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THE SPOILER: THE SYSTEMIC ROOTS OF RUSSIAN REVISIONISM

11 JUNE, 2020

WITH

BRIAN WHITMORE OF THE CENTER FOR EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS  
POST-EVENT WRITTEN Q&A ANSWERS

During the webinar, the Russia Strategic Initiative and Brian Whitmore were only able to answer a few questions. Brian Whitmore answered the questions below that were not addressed during the event.

1. Sir, Is the Sistema and the network of influence similar to what is often called the “friends of Putin” that seem to control a lot of Moscow?
  - a. Answer: “Sistema” includes Putin’s network of friends and cronies, but it is much broader and deeper. Sistema encompasses the entire network of patron-client relationships and clan structures that permeate Russian politics and the Russian economy at the federal and regional level.
2. Despite the normative tensions, it’s still true that at the end of Yeltsin’s leadership and in Putin’s initial terms, Russia was more amenable to dialogue with the West, for example, via the Russia-NATO mechanism. Can you please provide a more nuanced view of how Russian views of US have evolved (deteriorated?) time, specifically over the last two decades?
  - a. Answer: I would say a few things about that. First, Russia’s apparent amenability to dialogue during the Yeltsin and early Putin years was primarily a function of its weakness vis-à-vis the West. Second, even in this period, Russia was using the dialogue it was having with the West to advance its goal of dominating the former Soviet space. And finally, Russia’s revanchist behavior was evident even in the “good old days,” as evidenced by their intervention in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria.
3. Could you name a few of these clans and what areas they control?
  - a. Answer: The clans are constantly shifting. Among the most powerful, there is a group connected to Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin; one connected to Rostek CEO Sergei Chemezov; one connected to



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Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev[ and one connected to businessmen (and longtime Putin cronies) Boris and Arkady Rotenberg, Yury Kovalchuk, and Gennady Timchenko.

4. At the risk of engaging in whataboutism, there is plenty of corruption and opposition research in the West. Ledeneva argues that informality and informality form a continuum in which unwritten rules both supplement and undermine the written ones, a logic that can be applied both in Russia and the West. Why do we think that this more of a prominent feature of Russian political economy than that of the West?
  - a. Answer: Corruption in the West can be described as a bug in the system. In Russia it is a feature. Corruption is effectively sanctioned in Russia as a carrot and stick to control the elite. Kleptocracy is institutionalized. There is nothing analogous in the West. Although I would argue that certain reforms are needed – including reform of beneficial ownership and offshore legislation, tightening laws on money laundering, and a more robust FARA regime – to protect our system from the weaponized corruption emanating from hostile foreign actors like Russia.
5. You reference the use of "maskirovka" for political purposes in the 1990s. To what extent do we see Russia using maskirovka today? Should the US be wary of partnering with some FSU countries because they maintain close relations with Russia?
  - a. Answer: Maskirovka is a constant feature of Russian politics and foreign affairs. I believe the U.S. and its allies should partner with former Soviet countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, which are trying to join Western structures.
6. The current environment of corruption and Kremlin scrutiny in Moscow discourage entrepreneurship, both Russian and from aspiring immigrants. Is there a significant 'brain drain' from Russia, especially among the youth? If so, how long can Putin withstand w/o limiting measures?
  - a. Answer: Russia is experiencing a significant brain drain as some of the best and the brightest are leaving the country. The most prominent example is that of Pavel Durov, the founder of VKontakte, the



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“Russian Facebook,” but there are many more. This represents a significant problem for Russia moving forward.

7. Comparing Russia now to the Soviet Union of the past, what is to stop their economy from imploding again? Do some believe this time will be different?
  - a. Answer: The Russian economy’s excessive dependence on hydrocarbons represents a significant structural problem going forward. Every serious economist understands that it is necessary to diversify and decentralize the economy. But doing so would mean surrendering a degree of political control that the Putin regime finds unacceptable. I call this Russia’s “paradox of modernization.”
8. Is it cheating if two people are playing separate games via different rules? And is there a way we can change the rules of the game we are playing without resorting to using the Russian rules, but in a way that causes the Russians as much consternation as their different rules cause us?
  - a. Answer: What defines “the West” is that we choose to live by certain rules. We choose to live in societies governed by the rule of law. To change this would be to change what we are and this is something we should never compromise on.
9. I’ve heard you mention Ukraine as a model for Russian citizens if they wanted to become more Western, what is the best case you can see Russia following in the years ahead?
  - a. Answer: As I said, a stable, free, democratic, and prosperous Ukraine could provide a catharsis for Russian society that could undermine the dominance of ‘sistema’ – but this is by no means guaranteed. In the optimistic scenario, a successful Ukraine combined with a new generation coming of age in Russia could provide an impetus for change.



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**The Russia Strategic Initiative** (RSI) is a U.S. Department of Defense organization that works with structures throughout the U.S. Government and with public and private think tanks around the world to develop a common understanding of Russian decision-making and way of war that supports the Coordinating Authority's integration that lead to integrated planning, assessments, and action recommendations.

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**Project CONNECT**, an RSI project, is a webinar series Thursdays that brings experts to present on Russia-focused topics that are educational, focused, and relevant and accessible from around the world. Please reference [Project CONNECT's website](#) for a full event listing with registration information along with detailed past events and their presentation materials and post event recordings.

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