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Russia's Secret Weapon

By Mark Galeotti

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Forget "polite people" sneaking across Russia's borders. Forget Russian rockets slamming into targets across eastern Ukraine. Forget even the "gas weapon" — the economic weapon that holds Europe hostage. As far as Moscow is concerned, its secret weapon is the division, distraction and short-term thinking of the West: the attention-deficit disorder society.

Isn't that a little harsh? It's not that hard to see how such a view predominates. Crimea is already old news, a fait accompli.

Outside the Netherlands and Australia, the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 shoot-down is likewise at best a below-the-fold story. Given a combination of the disruption brought about by war, willful Russian muddying of the waters and the time and difficulty involved in reaching any rock-solid conclusions about the crime's cause and perpetrators, a public — and, indeed, political elite — conditioned to instant opinion gratification has moved on.

In the West, the gruesome atrocities of the Islamic State, the equally gruesome spread of Ebola and even the relative flexibility of the latest iPhone appear to have become more important than the undeclared but very real war being fought just outside NATO and the EU's

picket fence.

After all, to the Kremlin, this is a conflict fought not so much with guns and tanks, nor even with gas and money. Instead, it is a challenge of will, determination and endurance. The West has all the face cards, but Moscow plans to outwit and outwait it.

To this end, it becomes crucial to do everything to encourage the distraction of the West. Russia's security agencies have genuine concerns about the Islamic State, for example: In the short term, it is drawing militants away from the North Caucasus, but in due course, they will be back, with new experience and new allies.

But to the Kremlin, it is a godsend, not just a new and more pressing concern for the West, but also a point of leverage. Let us help with these nasty jihadis, the Russians can hint, these shaggy barbarians who are our common enemy. Of course, if we become your allies in the Middle East, or even just hold back from the interference and obstructionism you know we could deploy — remember Syria? — then we'd expect a certain quid pro quo.

Likewise, the new model of Russian political warfare in the West comes not as a tidal wave, but through a dozen meandering streams: Russophile "useful idiots," surprisingly well-funded fringe parties and single-issue lobbies with divisive messages, RT and similar media outlets, funny little think tanks with empty offices but full bank accounts, business lobbies, and so on.

Their role is not so much to convince the mainstream that Putin is their friend and Russia is the model to adopt — good luck with that — but instead to hold up a distorting and magnifying lens to the flaws, conspiracy theories and crackpots of the democratic world. See, they say, you're no better: What grounds do you have to criticize Russia? And besides, look at this shiny problem over here, isn't that far more important? Don't pay attention to Ukraine, pay attention to this, instead.

The sad truth of the matter is that there is considerable mileage in this strategy. Washington is far more concerned with the Middle East — and, let's be honest, the November midterms — than Ukraine. The European Union's response has been encouraging in some ways, but also marked by massive disputes between states over the best response, driven by national self-interest and personal rivalries.

Nonetheless, it is glib to assume that this attention-deficit disorder is all there is to the West. When the first sanctions were applied, back in March, I keenly remember that Russian Foreign Ministry people, and scholars and experts who worked with and advised them, all airily reassured me that this wouldn't last six months, that by then the West would have lost the interest or the will to wrestle with Russia and come up with some new reset.

Fair enough, that's how it has always been in the past, and especially in light of the disastrous original U.S. "reset" policy, as well as the unseemly haste to return to business as usual after the 2008 Georgian war, then that may have seemed a plausible project. But we're already into the eighth month of sanctions.

That the West is not terribly good at holding its focus on threats that are not obvious and immediate is perfectly true — just look at the sluggish response to climate change,

perhaps the most serious existential threat to us all.

Its commitment to transparency, plurality of opinions and legality does indeed hinder quick responses, apart from bombing insurgents in the Middle East, but that's another story. This is a community of different nations with different interests and values, granted.

Nonetheless, for all that, there does seem to be a genuine sea change taking place in attitudes toward Russia.

There may be pragmatic engagement, but I can't see many serious leaders thinking Putin is an ally, or even anything other than a dangerous and unpredictable neighbor. Nor is the sanction regime likely to be wiped away any day soon.

If the West has attention-deficit disorder, it is at least a high-functioning attention-deficit disorder, and it can certainly learn whom to trust. It may not yet have a strategy to do something about its nemesis in the Kremlin, but it will. Putin's secret weapon may yet turn out to be his downfall.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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