the Kremlin as an effective mechanism to blackmail and pressure the political leadership of Ukraine and the West. After all, Putin still retains all the abilities to shift the military conflict into an active phase regardless of the world’s reaction.
The primary means of affecting the Ukrainian public opinion was by propagation of the key Kremlin TV channels practically all across the territory of Ukraine via satellite. Here we are not talking about freedom of speech or offering an alternative point of view, but rather about an aggressive information war which mass media controlled by Putin wage against Ukraine.

1. Using «hate language»

Russia accepted the results of the Ukrainian elections, and Vladimir Putin has met multiple times with the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and is conducting official talks with him. However, this does not prevent Russian TV channels from continuously referring to the Ukrainian leadership as the «Kiev junta» that came to power «illegitimately.» Ukrainian troops participating in military operations against separatists in the east of the country are called by the Kremlin propaganda by names none other than «hit squads» and «Banderites» [or «Bandera’s goons»]. Armed supporters of the self-declared Donbass republics, on the contrary, are respectfully called «people’s militias.»

Often the rhetorical attacks on Ukraine on Russian television channels are closely intertwined with anti-American rhetoric. For example, in April 2016 it went so far that the Kremlin’s nefarious propaganda mouthpiece Dmitry Kiselyov compared the USA’s politics in regards to Ukraine with the politics of the Nazi Germany and showed during the broadcast a portrait of Adolf Hitler along with a quote attributed to him.

2. Disinformation

The Kremlin mass media systematically manipulate and fabricate facts in order to mislead or deceive their audience.

A prime example of this was the coverage of the tragic incident when the Malaysian Boeing was shot down in the sky over Donbass on July 17, 2014. The international Joint Investigation Team concluded that the airliner had been shot down by a Russian Buk missile system from the territory controlled by separatists, after which the system returned to the territory of Russia.23

In turn, the Kremlin propaganda offered a theory that the Boeing was shot down by a Ukrainian fighter jet.

Propaganda reporter Mikhail Leontyev demonstrated in a Russian TV broadcast a satellite image that allegedly captured the moment of the attack. Uncovering the lie did not take long; it turned out that a Google map image taken two years prior to the tragedy was being used for that photo. Besides, the airplane captured in that image was a Su-27, rather than a MiG-29 as Leontyev had represented. Furthermore,
experts noticed that the dimensions of the aircraft did not correspond to the dimensions of objects on the ground, and the time and place of the incident did not match the reality. Besides, the Donetsk airport was seen in the image, whereas the Boeing was shot down 50 km away from it. 

3. Provocative Lies

Covering Ukrainian events, the Kremlin propaganda often create deceptive news stories aimed at invoking hatred towards the Ukrainian military and officials. This is not just disinformation but rather lies that breed hatred.

Here’s one flagrant example of such lies: a Channel One story in which the viewers were told that Ukrainian armed forces that took control of the city of Sloviansk executed a child by crucifying him in the central square while his mother and city residents watched. Journalists went to the city and questioned multiple locals but could not find a single piece of evidence that a child had been executed. On the contrary, Sloviansk residents spoke of the tactful behavior of the Ukrainian troops who took over the city after the separatists had retreated. As a result a scandal broke out, and Channel One admitted that it held no proof of the «crucified boy» information it had published but refused to offer any apologies.

«They are screaming nonstop, on every channel, that fascists have taken over power in Ukraine, that those fascists are now marching on Crimea, threatening the Russian population, that they soon will be in Russia. This is the hysteria,» says former Russian Union of Journalists secretary Igor Yakovenko.

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In order to protect its country from aggressive propaganda and disinformation the Ukrainian government banned the broadcasting of Russian channels. That prompted the Kremlin to support Ukrainian mass media loyal to Russia and able to serve the interests of the Russian ruling elite.

And so Channel 112 appeared in Kiev. Vitaliy Zhakharchenko – who headed the MVD in the government of Yanukovych – has been named its actual owner (it was his subordinates who participated in the forceful suppression of the Maidan protests). After President Yanukovych fled, the head of the MVD also left Ukraine; he is currently wanted by law enforcement. Zhakharchenko controlled Channel 112 through his close associate Viktor Zubritsky, a media manager who was at one point suspected of kidnapping Maidan activists.

Observers noticed many times that the coverage of Ukrainian events was done by the channel according to the Kremlin propaganda standards. In 2015 the channel received an official warning from the National Council of Television for airing propaganda aimed at stirring up hatred in the Ukrainian society.

The information attack on Ukraine is held on the international level, too. The flagship of Putin’s propaganda – state-owned Russia Today – continuously discredits Ukraine in English, Spanish, and Arabic language broadcasts.

This TV channel, for example, was noted for using crude disinformation during the coverage of the Malaysian Boeing crash.

Russia Today was the first to accuse the Ukrainian government of attacking the airliner, referring to a Twitter message posted by some Spanish dispatcher named Carlos who allegedly had been employed at the Borispol airport in Kiev.

«Military airplanes were flying next to the 777 three minutes prior to its disappearance from the radar screens, just three minutes,» the channel quoted «Carlos.» Subsequently this theory was aired by other Kremlin mass media as well. However, Ukraine officially refuted the existence of such employee; moreover, it turned out that the law prohibited any person who did not possess Ukrainian citizenship from working in air services.

«Carlos’» Twitter account (@ spainbuca) was soon deleted, and no journalist was ever able to contact him. The Novaya Gazeta noted that the mysterious Spanish dispatcher first appeared in the information field on the Russia Today website on May 9, 2014, where, against the background of a photograph with the face covered up, the channel ran a story about a dispatcher who was a foreigner and was allegedly threatened in Kiev for expressing his thoughts.
It should be noted that Russia Today TV channel receives enormous funding from the Russian government. For example in 2017 the TV channel will receive from the Russian budget 18.7 billion rubles (more than $300 million USD). According to Russian economist Vladimir Milov’s calculations, this money allocated for propaganda could have been used to increase Russia’s spending on funding basic sciences by a third.32

From the look of things, neither does the Kremlin skimp when it comes to supporting radical political groups operating on the Ukrainian territory. According to the SBU head Vasyl Hrytsak, «Ukrainian special services have recorded multiple instances of certain Ukrainian politicians secretly meeting with representatives of former Ukrainian political elite who fled to Russia and receiving financing from foreign special services as well as from those who fled from Ukraine. These funds are later used to destabilize the situation inside our country.»33

For example, such accusations are aimed at the Ukrainian nationalist party Svoboda which failed to win any seats in the Ukrainian parliament during the most recent elections. Member of Parliament [from the Democratic Alliance] Serhiy Leshchenko has stated that Svoboda was receiving financing from the Party of Regions which was headed by Viktor Yanukovych. After the latter fled, Leshchenko gained access to documents containing the second set of books, the so-called «black ledgers» of the Party of Regions. «In those documents where Yanukovych’s political consultant Manafort was listed we saw a payment to Svoboda in the amount of $200,000,» reported Leshchenko.34

Svoboda’s critics say that radical actions organized by the party under nationalist slogans do a favor to the Kremlin propaganda which actively publicizes “the atrocities of Ukrainian Nazis.” The most recent example: the Svoboda activists beat up a Russian voter in front of the Russian embassy building in Kiev where he had been trying to vote in the parliamentary elections on September 18, 2016. The story about this incident was aired by the Ukrainian TV channel 112 and was actively rebroadcast by the Kremlin media.35

Radicals from Svoboda also periodically attack their compatriots in Kiev. For example on August 31, 2015, during protests in front of the Ukrainian parliament a party activist threw a live grenade at the police as a result of which four law enforcement officers guarding the perimeter were killed.36

After Viktor Yanukovych fled the country the Party of Regions headed by him was dispersed. So, prior to the 2014 parliamentary elections the Kremlin needed a new loyal political force which would represent its interests in the Ukrainian politics and the future Verkhovna Rada.

Several organizations competed for the position of the chief pro-Kremlin power.
January 2015, in the heat of active warfare in eastern Ukraine, Bloc representative Yulia Lyovochkina accused the Ukrainian government of «building a wall with Russia» and called on her European colleagues to act against that.39

Moreover, bills brought before the parliament by the Opposition Bloc members are apparently first approved by the Russian President’s administration. This follows from the email correspondence between the Russian President’s Aide Vladislav Surkov with his subordinates, which has been hacked and published for public access.

Viktor Medvedchuk is the person often named as one of the key ideologists representing the interests of Vladimir Putin in Ukrainian politics. He is connected with the president of Russia not just politically but also via family ties: back in 2007 Putin became godfather to his son. Medvedchuk assumed the role of the intermediary between Kiev and the Kremlin’s appointees on the invaded Donbass territories. In 2014 National Security and Defense Council head Andriy Parubiy stated that it was Medvedchuk who was the channel of financing extremist groups that organized the armed uprising in the cities of Donbass.40

The primary lever of the Kremlin’s pressure on Ukraine has been and still remains the Ukrainian company Naftogaz – a state-owned monopoly that has been for many years criticized of corruption. Naftogaz controls more than 80% of extraction, transportation, and sales of gas and oil on the territory of Ukraine, and fully services the supplying of Russian gas to Europe. Many Ukrainian politicians are unable to resist the temptation to line their pockets using Naftogaz schemes.

The face-off to occupy this niche in 2014 was between the Strong Ukraine party created by Serhiy Tihipko who had served as Vice Premier-Minister in Yanukovych’s government, and the Opposition Bloc which former Party of Regions veterans built on the crumbling of the old party’s structure.

In the end, the Kremlin bet on the Opposition Bloc and appointed Vladislav Surkov, Aide to the Russian President, as its Moscow handler. The cause for this most likely lay in the fact that the Bloc leaders were dependent on the Kremlin and thus were easily controlled. As a result of the elections the Bloc received 9.43% of the vote and formed a 27-member parliamentary party.37

Vladimir Landik, former Party of Regions associate of the so-called «Oppositionists,» frankly speaks about the Bloc defending the interests of Vladimir Putin. «If they say one word unfavorable to the Kremlin, they will immediately lose their assets in Russia. They transferred everything there. The Bloc leaders’ billions are safe kept by their best friend Putin. Moscow keeps the former ‘Regionalis’ on the hook with money and blackmail.» «Putin gave to the Party of Regions money, let them structure shady gas and oil schemes, but demanded that they keep their assets in Russia. And now what? ‘Yours yesterday is ours today.’»

Moreover, bills brought before the parliament by the Opposition Bloc members are apparently first approved by the Russian President’s administration. This follows from the email correspondence between the Russian President’s Aide Vladislav Surkov with his subordinates, which has been hacked and published for public access.

Viktor Medvedchuk is the person often named as one of the key ideologists representing the interests of Vladimir Putin in Ukrainian politics. He is connected with the president of Russia not just politically but also via family ties: back in 2007 Putin became godfather to his son. Medvedchuk assumed the role of the intermediary between Kiev and the Kremlin’s appointees on the invaded Donbass territories. In 2014 National Security and Defense Council head Andriy Parubiy stated that it was Medvedchuk who was the channel of financing extremist groups that organized the armed uprising in the cities of Donbass.

There are plenty of examples of how the Opposition Bloc represents the Kremlin’s interests. For example, in
Oleksandr Onyshchenko. When Yanukovych headed the country, Onyshchenko was a member of the Party of Regions. However, in the last elections he ended up in the Verkhovna Rada through a majority constituency and joined the People’s Will parliamentary group.

Onyshchenko has long been connected to Yanukovych by business partnership. In Kiev Onyshchenko is considered the key oligarch in the sphere of gas extraction. According to Ukrainian parliamentary Tetiana Chornovol, Onyshchenko was a long-time manager in Yanukovych’s team and oversaw his business in the area of natural gas extraction.

Chornovol notes that in 2008 Yanukovych’s people started to transfer ownership of gas extraction businesses to shell companies so that state-owned wells could later not be returned to the state. «And that is when Onyshchenko first appeared in the public eye. He turned up as director of a company called Nadra Geocenter, which had been created in order for Yanukovych to receive income from the extraction of domestic natural gas,» says Chornovol.41

The Onyshchenko operating scheme was as follows. Private companies extracted gas under joint operation agreements with Ukrgazdobycha state company (itself a subsidiary of Naftogaz Ukraine). A joint venture was created, the state company transferred the use of wells to it, and a private investor brought in the funds and provided the labor, and also received the right to sell the extracted gas. That way instead of the state budget the money ended up in the pockets of those who controlled the joint ventures.

The aforementioned Nadra Geocenter Company where Onyshchenko was listed as director became part of the «Yanukovych Family» business empire and received from Ukrgazdobycha control over dozens of wells. (It is notable that the last agreement to transfer control over wells was signed on the day the Maidan protests began.)

After the flight of Yanukovych, his minion Onyshchenko basically became the owner of gas extracting assets including Nadra Geocenter, Has, Karpatnadrainvest, Plast, Gazovy Alyans, and a host of other companies. That’s how he became the key natural gas oligarch of Ukraine.

In the summer of 2016 Oleksandr Onyshchenko fell under suspicion of creating schemes to illegally sell gas and was named in a criminal case brought under the penal code section «grand scale embezzlement of state property.»
According to law enforcement, Onyshchenko’s companies caused the state losses totaling 3 billion Hryvnia: 1.6 billion were proceeds from the sales of natural gas to middlemen and transferred out through shell companies, and more than 1.3 billion were unpaid land use rent. It should be noted that the implementation of such a scheme could be made possible only with the cooperation of Ukrgazdobycha and Naftogaz officials.

The Onyshchenko case illustrates how the Ukrainian criminal oligarchs’ interests coincide with those of the Kremlin. Returning Ukraine back into the sphere of the Kremlin’s influence is as beneficial to Putin as it is to oligarchs like Onyshchenko. The Kremlin’s propaganda and the oligarchs’ money hit the same target – the new Ukrainian government.

According to the former prime minister of Ukraine Arseniy Yatsenyuk, vast amounts of money were spent by Onyshchenko specifically to remove the government. «A mass media campaign was financed, politicians in the parliament were paid to come out to the podium and lie. For 10 months, $3 million a month went toward removing the government. That was because the government did not give Onyshchenko the ability to implement policies,» says Yatsenyuk.42

After the criminal case was brought, Oleksandr Onyshchenko fled abroad. In December 2016 he stated that he was in possession of damaging information about the Ukrainian leadership; that allegedly he had secretly recorded negotiations with President Poroshenko and was planning to make it public. The Kremlin’s propaganda actively carried on this story.

However, it soon came to light that handlers from the Kremlin stood behind Onyshchenko’s actions. Mass media published a video recording made immediately before Onyshchenko’s broadcast on one of Russia’s state TV channels. An instructor’s voice is heard in the recording, preparing Onyshchenko for the interview and explaining exactly how the member of the Parliament should talk about his relationship with the Ukrainian President:

«I won’t be asking questions right now because it will seem like they’re leading questions, leading... That is, cannot ask leading questions. So now you start with a phrase like this. He will now turn on, pause – one second, and you say: ‘But the situation where I considered him a partner then changed.’ Because that’s how it is... that is the truth. But the situation where I considered him a partner then changed.»

Soon the «instructor» became known as well. He turned out to be the aforementioned Viktor Zubritsky – creator of Channel u2 which is associated with the name of the former MVD head Zakharchenko.

Soon the «damaging information» was published as well. However, instead of the previously announced secret recording of negotiations with President Poroshenko the public was provided with a recording of Onyshchenko’s conversation with one of his colleagues from the Ukrainian Parliament in some shady joint.
NATIONAL INTERESTS OF RUSSIA

Russia is critically interested in maintaining peaceful and good neighboring relations with surrounding countries. This guarantees our state economic advantages and political stability. And there is no doubt that it corresponds with the national interests of Russia.

However, instead of improving relations with the world around, Putin maintains a continuous policy of aggressively bringing to heel those countries which he sees as being in the realm of the Kremlin’s geopolitical influence. A broad arsenal of means is used for that: persuasion by propaganda, financial support of loyal parties and journalists, corruption, economic pressure, political blackmail, and finally direct military intervention.

Such hybrid aggression casts a shadow of doubt on the effectiveness of the European security systems, the vulnerability of which became obvious with the onset of Putin’s campaign against Ukraine. It should be noticed that the Kremlin strategists skillfully use methods of external pressure on Ukraine as well as ‘agents’ inside the country – above all, local oligarchs interested in the reinstatement of the old ways.

The outcome of the showdown between the Kremlin and Ukraine will also directly affect the future of Russia and Europe. If Putin’s unrelenting pressure proves fruitful, and Kiev returns into the domain of the Kremlin influence, then there is no doubt that the Russian president will attempt applying the same methods towards other countries of the former USSR. Putin’s obvious targets are Moldova, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. However, there are also risks for the Baltic States, in spite of their NATO membership.

Putin has proven more than once that he is a threat to his citizens as well as the surrounding countries. And the less counteraction he encounters, the more aggressive his actions will become.
“I don’t believe that friendship with Russia is bad. But I don’t like it when ‘friendship’ is forced by means of bribery and violence.”

BORIS NEMTSOV