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“WILL THE REAL REVISIONIST PLEASE STAND UP?” NOTES FROM THE PROJECT GRAY SYMPOSIUM RUSSIAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE GRAY ZONE

The U.S. Army Special Operations Center of Excellence Project Gray initiative seeks to engage in timely dialogue about critical issues of U.S. national security. Those efforts hit the mark in this year’s *Russian Engagement in the Gray Zone Symposium* at the National Defense University. Hosted at Fort McNair by the College of International Security, and supported locally by the College’s Joint Special Operations Master of Arts program at Fort Bragg, the event highlighted a range of scholarly, U.S. government, and partner-nation perspectives on the nature and goals of Russian foreign policy. The primary purpose was educational—directed through a configuration of active roundtable discussions and direct engagement between Maj. Gen. James B. Linder, commanding general, U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School and CISA students.

As with the Gray Zone-focused event last year, debate defined the process as much as the outcome. Whether dealing with the choice of titles — *Russian engagement vs. aggression* — or the very definition of the Gray Zone as a *place on the map, type of threat or paradigm for policy making*, participants entered into and moved the conversation into fruitful areas from the start. At its core, the symposium raised a central theme that addressed whether or not Russia is in fact a *revisionist* power, and if so, considers itself one. The heart of this question rests in part on contending perspectives about the role of historical narratives, and how they do or do not find traction within Russia’s long-standing sphere of influence.

Ukraine factored heavily into the debates, as did the Kremlin’s use of the Compatriot Policy to “protect” ethnic Russians and those who support

Russian interests living in the Baltics, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Balancing some local perspectives hostile to Russian influence operations in the region and beyond, against other local grievances against the West in favor of Russian interpretations of events, the symposium’s participants presented a nuanced picture of the complexities facing not only the United States and its partner nations in the region, but also Russian foreign policy itself.

As with other historic empires, Russian international goals have expanded from the regional hegemony of the Tsars, through the globalist empire of the Soviet Union. Today, it combines aspects of both through attempted control over the “near abroad” — that zone where Russian political, military, economic and social influence predominates local governments and other external great powers — with broader reach into Syria, the European Union and China, all with a universal anti-Western rhetoric. As a result, uncertainty remains about Moscow’s intentions and capabilities to meet them. In particular, the symposium asked what each of Russia’s imperial epochs communicates about the types and resilience of long-standing Russian interests. In posing that question, the more fundamental question arose if Russia is rather the status quo power, and the United States the revisionist challenger in contrast.

The issue of defining revisionism also touched on how the United States and Russia approach their respective interests, the policies used to achieve them and how each perceives the constraints facing their actions in a broader global context. Discus-

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Subject-matter experts engaged the audience at the Project Gray, Russian Engagement in the Gray Zone Symposium, at the National Defense University October 19-20, 2016.

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sions about the role of democratic accountability in the West pointed to Russia's otherwise largely unconstrained propaganda machine, and the view that Russian policy assumes a continuation of the Cold War competition by other means. These topics then branched out into deeper analysis of Russian domestic systems, their vulnerability to democratic messaging from external actors, and ultimately, prospects for President Vladimir Putin to retain and expand his personal grasp on power at home as much as abroad.

Undergirding those debates, the place of *hegemony* as a driving force in Russian engagement in the Gray Zone arose in several panel discussions. However, one area that needs further examination is the concept of Russian hegemony as something other than overt control. Instead, it points to a form of political *opportunism* that often stymies U.S. and Western counter-narrative efforts.

First, the message from the Kremlin states clearly that the West, and the United States in particular, meddles endlessly in foreign countries, often to everyone's detriment. Accordingly, this has created the problems in Iraq, as well as failed to solve deeper problems in places like the Balkans. In contrast, Russia presents itself as a bastion of stability, with supporting evidence from counter-liberal movements springing up in Europe and the U.S. itself.

Second, this "war of ideas" is at the heart of Russian views of the current global environment, one that bears similarities to U.S. approaches, despite some very important differences. *Indirect warfare*, rather than overt matching against the otherwise superior military capabilities of the West, is the hallmark of Russian strategy. Whether it is called hybrid, state-sponsored 4th generation or political warfare, the hyper-connectivity of information and its use by state and non-state actors factors heavily into Russian influence

operations. These also find support through "lawfare" — the manipulation of existing international laws by exploiting their definitional vagaries — as much as outright military deployments through either show-of-force exercises along contested borders, or direct occupation, both appearing around Georgia, the Baltics and Ukraine.

Third, Syria shows that Russia can and will stop U.S. destabilization efforts, as defined from the Kremlin's perspective on what a good solution to the Arab Spring looks like. As one panelist described, support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime relies more on Russian interests to poke the Americans in the eye, rather than any basis of popular support from the current desolate "astroturf" of Syrian civil society. Other panelists connected the migrant crisis in Europe as another form of indirect warfare to destabilize Western consensus on everything from Russian sanctions, to the very nature of security and identity in a democratic political system.

Taken as a whole then, Russian engagement in the Gray Zone focuses on control of the imperial near abroad, shaping operations to expand a political buffer zone in Eastern Europe, all the while reaching globally for status. Facing that challenge, what can the United States and its democratic allies do in response? Most important would be to *retake the strategic initiative*.

Competitive smear campaigns against Putin personally, or against the closed and corrupt system of patronage surrounding him, will not likely yield fruitful results in either countering Russian influence operations abroad, or within Russia itself. Instead, as seen in the polarized, politicized information "wars" between the right and left in the United States, bashing only serves to reinforce the narratives each side holds about itself and the evils of the other group. Rather than go that route, a more effective method would be twofold.

First, it means recognizing the valid Russian perspective that the United States has in fact encircled the Motherland through NATO expansion in Eastern Europe, pro-Western (and by default) anti-Russian democracy building in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as U.S. counterterrorism partnerships in Central Asia. The key here is not to justify the Russian perspective, but to acknowledge the footing on which it rests in order to do the more important work of strategic communication. Specifically, the message from the U.S. should emphasize what the West does best — *responsive government and local business development*. These sound a lot like democracy and foreign aid, but the messaging distinctions are important.

Responsivity does not require the overtones of Western liberalism, instead allowing for whatever moral, philosophical, economic or ethnic makeup the electorate chooses as the basis for their political system and who governs it. At the same time, it also calls for the state to provide and protect space for

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Col. Patrick Duggan and Dr. Sebastian Gorka participate in a roundtable discussion on the Analysis and Implications of Russian Power Projection.
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public debate about that system and the policies it produces. Doing so sets boundaries on what can and cannot be debated, while recognizing that these boundaries have the potential to change. It thus helps to ensure the centrality of social interests and values, and that the government tasked with promoting them has restraints placed on its actions. The failure to recognize these contributed to the crisis of leadership in Ukraine that sparked the Euromaidan Revolution.

Equally importantly, local business development has less to do with macroeconomic assistance packages between states — with their deeply mixed record of success and failure — and more to do with entrepreneurship through corporate investment in small-scale joint ventures. This can also take the form of microfinance to support local market development and build community accountability between borrowers. Both efforts have deep roots in the evolution of Western capitalism and more recent Eastern variations, and thus can have broad appeal.

Second, the Donbass speaks for itself. The parts of Eastern Ukraine ravaged by Russian-sponsored war stand in stark contrast to the “democratic utopia” Russia portrays out of Crimea, despite of the latter’s clear violations of international law. Whether those regions ever return to Ukraine, as unlikely and ultimately undesired by the locals as that may be, the simple truth is that Russia broke its most effective tool of political influence — an inside track to the democratic process in Ukraine. Without the ability to support pro-Russian sentiment in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea to sway national elections, the Kremlin has resorted to less effective media campaigns and economic strong-arming. Both are certainly formidable weapons against a country struggling to find its way, even if the majority of citizens know the destination lies with the West. However, the strength of the West to counter those influences is equally, if not more so, up to the task.

Promoting legal protections for minority groups, while enshrining that majority values prevail, remains a truism of the Western world view. When combined with the “curb appeal” of life under Western systems of responsive government and local business development, presenting a better alternative to life in Russia or its destructive zones of control is not a hard sell — if the United States and its allies have the will to make the offer. As such, these issues will continue to be part of the ongoing conversation, one greatly supported by the Project Gray initiative. — *Dr. Spencer B. Meredith III, Ph.D., Fulbright Scholar, Associate Professor, Joint Special Operations Master of Arts, College of International Security Affairs, National Defense University.* 

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