Discolored Revolutions: Information Warfare in Russia’s Grand Strategy

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The democratic West and the Russian Federation are in the midst of an information war. Or to be more precise, the Russian government is waging an information war against the West. While the notion that Moscow has been using information tools to undermine the West will not be new to most readers, what may be surprising is that Russia perceives this as a defensive conflict. In Moscow’s perception, Western governments have long been waging information warfare by using a grand strategy centered on democratic values that seeks to overthrow authoritarian regimes by creating and controlling democratizing civil resistance movements, also known as color revolutions. Unbeknownst to many in the West, the Kremlin believes that Western governments are deploying this strategy against Moscow to topple the regime of Vladimir Putin and replace it with a Western-style democracy. In response, the Kremlin has sought to develop its own color revolution weapon by copying what it believes the West is doing, except in its political inverse: instead of promoting liberal values to topple authoritarian governments, Moscow has engaged in a grand strategic pivot that centers illiberal, or what it calls “traditional” values—including racism, homophobia, and misogyny—in an information warfare strategy designed to undermine and eventually overthrow democratic systems.

To understand Moscow’s grand strategic shift, this paper will first look at how the Kremlin understands information warfare as a concept and how it works within the modern security environment. Next, it will examine how Russia’s
security elites believe one powerful form of information warfare—soft power—can be used to create color revolutions in three stages: first, by promoting democratic values; then, by using value promotion to create an internal front in a target country; and finally, by harnessing that front to generate chaotic events. This paper will then use Moscow’s perception of Western information warfare as a framework for understanding its own actions. Applying this framework to Russia’s activities around the globe offers a greater understanding of how Moscow is waging its information war at the grand strategic level.

**Information Warfare in the Cognitive Domain**

Information warfare is defined by one NATO program as “an operation conducted in order to gain an information advantage over the opponent. It consists in controlling one’s own information space, protecting access to one’s own information, while acquiring and using the opponent’s information, destroying their information systems and disrupting the information flow.”¹ Military analyst Tim Thomas explains that Russian information warfare contains two components, that which exerts “information/psychological and information/technical influence on a nation’s decision-making system,” and “the technical sphere.”² The technical sphere, which includes cybersecurity, is well understood. Less well understood is Russia’s approach to the cognitive or psychological sphere of information warfare, which will be this article’s focus. For the purposes of this article, using Thomas’ framework for the cognitive space, information warfare will be defined as that which exerts an informational or psychological influence over a foreign nation’s decision-making system or its populous in order to gain a strategic advantage for the deployer.

Today, Russia’s security establishment believes that a recent revolution in information and communications technologies (ICTs) has meant that information tools are significantly more powerful and can exert influence over larger-scale populations. In 2004, Lt. Gen. Vladimir Serebryannikov wrote that a revolution in science and technology had enabled the altering of the mentality and psychology of entire nations.³ American analyst Stephen Blank observed in 2013 that “Russian thinkers see [information warfare] and [information operations] as a new means to conduct large-scale political warfare to reshape the thinking of an entire political community.”⁴
together, these quotes explain how the Kremlin sees the revolution in ICTs as dramatically increasing the capacity of information warfare in the current security environment.

General Makhmut Gareyev, the influential Russian military theorist, argued one step further, saying in 2005 that because nuclear weapons have rendered large-scale wars unlikely, “other ways of achieving political objectives have been devised: economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and information warfare. One country after another can be bent into submission using subversive means from within.” Gareyev’s perception of subversion traces to Russian perspectives of the Serbian civil resistance movement in the year 2000 and the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, illuminating what Russia’s security services have come to believe: that information warfare is so powerful, it can be used to overthrow target governments by generating color revolutions.

Countering the Color Revolutions

In the West, color revolutions are viewed as the result of individuals living under oppression standing up for their political rights. Among Russian elites, however, color revolutions are seen as the result of Western information warfare being used to influence populations to overthrow targeted regimes. Including Ukraine’s 2004 Orange revolution and the Arab Spring starting in 2010, among others, the idea that Western governments are behind nearly every democratizing event has hardened into conventional wisdom amongst Russia’s security services. During the 2014 Moscow Conference on International Security (MCIS), the statements of Valery Gerasimov, chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, reflected this belief when he argued that “color revolutions are becoming the main means of [Western countries] achieving [their] political ambitions.” In this perception, democracy promotion and soft power have become central concepts in Moscow’s understanding of information warfare. The perception that western democracy promotion amounts to hostile information warfare explains why organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy have been banned from Russia.

In both the West and Russia, Western soft power is thought of as encompassing both democracy promotion and the bond of attraction that forms between democratic states and with those seeking democracy under authoritarian rule. Among Russian foreign policy elites, soft power in the form of democracy promotion is seen as one of the strongest forms of information warfare. To Moscow, soft power subverts target populations by making them want democracy and serves as the catalyst for overthrowing targeted governments via color revolutions. Vladimir Putin defines soft power as a “matrix of tools and methods to
reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence,” which are used “to develop and provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes, to manipulate the public and to conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries.”

In Putin’s conceptualization of soft power and Gareyev’s belief that states are using subversion to topple governments, we can see the outline of an imagined color revolution weapon that occurs in three stages. In the first stage, Western states engage in democracy promotion. It is worth noting that in Putin’s lexicon, promoting “extremism” is often a reference to promoting democracy. Putin believes Western states engage in democracy promotion as a form of information warfare designed to subvert targeted populations. “Cultural identity, spiritual and moral values, and value codes are the realm of tough competition and sometimes targets of open information warfare and well-orchestrated propaganda attacks,” Putin said at an event on patriotic education in 2012, tellingly noting that “attempts to influence the outlook of entire peoples, the desire to subordinate their will, to impose one’s system of values and concepts are an absolute reality.”

The second stage in Western information warfare is to use democracy promotion to generate a “front” in a target state. In Moscow’s perception, democracy promotion influences the values of a target population by making them want democracy. These pro-democracy groups form a bond of soft power attraction with Western democracies which allows them to serve as a “front” for the hostile state. In his article explaining the mechanics of Western color revolutions, Gerasimov describes pro-democracy opposition groups as “a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state.”

In the final stage, Russia sees Western aggressor states using pro-democracy “fronts” to create chaos in a targeted country—usually by generating protests. The chaos then creates opportunities for Western democracies to achieve political goals, either by using diplomatic tools to install a friendlier government, as in Ukraine, or by using military tools to overthrow a hostile regime, as in Libya in 2011. The prominent Russian analyst Aleksandr Bartosh explains the perception that front groups are used to generate “controlled chaos,” using the example of provoking law enforcement to use unnecessary force. In a 2019 presentation, Gerasimov described a “trojan horse” strategy wherein the United States uses a fifth column—or an internal front controlled by Washington—to destabilize a target country. Gerasimov’s description hews to the Russian perception that the West is using pro-democracy groups as a front to foster color revolutions.
In 2012, Gareyev wrote that there are two primary ways to achieve political goals in the current security environment. One method is through military force; the second is “...the creation of controlled chaos to provoke in the opposing countries various kinds of unrest, overthrowing the unwanted power structures within and disturbing the internal stability of the state, as was done in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan and is carried out today in the Middle East.” Once again, Gareyev argues that strategic stability in the nuclear space means that adversarial nuclear armed states are forced to use subversion against each other to achieve policy goals.12

We can see the full life cycle of color revolutions in the view of Russia’s security establishment in remarks given by Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu during the 2014 Moscow Conference on International Security (MCIS). Shoygu noted that the phenomenon of the “color revolution,” increasingly in the shape of armed conflict, has become a major contributor to destabilizing many regions as “foreign values are being imposed on peoples under the guise of expanding democracy” and “socio-economic and political problems of individual states are being exploited in order to replace nationally-oriented governments with regimes which are controlled from abroad ...”13

Moscow’s perception of the color revolution agenda explains why Putin’s regime felt like it was the target of western information warfare when pro-democracy protests broke out during his 2011-2012 re-election campaign. Putin blamed the protests on Western states broadly and on US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton specifically,14 and said they were funded by “so-called grants.”15

Moscow’s “Traditional” Values-Based Grand Strategy

In Moscow’s understanding of color revolutions, this new type of information warfare is enabled by a values-based approach to foreign policy. This understanding has led some Russian security elites to believe that soft power has become as powerful or more powerful than entire armies. In his writing about color revolutions, retired Russian Col. Gen. Leonid Ivashov said that “the set of measures that the Americans call ‘soft power’ lead to the same effect as if the state had been attacked with all the means of classical wars—with air strikes and invasions of large armies.”16

The notion that democracy serves as the central animating principle of Western states may be referred to as Russia’s sense of Western grand strategy.
Hal Brands defines grand strategy as “a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so.”17 This understanding created a dilemma for Vladimir Putin as he sought to rebuild Russian strength. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the modern Russian state has not had a readily identifiable ideology through which it can generate soft power and utilize modern information warfare. From Moscow's perspective, it needed its own values-based grand strategy to shape and enable its own use of soft power in the modern security environment.

Just as the Kremlin came to perceive modern information warfare as being enabled through a values-based state ideology, the Russian Federation embarked on a grand strategic pivot to promote a new values-based state ideology. Upon returning to the presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin began promoting the idea that the Russian state is a defender and promoter of “traditional values.”

Grand strategy, by its nature, is intimately connected to the domestic politics of a state. As the British army officer J. F. C. Fuller explained it in an early conceptualization of the idea, grand strategy is “the national fabric upon which the war picture . . . is woven.”18 During his 2013 speech to the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin seemed to publicly grapple with the need for a grand strategic pivot. In the speech, Putin described the need for a new national idea, saying that “after 1991 there was the illusion that a new national ideology, a development ideology, would simply appear by itself.” Putin went on to explain that developing this national concept was important because geopolitical influence was dependent on “whether the citizens of a given country consider themselves a nation, to what extent they identify with their own history, values and traditions.” Putin also connected this need to the information domain, saying that a new national ideology was important to develop because one of the main focuses of modern international competition is “ideological-informational.”

Putin continued to think through a new ideology in front of his audience, ruling out both the “fundamental conservatism” of pre-1917 Russia and “extreme, western-style liberalism” for being too “far from reality.” Instead, Putin felt an emphasis on history, values, and traditions would help the Russian state resist pressure from the West, which he viewed as trying to impose foreign values. As Putin continued, he began to tease out a new national ideology that emphasized “traditional values” in contrast to what he considered the moral degradation of social liberalism in the West: “We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan. The excesses of
political correctness have reached the point where people are seriously talking about registering political parties whose aim is to promote paedophilia.” Later in the speech, Putin bemoaned the “failures of multiculturalism” because immigrants “are not able to integrate foreign languages or foreign cultural elements into their societies.”

Putin’s Valdai Discussion Club speech, along with other events, speeches, and a think tank report titled “Putin: World Conservatism’s New Leader,” were all part of a rollout by the Russian government to brand the Russian state as a promoter and defender of “traditional values,” defined in broadly ethno-nationalist and anti-LGBTQ+ terms. This rollout was captured in a 2013 Atlantic article “Vladimir Putin, Conservative Icon” its subtitle reading: “The Russian president is positioning himself as the world’s leading defender of traditional values.” By positioning himself as the “world’s leading defender of traditional values,” Putin developed an ideological framework that unlocked Moscow’s use of soft power by attracting a global coalition of far-right conservatives using ethno-nationalism and anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice.

Putin’s positioning of himself as a far-right conservative leader was logical from a grand strategic perspective. Political scientists have long written about the connection between socially illiberal values like racism and homophobia and politically illiberal values like authoritarianism. For example, in a recent study, Beate Kümper and Andreas Zick found that the more group-focused enmity a person has—which they define as including ethnic racism, anti-immigrant attitudes, sexism, and homophobia, among others—the more authoritarian values that person has. Putin himself intuits the connection between social and political illiberalism. In a 2019 interview with FT, he argued that “the liberal idea’ had ‘outlived its purpose’ as the public turned against immigration, open borders and multiculturalism.” By developing a values-based grand strategy centered on ethno-nationalism and anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice, Putin could undermine the democratic values he views as an existential threat to his regime, while also enabling an offensive information warfare strategy responding to, and mimicking, the West’s color revolution agenda.

Putin's pivot to traditional values also works politically inside Russia. An emphasis on traditional values defends against Western soft power by promoting a value system that reinforces the traditional hierarchies holding together Russian autocracy. As Professor Alicja Curanović wrote in reference to the Russian government’s pivot, “the prominence of traditional values in social life strengthens nationalistic attitudes. In traditional societies, respect for authority
and hierarchy translates into deference to the authority of God, Family, and Homeland.”

**Developing Moscow’s Own Color Revolution Toolkit**

By pivoting to a values-based grand strategy, Moscow unlocked the ability to create its own color revolution weapon while also combating liberal values. To reiterate, Moscow perceives that value promotion and soft power generate color revolutions in three stages: first, by promoting a specific value set; second, by using that value set to cultivate a “front” in a target country; and finally, by harnessing the “front” to create opportunities to overthrow the government by generating protests or chaos inside the state.

**Promoting “Traditional” Values**

Since his return to the presidency, Vladimir Putin has continued to reinforce the notion that the Russian Federation is a defender of traditional values by promoting anti-LGBTQ+ and ethno-nationalist values. In 2013, he banned “gay propaganda” from the Russian state and in 2021 he officially banned gay marriage. Along the way, he issued a slew of anti-LGBTQ+ statements, including deliberately antagonistic ones like “as long as I’m president … there will be dad and mum.” Putin has also continued to promote ethno-nationalism, in particular white nationalism, under this banner of “traditional values.” In his 2013 speech to the Federal Assembly, Putin maligned “eroding ethnic traditions and differences.” In a 2019 interview with *The Financial Times*, Putin also attacked “multiculturalism,” saying that German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decision to take in one million refugees, primarily from Syria, was a “cardinal mistake” because “…migrants can kill, plunder and rape with impunity because their rights as migrants have to be protected.” Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy labeled the preservation of Russian traditional values as a “long-term national strategic interest.”

Putin has reinforced his values-promoting strategy by engaging in traditional soft power strategies such as NGO value promotion. For example, the Russian government has provided both official and unofficial support for the World Congress of Families, a US-Russian network of interconnected organizations that the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has labeled an anti-LGBTQ hate group. In 2015, Russia hosted an event called the International Russian Conservative Forum, which the SPLC described as a “White Nationalist Conference.” The Russian government has also supported white nationalist organizations. As Shelby Butt and Daniel Byman write, “one of Moscow’s most pernicious (influence) efforts is its support for white-supremacist and other far-right groups,
encouraging them with propaganda, providing them with a haven, and otherwise making them stronger and more dangerous.”32 Julia Davis, a journalist with The Daily Beast, describes how Moscow uses state media to “…attract Western converts with …bigotry—turning Russia into the land of ultimate political incorrectness, the world’s anti-woke capital.”33

Cultivating Front Groups
The promotion of social illiberalism has created a soft power bond of attraction not just with other autocratic states, but with like-minded individuals and groups within the West. Russia’s promotion of anti-LGBTQ+ values has generated positive feelings and good will toward Putin from like-minded conservative individuals and groups. For example, influential American social conservative Franklin Graham traveled to Russia in 2015 to meet with Vladimir Putin. After the meeting, he said point-blank: “I very much appreciate that President Putin is protecting Russian young people against homosexual propaganda.”34 We can also see how this soft power bond has been cultivated in real time in a 2018 interview with former Alabama Senate candidate Roy Moore:

Q: [Ronald Reagan] said that Russia was a focus of evil in the world.
MOORE: You could say that very well about America, couldn’t you.
Q: You think?
MOORE: Well, we promote a lot of bad things, you know.
Q: Like?
MOORE: Same-sex marriage.
Q: That’s the very argument Vladimir Putin makes.
MOORE: Well, then maybe Putin is right. Maybe he’s more kin to me than I know.35

Putin’s support for ethno-nationalism has also forged bonds of attraction with white nationalists. The New York Times described the scene at the 2015 International Russian Conservative Forum: “railing against same-sex marriage, immigration, New York financiers, radical Islam and globalization, among other targets, one speaker after another lauded Russia and President Vladimir V. Putin as a pillar of robust, conservative, even manly values.”36 One prominent white nationalist leader in the United States described Russia as “the leader of the free world right now,” adding that “Putin is supporting nationalists around the world and building an anti-globalist alliance, while promoting traditional values and self-determination.”37
The cultivation of white supremacist groups extends to violent organizations. The leader of the American neo-Nazi group “The Base,” which was described by the FBI as a “racially motivated violent extremist group,” is currently operating out of Russia.\textsuperscript{38} Moscow’s cultivation of extremist groups is widespread and multifaceted. In an article for \textit{The Atlantic}, Michael Carpenter observed the growing phenomenon: “it seems almost too strange to be true: fight clubs, neo-Nazi soccer hooligans, and motorcycle gangs serving as conduits for the Kremlin’s influence operations in Western countries … [T]his is exactly what is happening across Europe and North America as Russia’s intelligence services co-opt fringe radicals and angry young men to try to undermine Western democracies from within.”\textsuperscript{39}

The cultivation of individuals and groups based on shared values includes political elites. As Center for European Policy Analysis President and CEO Alina Polyakova observed, while “prior to 2010, one would be hard-pressed to find public statements in praise of Putin by far-right leaders … today, they are commonplace.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{Controlling Chaos}

Moscow’s attempts to harness the final stage of the color revolution agenda, where cultivated front groups generate controlled chaos using the protest potential of the society, is best evinced by their failed coup in Montenegro. In 2016, less than one year after Montenegro opted to join NATO, Russian security forces attempted to overthrow the government by creating controlled chaos and large-scale protests. According to a report written for the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), Moscow’s plan began by “stoking political and ethnic divisions” in Montenegro.\textsuperscript{41} Russian security forces then used the promotion of ethnic nationalism to recruit Serb ethno-nationalist militia groups who served as foot soldiers, or a front group, in the attempted coup. The coup sought to bring to power the Democratic Front (DF), a coalition of Serb right-wing nationalist parties who had also been coaxed into pro-Russian positions through the deployment of soft power.

The plan for the coup, as designed by Russian intelligence, was for the DF to falsely declare itself the winner of parliamentary elections on election night and call on their supporters to storm the parliamentary building. Inside Parliament, Serb militia members dressed in Montenegrin police uniforms would open fire on the protestors. The DF would then accuse the government of using violence to prevent their victory and call for nationwide protests. The coup planners would use the resultant chaos to assassinate the head of state, declare a state of emergency, and seize control of the government. The coup failed when police uncovered the plot just days before elections.\textsuperscript{42}
In Moscow’s attempted coup in Montenegro, we can see all the elements of the perceived color revolution agenda. American readers will also recognize some elements of what happened in Montenegro in the January 6 storming of the US Capitol by supporters of former president Donald Trump. While there is no evidence that Moscow was involved in planning the events of January 6, its profile fits the kind of event Russian security services would hope to generate. The insurrectionists were motivated by ethno-nationalism, populated by pro-Russian far-right militia groups supported by Moscow, and fueled by conspiracy theories promoted by Russia. These groups sought to overthrow American democracy by harnessing the protest potential of a cultivated population to create chaos. The events of January 6 supported Moscow’s key strategic goal of undermining American soft power. In a telling response to the insurrection, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said, “after something like this, I believe it would be very difficult for the world to see the United States as a symbol of democracy.”

**Russia as “Traditional” State**

Moscow’s grand strategic pivot to traditional values helps unlock and explain the growing importance of information warfare and its understanding of how the concept works in the current security environment. Yet the Kremlin is as opportunistic as it is strategic. The grand strategic framework presented here is best understood as a set of general principles through which Moscow creates opportunities for itself to achieve policy goals. The use of influence campaigns, active measures, social media trolls or bots, and state media all take the form of information warfare strategies and tactics that exist within this grand strategic framework. These efforts can appear contradictory; for example, Moscow has also periodically cultivated left-wing audiences and political figures. While the Kremlin is always happy to exploit support from any group, they have not developed the same kind of grand strategic architecture to attract the far-left as they have with the far-right. Instead, Moscow has bet its future on centering racism, homophobia, and other illiberal values in its foreign policy.

This approach to information warfare carries with it important implications. For one, changes to the information environment mean that values themselves are viewed as weapons. The weaponization of values means that they are subjected to the laws of the security dilemma—the dynamic whereby increased strength of one side’s weapons inherently makes adversarial states feel less secure. In this zero-sum game, increased democratization is perceived as a threat to Russian security interests. This understanding provides important context for Moscow’s actions in a place like Myanmar, where Putin stepped in...
to support a military coup that overturned a fragile democracy. A rising tide of illiberalism in Europe and the United States is what winning looks like to Moscow, pro-Russian thugs disrupting Pride parades in neighboring countries is successful hegemony, and democratic states like Hungary and Poland transitioning to authoritarianism on the back of ethnonationalism and homophobia is the Kremlin’s theory of victory. (Though it is worth noting that an increasingly authoritarian Poland still poses a strategic threat to Russia, if not an ideological one).

The second implication of Russia’s strategy is found in debates about right-wing extremism. Across the West, there is great concern about the rise of right-wing extremism and the threat it poses to democratic governance. Recognizing that Moscow sees fostering right-wing extremism as a critical means to achieve its policy goals provides important context to this debate. Acknowledging that Moscow is weaponizing right-wing extremism as a means of subverting democracies is important to the conversation about policy responses to extremism. Understanding this interest is also important in evaluating Russian motivations toward its foreign policy. For example, Russian military interference in Syria is usually analyzed through the prism of geopolitics. However, its actions targeting civilian population centers also helped create a refugee crisis that drove right-wing radicalization across Europe.  

Moscow is weaponizing right-wing extremism as a means of subverting democracies.

Refugee generation and weaponization is a key plank in Moscow’s strategy and will likely expand moving forward. Moscow’s perception of how the West deploys information warfare informs how the Kremlin itself believes the tool works in the current security environment. The perceived connection between information warfare and state ideology has meant that Putin’s government felt it is necessary to better develop the national idea for his regime. By establishing a grand strategic framework centered on the promotion of illiberal values—both social and political—Moscow has created a new challenge for democracies. Whether democratic states are prepared to fight back or not, great power competition in the 21st century will be defined by an information confrontation between liberal and illiberal values.
Notes

11. Ibid.
18. Ibid.


42. Ibid.