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Changing Character of War Centre
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From Hammer to Rapier: Russian Military Transformation in Perspective

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With the arrival of 2018, the Russian armed forces have been through almost a decade of military restructuring and reforms, and also modernization. These concurrent processes, launched in 2008 and 2011 respectively, have resulted in the restoration of the military as an effective instrument of national power available to Moscow. Importantly, though, the Russian armed forces remain in a state of transformation, assimilating combat experience from Syria and Ukraine, while embarking on a new phase of weapons procurement and modernization. Having gained considerable experience in employing force to pursue political ends, the evolution of Russian strategy and doctrinal preferences is steadily coming into relief.

Between 2008 and 2012, in reforms led by then-Defence Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov, the Russian General Staff scrapped much of the inherited legacy Soviet military, restructured the armed forces, and reconstituted a much smaller permanent standing force. Moscow then launched a deep modernization program, the state armament program (GPV) 2011-2020, to compensate for two decades of divestment in its armed forces. Since 2013 an additional emphasis has been placed on training, joint exercises, snap readiness checks and investments in expanding the percentage of contractors vice conscripts in the armed forces.

Three main trends merit outlining: first, the Russian armed forces have continued to expand in size since 2011; second, in terms of readiness, manning levels and the like, the military is more operational than at any time since the early-1990s; and, third, it is receiving a substantial amount of modernized or entirely new equipment on an annual basis. The battlefields of Ukraine and Syria have given the Russian leadership considerable opportunity to evaluate the capabilities, limitations, and necessary adjustments that need to be made to its armed forces.

Combat experience in Syria has proven to be the greatest influence on Russian leadership and staff decisions. According to General Valeriy Gerasimov, Chief of General Staff, all of the military district, combined arms armies, air force and air defence army commanders, and many of the divisional commanders, have served in Syria. In 2017, the senior military leadership underwent the largest rotation for a decade, the result of which has been further promotion and advancement of those with command experience in Syria. From the recent promotion – and decoration as Hero of the Russian Federation – of Sergei Surovikin to head the Aerospace Forces, to those such as Andrey Kartapolov, the commander of the Western Military District, all who served with success have become military district or senior service commanders in the Russian armed forces.

While much of Russia's firepower remains concentrated in its ground force, the overall focus of Russian military development from 2008 to 2014 was to counter Western advantages in air power, and develop the capability to engage in non-contact warfare with precision standoff weaponry. To this end, much of the investment initially did not go towards Russian ground forces, despite Russia being a Eurasian land power with distinct disadvantages in other domains relative to the United States. Instead, viewing the overwhelming US conventional superiority in offensive fires and air power as a strategic threat, Russia's General Staff has been beset with the question of how to deter through the threat of effective retaliation, or if necessary, defeat, the possibility of a large-scale U.S. aerospace attack.

Russian strategy has consistently emphasized the importance of improving conventional deterrence in deploying long-range precision guided weapons across the force, complemented by escalation control via non-strategic nuclear weapons. The force is structured around two aims: deterring or coercing other great powers, and providing Moscow with an effective military instrument to impose its will in its near abroad. Conflicts near and far have been mutually reinforcing for establishing coercive credibility *vis-a-vis* the US, demonstrating newly deployed capabilities and the resolve to use force in international politics.

Part and parcel of the evolution in Russian military thought has been to seize on the inherent cost and potential indecisiveness of using conventional military power. Political ends on the battlefield should be achieved via low cost, or deniable means, particularly if proxies or local forces are available. The importance of non-military instruments, coupled with the non-kinetic, such as information warfare, cyberwarfare, or electronic warfare is strongly appreciated. To this end, Russia has also expanded its capacity for unconventional or irregular warfare, establishing a Tier 1 special forces unit (KSO) and building up a nascent mercenary force, as demonstrated by the Wagner Group's combat operations in Syria. Thus, the high-end capabilities, be they 4th generation submarines or long-range cruise missiles, are there to shape adversary decision making about the potential costs of a war with Moscow, while generally the Russian armed forces prefer a minimalist footprint in the battlespace.

A reform and modernization strategy aimed solely at peer opponents was ultimately sidelined, however, by the war in Ukraine in 2014, which forced the Russian leadership to recognize the continued importance of large standing ground formations, and which fell back on more traditional Soviet strengths: armoured warfare, area of effect fires, massed artillery, large motor rifle formations. Deterring the U.S. proved of little use in fighting an actual war with one's neighbour, which also happened to be the largest country in Europe. Changing course, the Russian leadership sought to expand the size of the ground force, rearm it, and is in the process of deploying large formations ringing Ukraine. Throughout the Russian general purpose forces there has been a dramatic expansion in ground force formations, combat aviation, logistics and support units, missile brigades, and key enabling capabilities such as electronic warfare, drone, and reconnaissance companies across brigades.

Russia's ground force today numbers some 350,000 (ground force and VDV) of a total military that is now well above 900,000 in active strength. Of that, it is likely they can force generate on short notice 50,000 to 60,000, in manoeuver elements organized as battalion tactical groups, and be the first with the most anywhere on Russia's periphery. Russian forces lack a standing operational reserve, and as such are not setup for occupying or holding large tracts of land. Instead, this is a military built to pulse firepower onto the battlefield and allow Moscow to impose its will by force, i.e. achieve political ends through decisive battles, and then (ideally) withdraw. Russian doctrinal thinking remains focused on the correlation of forces and methods on the battlefield, but the political leadership employs the military judiciously, holding it in reserve as much as possible. In the modern Russian army, agility and mobility have been added to the historic repertoire of heavy metal, and contact warfare via large armour and artillery formations.

Even so, modernization and readiness remain uneven in the Russian military, as does professionalism. The contract share of the force is likely in the 350,000-400,000 range, heavily concentrated in the navy, aerospace and airborne forces, as opposed to the army. Sustaining the positive upward trend of increasing contractor share of the force is one of the major challenges the Russian military will face in the coming years. Still, combat experience in Ukraine and Syria showed that modernized Russian equipment, with current readiness rates and training is more than sufficient to take on any former Soviet republic. Its latest generation technology is frankly overmatch for most adversaries, with the exception of peer powers, and Russian "good enough" can hold its own in a short-term, high-intensity fight with NATO.

Currently fielded advanced capabilities mostly represent late generation Soviet designs, which were finished and deployed across the force thanks to the initial $670 billion modernization program. Questions remain about the defence industry's (and the wider economy's) capacity to sustain research and development into the 2030s. Future procurement (2018-2022) will focus less on platforms, except in the growing ground force, and more on new families of weapon systems. Russia has demonstrated the capability of new or modernized weapon systems, but what it currently lacks is capacity.

Although defence spending reached its peak in 2015, with perhaps 4.2% of GDP, it continues to remain well above 3% today (the current defence budget is ~2.8 trillion rubles). Despite cuts, there is a strong sense of continuity to the reforms and investments made which will carry the Russian military well into the 2020s. The upcoming state armament program for 2018-2027, expected at 19 trillion rubles, is smaller than the Ministry of Defence hoped for, but the heavy lifting of investing in Russia's defence industrial complex and modernizing a depleted force has in part already been completed. The question is whether the Russian economy can provide the resources required to sustain it, given the prolonged impact of sanctions on access to defence technologies. Domestic procurement cuts will undoubtedly increase dependence on arms exports within the defence sector. Moscow may be charting this course amidst imposing constraints and into strong financial headwinds, but it does appear committed to defence spending.

The progress made by Russian armed forces remains fitful, unevenly distributed across the force, and caveats and questions abound regarding its future trajectory. Despite these limitations, Russia has not only resurrected the military as a capable instrument of national power, with demonstrable results in international politics, but is moving beyond nuclear deterrence to resurrecting a credible conventional deterrent as well. Having reforged the sword, the coming years will focus on sharpening and strengthening the metal.

Yamal LNG Affirms Russia's Determination and Political Prowess

NAZRIN MEHDIYEVA

On 8 December, President Putin inaugurated Russia's first Arctic gas liquefaction plant, Yamal LNG. The project has cost Russia $27 billion but, on the assessment of the Russian leadership, was well worth the risk and expense. Yamal LNG marks a seminal event for the country's energy industry and represents an act of political defiance of the Western sanctions regime.

The Yamal project has enabled Russia to reassert its role in the international gas market by establishing itself as an important LNG player with global ambitions. Prior to Yamal LNG, Russian companies had very limited experience with LNG: the country's single LNG-producing facility, Sakhalin-2, came under Gazprom's ownership only close to the project's completion. Even then, Shell had to be retained as the operator and technical advisor on the project.

Russia's lack of expertise with LNG was widely seen as a source of weakness and was one of the pressure points pinpointed by the Western sanctions regime after Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Specifically, the sanctions aimed at slowing down, and if possible precluding, the development of hydrocarbons in the Arctic. The underlying calculation was that without an established presence in the rapidly growing LNG market, Russia, with its declining fields in Western Siberia and continued reliance on pipeline sales to Europe, could not aspire to remain the world's leading hydrocarbons exporter.

Retaining its position among the top three world leaders in the production and export of energy resources over the next twenty years has been stipulated in the draft Energy Strategy to 2035 as Russia's key strategic goal. Predicated on the understanding that international competition for export markets is intensifying, Moscow has focused on growing hydrocarbons production and presence across the markets, despite low oil prices. Faced with the Western sanctions, Russia has looked to Asia to secure the financial and technological resources to expand into LNG and the Arctic – and ideally, into Arctic LNG. It has been remarkably successful.

Financing

Today, Yamal LNG is a joint venture between Russia's independent gas operator Novatek (50.1%), France's Total (20%) and China's CNPC and Silk Road Fund, which have a cumulative stake of 29.9%. Chinese funding came at a time when the project was at an inflection point: having secured $15 billion in funding, Novatek was unable to progress as it required another $12 billion but had been cut off from Western financing by the sanctions. The necessary amount came from the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank Corporation, which provided 15-year credit line facilities for $10.6 billion and $1.5 billion, respectively. This breakthrough in itself scored a major political victory for Russia.

In its Final Investment Decision in December 2013, Novatek committed to build three trains with the combined capacity of 16.5 million tonnes per annum. The first was launched in December while the other two are due online in 2018 and 2019, respectively. Both are well on track and could even become operational several months ahead of schedule. In a briefing in London in October, Novatek stated that it intends to add the fourth train to the project before 2020, increasing total capacity by 1 million tonnes per annum. The source of the funding for the extra train has not been made public but it is understood that the project has the backing from Total, the Silk Road Fund, the Russian government and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation.

Logistical infrastructure

Yamal peninsula is Russia's "frontier" hydrocarbons province. As such, before any hydrocarbons production could take place, project partners had to construct staff facilities for 20,000 people, an international airport at Sabetta and a large cargo port via which LNG modules could be transported by sea to the peninsula. This augmented the costs for Yamal LNG but also paved the way for a new project on the neighbouring Gydan peninsula, Arctic LNG-2. At a comparable planned annual capacity of 10 million tonnes of LNG per annum, the costs for the new project are significantly lower, at $10 billion (vs. $27 billion for Yamal LNG).

LNG technology

Novatek's success in procuring LNG technology from non-Western sources has greatly contributed to undermining the effectiveness of the sanctions. Previously, LNG technology and expertise in building liquefaction facilities was possessed almost exclusively by Western majors. Yamal LNG provided a chance for China to make its first foray into the export of LNG equipment. In line with the $1.6 billion contract between Yamal LNG and China Offshore Oil Engineering Corporation (COOEC) signed in July 2014, the Chinese company manufactured 36 core kit LNG modules weighing 8,000 tonnes each. Upon completing the assignment, COOEC stated that the project had enabled it to master the LNG core process module construction technology and enter the international high-end hydrocarbons equipment market. Altogether, Yamal LNG has used 200 modules that were manufactured across 10 Asian fabrication yards, mainly in China but also Indonesia. Moreover, Yamal LNG has commissioned South Korea's Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering to build 15 Arc7 LNG tankers to transport the output from the project. These are the world's first ice-class LNG tankers able to navigate in temperatures of minus 50 degrees Celsius and sail independently through ice of up to 2.1 metres deep. Successful tests were completed in ice-bound waters of the Kara and Laptev seas in spring 2017.

At the inauguration ceremony in December, Putin stated: 'At the start of the project, people told me not to pursue this. Those who started this project took a risk but achieved a result'. A key person behind the project appears to have been Gennady Timchenko, widely regarded as a member of Putin's inner circle. Timchenko is, among other things, a co-founder of the judo club of which Putin is honorary president, though the billionaire denies that his fortune, estimated by *Forbes* at $16 billion, has been due to his relationship with Putin. Timchenko has been on the US sanctions list since March 2014 after the US Department of Treasury alleged that Putin had invested in the international oil trader Gunvor, which Timchenko had co-founded.

Remarkably, Timchenko sold his 43% stake in Gunvor just one day before the sanctions were imposed. He has since then focused on his Russian assets – most prominently Novatek. Timchenko owns a 23.5% stake in Novatek whereas another key player, Leonid Mikhelson, owns a 24.8% stake. Mikhelson is also the chairman of Novatek and, with an estimated fortune of $18.4 billion (as of April 2017), he tops the list of the wealthiest Russians, according to *Forbes Russia*. He is not known for close connections to Putin but both Mikhelson and Timchenko have stakes in petrochemical giant Sibur in which Kirill Shamalov, believed to be Putin's son-in-law, also has a small share (Mikhelson - 48.5%; Timchenko - 17.0%; Shamalov - 3.9%). 62 year old Mikhelson is a career oilman who keeps a remarkably low political profile. Most of his statements to the media, as well as recorded conversations with Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev focus on Novatek's grand projects in the Arctic, emphasise the jobs they create and the contribution they make to enhancing Russia's standing among the global exporters of energy. He is exactly the type of "doer" that the leadership needs and cherishes: his loyalty, professionalism and now stellar performance in delivering a project against all odds make him a person of formidable standing.

Following the successful launch of Yamal LNG, Novatek has announced that it would invest $47.6 billion

in the Arctic by 2030. The investments should be expected to focus on the Yamal and Gydan peninsulas. In November, Novatek proceeded to sign a strategic cooperation agreement with CNPC to jointly develop Arctic LNG-2 and a memorandum of understanding with the China Development Bank Corporation for the provision of up to $3 billion in financing for the project. The plant may become operational by 2022-23, and LNG modules are expected to be built at the Kola Yard which the company is constructing outside Murmansk.

Novatek's success has pushed the boundaries of what is possible under the Western sanctions regimes. Yamal LNG has become the world's first LNG project inside the Arctic Circle and has confirmed Russia's standing as an Arctic power. Politically, it has enabled Russia to stand defiant in the face of the Western sanctions and strengthen ties with Asia. Completing a highly complex project on time and on budget has moved Moscow closer to its strategic aim of preserving its leadership in hydrocarbons production and export. The combined volumes of liquefied gas produced at Sakhalin-2, Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2 will make Russia one of the largest global suppliers of LNG. The volumes will not yet compare to those of Qatar, which is the world's largest LNG exporter and which Russia wants to match and surpass. Nonetheless, given the vast reserves, political determination and the newly acquired LNG experience, Russia will be in a good position to do so in the medium and long run.

Russia's Political Economy: A Slow and Uncertain Recovery

RICHARD CONNOLLY

In 2017, the Russian economy recorded annual GDP growth for the first time since 2014. The most recent estimates suggest that GDP growth of 1.8% should be expected for the year as a whole, although the rate of year-on-year growth did slow towards the end of the year. This performance was in line with the average of most official forecasts made at the beginning of 2017 when annual growth of between 1.5-2% was forecast.

While this represented the best annual performance since 2012, the pace of the recovery was disappointing considering the protracted and severe nature of the 2015-16 recession. Moreover, with global GDP rising by around 3.6% in 2017, Russia's share of global output continued to decline. This trend looks unlikely to change in the near future: most official forecasts – whether from the IMF and World Bank, or from Russia's Central Bank or Ministry for Economic Development – envisage Russian GDP growth of between 1.7-2.2% over the next two years. Thus, while the economy certainly did not collapse after 2014, it has performed poorly relative to many countries that Moscow would consider to be economic competitors.

Growth was driven primarily by the rising value of crude and refined oil exports. In 2017, joint efforts by Russia and OPEC to support prices through production cuts proved successful in supporting prices of over $50 per barrel. These negotiations were carried out by Alexander Novak, Minister for Energy since 2012, sometimes against the backdrop of opposition to production cuts from powerful figures in the oil industry, such as Igor Sechin, CEO of Rosneft, and Vagit Alekperov, President of Lukoil. Nevertheless, global inventories of oil remain high, prompting the extension of the Russia-OPEC deal to the end of 2018. For Russia and other oil exporters, much will depend on what happens to global oil inventories. On the one hand, forecasts from the International Energy Agency (IEA) suggest that inventory levels may rise in the coming months, despite the output cut. If so, oil prices are unlikely to rise significantly, and could even fall. On the other hand, if inventories follow the trajectory of 2017 and continue to fall, a closer gap between supply and demand could result in any geopolitical shocks – unrest in Iran or Venezuela, for example, or conflict on the Korean peninsula – exerting disproportionately strong upward pressure on prices. As ever with Russia, the price of oil will be the key economic variable to watch in the coming months.

Investment

Investment in fixed capital – a pre-requisite for any sustained expansion of economic activity – looks set to have grown over the course of 2017 by around 4% year-on-year at the end of the third quarter. This is the first time that investment in fixed capital has grown on an annual basis since 2013. But the pace of this recovery remains slow, especially given the protracted length of the slump in investment that took place over 2014-2016, and two trends are cause for pessimism. First, the pace of investment growth looked to have slowed towards the end of 2017 as investment by the state and large firms slowed.

Second, what investment has taken place was concentrated in energy (especially pipeline construction), agriculture and some sub-sectors of manufacturing. Investment continued to contract in other parts of the economy. This absence of broad-based investment growth will undermine efforts to boost annual GDP growth rates to anything more than 2% even if oil prices rise.

Inflation and living standards

In 2017, living standards continued a slow and uneven recovery from recession. Inflation dropped to a post-Soviet low level of 2.5% in the first eleven months of the year, retail sales grew slightly, and the unemployment level of some 5% also reflected a post-Soviet low level. These positive developments were tempered, however, by the fact that real disposable monetary incomes fell in year-on-year terms in November by around 1.5%, suggesting that disposable income will fall for the fourth year in succession.

The benefits of the return to economic growth and the reduction in inflation were confined to a small segment of the population, therefore, and it is likely that the government will need carefully to monitor any rise in popular discontent as the presidential election looms in March. The announcement that military pay would rise by 4% annually over the coming years indicates that the government will at least try to ensure that key support bases are not excluded from the modest improvement in economic fortunes.

Economic policy

Fiscal and monetary policy
Fiscal policy and how the federal government allocates its resources reveals much about the social and economic priorities of the government. The federal budget for the period 2018-2020 was accepted in December, and the details indicate that budgetary consolidation will proceed more quickly than many anticipated. In 2018, federal budget spending is forecast to decline slightly in nominal ruble terms, which should result in a real decline of at least 3-4% depending on the rate of inflation (which itself is forecast to average around 4% over the next three years). As nominal spending declines and if the economy continues to grow, total federal government spending as a proportion of GDP is expected to decline.

The projected allocation of federal expenditure for the next three years also hints at a gentle rebalancing in government priorities, with greater emphasis placed on spending on health, education and support for the economy.

The most noteworthy reduction is envisaged for social welfare spending, much of which is allocated to pensions expenditure. A reduction in direct government spending on pensions is expected to result in a substantial decline in federal social welfare spending, which should decline from 5.5% of GDP in 2017 to 4.4% in 2019. This is a significant development given the extent to which Russia's ageing population is expected to cause a surge in pensions expenditure over the next decade.

Defence expenditure, which rose considerably between 2010 and 2015, is projected to remain stable in nominal terms but to decline in real (i.e. inflation-adjusted) terms. Spending on the 'national defence' chapter of the budget is projected to decline from 3.1% of GDP in 2018 to 2.5% in 2020. It is possible that the new State Armament Programme (GPV-2027) will result in more resources being allocated to defence procurement, which might in turn boost defence spending in general. If the current approximate levels of defence procurement are maintained, however, it might be possible to both continue with the current trajectory of military modernization while still reducing the overall defence burden on the economy.

The relatively conservative nature of budgetary plans should leave some room for the government to provide discretionary – albeit modest – support for the economy in the run up to the presidential election in March. Basing the budget on oil prices of around $40 per barrel means that because current prices are closer to $60, the government could have greater financial flexibility should it be needed.

Even so, it is also important to note that the budget is based on what might prove to be an excessively optimistic forecast for increased tax revenues. A large proportion of the expected tax revenue growth is

expected to be derived from dividend payments made by state-owned companies. This has proven to be an unreliable source of tax revenues in the past. Consequently, higher-than-expected revenues from oil exports may need to fill the gap created by lower-than-expected tax collection elsewhere in the economy. This may compromise official plans to reduce the extent to which the government's fiscal position is shaped by fluctuations in the oil market.

Assuming no sharp fluctuation in the oil price, the current low rate of inflation should allow the Central Bank (CBR) to continue reducing interest rates from the current level of 7.75% (compared to 10.5% a year ago). The CBR has been cautious in reducing interest rates in the past, so is likely to reduce interest rates further only slowly.

The CBR, led by Elvira Nabiullina, an experienced economist who has also served as Minister of Economic Development and Trade (2007-2012) and then President Putin's economic advisor (2012-2013), has actively "sanitised" the domestic banking system, and took over two ailing privately-owned banks in the second half of 2017. This has resulted in the state's role in the Russian banking system further growing above an already high level: it is now estimated that state-owned banks account for around 70% of total banking assets in Russia. This reflects a wider tendency towards state domination of the 'strategic heights' of the Russian economy.

Structural reform

The leadership will continue to discuss plans to boost the rate of annual economic growth to over 3%. But while some progress in stabilising the macroeconomic situation might be expected, especially in reducing expenditure and balancing the federal budget, meaningful progress in implementing micro-level and structural reforms – i.e. improving property rights, strengthening the rule of law, and so on – are likely to be resisted by strong entrenched interest groups close to the leadership.

It is also rumoured that the president recently informed high-profile business leaders that they should not expect any significant change in the business environment in the near future. As such, only incremental and probably technical reform can be expected in the coming months, though this may change after the presidential election.

Conclusion

The economic situation might best be described as "stagnant but not serious" – there was no collapse in 2017, as some had anticipated, and there are signs of a slow, albeit uncertain recovery. That this modest recovery was driven by a steady increase in the oil price demonstrated that Russia is as susceptible to fluctuations in global hydrocarbons markets as in the past. The deal to reduce output with OPEC, and Saudi Arabia in particular, is therefore of immense importance to Russia's immediate economic fortunes. Should the deal break down, a reduction in oil prices is likely to drive the already-modest rate of growth even lower. Even if the deal continues to boost prices, something new will be needed from economic policy-makers if investment and living standards are to rise in a significant and sustained fashion.

Review of Bacon, E. *Inside Russian Politics*. London: Biteback Publishers, 2017. Select bibliography, Index, Pb. 263pp. ISBN 978-1-785-90231-4

EMILY FERRIS

Edwin Bacon's stated approach to Russia in his new book, *Inside Russian Politics,* is in many ways admirable. An experienced Russia-watcher, he seeks to refocus Western analyses of Russian politics, highlighting our over-emphasis on President Vladimir Putin and arguing for the need to look beyond the political hubs of Moscow and St Petersburg into the regions. The book hits important notes, including the significance of Putin's regular rotation of regional governors – a process that saw some 30 governors replaced in late 2017 – and bringing to the fore issues such as the enduring popularity of the Communists and the support for the LDPR (a nationalist party). Bacon also draws on the 'First Person' set of interviews that Putin gave in 2000 – that are too often forgotten but remain essential reading – to dispel some myths about those people Putin trusts.

In attempting to re-orientate readers' views, however, the argument frequently becomes embroiled in criticism of the West as a way of making sense of Russia. Bacon points, for instance, to findings from survey data that conclude that British attitudes to immigration are less liberal than Russia's (p.160). Leaving aside the fact that comparisons between the UK and Russia are unhelpful in attempting to shed light on the other here – Russia is many times larger, immigration from Central Asia has been a feature for years and Russia has been largely unaffected by the 2015 migrant crisis – the purpose of this point appears to be self-criticism. Making a British audience take a hard look at themselves before making assumptions about Russia detracts from the overall argument, drawing the reader into a debate with the author about British politics, instead of delving into Russian politics.

A second problem is an inconsistency of judgements made about Russian actions. In suggesting that we should analyse Russia as we would any other country – a worthy argument – Bacon's approach glosses over some of Russia's negative actions, apparently for the sake of balance, while making inconsistent judgements about others. The book contains plenty of judgement about the irresponsibility and hyperbolic rhetoric of Western Russia-watchers, but on the issue of Russian intervention in the US elections, Bacon remains largely silent. He briefly mentions the role of Russian news agencies such as *RT* and *Sputnik*, but otherwise he states explicitly that he will 'leav[e] aside any judgement on the matter'. Why? There is plenty to say on this point without descending into anti-Russian criticism. Similar treatment is given to the war in eastern Ukraine – the discussion of MH17 is brief and passively phrased, with no mention of the Buk, but the author is content to make a judgement call about the Russo-Georgia conflict in 2008, and assigns blame to Georgia for its initiation, even though this is debatable.

This is also illustrated by his approach to aspects of Russian internal politics. In his discussion, for instance, of opposition figure Alexei Navalniy, for example, Bacon lists Navalniy's 'presidential attributes' as 'tall, good-looking and confident' (p.74). He could have pointed to some of Navalny's other attributes that would qualify him for the job, such as his law degree or his long career in political activism. But there is only passing mention of the real issue which many Western analysts, perhaps enamoured of Navalny's height, good looks and confidence, often overlook or play down: his nationalist and occasionally racist views. Charismatic as he may be, some of Navalny's public comments would have ended his political career long ago had he been a British politician, and some of his views, including about international affairs, should make his cheerleaders in the West uncomfortable. Many Westerners have adopted an "anyone but Putin" approach to Russian politics, but Navalny's anti-corruption and social media activities do not mitigate the other less palatable aspects of his political career.

The book also misses a potentially illuminating analysis of the authorities' reaction to different kinds of domestic protests, which, as the author acknowledges on pages 98-99, are not solely the preserve of Navalny-led opposition factions. While he does briefly discuss the long-distance lorry drivers' protests, a feature of the past two years, an interesting angle to draw out could have been how the authorities chose to react in this instance. Bacon correctly points out that these lorry drivers were not interested in forcing regime change, but were protesting for socio-economic reasons; the unpopular road toll tax is designed to increase cargo delivery costs for heavy goods vehicles. But these blue-collar workers represent the incumbent United Russia party's main support base, a fact of which the government is well aware. For this reason, the authorities did not detain protesters or respond with disproportionate force, even though the demonstrators blocked arterial roads into Moscow for several weeks and caused serious operational delays.

Instead, the authorities negotiated with demonstrators and agreed to reduce and delay the implementation of the tax, indicating that they are capable of behaving in a nuanced way towards protesters, recognising their voting potential. Similarly, protests earlier this year by miners over delayed wages in the Far Eastern Zabaikalskiy region are indicative of restive behaviour in the underfunded regions outside of Moscow. Russia's political apparatus is not infallible and the authorities are aware that to maintain their popularity over the next six years, they will have to adjust their thinking (and the budget) to appeal to this support base.

While this book is accessible and offers a good overview of Russian politics for students and analysts, it would have benefitted from a more nuanced analysis of the more contentious issues. The book is timely, with Russia in the headlines; the relationship between Russia and the West approaches a(nother) diplomatic nadir and Russia's presidential elections loom in March. But although books of this kind are important, this one ultimately gives a rather unbalanced view of Russia, despite its attempts to do the opposite.

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