

Russia's Policy of Deception and Denial

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A policy of deception and denial is the cornerstone of Russia's overarching strategy of confusion, paralysis and ultimately defeat of the opponent.

Consistency, conviction and perseverance are key words to describe the policy of deception and denial. The cases presented below shed light on the consistent pattern of President Vladimir Putin's government to deceive others and depict Russia as the one that comes to the aid of the underdogs, whether in Georgia, Ukraine or elsewhere. Syria is a special case where Russia cannot abandon its military bases to aggressive Western powers. As a result, Russia paints an image of an allegedly bellicose West that wants to destroy what remains of Syria, while Russia is depicted as defending the independence and sovereignty of the country against the obtrusive West. In other words, Russia is good, attentive and caring, while the West is evil, irresponsible and careless.

President Putin has consistently pursued and implemented his policy of deception and denial since the outbreak of the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, a war which Russia blames on Georgia and in which Russia was obliged to come to the aid of the underdogs Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Despite the ceasefire agreement between Russia and Georgia signed on 12 August 2008, which provided for the withdrawal of Russian and Georgian forces to pre-conflict positions, Russian troops did not retreat to the positions they held before the beginning of hostilities, but remained in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the pretext of defending the territories against aggressive and unpredictable Georgian policies. The subsequent Russian policy of integrating Georgian territory in South Ossetia is seen by Putin's government as a normal thing, and weakened Georgia can do little about it if it doesn't want to provoke Russia; Georgia simply complains about being encircled by Russia. Thus Russia can portray its weaker

Photo: Kremlin



President Putin has consistently pursued a policy of deception and denial.

opponent as uncontrolled, unpredictable and revengeful. According to Russian politicians, Georgia continues to have a grudge against the independent states Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and one fine day – in the not-too-distant future – Georgia will try to reclaim both areas. Even if this is far from the truth, it is the goal of Putin's government to slander the Georgian government. Consequently, Russia always holds others responsible for any misconduct and represents Russian actions, such as the occupation of territories, as a humanitarian gesture for vulnerable minorities protected by Russia from militant Georgia. The fact that Russia is occupying Abkhazia and South Ossetia and that the occupied territories simply have no choice but to be pro-Russian is denied by Moscow, although the reality in the occupied territories looks quite different. Russian politicians would immediately reject the author's analysis, but that is to be expected. Russia has applied the

same strategy to the annexation of Crimea, which was supposedly necessary to defend the endangered Russian population.

We must not forget that President Putin has repeatedly said that Russia did not annex Crimea, but rather accepted the will of the Russian people living on the peninsula to return to Russia through the referendum on 16 March 2014, which would make the whole story more credible and legally binding. Putin's statement was reiterated by Sergei Lavrov, Foreign Minister, when he said that Moscow "will respect the will of the Crimean people".

Russian media then spread the story that Crimea is legally bound to Russia, and throughout Russia people did not understand why the West showed such a hostile attitude. However, the referendum was considered illegal by most members of the European Union, the United States and Canada, as it took place at a time when Russian soldiers were stationed on the peninsula. Thirteen members of the United Nations Security Council voted in favour of a resolution invalidating the referendum, but Russia vetoed it and China abstained. A resolution of the UN General Assembly was adopted on 27 March 2014 by 100 votes in favour, 11 against and 58 abstentions, invalidating the referendum and confirming Ukraine's territorial integrity. Nevertheless, Russia refuses to recognise the resolution, which underlines Russia's contempt for the international community and shows that Russia's national interests take precedence over the resolutions of the international community.

In addition, the Kremlin's version of the Crimea story was disseminated in English-language media outlets to convince short-sighted Westerners that it was indeed the desire of the Russian majority in Crimea (about 60 percent) to rejoin Russia and not remain part of Ukraine. Whether a similar strategy can be applied in the Baltic States and Kazakhstan, all countries with a large Russian population, cannot be discussed in this article, but this possibility cannot be ignored. In addition, a wealth of articles on this topic has been published since March 2014.

The claim that the people of Crimea welcomed unification with Russia only at gunpoint is absurd, the Kremlin claims. The Russian soldiers on the peninsula were only responsible for the proper conduct of the

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referendum, and that was all. For inexplicable reasons, the West rejected the Russian narrative and unanimously imposed economic sanctions against Russia (with the exception of Turkey as a member of NATO's Western alliance), which still exist despite President Putin's "good will" to improve relations with the West. Putin laments that his country is punished for a non-existent crime (annexation of Crimea) that Russia did not commit because it was the free will of the Crimean Russians to belong to Russia. Sanctions, however, did not prevent Russia from continuing its policy of deception and denial.

If one believes the Kremlin, then the subsequent war in eastern Ukraine has shown that there was no Russian military involvement and that since March 2014 no Russian soldier has fought on the side of the separatists. Western reports of this kind are allegedly shameful lies that are supposed to damage the reputation of the Russian military and President Putin as commander-in-chief. If the European Union and NATO member states provide sound evidence of Russia's involvement in various operations around the world, the Russians claim that this evidence is either not concrete enough or is deliberately intended to denigrate Russia. Russia's refusal to take responsibility for misconduct is therefore in line with its policy of deception and denial. Russia does not intend to change this policy in the near future, as this policy has repeatedly acquitted Russia of misconduct, while the evildoers in the West have repeatedly failed to provide sufficient evidence of Russia's involvement.

In another Russian narrative, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is said to have called on the Russian military to defend Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, while the West came to Syria without invitation and should therefore leave sooner rather than later. Once again, Russia appears as a friendly supporter of humanitarian aid, while the West is a warmonger who does not want to leave Syria. At the same time, Russia has no plans to leave Syria in the foreseeable future, although it often says it is withdrawing militarily. The claim to withdraw from Syria has already become a recurring proverb in Russia. And once again, according to Russian interpretation, Russia is right and the West is wrong. Since the West is involved in the Syrian military operation, it should then also pay for the reconstruction of the country after the war. Yet another Russian narrative refers to the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia Skripal in March 2018, who were allegedly poisoned by Russia. As in the cases mentioned above, Russia denies



Photo: Kremlin

At the 70th session of the UN General Assembly on 28 September 2015, President Putin declared that the West had staged a coup in Ukraine.

any involvement. It also rejects all allegations from the United Kingdom, because they are allegedly flawed; according to the Kremlin, there are actors who are interested in blaming Russia.

In short, there is a uniform pattern of Russian behaviour based on deception and denial of Russian involvement; any Western evidence is rejected on the grounds that it does not have a sufficient basis and that Russia has acted correctly or is not involved. According to Russian logic, Western accusations are always unfounded and malicious.

This is a consistent pattern, and things will go on like this. In support of the author's claim, I quote James Mattis, US Secretary of Defence, who told reporters in Washington on 27 March 2018: "They remove the badges from the soldiers' uniforms and go to Crimea. They have nothing to do with what the separatists are doing in eastern Ukraine. I'm not sure how they can say that, but they are doing things they obviously want to deny." This has been Russia's way out of a delicate situation. Whether or not the West believes in the Russian narrative is irrelevant to President Putin and his government; having an honest face and smiling behind the backs of naive Europeans and Americans is Russia's way of outwitting and dividing the EU and US politicians and ordinary citizens. We must not forget that Putin has many supporters in the West who, despite repeated fraud, still want to deal with Putin's Russia; Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the UK Labour Party, for example, said on 21 March 2018 that he would "do business" with Russian President Vladimir Putin, although he claimed "all fingers point to Russia on Salisbury", namely to the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia Skripal.

Russia's Western admirers can indeed be described as Putin's useful idiots of the 21st century. Many of them live in the Member States of the European Union and propagate Putin's Russia and thus enjoy Western fundamental freedoms, while at the same time praising Putin's autocratic regime and,

surprise, surprise, they see no discrepancy between the freedoms taken for granted and the support of the autocratic regime.

So far the Russian policy of deception and denial has worked like magic in various places around the world; Moscow has little reason to change it even if the West continues to scold Russia. Moreover, Russian politicians feel that the West can always be outwitted, because the West needs Russia more than Russia needs the West. This prevailing view finds support among Western economic circles and lobbyists who are campaigning for a rapprochement with Putin's Russia. After all, these circles are interested in maintaining economic relations with Russia despite Russia's persistent misconduct, which they prefer to overlook. In addition to the moneyed circles, various political left- and right-wing parties are in favour of maintaining cordial relations with Putin's Russia. Once again, Putin's useful idiots continue to stand up for Putin's Russia, despite the latter's consistent policy of deception and denial. It is uncertain whether the West will come to its senses and understand that Putin's Russia is a destructive force, but one thing is certain: Putin's useful idiots will not disappear from the international stage and their numbers will not decline but rise; their voices will be heard constantly, and Putin will continue to count on their support, as in a good old-fashioned marriage.

After all, Russia's policy of deception and denial is consistent. Those who are vulnerable become believers and loyal supporters; they are 100% convinced of Putin's sincerity and become Putin's useful idiots at home and abroad who perceive the West as aggressive and expansive. Russia's policy of deception and denial, including Russia's refusal to take responsibility for misconduct, is a successful strategy for Russia to act from a position of weakness. It remains to be seen whether the West will accept Russia's manoeuvring. It can be said, however, that this is an ongoing issue on which we have not yet heard the last word