

Putin\222s Game Plan
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Russia is no longer the Soviet Union, an enemy with nukes they were ready to use. They held captive a huge empire, part of which was a continuation of their 19th century occupation of the Muslim Silk Road states in Central Asia and across Siberia to the Pacific. The other part was taken at the end of World War II: most of eastern Europe, because their troops had "liberated" them.

In the almost half century of the Cold War, the United States and western Europe were able to contain the Soviets so that they could not take new territory. It appeared to be a standoff until, unexpectedly the Soviet Union collapsed. The combination of our spending and their grim rule over people increasingly unwilling to put up with it brought them down. It was only luck that kept the Soviets and the US from going to war with nuclear weapons.

Vladimir Putin, a minor Communist intelligence officer in East Germany as the Berlin Wall came down, watched this fall bitterly. As Russia descended into anarchy, he found an opportunity to fill a power gap at the top (replacing the alcoholic President Yeltsin, promising to protect him from prosecution). He gathered a small group of former KGB operatives and they seized the opportunity to convert all the major Soviet state assets into private wealth for themselves. This was probably the biggest heist ever managed in Europe. Putin and his clique have looted half the wealth of Russia.

Putin is a very smart man. He was bitter about the collapse of the USSR, hated what he considered the corrupt and chaotic nature of liberal democracy, and resolved to continue his war with the west without resorting to war, which he knew Russia would not win. Communism was dead as an ideological governing system, but Russian nationalism, a thousand years old, was still alive and well. Russia\222s history was always autocratic, the Czars replaced by dictators, the nobility replaced by oligarchs and rubber-stamped parliament. There was little fuss over his running Russia, a president for life.

Putin\222s long career as an intelligence operative primed him to continue Russia\222s long policies of fighting against the liberal West. As a short man, he learned to wrestle, a sport that does not necessarily depend upon size. Russia, despite its size, has a small economy, much of it under the table and in bribes. They manufacture little that anyone wants. They are too far north to have much agriculture that can feed them. Life expectancy is poor, thanks to alcoholism and women unwilling to bear many children. For them to wage war against the mighty, flourishing, and wealthy west, they would have to be clever. And clever they have been in adapting one of their oldest tools, disinformation (fraudulent documents and conspiracy theories) to undermine the West.

Our own Intelligence Community figured this out during the very strange 2016 election process in which an unlikely rogue, Donald J. Trump, won the election, largely with Russian help. When outgoing President Obama tried to sound the alert, Senate leader Mitch McConnell refused to make it bipartisan. Why would he? His party was the beneficiary of Russian help, and that mattered more to him than the country\222s welfare.

The same use of social media to plant fake news is being used throughout Europe. In Western Europe, it is planting discord in an attempt to elect right-wing nationalists who will leave the EU. In Eastern Europe, once Soviet states have reverted to dictatorship and resurrected their old racism. They even conned the British to exit the European Union, a move that will diminish the UK and threaten the EU.

Russia is already working to damage our next election campaign. They find already existing conflicts, underground antipathies, and work to make them worse. Our Intelligence Community is on to them, although Trump and the Republicans are unwilling to act. But most of us will not be blindsided this time. There is no end game to this Russian gambit. They can only be spoilers, not inspirers. We still have the better game: our democracy.

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