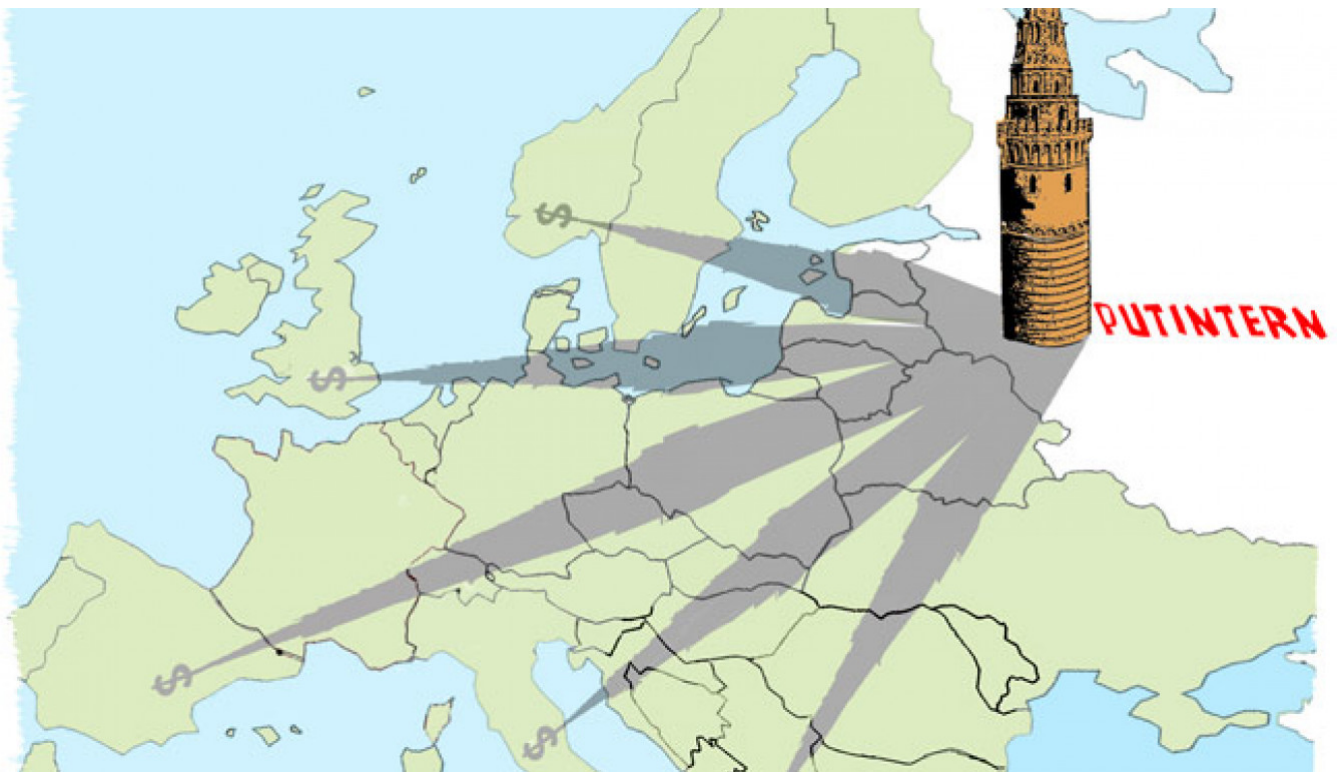


Kremlin's 'Shadow Power' Tarnishes Its Image (Op-Ed)

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

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Russian "hard power" is evident in regular Kremlin parades and the highly irregular war in the Donbass. Its "soft power" is distinctly limited: Surveys show that the country is generally neither liked nor trusted worldwide and certainly not seen as a model to follow except by a handful of would-be "strong men" admiring Putin's macho poise and tight grip on power.

But there is another kind of power, covert and negative, but this "shadow power" is something Moscow still possesses.

This was highlighted last week by the release of the annual report of the BIS, the Czech security service. It notes the continued high levels of Russian intelligence activity throughout the country. (Western nations pretty unanimously report intelligence activity and penetration at Cold War levels.)

However, according to the BIS, these spies and networks are not so much gathering

intelligence as using agents as active instruments of policy, from continuing to fight for a share of the Czech Republic's power industry through to spreading propaganda.

The BIS warns that "Russia continued its attempts to exert influence over the Russian community in the Czech Republic, or more specifically [tried] to establish pro-Kremlin organizations and individuals." To this end, it claims "Russia is creating a structure in Europe drawing on the concept of the [Soviet] Comintern (the Communist International)."

The Comintern was essentially a tool of ideological power, an instrument to spread propaganda and recruit agents, allies and convenient dupes. While Stalin's empire was hardly a genuine expression of Marxist-Leninist ideals, it was able to veil itself enough in the red flag to be able to claim to be an exemplar of its brave new world.

What, by contrast, can today's "Putintern" offer? The first, and most obvious answer is money. The Re:Baltica group of investigative journalists spent a year tracking the payments in the Baltic region made by Rossotrudnichestvo — the federal agency responsible for ethnic Russians abroad — and other Kremlin-funded organizations.

To be fair, some of the money supported genuine cultural interchange and measures such as translating Estonian laws into Russian that help the local population. However, according to Re:Baltica, the majority went to supporting individuals campaigning for supposedly downtrodden local Russians and niche media outlets likewise pushing a Kremlin-convenient line.

If the Putintern cannot win Russia many firm friends, it can at least divide, distract and dismay its enemies. With no real ideology the Putintern can become an axis of the unhappy, a place for Westerners to work on their grudges and conspiracy theories. It is noteworthy that the BIS report cites both left- and right-wing extremists as coming under Russian influence.

After all, it doesn't matter if you are a right-winger unhappy with multiculturalism and LGBT rights, a leftist suspicious of globalization and modern capitalism, an anti-Semite, and Islamophobe, or that contradiction in terms, a "9/11 truther," there is a place for you in the Putintern.

Much of this is fostered by Russian media sources, but there is also a role for the spooks in generating what the BIS call "influence and propaganda structures." They provide cutouts, for example, to fund those useful groups with whom the "overt" Russian agencies can't be seen in bed or who might not like to know they are getting Moscow's gold.

However, the intelligence services also seek to develop Russia's "shadow power" in even more insidious ways. For instance, many security services, especially in Central and Northern Europe, warn that they are trying to recruit, corrupt and compromise rising young politicians and opinion-formers at a local and national level. The scope for other "active measures," from provocations to subversion, is considerable.

Of course, there is little room for the dewy-eyed innocent in geopolitics. Every country spies on everyone else, including its own allies. Misinformation, disinformation, spin and subterfuge will always be part of the game.

However, perhaps precisely because its hard power assets are already deployed to their fullest and its soft power all but absent, Moscow seems especially prone to seek this "shadow power" somewhere in between, the power not to force, nor to inspire, but to manipulate and disempower.

That can be a useful asset, to be sure, but only in the short term and only at a cost. The cost is not so much in rubles — so far, there's no evidence the economic crisis is also affecting the spies — but in credibility and legitimacy. The more the Kremlin relies on such methods, the more toxic it makes its own brand.

Mark Galeotti is professor of global affairs at New York University.

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