

Putin's Plot Against America

There is a growing fear in Washington that Russia will resort to hybrid tactics to inflict pain on Western powers in ways that it can no longer achieve through conventional warfare alone.

What has kept Putin from giving the green light for a wider, more forceful and disruptive asymmetric offensive in Europe? *Photo: Contributor/Getty Images*

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From Moscow's vantage point, it isn't simply the gross incompetence of its military and intelligence services that prevented Russia from seizing Ukraine in a flashy *blitzkrieg* last February. It was the fact that Ukraine was armed with NATO weaponry, its troops trained by NATO advisors, its intelligence services constantly fed information by Western intel agencies. Moscow has made no secret of this frustration or its assertion that the battle for Ukraine was a proxy war against the West, itself. This is why, from the very beginning, Moscow has framed this war as one not between Russia and Ukraine, but rather one between Russia and what **Vladimir Putin** and his coterie love to call "the collective West." And, according to this consensual ideology, it is this collective West—not the incompetence of any generals or advisors—that has thwarted Putin's aims of swallowing Ukraine and fulfilling his dream of a pan-Slavic super state with Moscow at its capital.

The Ukrainian military, which has come to be known as the MacGuyver army in defense circles, has fought bravely and with great flexibility, able to deftly outmaneuver what was once considered the second most potent army in the world, doing so with a patchwork of various weapons systems from all the various countries of Europe and the U.S. That's not as easy as it seems. But Putin is not *totally* wrong. And, indeed, while Russia has punished the Ukrainian people a bushel and a peck and a noose around the neck, what about the West?

Yes, there have been inflationary pressures but that's not enough: on the whole, the West

is wealthy enough to withstand them. Last summer and fall, the West worried about a hard, cold winter exacerbated by the potential twin punch of high energy prices and Moscow's ability to weaponize Europe's dependence on Russian energy. As I explained in my **dispatch last week**, Russia originally thought it could punish the collective West, but that gun didn't fire. Europe quickly diversified away from Russian oil and gas, depriving Russia of its main energy market.

The nuclear threat? Well, that worry seems to have abated a bit for now, too, mostly because, as I **noted** before, **Xi Jinping** and **Narendra Modi** have made very clear to Putin that they will wash their hands of him if he goes nuclear. Right now, isolated from the West, Putin needs them too much economically to risk his own isolation.

So what is left? People in the Biden administration are worried that this leaves Putin with one remaining option: unleashing a wave of asymmetric chaos across the West. Think political interference, cyberattacks, assassinations. "The Russians wrote the book on this but they haven't turned it on," said **Marc Polymeropoulos**, who once ran the C.I.A.'s operations in Europe, countering the Russian threat. "Why is that?"

The Swedish Affair

On Saturday, January 21, a far-right dual Danish-Swedish national named **Rasmus Paludan** walked up to the Turkish embassy in Stockholm and **set a Quran on fire**. Turkey, a majority Muslim country and NATO member which had already been on the fence about voting to

accept Sweden into the alliance, was outraged. This triggered protests in Ankara, with Turkish protesters setting a Swedish flag on fire outside the Turkish embassy. The Turkish foreign minister **said** that the Swedish government was complicit in the Quran burning—Paludan had gotten a government permit for his demonstration, after all—and Turkey **canceled** a visit by the Swedish defense minister, who was on his way to Ankara to plead his country's case for NATO accession. Within days, anti-Swedish protests broke out around the **Muslim world**. By week's end Turkish President **Recep Tayyip Erdogan**, who had already extracted significant concessions from the Swedes for his NATO vote, **said**, "Those who allow such blasphemy in front of our embassy can no longer expect our support for their NATO membership."

But then an interesting bit of information emerged. Paludan, it turned out, hadn't paid for his own protest permit. It had been **paid for** by a journalist, **Chang Frick**, who had once been a contributor to Russia Today and once **bragged**, while pulling out a wad of rubles, "Here is my real boss! It's Putin!" The foreign minister of Finland also **publicly hinted** that the Quran-burning incident had ties to Russian intelligence.

Whether it's true or not, it would be a very good plot indeed: upsetting the Turkish government enough to block Sweden's entry into NATO and land the perfect black eye to **Jens Stoltenberg** and the collective West. In Spain, meanwhile, authorities have closed in on the culprit *behind* the culprit—a **74-year-old man**—who was arrested for sending grotesque letter bombs containing animal eyeballs to Spanish officials in November and December of last year. Targets included the Spanish Prime Minister's residence and the country's defense ministry, Ukrainian and American embassies in Madrid, as well as a weapons manufacturer in Zaragoza that makes grenade launchers being sent to Ukraine.

Last week, the *New York Times* **reported** that American and European intelligence agencies believed that Russian intelligence, specifically the G.R.U., operating through a radical, white nationalist group called the Russian Imperial Movement, had directed the attacks. The aim, apparently, had been to demonstrate that Russia still had the ability to reach far across the European continent and cause chaos, fear and uncertainty. And let's be honest, a letter bomb full of eyeballs would do just that.

Despite these attacks, there are other things going on in the shadows of the intelligence world. Just before Halloween, Norway **arrested** a handful of Russian nationals it has charged with spying for flying drones over sensitive military objects. (One of them turned out to be **Andrey Yakunin**, son of **Vladimir Yakunin**, an Orthodox true believer oligarch who is very close to Putin.) Over Thanksgiving, Swedish authorities arrested a couple who turned out to be a pair of Russian illegals (i.e., members of what is essentially a sleeper cell, like in *The Americans*). Just before Christmas, German authorities **arrested** a Russian agent working inside Germany's own version of the C.I.A. (known as the Federal Intelligence Service) for passing sensitive information from the N.S.A. and Britain's G.C.H.Q. to the Russians.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine last February, Europe and the U.S. have made over 400 Russian diplomats *persona non grata*. And those were not, of course, diplomats, but Russian intelligence agents working under diplomatic cover. Even formerly friendly countries, like Serbia, which Russian intelligence considered essentially theirs, cleaned house in earnest. "The Russian services were used to kicking in the doors and doing whatever they wanted in Europe without consequence, but after the invasion of Ukraine, everything changed," said **Roman**

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Plan B

This has, according to people in the intelligence world, significantly degraded the Russian security services' ability to operate in the West as they once did. "After kicking out diplomats, we see that Russia is trying to return their people to Europe," Dobrokhotoov told me. "It turns out it was very painful for Russia. In those countries they were kicked out of, they're trying to get them back in." Travel into Europe is still quite easy for individual agents of small groups of them, using, say, Kazakh or Georgian passports and exploiting the weakest links in the Schengen visa system, like Italy. But still that hardly makes up for the sheer quantity the Kremlin has lost.

According to Bellingcat's chief Russia investigator **Christo Grozev**, the Kremlin is now activating more long-hidden illegals' networks to do the jobs that agents in the now empty *rezidenturas* did. But this is definitely Plan B, and that comes with its own drawbacks. "On one hand, it makes sense to use your options," one former high-ranking Eastern European security official told me. "On the other hand, knowing that the environment for those illegals is so poisonous, it's not a good environment to work in. If I were a director, I would wait a bit. All the counterintelligence services in the West are looking for Russian spies. These are really expensive assets, you've been building them up for 30, 40 years, it

doesn't make sense to use them and have them get caught."

That is part of the problem. If before, Russia could stage attacks or throw a wrench into Western politics, it was able to at least play for plausible deniability, however thin their case. Now, after February 24, 2022, even that thinnest of veneers has been torn to shreds. Now, all signs always point to Russia and it has become nearly impossible for Russia to make a case otherwise. "It's harder to use useful idiots anymore," said Dobrokhotov. "They're still idiots, but they're less useful because Russia has become so toxic."

Then there's the cyber component. As **Michael Schwartz** of the *New York Times* **reported**, the big cyberattack that was supposed to absolutely cripple Ukraine just as Russian forces poured across the border was a big bust. The problem? Sandworm, the jewel of the Russian cyber-arsenal, turned out to be riddled with sloppy programming errors. Moreover, these are one-time weapons. "A solid cyberweapon is expensive to build and once you use it, you lose it," said the Eastern European security official. "Everyone knows it. Which is why maybe they're holding back."

Still, there are other things the Russians could target: ports where liquefied natural gas arrives to supply Europe, supplanting Russian gas. Or targeting Poland, which is the hub of NATO transport into Ukraine. But so far, Russia has refrained from doing so. (The jury is genuinely still out on who blew up the Nord Stream pipelines.)

The far scarier option is assassinations. Assassinations of Western political leaders, journalists, activists—you know, the kind of thing Putin perfected at home. That would be relatively easy to accomplish, according to intel veterans, especially for a power who no longer cares about getting blamed for the murders. It's not hard to get a small team of




assassins into Europe, do the deed and then quickly get them out, though the last part has gotten trickier in the past year, as has making it look like it wasn't the handiwork of the Russian state. "Assassinations are a bigger concern," explained Polymeropoulos. "They're harder to stop. They get caught after the fact because they're sloppy, but they can still do it."

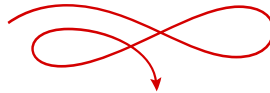
But even the most hawkish veterans are skeptical that Putin would go on a murder spree across the West—at least just yet. "Then the question is, whom to assassinate?" said the former Eastern European security official. "It sounds a bit crazy to start going around shooting people. He would get a more united E.U., a more united West. It sounds a bit far-fetched." It would also, according to Polymeropoulos, likely get Russia finally labeled as a state sponsor of terrorism, which brings with it a whole new cascade of sanctions.

The Eastern European security official, though, had a broader explanation for why Putin had still not given the green light for a wider, more forceful and more disruptive asymmetric offensive in Europe. "They're still immensely focused on Ukraine and Putin cares only about Ukraine," the official said. "Yes, he has thought about attacking the crazy Westerners who support Ukraine, but his main effort is still Ukraine. In case he opens new fronts against the West, it would be a disadvantage. He would dedicate a lot of energy to doing this, and the West would know it's him doing it and this would unite Western countries even more. If it took months to decide on sending tanks to Ukraine, in this case, there would be some very quick decisions made to send even more advanced weaponry. This is my gut feeling."

Then the official, used to being on the front lines of a long-running hybrid war with Russia, added, "But you should never trust your gut feeling when talking about Russia. We can't

rule out anything, even the nuclear threat. At the end of the day, Putin doesn't care what India or China thinks. At the end of the day, if he thinks that it is a good idea to do it, he won't care what they say."

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