

SMA Reach-back

Question (R2 Special): *What are the indicators of changes in Russian strategic interests in Syria?*

Executive Summary

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois, NSI

Russia's strategic interests in Syria are fairly stable

Timothy Thomas, a Russia expert from the Foreign Military Studies Office and former US Army Foreign Area Officer (FAO) believes that a fair articulation of Russia's long-term strategic interests is right where they should be: in the country's 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS).¹ The only "changes" that Thomas expects will be the result of the "gradual accomplishment" of several interests. First among these is strengthening Russian national defense, which in Syria has meant Russian forces taking the opportunity to test new weapons systems and command procedures while working to keep ISIL and Islamic extremists from Russia's southern borders. Second, Thomas reports that "consolidating the Russian Federation's status as a leading world power" in a multipolar international system has been accomplished by Russian actions in Syria and Ukraine "in the eyes of many nations."

What could change? How Russia prioritizes its interests

Thomas points to optimistic versus pessimistic Russian views on how the recent US election will impact US policy in Syria. Optimistically, some feel that the election of Donald Trump may diminish the US security threat, offer Russia new opportunities in the region, and thus allow Russia to prioritize other interests than it has been. This logic is based in the belief that the new US Administration will be willing to tolerate Assad in order to work in concert with Russia to defeat terrorist threat from ISIL and other groups. Russians taking a more pessimistic view however argue that forging a US-Russia partnership in the region will not be as simple as a change of Administration.

What might signal a change?

Dr. Tricia Degennaro (Threat Tec, LLCI -TRADOC G27) believes that "the key to understanding signals for change include Russian rhetoric and key troop maneuvers. The Russian President's messaging is the signal to change." Dr. Larry Kuznar (Indiana-Purdue; NSI) reports empirical analysis of President Putin's language use and whether Putin's language patterns might be used as indicators of Russian change of strategy in Syria. Dr. Kuznar uncovers a "blip" then "brag" pattern in Putin's public discourse that may be used as an indicator. Specifically, Kuznar finds that prior to a major event (like invading Ukraine) Putin begins mentioning a few key *emotional themes* (e.g., pride, protection, unity, strength and Russian superiority) and *political themes* (e.g., Russian security, Russia's adversaries, Russian energy), a "blip," then goes silent presumably during the planning and execution phase. Once the activity or goal is complete however, Kuznar finds that "Putin is

¹ Allison Astorino-Courtois and NSI Team constructed a matrix of Russian strategic interests considering input from Timothy Thomas (Foreign Military Studies Office, Ft. Leavenworth) and Eugene Rumer (Carnegie Endowment) that was previously reported in SMA Reachback V7. It is reprinted in the SME Input section below for convenience.

characteristically tight-lipped about his interests and intentions, but tends to brag after he achieves a victory.” He habitually “relaxes his restraint and releases a rhetorical flourish of concerns and emotional language”, i.e., some major bragging.

In short, Dr. Kuznar (Indiana-Purdue) finds an empirical basis to suggest that specific linguistic themes such as *pride*, *Russian superiority* and *France*²) as well as more general emotional and political themes “may serve as early indicators and warnings of Putin’s intent.” Currently Putin’s mention of pragmatic themes in relation to Russian energy resources and his recent concern with Turkey, and emotive themes, such as the threat of Nazism, may serve as indicators of his activities if his past patterns are retained. And as such, “may have direct implications for his intentions in Syria.”

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Editor: Allison Astorino-Courtois (NSI)

SME Input

Russia’s Changing Strategic Interests in Syria

Timothy Thomas
Foreign Military Studies Office, TRADOC

I believe that to look at Russia’s strategic interests one needs to start by referencing the *National Security Strategy (NSS)* that appeared on 31 December 2015.³ Here long-term national strategic interests are stated in Section III of the document. The **bold** areas of the section below appear to me to be the strategic interests that Russia has accomplished thus far, and the rational as to how or why is noted in brackets at the end of the section. Overall, it appears that the only “changes” in Russia’s strategic interests in Syria are the gradual accomplishment of several strategic interests proposed in the *NSS*:

“Overall, it appears that the only “changes” in Russia’s strategic interests in Syria are the gradual accomplishment of several strategic interests proposed in the *NSS*...”

- **strengthening the country’s defense**, ensuring the inviolability of the Russian Federation’s constitutional order, sovereignty, independence, and **national and territorial integrity**;

² France, Germany and UK come up in Putin’s discourse as perceived adversaries in “gray zone” activities such as various operations in Ukraine.

³ The following analysis is based on Russian unclassified news sources.

[Russia has been able to test numerous weapons and conduct lessons learned regarding deployments, mobilization potential, and especially aerospace and naval capabilities; Russia continues to try and keep ISIL out of Russia's soft underbelly in the North Caucasus and preserve its territorial integrity.]

- **strengthening national accord**, political and social stability, developing democratic institutions, and **refining the mechanisms for cooperation between the state and civil society**;

[National accord remains strong for continued Russian actions in Syria as witnessed by Putin's strong following, and the military's National Defense Management Center was exercised accordingly during Kavkaz-2016, where the military was provided control over civilian entities during the exercises scenario, which is a scenario that will take place if a state of emergency is declared in Russia's Southern District, for example, if ISIL gains a foothold there]

- raising living standards, improving the population's health, and ensuring the country's stable demographic development;
- **preserving and developing** culture and **traditional Russian spiritual and moral values**;

[Russia's traditional support of Syrian President Assad and its traditional and long-standing Middle East policy remain intact, along with well scripted geopolitical moves in the area supporting Iranian and Hezbollah capabilities; Assad stated that Russia was asked to participate due to their morals, meaning that Russia is there to destroy terrorism, not because they want something in exchange]

- increasing the competitiveness of the national economy;
- **consolidating the Russian Federation's status as a leading world power**, whose actions are aimed at maintaining strategic stability and mutually beneficial partnerships in a polycentric world.⁴

[Russian actions in Syria and Ukraine, in the eyes of many nations, has enabled it to reclaim most of its old glory as a military power and threat with which nations must contend, as witnessed by worries all over Europe as to what Russia might do next]

The *NSS* also notes that strategic national priorities include: national defense, state, and public security; economic growth; science, technology, and education; healthcare and culture; ecology; and strategic stability and equal strategic partnership. It is the former and latter that appear to have special significance for Russia's leaders, while those in between the first and last entries are more general in nature.⁵

Potential Change

One potential significant change in Russia's strategic interests appears to be connected to the result of President-elect Donald Trump's emergence as the next president of the United States. Konstantin Kosachev, the head of the Upper House committee for international relations, feels that instead of supporting an opposition group intent on overthrowing

⁴ Moscow *President of Russia* website 31 Dec 15, Russian Federation Presidential Edict 683 approving appended text of "The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy."

⁵ Ibid.

President Assad, the US will now join Russia in an attempt to eliminate the terrorist threat from Syria:⁶

“There are no impenetrable barriers in the way of this. It is very important for us to understand that the United States’ strategic interests regarding Syria are about to change, because until now their priority was not in suppressing terrorism, but in displacing the country’s government. Such changes are in line with Donald Trump’s electoral rhetoric.”⁷

Boris Dolgov of the Russian Orientalism Institute’s Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, believes that, while changes in the US approach to the Syrian crisis are possible, the US continues to support several armed groups at present, so building a US-Russian partnership won’t be quick or easy. The US State Department, for example, will only allow Russia to join the US-led coalition if Moscow withdraws support for President Assad.⁸ However, Russian reasoning appears to be that they would change their strategic interest from competing with the US and attempting to contain it to cooperating with it. This would fulfill the strategic interest of “maintaining strategic stability and mutually beneficial partnerships in a polycentric world.

The gist of a November 2016 discussion is that long-term strategic interests have been replaced by short-term and tactical interests by Russia’s leaders. Political analysts hold fundamentally opposing views on what has been successfully achieved over the past four years. Thus, Aleksey Mukhin, the general director of the Center for Political Information, links the country’s main success over the four years to a reset of the system for military modernization⁹ -- which is in line with the strategic interest of strengthening defense. Mukhin thinks the Russian Federation has “entered the ranks of the countries that take and will take geopolitical decisions.” He says “the attempt to tear the country’s economy to shreds has led to its strengthening.” India, the countries of Latin America, and some Middle Eastern regimes have started to be seriously considered as Russia’s allies: “and of course Europe, which is turning towards Russia. America’s attempts to impede this process are only intensifying it.” Mukhin’s thinking is that Russia’s strategic interests are gradually expanding and developing mutually beneficial partnerships.

“Russia’s strategic interests in Syria are changing. The war against ISIL, which originally resulted in serious political and military strengthening of the Syrian regime, is giving way to diplomatic priorities.”

Political analyst Nikolay Petrov in turn notes that “all the positive things that the experts note are short-term and perishable.” In his opinion, when the Russian Federation reunited with Crimea in 2014 “long-term and strategic interests were forgotten for the sake of short-term tactical interests.” It is another issue how successful the regime was in achieving these interests, however, the expert stresses, “there is no doubt that strategically we have not only lost heavily but,

⁶ Moscow RT Online (in English), 21 Nov 16.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Velimir Razuvayev: "Vladimir Putin Exaggerated Promises -- Results of Third Presidential Four-Year Term Look Ambiguous," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online* in Russian 15 Mar 2016.

having obtained a short-term tactical gain, we are paying for it – more and more as time goes on: in a way we are in an impasse, from which we can only find an exit.”

A March 2016 discussion noted that ceasefires usually result in the intensification of peace talks, as the sides look for compromises over the question of defining the list of terrorist organizations on the territory of Syria.

Russia’s strategic priorities in Syria are changing. The war against ISIL, which originally resulted in serious political and military strengthening of the Syrian regime, is giving way to diplomatic priorities. The reaching of an accord with the United States was perceived as a major diplomatic success for Russia and the United States. Even though fragile, this is a new experience of cooperation with Washington under conditions of a geopolitical crisis. The truce will be extremely difficult to ensure, as Russia and the United States do not control all the participants in the hostilities. Under such conditions the armistice agreement for all intents and purposes turns out to be an attempt by the United States and its allies to make Russia ease up on the bombing. Moscow is reckoning on converting military victories into diplomatic dividends. If there are none, however, the military operation may be resumed with its former intensity.¹⁰

Recent headlines indicate the strategic interests being exercised are in line with the *NSS* focus that a strategic interest is **strengthening the country's defense**: Putin orders indefinite deployment of Russia’s air group to Syria; Russia’s aerospace force will have immunity; there is no military solution to Syria; new stage of the operation involves the use of air assets and cruise missiles based on ships (first time an aircraft carrier was involved in military operations); using commercial satellite images instead of just military imagery from intelligence satellites; military helicopters are using new tactics against hostile air defense.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova discussed Russia's strategic interests in a 17 October 2016 press interview:

Question: The West has accused Moscow of pursuing malicious goals in Syria. What are Russia's strategic interests in a Syrian settlement?

Maria Zakharova: To answer your question, I would have to deliver a long lecture on Russia and its role in the Syrian conflict. What do we want in Syria? Although we have talked about this today, I will answer your question, trying to be as concise as possible.

First, our goals in Syria and our views on the developments related to a settlement in Syria can be found in UN Security Council and ISSG documents, as well as the agreements reached by Moscow and Washington on September 9 this year. If you want to know exactly what Moscow wants from a settlement in Syria, you should read these documents that provide an unambiguous answer. Speaking globally, we want a settlement. We believe this is possible if the developments are steered along the two tracks that were outlined in early 2016: a political dialogue (even if indirect at first, but with a view to making it direct) between the Syrian Government (Damascus) and a broad opposition group, not just a single group of

¹⁰ Tatyana Stanovaya, leader of Analytical Department of Center for Political Technologies: "Fragile Truce," *Politkom.ru* in Russian 29 Feb 2016.

people who claim to be a broad opposition bloc. We are talking about a comprehensive opposition group, including both internal and external opposition, those who have taken the side of Damascus in this global conflict, and those who demand that Bashar al-Assad step down. The entire range of opposition should come together for talks or dialogue, or however you want to describe it.

A second vital aspect is the fight against terrorists, who continue to receive encouraging signals from some Western and regional countries that their cause is right and they will celebrate victory soon. Unfortunately, this is a road in the opposite direction, away from what we have agreed upon and put on paper. The encouragement of terrorists or moderates ultimately makes them part of terrorist organizations, which is absolutely contrary to Russia's global approach. We believe that a Syrian settlement should include the above elements. As we have said more than once, the result we are after is a free, sovereign, democratic, multi-confessional, secular, united and integral state with democratic institutions. [end]

While not directly related to Syria, a 14 October 2016 article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* noted the importance of maintaining Russia's national and territorial integrity: Armenia is just as much a strategic ally of Russia as Azerbaijan is of Turkey. Yerevan wishes to obtain the same unequivocal support from Moscow as Baku receives from Ankara on the Karabakh issue. But it does not have this support, and is unlikely to get it. Things are more complicated for Russia than for Turkey. Russia has declared the South Caucasus a zone of its strategic interests. And consequently, of its responsibility as well. Any attempt by it to resolve the conflict in favor of one of the sides would entail the loss of the other side as an ally. Relations with one of the region's entities -- Georgia -- have been spoiled, and no prospects of improvement are in sight. The loss of Azerbaijan or of Armenia would probably put paid to Moscow's Transcaucasus ambitions.

Russia's Changing Strategic Interests in Syria

Dr. Patricia Degennaro
Threat Tec, LLCI -TRADOC G27

Russia has an extensive history with the Syrian regime. Diplomatic relations began in 1944 and they have not faltered. Russia has provided military support for the Syrian army since the relationship started. As conflicts and instability plagued the region, the ties between the two countries strengthened. Tartus, Syria, home to the Russian Mediterranean Black Sea naval fleet was established under then-President Hafez Al-Assad in 1971 allowing Russia to finally have a stable presence in the Middle East.

Russia is Syria's main supplier of weapons. They have forgiven past Syrian debt and after the civil war continue to invest in positioning Russian military more broadly across the Syrian nation. To date, there is a Russian airbase in Latakia, Hmeimin, and Palmyra, extensive joint Russian signal intelligence posts across Syria and other technologically advanced weapons have been

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brought in during the current conflict. Additionally, there are naval assets in the Mediterranean and Caspian seas.

Russia demonstrated its capabilities to support deployed forces in its Syria operations. While admittedly projecting a small footprint into a permissive air environment, Russia's ability to deploy quickly and immediately conduct continuous operations introduces a significant strategic capability. Intervention there has been swift and multi-faceted. As Western powers tried to halt weapons support for Assad, Russia upped the ante. Russia repositioned naval forces, developed stronger military relationships with various governments, took charge of the chemical weapons disposal, built new operational basis and sent its Kuznetsov aircraft carrier to further demonstrate naval power. Putin established basing rights in Cyprus, held the first-ever joint naval drills with Egypt, renewed military sales with Algeria, used Iran's Hamedan airbase to conduct strikes in Syria and continues to strengthen its ties with Turkey.

Analysis

"The Russian Army is never as strong as it describes itself, but never as weak as it seems from the outside" -Dmitri Trenin & Aleksei Malashenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier*

Russia's military operations thus far have been in support of the Syrian regime. It is unlikely that Russia will 'take over' land in Syria other than in support of the regime. The Russian nation does not exist in the way that Britain and France exist. It is a complex, multi-national state, and as result is fundamentally insecure with many areas that could be potential flashpoints in the future. There are few, if any, political or bureaucratic constraints in using Russian diplomatic, information, military and economic power and it uses all of them in concert. The main fear lies with the US or other countries interfering in its sovereign interests.

While the US invested time, personnel and resources in Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia streamlined its force structure. Tactical units benefited from significant training which focused on one aspect of the fight. Technological capabilities were improved and adaptability and rapidity of response improved.

The key to understanding signals for change include Russian rhetoric and key troop maneuvers. The Russian President's messaging is the signal to change. There are many other moving parts to shape, influence, and maneuver in the Syria theater. Russia is cooperating with Iran, Hezbollah, and in many instances, Turkey. It would prove beneficial to map this network of players to identify key movement points.

Russia will continue to shape the information environment through narratives that reinforce the power and successes to be those of the Assad government. Their information campaign is key. In essence, actions, and Putin's language, speak louder than words. Due to the complexities of theater, Russia is unlikely to escalate the conflict. The Syria regime and its partners are benefiting from the Western effort to weakening ISIS. It enables them to gain ground and face a less lethal guerrilla and insurgent component. Russia is unlikely to escalate unless it is directly targeted by an opposing actor. Thus far the situation has remained one of communication between large state actors and the understanding by all parties that escalation for now lies under the concept of "escalate to deescalate. This may change if there was a direct intentional attack on Russian assets.

To reiterate, Russian information operations is a key to identifying potential Russian moves. It informs intention, maneuvers, escalation and de-escalation throughout this conflict. Finally, it is highly doubtful that Russia will back down from its current posture and/or ever retreat from the region without a major fight.

Indicators of Changes in Russian Strategic Interests: Thematic Analysis of Putin’s Discourse

Dr. Lawrence A. Kuznar,
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Abstract and Summary Findings

Analysis of Putin’s use of language prior to and during gray zone activities in Crimea and East Ukraine provide insight into language shifts that may indicate that he is engaging in gray zone activities in Syria.

The primary findings include:

- 1. Putin is more restrained in his language than most Western leaders, making indicators of his intent rare.*
- 2. The rarity of these indicators increases the ability to detect them as statistical “blips” in his language use; a thing that rarely appears is noticeable when it occurs.*
- 3. When Putin mentions key emotive issues (a “blip”), he is disciplined in subsequently silencing himself during apparent planning and execution phases.*
- 4. However, once his goal is achieved, he relaxes his restraint and releases a rhetorical flourish of concerns and emotional language (a “brag”).*
- 5. After a rhetorical flourish, Putin again restrains his discourse when planning and executing operations to achieve his next strategic goal.*
- 6. The blip patterns that may be detected are manifest in **emotional themes** such as Pride, Protection, Unity, Strength and Russian Superiority, and **political themes** such as Russian Security, mentioning adversaries, Russian energy and the Ceasefire.*
- 7. Putin exhibits a sustained and increasing apparent concern with Russian energy resources and the threat of Nazism, consistent with earlier studies.*
- 8. Putin is demonstrating an increasing concern with Turkey, which may have direct implications for his intentions in Syria.*

Introduction

This report describes systematic patterns in Vladimir Putin’s use of language that may aid analysts in identifying his interests and intentions, and more important, in anticipating his future course of action. The findings of this report are based on an analysis of approximately three years of Putin’s speeches (2012 – 2015) that encompass “gray zone” activities and overt military actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (Donbass), and that bleed into Russia’s intervention in Syria.

In previous studies, Putin demonstrated less emotion and more restraint in his use of language than other Eurasian and Western leaders (Kuznar & Yager, 2016). This makes identification of leading indicators of his intent difficult on the one hand, since he gives so

little up. However, the rarity with which he demonstrates his intentions through his use of language also makes the rare occasions in which he does so all the more noticeable, since there is a lack of “noise” surrounding these rare signals. Noticing these uncommon “blips” on his discursive screen requires sustained, careful analysis of his use of language, and a strong baseline against which statistically significant indicators can be identified. The work upon which this study is based is an attempt to provide such a baseline and to identify indicators and warnings of Putin’s intent in the Gray Zone.

The following sections provide detailed empirical evidence for the primary findings listed in the Abstract. It is important to recognize that the specifics (e.g. the specific themes that were statistically important) of these preliminary results are not so important as the general trends they exemplify. It is useful to recognize that some specific themes (*Pride, Superiority, France*) may serve as early indicators and warnings of Putin’s GZ intent, but similar themes (emotional, political, adversaries) should be recognized as potential early indicators as well.

Methods

This analysis is based on a systematic identification of themes and rhetorical devices in Putin’s language use that identify issues of concern to him, his intentions, and how strongly he feels about them. His linguistic behavior has been monitored over three conflicts (Estonian cyber attack of 2007, Annexation of Crimea 2014, intervention in E Ukraine 2014).

Themes are entities that can be named (nouns, concepts, actions).¹¹ Some themes are relatively neutral in sentiment, such as Trade and Political Process. Others carry additional emotional impact, such as Victimization, Pride, and Strength. **Rhetorical Devices** are ways of using language (Repetition, Metaphor, Pejoratives, Sarcasm) that amplify the impact of themes. The basic metric used in this report is theme/rhetorical device density, which is the # times a theme occurs per words in a speech. This metric normalizes theme/rhetorical device metrics per document, allowing comparisons across any analytical dimension, and placing the relevant importance of a theme in appropriate context in relation to other themes.¹²

Data

Nineteen speeches delivered by Putin from 2005 to 2015 constituted the source data for this analysis (Table 1). Each speech was coded (themes/rhetorical devices and their associated language identified) by at least two coders.

Table 1. Corpus of Putin Speeches

Case_Study	Document_Name	Date	Word_Count
Estonia	2005.05.10_Putin Govt_Vladimir Putin_04	5/10/05	326
Estonia	2005.05.23_Putin Govt_Vladimir Putin_01	5/23/05	36
Estonia	2007.10.11_Putin Govt_Vladimir Putin_02	10/11/07	92

¹¹ Themes will be capitalized and italicized in the text, to differentiate them from their more generic uses. Also, when appropriate, definitions of the themes will be provided in footnotes.

¹² It is easy to focus on a single theme mentioned by a speaker, but density is a more accurate representation of a theme’s importance beyond the simple fact that a speaker mentioned it.

Estonia	2012_Putin Govt_Vladimir Putin_03	1/1/2012	30
Crimea	2013.12.12_Putin Govt_Vladimir Putin_03	12/12/13	9358
Crimea	2013.12.31_Putin Govt_Vladimir Putin_05	12/31/13	596
Crimea	2014.01.28_Putin Govt_Vladimir Putin_07	1/28/14	1767
Crimea	2014.02.04_Putin Govt_Vladimir Putin_06	2/4/14	847
Crimea	2014.03.18_Putin Govt_Vladimir Putin_01	3/18/14	5246
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_02	6/6/14	1780
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_03	8/15/14	794
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_04	8/27/14	1135
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_05	9/3/14	757
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_06	9/12/14	1992
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_08	11/16/14	3227
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_10	12/6/14	655
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_12	2/17/15	3165
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_13	3/20/15	936
Ukraine	Vladmir Putin_14	4/8/15	2088

A codebook of 254 themes and rhetorical devices covered events, politics, places, actions, cultural values and rhetorical devices. The final database comprised a total of 2062 coded segments of text that represented these themes and rhetorical devices. Theme densities were calculated for each document, and the variations of these densities through time were used to identify trends and possible indicators and warnings (I&W) concerning Putin's intentions and likely future actions. Only those trends that were statistically significant at the .05 level are reported here.

Russian GZ Aggression: Crimea – Ukraine – Syria

Crimea was officially annexed on 18 March 2014. In April of 2014 combatants lacking insignia were present in Eastern Ukraine. Crimea appears to have been a precursor to Ukraine, and therefore data preceding both incidents are used in this analysis. Speeches by Putin were analyzed up to 4 months preceding the annexation of Crimea in order to search for indicators and warnings of the impending annexation. The analysis of the rebellion in E Ukraine is complicated by the fact that it occurred a month after the annexation of Crimea, not providing a period of relative quiet before during which indicators might emerge. Therefore, the period prior to and including the annexation of Crimea will have to constitute the preceding period to the rebellion in E Ukraine.

Discursive Indicators & Warnings: Crimea Alone

Putin is uncharacteristically logical and unemotional in his use of language compared to other Western world leaders (Kuznar & Yager, 2016). However, he still reveals issues of importance, and occasionally reveals his hand. This appears in two primary ways when analyzing the Crimean annexation alone: the Brag and the Blip and Brag.

The Brag

Putin is characteristically tight-lipped about his interests and intentions, but tends to brag after he achieves a victory. This pattern offers nothing in terms of predictive analytics, but may reveal other aspects of his personality, such as a need for attention and approval.

Bragging behavior was manifest with **political themes** such as *borders*, Ukrainian politician *Petro Poroshenko*, *irregular troops*, and the *UK*. Interestingly, Putin used the rhetorical device of making a *veiled threat* after the annexation took place, but not before.

The Blip and Brag

In a few cases, Putin showed his hand by mentioning interests and intentions slightly, but in a statistically discernable manner in advance of GZ activity. However, as GZ activities were underway, he stopped mentioning these concerns in a disciplined manner, but once again released a flourish of rhetoric about them once his end was achieved. Because Putin shows his hand in these cases, mentions of hot-button items show up as statistical blips, but then go away. These blips provide evidence that there is an increased probability that Putin is planning or undertaking GZ activity.

In some cases, the Blip and Bragg was manifest in **emotional themes** such as claims of *superiority* and the issue of *separatism*. For instance, in a speech delivered on 28 January 2014, Putin asserted Russian energy superiority in relation to its adversaries.

“We know what we are doing, and how. We have enormous resources. We are prepared to work constructively. Indeed, people have been discussing this throughout all previous months” (28 January 2014).

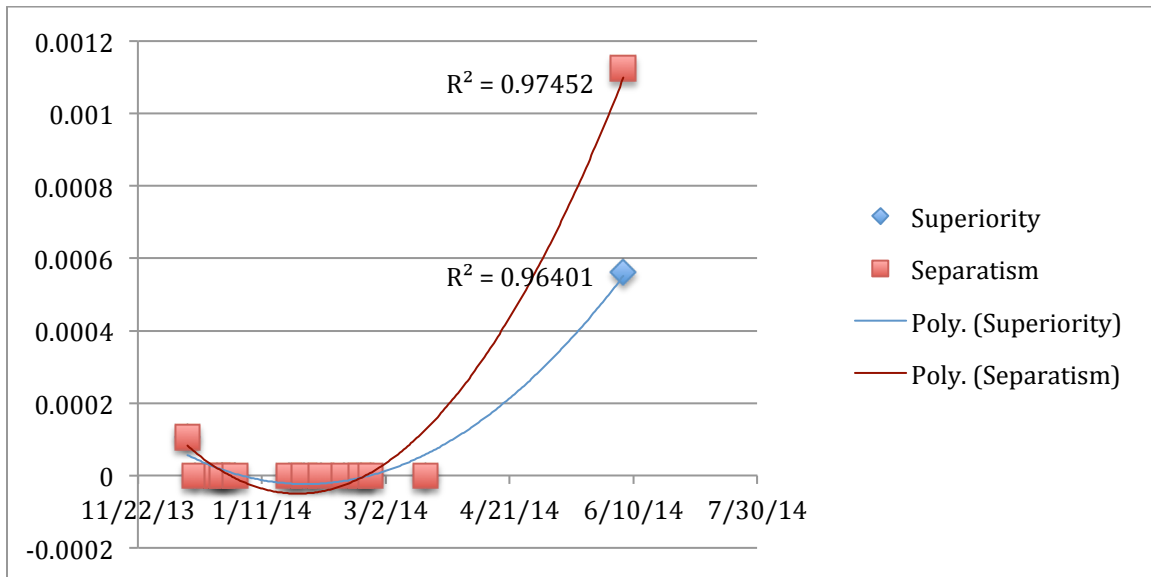


Figure 1. Crimea Case: Blip and Bragg of Emotional Themes

In other cases, Putin mentions adversaries such *France* and *Germany*.

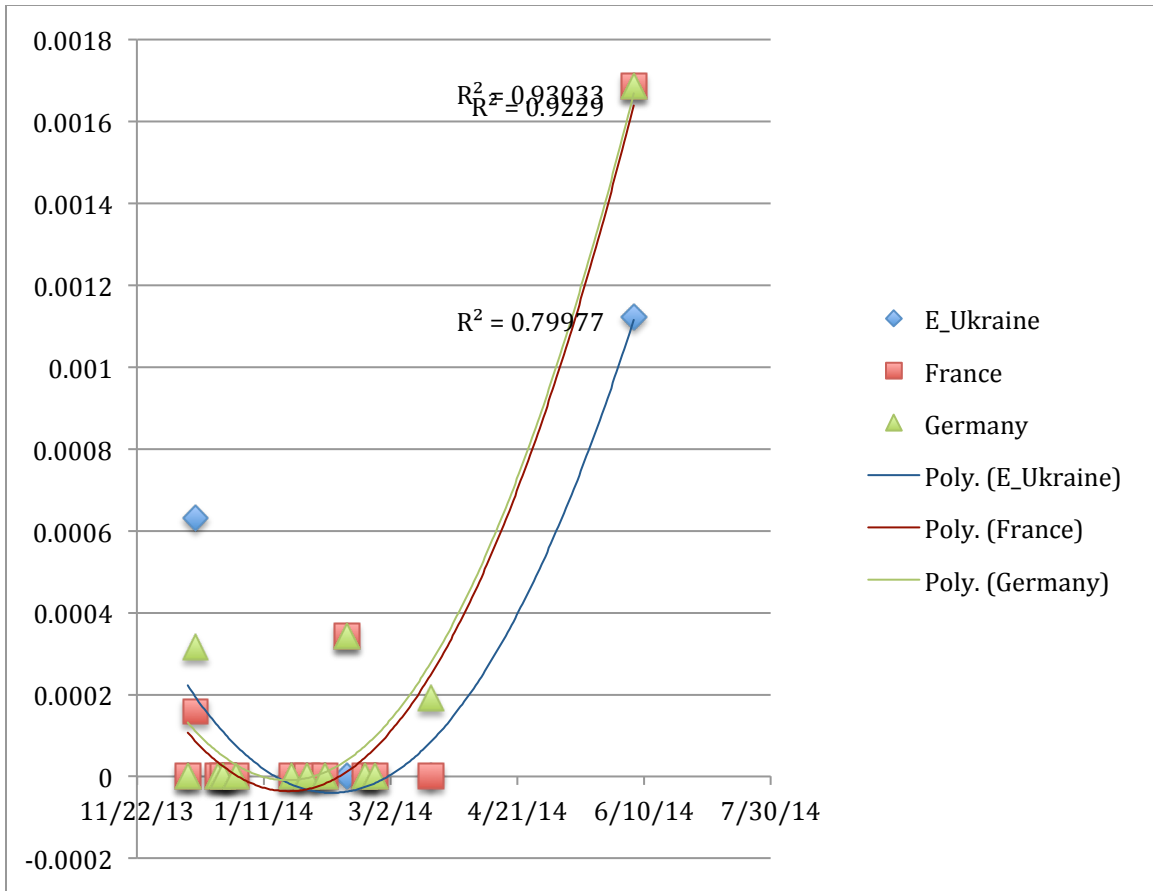


Figure 2. Crimea Case: Blip and Bragg of Adversaries

Statistical blips are also manifest with pragmatic concerns such as *Energy* and *Ceasefire*.

“I think the Ukrainian leadership must show goodwill – or, if you will, demonstrate government wisdom. This [counter-terrorism] operation must be stopped immediately, a ceasefire must be declared immediately. This is the only way to create the conditions for negotiations. There is no other way!” (Putin 6 June 2014)

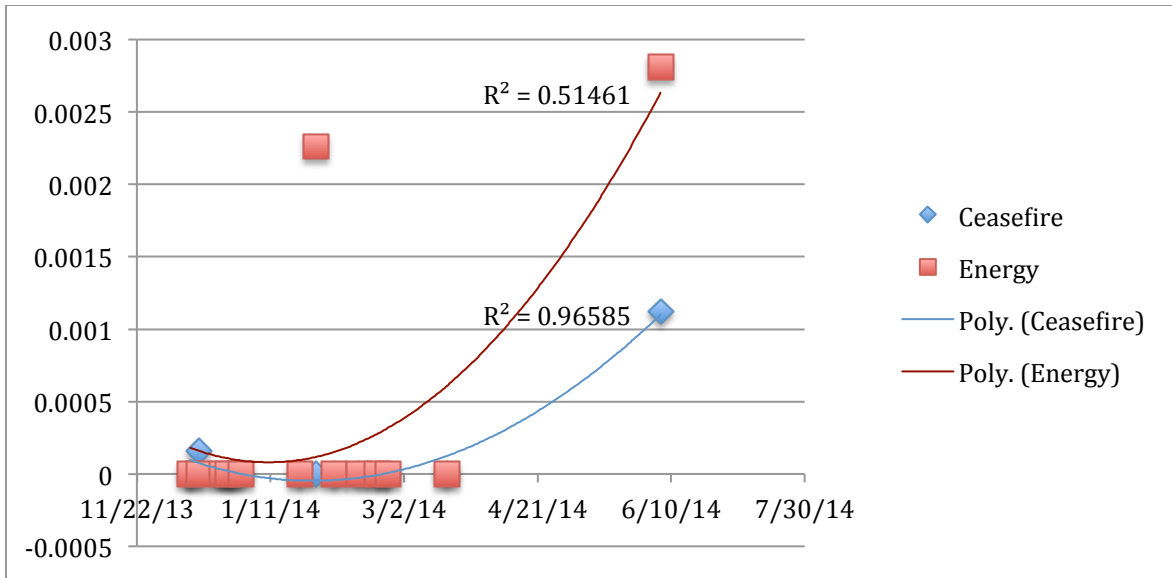


Figure 3. Crimea Case: Blip and Bragg of Pragmatic Concerns

Rhetorical Devices and Emotionality

Putin demonstrated an initial absence of emotional language that peaked as he approached victory and either increased or leveled off afterward. The increasing use of rhetorical devices to amplify his message may provide an indicator that Putin is nearing significant action. This pattern was observed in the case of *counterarguments*, use of *examples* and *intensifiers*.¹³

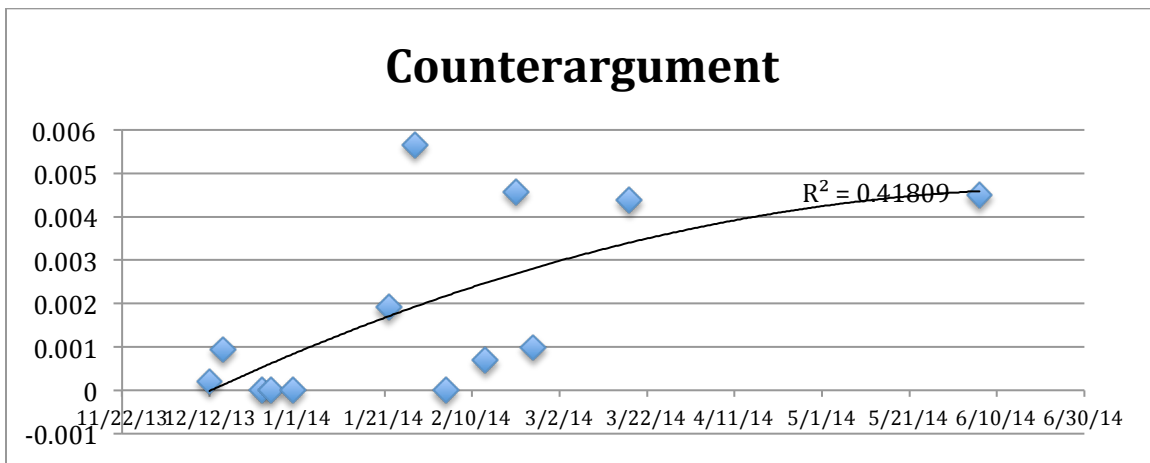


Figure 4. Crimea Case: Increasing Use of Counterargument

“Moreover, the Crimean authorities referred to the well-known Kosovo precedent – a precedent our western colleagues created with their own hands in a very similar situation, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia,

¹³ Counterargument is presentation of one’s argument and contrasting it point for point with an opposing view; Example is the use of specific current or historical examples to make one’s point; Intensifiers involve the use of adjectives such as “very,” “great,” and “often” to emphasize a point.

exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country's central authorities." (Putin 18 March, 2014)

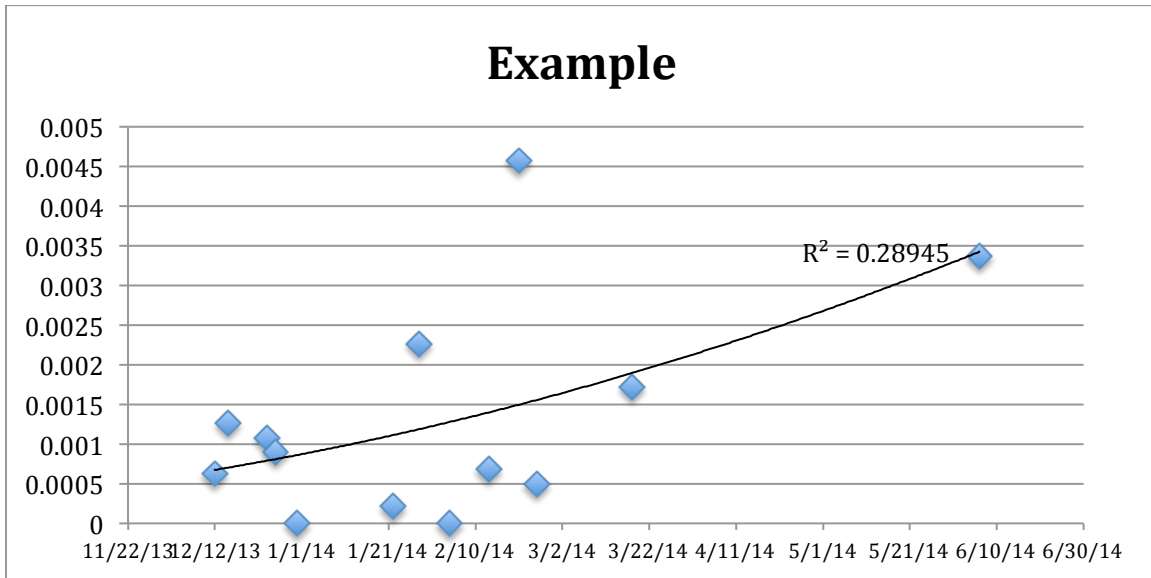


Figure 5. Crimea Case: Increasing Use of Examples

"We have seen in recent years how attempts to impose a presumably more progressive model of development on other countries in reality led to regress, barbarity and massive bloodshed. This happened in a number of countries in the Middle East and North Africa. These dramatic events took place in Syria." (Putin 12 December 2013 on the futility of Western attempts to impose democracy).

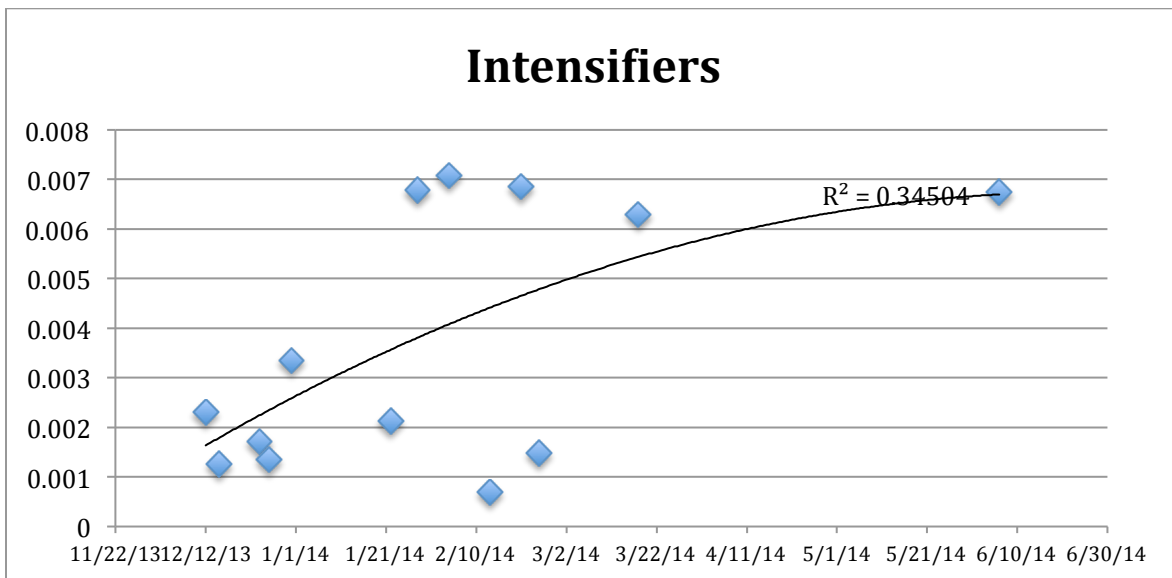


Figure 6. Crimea Case: Increasing Use of Intensifiers

"Colleagues, let me turn to a *very* important subject with *profound* implications" (Putin 12 December 2013). [emphasis added]

Discursive GZ Indicators: Eastern Ukraine

If there was any lead-time in which to identify early I&W to overt GZ activities in E Ukraine, then the period leading up to the annexation of Crimea necessarily meets the requirement. Therefore, the period leading to the annexation of Crimea will be incorporated into the analysis of GZ activities in E Ukraine.

The Blip

In some cases, Putin statistically and dramatically diminishes, but does not eliminate, his rhetorical flourish after the annexation of Crimea. This is manifest in **emotive themes** such as *protect*, *strength*, and *equality rights*.¹⁴

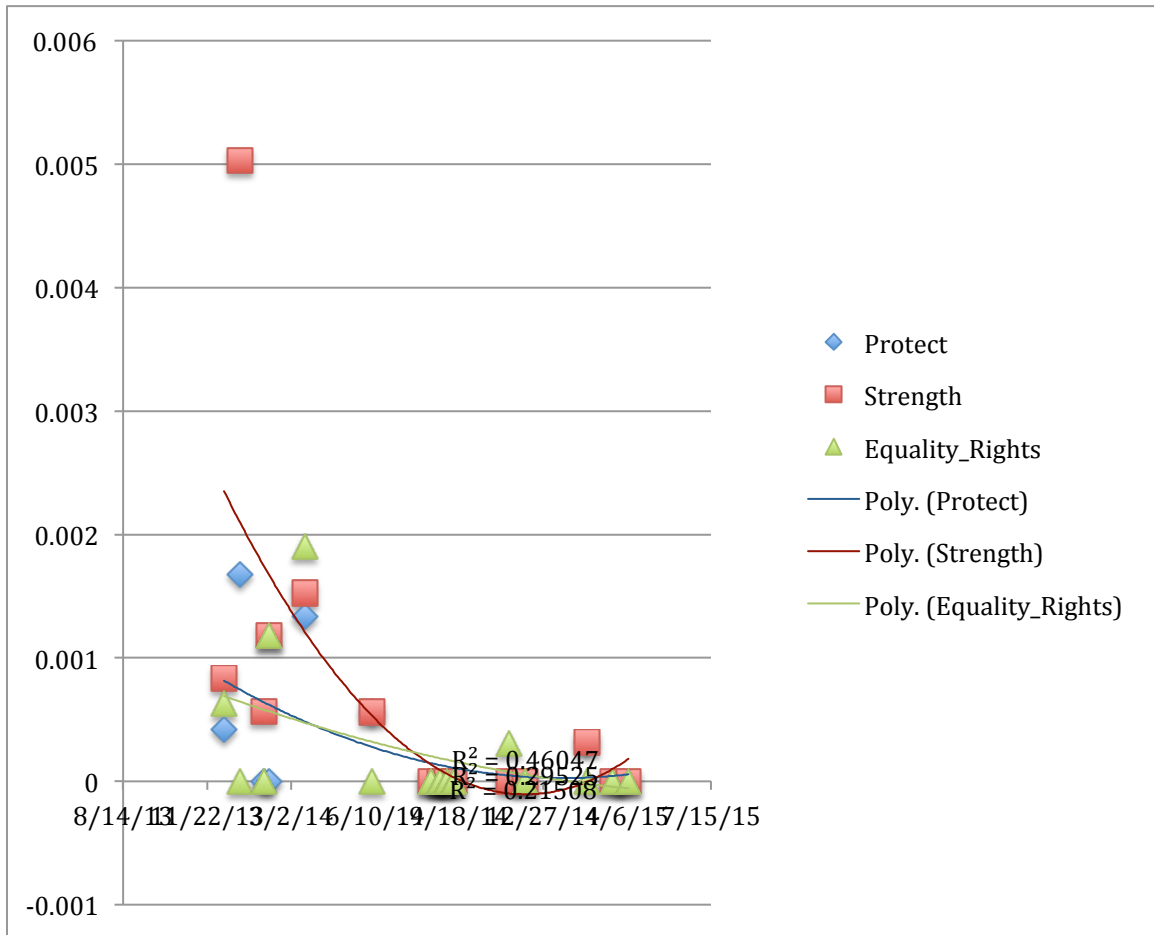


Figure 7. Ukrainian Case: Emotive Themes

“And we know that more and more people in the world support our approach of protecting traditional values, which have been a spiritual and moral foundation of our civilization and every nation” (Putin 12 December 2013).

“It is at historic turning points such as these that a nation demonstrates its maturity and strength of spirit. The Russian people showed this maturity and strength through their united support for their compatriots” (Putin 18 March, 2014).

¹⁴ *Protect* is a reference to the need to protect one’s interests and people; *strength* is reference to one’s own strength; *equality rights* is reference to rights the speaker is asserting.

This pattern is also demonstrated with **rhetorical devices** such as *example*.

Blip and Radio Silence

In some cases, Putin completely eliminates his rhetorical flourish after the annexation of Crimea and goes radio silent on some themes as the preparations and execution of the E Ukrainian rebellion are underway. This is manifest in **emotive themes** such as *pride, self-defense, and unity*.¹⁵

“Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride” (Putin 18 March, 2014).

“Are we ready to consistently defend our national interests, or will we forever give in, retreat to who knows where” (Putin 18 March, 2014)?

“These emotions and aspirations strengthen our unity. Being together is the only way for us to be strong, to make sure Russia keeps developing, and to make all our plans and ideas come true” (Putin 31 December 2013).

¹⁵ Pride is any expression of pride, often national in nature; Self-Defense is expression of the need for self-defense of one’s country or group; Unity refers to the need for unity within one’s group.

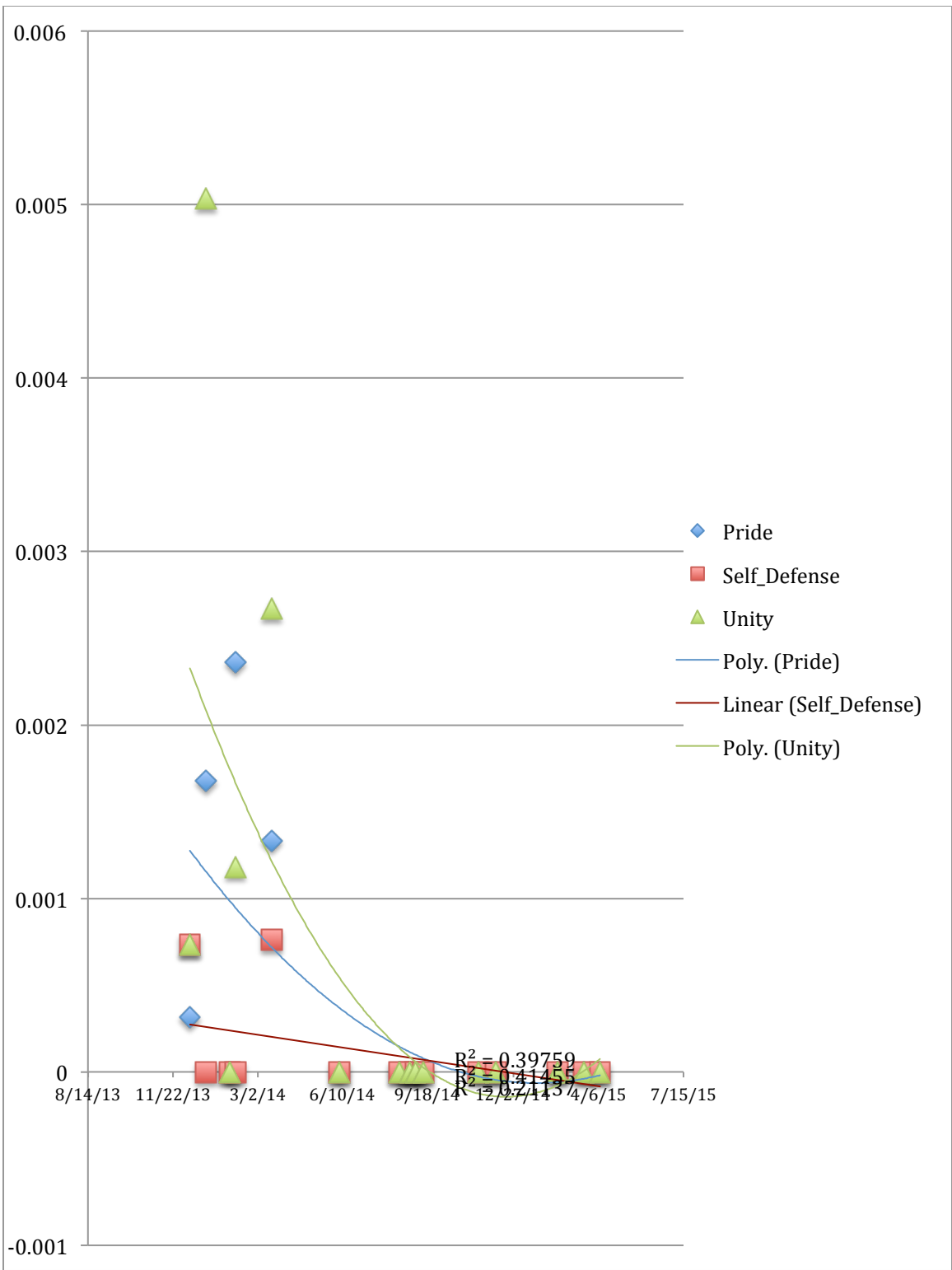


Figure 8. Ukrainian Case: Emotive Themes that Go Silent

It is also manifest in **political themes** such as *security*, and *democracy*.¹⁶

“Thanks to our military doctrine, and to the advanced weapons that are already being supplied to the Armed Forces, we are fully capable of ensuring Russia’s security” (Putin 12 December 2013).

“What do people here in Russia think? Here, like in any democratic country, people have different points of view, but I want to make the point that the absolute majority of our people clearly do support what is happening” (Putin 18 March 2014).

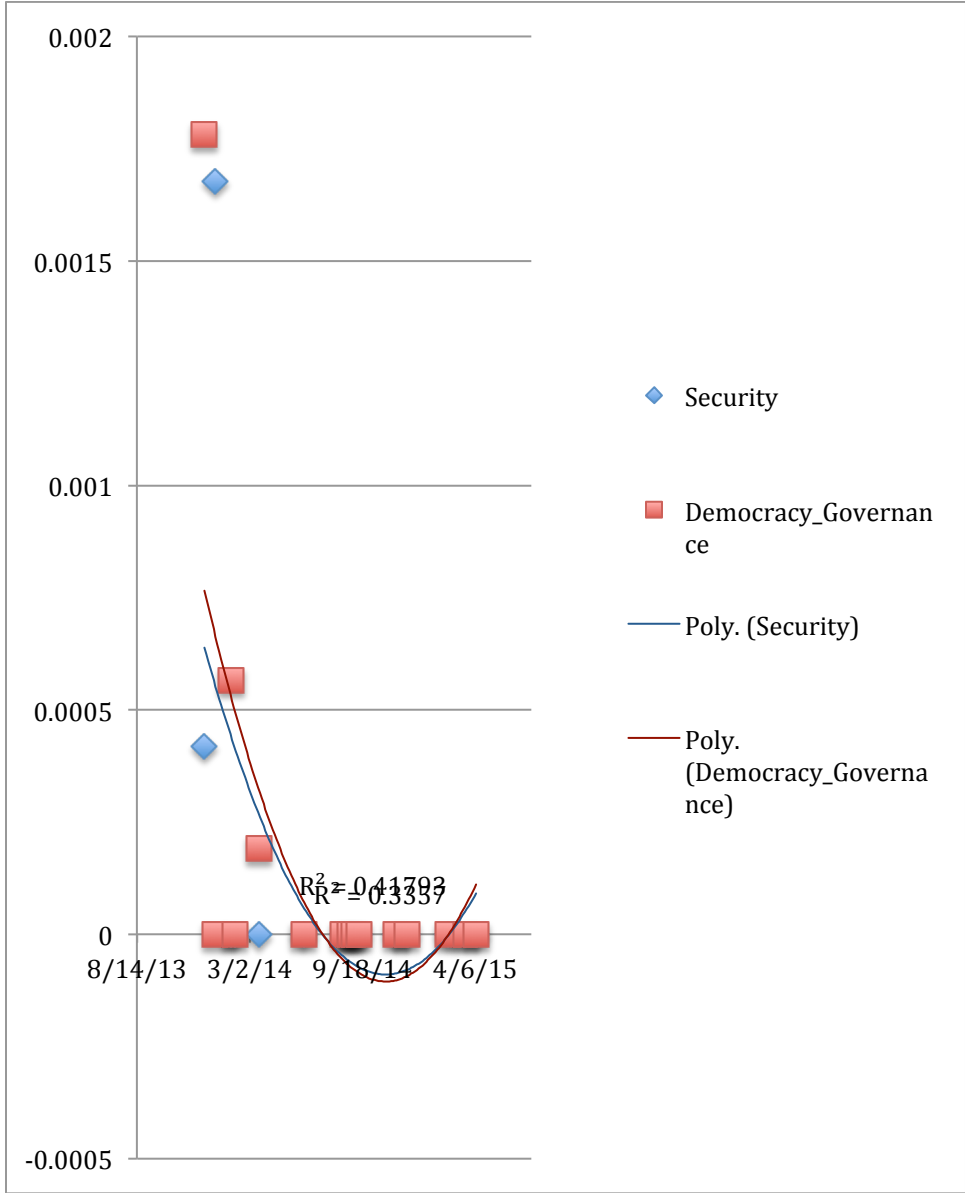


Figure 9. Ukrainian Case: Political Themes

¹⁶ Security is reference to the speaker’s national security; Democracy is reference to democracy, which in Putin’s case is usually critical.

The Blip and Brag

As yet, Putin has not increased his use of political or emotional themes in relation to events in Ukraine. This may be because his aims are not yet achieved. However, in evidence that he may be becoming more comfortable with his success in E Ukraine, some **rhetorical devices**, including *figurative_language*, *intimacy*, *kinship*¹⁷ are beginning to increase.

“But as Nikolai Berdyaev said, the meaning of conservatism is not to prevent moving forward and upward, but to prevent moving backwards and downward, into chaotic darkness, back to the primitive state” (Putin 12 December 2013).

“Dear friends, we have gathered here today in connection with an issue that is of vital, historic significance to all of us” (Putin 18 March 2014).

“Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other” (Putin 18 March 2014).

Increasing Interest

In only three cases does Putin indicate increasing concern with issues through a sustained increase in his mention of certain themes. These patterns do not provide indicators of future action, but they underscore what appear to be enduring and increasingly important issues in his decision calculus. Putin indicates a sustained and escalating concern with economic concerns, especially *Russia’s oil and gas industry*. This is consistent with the findings of several researchers regarding Putin’s core geo-political interests (Bragg, 2016). One **emotional theme**, *Nazism*, appears to be of increasing concern to Putin, consistent with earlier findings (Kuznar & Yager, 2016). Finally, Putin is expressing increasing interest with *Turkey*, months after the downing of the Russian fighter by Turkish air defenses.

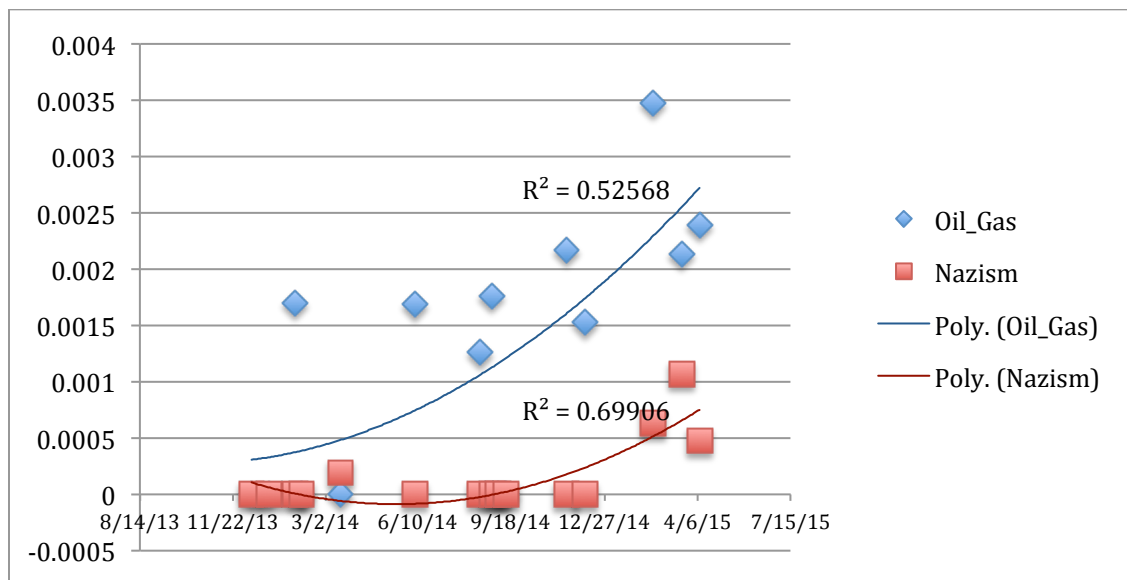


Figure 10. Ukrainian Case: Sustained and Increasing Concerns

¹⁷ Figurative_Language is the use of metaphor, metonym, symbolic language and allusion; Intimacy is expression of social closeness (e.g. my friends, excessive use of “we” and “our”); Kinship is the use of kin terms (brothers and sisters, my children) to express social closeness.

“My second point concerns lowering energy prices” (Putin 28 January 2014).

“However, those who stood behind the latest events in Ukraine had a different agenda: they were preparing yet another government takeover; they wanted to seize power and would stop short of nothing. They resorted to terror, murder and riots. Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites executed this coup. They continue to set the tone in Ukraine to this day (Putin 18 March 2014).

Russia and Turkey have very many – I’d like to stress this – coinciding regional interests. Moreover, a number of regional problems cannot be solved unless Turkey joins in to help address them. This is why we are highly interested in promoting our relations, and we will do just that” (Putin 18 December 2014).

References

Bragg, B. (2016). *Drivers of Conflict and Convergence in Eurasia in the Next 5-25 Years: Integration Report*. Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) Periodic Publication, OSD/ASD (R&E)/RSD/RRTO, Arlington, Virginia.

Kuznar, L. A., & Yager, M. (2016). *Identification of Security Issues and Their Importance to Russia, Its Near-abroad and NATO Allies: A Thematic Analysis of Leadership Speeches*. Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) Periodic Publication, OSD/ASD (R&E)/RSD/RRTO, Arlington, Virginia.

Russia’s Strategic Interests Regarding Regional Conflict

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois and NSI Team considering input from Timothy Thomas (Foreign Military Studies Office, Ft. Leavenworth) and Eugene Rumer (Carnegie Endowment)

Russia INTEREST	DESCRIPTION	INTEREST TYPE				
		National security/ population safety	Int’l/ intergroup prestige	Domestic politics/ regime security/ constituent support	Economic survival/ prosperity	Identity/ ideology
Enhance international/regional influence at detriment to US	<p>Since coming to power in 2000, President Putin has been committed to restoring Russia’s global status as a world power. As Russia’s closest ally in the region Syria is “key to Putin’s calculus” as he seeks to position Russia as a counterweight to Western influence in the Middle East (Borshchevskaya, 2013).</p> <p>Putin’s extension of military support to the Assad regime directly challenged the US-led Coalition to defeat ISIL and Assad by building an alternative coalition against ISIL. In July 2015, Russian and Iranian ministers held a series of meetings, arriving at a “common position” on Syria and in September, the Iraqi military announced it had reached an intelligence sharing agreement with Russia, Iran and Syria in the fight against ISIL.</p>	X	X	X		

Like Assad, Putin has argued that it was the West's wrong-headed backing of the Syrian rebels not Assad's actions that escalated the violence (Putin, 2013) and led to the crisis in Syria (S. Dagher, 2015; Roth, 2015). From the Russian perspective, if the moderate Syrian opposition continues to erode, the US will have no choice but to moderate its own position on removing Assad. In this case, Russia will be well positioned to use its influence with Assad to gain diplomatic concessions from the West over Ukraine sanctions.

<p>Access to Mediterranean; retain port, airfield intel post</p>	<p><i>The Assad regime has been Russia's closest ally in the Middle East for more than 40 years.¹⁸ In 2013 President Putin made expansion of Russian naval power one of the "chief priorities" of his third term. This was followed a week later by announcement of the biggest Russian naval exercise in the Mediterranean which was seen by some as early indication that Russia did not intend to step away from Assad (Borshchevskaya, 2013). In September 2015 Russia began building a forward air base at Latakia, the port city where Russia maintains a small naval base. Safeguarding the Assad regime preserves Russian naval access to its only port in the Mediterranean where US and NATO forces have important bases and operations (Humud, Woehrel, Mix, & Blanchard, 2015).</i></p>	<p>X</p>											
<p>Stymie spread of extremism into central Asian states; weaken/ defeat Chechen and other extremist fighters</p>	<p><i>Broader geopolitical interests aside, the Russian leadership has a strong interest in counterterrorism operations and fears that the fall of the Assad regime will bring radical Islamists to power in Syria, destabilize the region and potentially affect the stability of Russia's southern regions. In short, the Russian position is that supporting Assad is essential if ISIL and other terror groups in the region are to be defeated (Tharoor, 2015).</i></p> <p><i>It took the Russia government nearly a decade to quiet its internal conflict with Chechen rebels and Russia remains wary of any ideological or ethno-religious movements that could emerge inside the country. From Putin's perspective not only do extremist ideology and battle-hardened jihadis from the North Caucasus pose a threat to population safety in Russia, they also threaten the domestic popularity of the regime and its international prestige.</i></p>	<p>X</p>	<p>X</p>										
<p>Demonstrate Russia still has the power to act as a global player</p>	<p><i>Related to Russia's interest in extending its global influence, is its interest in <u>demonstrating</u> its "rebuilt" strength and capabilities. There are a number of objectives associated with this. First, testing Russia's new weapons and command and control capabilities (of the new National Defense Control Center in Moscow) affords the military a real-life training opportunity. Second, it sends a clear deterrence message to the US about Russia's resolve to recover its place in the world and shows off the military's "professional competency" that as Timothy Thomas notes, "was lacking in Georgia."</i></p>		<p>X</p>										

¹⁸ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia accounted for 78% of Syria's weapons purchases between 2007 and 2012. Between 2009 and 2013 Russian companies invested more than \$20 billion in Syria

Avoid popular ire at economic downturn; sons dying abroad

While stirring up nationalist sentiment – particularly aimed at the damage American aggression does to Russian interests – helps bump up Russian opinion of Putin, the balance of his support rests on the perception that the regime has recharged Russia's economy and international stature.¹⁹

X

X

Russian shows of new military weapons and the effectiveness of the Russian military also play well at home in Russia. Timothy Thomas notes that “with the situation in Ukraine at a stalemate, and the economic effects of continuing low oil prices and economic sanctions felt across Russia, direct intervention in Syria offered Putin the opportunity to both distract domestic attention and ... from an increasingly unpopular conflict against brother Slavs in Ukraine; and reassure the population that the Kremlin is directing its attention toward the emerging threat to the south of the nation.”

Biographies



Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois is Executive Vice President at NSI, Inc. She has also served as co-chair of a National Academy of Sciences study on Strategic Deterrence Military Capabilities in the 21st Century, and as a primary author on a study of the Defense and Protection of US Space Assets. Dr. Astorino-Courtois has served as technical lead on a variety of rapid turn-around, Joint Staff-directed Strategic Multi-layer Assessment (SMA) projects in support of US forces and Combatant Commands. These include assessments of key drivers of political, economic and social instability and areas of resilience in South Asia;

development of a methodology for conducting provincial assessments for the ISAF Joint Command; production of a "rich contextual understanding" (RCU) to supplement intelligence reporting for the ISAF J2 and Commander; and projects for USSTRATCOM on deterrence assessment methods.

Previously, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a Senior Analyst at SAIC (2004-2007) where she served as a STRATCOM liaison to U.S. and international academic and business communities. Prior to SAIC, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a tenured Associate Professor of International Relations at Texas A&M University in College Station, TX (1994-2003) where her research focused on the cognitive aspects of foreign policy decision making. She has received a number of academic grants and awards and has published articles in multiple peer-reviewed journals. She has also taught at Creighton University and as a visiting

¹⁹ Thomas Sherlock, "Putin's Public Opinion Challenge," *The National Interest*, 21 August 2014. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/putins-public-opinion-challenge-11113>.

instructor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Dr. Astorino-Courtois earned her Ph.D. in International Relations and MA in and Research Methods from New York University. Her BA is in political science from Boston College. Finally, Dr. Astorino-Courtois also has the distinction of having been awarded both a US Navy Meritorious Service Award and a US Army Commander's Award.



Dr. Patricia Degennaro

Patricia (Tricia) DeGennaro is a Senior Geopolitical Risk Analyst for Threat Tec., LLC. She currently supports the US Army TRADOC G27 as an analyst in the Advanced Network Analysis/Attack the Network Directorate. DeGennaro has lectured at West Point and New York University on International Security Policy and Civilian and Military Affairs. She was selected as a Subject Matter Expert (SME) on the Middle East, Iraq, and Afghanistan for various projects under the TRADOC G2, the commander of the Multi-National Forces in Iraq, commander of the Special Operations Command Central, and the US Department of Defense Strategic Multilayer Assessment program. DeGennaro was nominated by the US Department of State as a Franklin Fellow where she served in USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance - Office of Civilian and Military Cooperation (DCHA/CMC) as a Senior Policy Advisor to support the Office and an Agency-wide Civilian-Military Cooperation Steering Committee in an extensive revision to the Agency's Civilian-Military Cooperation Policy. DeGennaro capitalizes on over twenty years of experience as an academic, author and consultant in international security. Much of her work focuses on stabilization in the Middle East and surrounding region, countering violent extremism, and transitioning nations from war.

DeGennaro has published several articles on US foreign policy and national security topics. Her focus is to encourage an integrated international policy that looks beyond war and the use of force. She is often an expert commentator for CNN, MSNBC, Al Jazeera, Fox News, BBC and various nationally and internationally syndicated radio programs. She holds an MBA in International Trade and Finance from George Washington University and an MPA in International Security and Conflict Resolution from Harvard University. She speaks fluent Albanian and has a basic knowledge of Italian, Arabic and Dari.



Dr. Larry Kuznar

Dr. Kuznar is Chief Cultural Sciences Officer at NSI, and a professor of anthropology at Indiana University – Purdue University, Fort Wayne, IN. His background is in discourse analysis, decision theory, and mathematical and computational modeling. He has supported many SMA projects, as well as work for AFRL, the Army Corps of Engineers, and NSI's commercial customers. His discourse work has been used to provide anticipatory insights into violent non-state actors such as ISIL and the Taliban, and state actors as varied as Iran, Pakistan, India and North Korea. He also contributed to NSI's computational modeling of social conflict. Dr. Kuznar's published work can be found in journals such as *American Anthropologist*, *Political Studies*, *Current Anthropology*, *Evolution and Human Behavior* and *Social Science Computer Review*.



Timothy L. Thomas

Timothy L. Thomas is an analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He retired from the U.S. Army as a Lieutenant Colonel in the summer of 1993. Mr. Thomas received a B.S. from West Point and an M.A. from the University of Southern California. He was a U.S. Army Foreign Area Officer who specialized in Soviet/Russian studies. His military assignments included serving as the Director of Soviet Studies at the United States Army Russian Institute (USARI) in Garmisch, Germany; as an inspector of Soviet tactical operations under CSCE; and as a Brigade S-2 and company commander in the 82nd Abn Division. Mr. Thomas has done extensive research and publishing in the areas of peacekeeping, information war, psychological operations, low intensity conflict, and political-military affairs. He served as the assistant editor of the journal *European Security* and as an adjunct professor at the U.S. Army's Eurasian Institute; is an adjunct lecturer at the USAF Special Operations School; and was a member of two Russian organizations, the Academy of International Information, and the Academy of Natural Sciences. Books published by Mr. Thomas regarding Russian military operations are (all are US Government publications and not available in bookstores): *Recasting the Red Star*, 2011, in digital form on our website; *Russian Military Strategy: Impacting 21st Century Reform and Geopolitics*, 2015, forthcoming.