Chapter 16

“This Has Triggered a Civil War”: Russian Deterrence of Democratic Revolts

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Abstract This chapter examines the use of deterrence by President Putin of the Russian Federation against potential democratic revolts. It combines insights from the literatures on democratic revolutions and social movements on the one hand and deterrence and coercion on the other. This exploratory research sketches a rough model of a strategy to deter democratic revolts. From Putin’s perspective, democratic revolts present a severe strategic threat. The chapter distinguishes two channels through which he can discourage or deter democratic revolts: suppression and the threat of intervention. It focuses on the latter and specifically on punishment after the revolt. Democratic revolts are not enacted by a unitary actor but by an emergent collective which, strictly speaking, does not exist prior to the event; this deprives the deterrent actor of the part of his arsenal that goes through backchannels. The alternative, targeting the population at large, carries increased risk that the threat backfires. Putin formulates carefully according to a rhetorical strategy that obscures his own role while ensuring the threat is mainly carried by news media, which report the failing aspirations of previous democratic revolts and the pains

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suffered by the people who fought for them. It serves Russia's interests to periodically feed the media by manufacturing incidents in any of the large number of frozen conflicts in which it is involved.

Keywords Putin • Democratization • Third Wave • Revolution • Agency • Activism • Intervention • Deterrence • Punishment • Frozen conflict

Of course, political and social problems have been piling up for a long time in this region [the Middle East and Northern Africa], and people there wanted change. But what was the actual outcome? Instead of bringing about reforms, aggressive intervention rashly destroyed government institutions and the local way of life. Instead of democracy and progress, there is now violence, poverty, social disasters and total disregard for human rights, including even the right to life.

(Vladimir Putin in a speech to the UN General Assembly on 28 September 2015.)¹

16.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the use of deterrence by President Putin of the Russian Federation against potential democratic revolts. From Putin's perspective democratization is a strategic threat not only to his own regime but also to his friends and allies, especially in the near abroad or what might be called his sphere of influence. Certainly Putin is not the only leader of a non-democratic state who views democratization negatively, but he does seem to be particularly active in fighting and discouraging democratic revolts against his allies.

Besides the utility of understanding the activities of an important factor in international politics today, the study of Putin's strategy promises to fill a gap in the literature on deterrence. Deterrence theory from the first concerned itself with the relations between states. Its focus on the use of military threats as a means to prevent war eminently suited the Cold War.² As proxy wars between the super-powers gained attention and strategic thought turned to limiting (horizontal and vertical) escalation, the conceptual frame was broadened to include coercive diplomacy, or simply coercion, meaning the use of military threats to compel one state to concede the demands of another.³ After 1989 the emphasis on frightening

¹Putin 2015. All quotes are from the version published by the Office of the President of Russia.

²Buzan and Hansen 2009.

³Schelling 1966; George 1991.

away the other superpower faded and Western scholarship began to include discussion on coercing non-state actors, especially insurgent groups.⁴ Subsequent literature has understandably focused on terrorist organizations and, more recently, on renewed superpower competition, not only with Russia but also China. It has also gradually incorporated aspects of constructivism, matching a shift in security studies generally.⁵ This has re-emphasized the importance of psychology and communication. It also increased attention to non-Western views, including of the spread of democracy and expansion of the Western sphere of influence; however, only the latter has been approached from the perspective of deterrence. Studies on coercing non-state actors have included assistance to friendly states, such as the US efforts against the Vietcong; Russian intervention in Syria also fits this category. However, they have focused on violent non-state actors and not on democratic movements.

Meanwhile the literature on social movements deals overwhelmingly with domestic relations. It usually includes domestic repression as well as the means available to social movement to put pressure on the authorities.⁶ Certainly this fits coercion and deterrence broadly defined, i.e. inducing fear to coerce an adversary to yield to the coercer's will, though the usual term for the use of fear in the relations between the state and its citizens is state terror. Van Creveld remarked on the salutary effect of Hafez al-Assad's 1982 bombing of Homs, discouraging further revolts by the Muslim Brotherhood and stabilizing his regime.⁷ Over the past two decades the resilience of authoritarian regimes has become an established topic in research on revolutions.⁸ Discussion of influence by outside powers in the social movement literature however, is largely limited to direct assistance to the authorities (increasing their capacity for repression) and expositions on exploitative economic relations prompting such movements in the global South.⁹ What is left out of both approaches is analysis of the potential for a powerful state to use military threats to discourage popular movements against its puppets and allies.

This chapter intends to start filling that gap. Exploratory research is not meant to provide definitive answers but to draw out key concepts and hypotheses about the relations between them, while providing just enough empirical evidence to demonstrate their validity as questions. I believe that a brief case study of Russia's activities in its near abroad will furnish that evidence and allow me to sketch a rough model of a strategy to deter democratic social movements—in other words: to provide proof of concept. To be clear, we do not have access to Russia's state secrets nor to Putin's thoughts, therefore this sketch cannot prove that they are

⁴Byman and Waxman 2002. For an overview of the current state of the research on this issue, see chapter “[Deterring Violent Non-state Actors](#)” by Eitan Shamir in this volume.

⁵Knopf 2010; Lantis 2009; Lupovici 2010, 2017; see also Buzan and Hansen 2009.

⁶E.g. Stewart et al. 2012.

⁷Van Creveld 2008.

⁸Goldstone 2011; Hess 2014.

⁹E.g. Bennett 2012; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010.

working according to such a strategy in a formal sense. I can only prove that their activities fit with the model I develop; if they do, it demonstrates merely that the model may have some utility in understanding their goals, ways and means.

The chapter proceeds as follows: The next section sets out Russia's interest in discouraging democratic revolts. I proceed to distinguish third party deterrence from domestic repression so as to get a clear view of the strategy in question. Section 16.4 tackles the problem of the adversary which, in the case of revolution, cannot be considered a coherent actor prior to the moment of revolt. I argue that this imposes severe restraints on coercion. Finally, in Sects. 16.5 and 16.6, I outline respectively the pains Russia can inflict, and has inflicted, on a country after a revolution, and the ways in which these pains can be kept alive as a deterrent to future democratic revolts.

16.2 Strategic Impact of Democratic Revolts

This investigation must start by acknowledging the strategic importance of democratic revolts. Between 1974 and 2005, 67 countries experienced a regime change towards democracy, fifty of them driven by popular movements. The number of democracies more than doubled, from 34 to 88, while the percentage of the world population living in a democracy rose to over 50%.¹⁰ Since then the rate of democratization has dropped, though the rate of pro-democracy revolts has stayed nearly the same. (It is not entirely clear what explains their declining success rate.)

The strategic impact of the change has been enormous. Democratic states are no longer a beleaguered minority, they now easily find friends in other democracies around the world. Southern and eastern Europe have been transformed, not only introducing democracy at home but also acceding to membership in NATO and EU. Latin America for the most part followed suit. The United States' allies along the Pacific Rim also democratized. Western claims to defend freedom and democracy gained credibility. While the US military adventure in Iraq after 2003 squandered part of that gain, it did not negate the soft power advantage of having a socio-political system that peoples across the world strive to emulate.

I do not here adopt an idealist perspective on these changes; viewing them through the eyes of Putin means assessing their impact in realist terms.¹¹ The West gained an enormous amount of territory, along with its population and resources. It increased its own strategic depth in Europe while stripping Russia of its buffer zone. As Russia's former satellites switched of their own accord, the West gained all this at very little cost to itself. NATO now directly borders Russia and the border sits much closer to Russia's strategic heartland than to NATO's historic core on the

¹⁰Rothman 2017; Hale 2013; Kinsman 2011; Doorenspleet 2005; Huntington 1991.

¹¹Tsygankov 2015; Larson and Shevchenko 2014; Sakwa 2013.

shores of the Atlantic. Periodic democratic revolts in Russia’s neighbours, including Ukraine and Georgia, keep up the pressure. Even when they fail to install democratic regimes, they demand Russia’s attention and resources. Russia has spent resources to prop up friendly regimes; it has fought an open war in Georgia in 2008 and a covert one in Ukraine from 2014, while giving substantial military support to Assad in Syria from 2012 and intervening directly from 2015. Each of these conflicts started with a democratic revolt and in each, Russia was fighting not to expand its influence but to keep what it had. From Putin’s perspective, then, democratic revolts present a severe strategic threat.

In an earlier article, I analysed Putin’s rhetoric, focusing on the speech he gave to the United Nations in 2015.¹² I argued that he invokes realism as a denial of the agency of pro-democracy protesters. He recasts democratic revolts as extensions of Western influence, even calling the Maidan Revolution “a coup d’état from abroad”¹³ and putting promotion of democracy in Ukraine and Syria in the same category as armed interventions such as in Libya 2011 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, all of which he condemns as breaches of the principle of state sovereignty. But the reality is that the revolts had domestic causes, were largely triggered by domestic events and their main protagonists were domestic NGOs.¹⁴ While the realist overlay is fitting when considering the outcome of the recent waves of democratization, it does not fit its causes or its operative mechanisms. In this chapter, I proceed on the assumption that Putin is well aware of this and is confusing the matter on purpose. His rhetoric aims at discouraging Western intervention, as well as gaining diplomatic credit with leaders of other non-democratic states, but surely he is under no illusion that doing so will end the revolts themselves. So what is he doing to discourage those?

16.3 Deterrence and Domestic Repression

We can distinguish two channels through which Putin and his allies may discourage or deter democratic revolts. The first is suppression by the authorities of the affected country. The second is the threat of intervention, either in support of those allies during the uprising or as punishment after their overthrow.

Certainly, these two are often intertwined; as Byman and Waxman remark “the fundamental issue is whether a specific threat, in the context of other pressures, significantly affected an opponent’s decision making.”¹⁵ The adversary, in this case the pro-democracy protesters or prospective protesters (more on them in Sect. 16.4),

¹²Rothman 2017. That chapter also dealt extensively with Western support for democratic revolutions, to reduce complexity I leave it out of the present chapter.

¹³Putin 2015.

¹⁴Rothman 2017; cf. Lukes 2005; Mattern 2005.

¹⁵Byman and Waxman 2002, p. 32.

experiences both domestic repression and the threat from outside at the same time and, to the extent that he regards the local authorities as marionettes, is even likely to view them as coming from the same source. The two channels are also quite closely linked conceptually, as explained above.

Nevertheless, I will focus here only on the threat of punishment after the fact. My first reason is that there are already sizeable literatures on domestic repression and intervention in civil wars *per se*; focusing on the potential effect of a third-party deterrent adds a new element into the mix (and it fits the theme of this volume). The second is that intervention in order to punish after democratic revolts has been a unique characteristic of Russian foreign policy in recent decades. Interventions in Moldova and Georgia actually predate Putin so it is unwise to view them only as expressions of his personal politics, it is probably more correct to see them as motivated by the attitudes of a significant section of the Russian political elite.¹⁶ Still, the number and intensity of such activities have grown during Putin's tenure to the extent that Western observers now perceive them as a threat not only to Russia's smaller neighbours but also to NATO.

Such fears are perhaps overblown if, as I argue, Russia's interventions are responses to democratic revolts, but they do reflect a ramping up of Russia's efforts to limit the spread of democracy in its sphere of influence.¹⁷ Note that Russia has not always answered regime change with armed intervention, the strategy of co-opting the new leaders is also part of its repertoire, for example in Kyrgyzstan after the 2005 Tulip Revolution and in Armenia in 2018. Armed intervention is clearly not the only tool in its toolbox.¹⁸ Where it has opposed the new government, Russia has shown a preference for hybrid intervention using local insurgents in combination its own assets, particularly intelligence operators and so-called peacekeeping forces.¹⁹ NATO's worry about Russia's activities is focused on this mode of operation, i.e. on capabilities rather than intentions. Below I show that hybridity offers major advantages to Russia in the context of a democratic revolt, only some of which apply to operations against NATO targets.

It is useful to draw out a few distinctions between domestic repression and punishment after the fact in order to get a clearer view of the type of intervention that concerns us here. Domestic repression is under the control of the local authorities, Putin's allies, who might take some guidance or direction from him but for the most part rely on local resources and personnel. The effectiveness of domestic repression depends on local restraints and sympathies, including those of security services personnel. The decision to use violence is often a pivot point, when the loyalty of the security services is tested against their sympathy for the protesters and their goals; it is frequently the point at which they refuse their orders

¹⁶Tsygankov 2015; Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010; Seely 2017; Larson and Shevchenko 2014; Sakwa 2013.

¹⁷Thornton 2017.

¹⁸Cf. Seely 2017.

¹⁹Seely 2017; Savage 2018.

and the regime’s authority collapses (examples include the first democratic revolt of our era, the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal and the 2014 Maidan revolution in Ukraine). Russian punishment makes use of local strongmen but also employs Russian operators and usually a sizeable contingent of soldiers and, most importantly, the punishment is directed from Moscow.²⁰ Russia’s ability to inflict punishment therefore does not suffer the same constraints: most of the men with guns are not compatriots, do not share local sympathies, and such defections as there may be do not threaten the collapse of Moscow’s authority.

There is also a difference in the timing of the actions. Domestic repression takes place prior to and during pro-democracy protests, and afterwards if the regime survives them. The punishment threatened by Putin takes place after the revolt, if the regime does not survive. The threat, of course, is active at every stage of the process, but that is a matter I take up below. First we must deal with a problem in identifying the adversary.

16.4 The Elusive Adversary

Democratic revolts are not enacted by a unitary actor but by a collective which, strictly speaking, does not exist prior to the event. Revolutions are attempts at regime change bypassing the regular procedures through mass mobilization. This last element seems to indicate a degree of organization but this is misleading. The academic literature links revolutions to social movements²¹ which, in turn, are described as “a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity”.²² The people taking to the streets are often called by a collective noun but their collectivity does not lie in any organization they are all part of. They do not even always share the same goals, other than removing the current regime; revolutionary movements are frequently rainbow coalitions with divergent ideas about the ordering of society after the revolution.

Most protesters are discontented citizens who might take to the streets if pushed too far, or who are already disposed to protest but waiting for the right opportunity. The root cause of democratic revolts is dissatisfaction with the conditions of life (poverty and lack of economic opportunity as well as lack of political rights) under the ancient regime but such regimes are not easily toppled, in fact in the face of widespread discontent they are remarkably resilient.²³ Protesters face a collective action problem: they find safety in numbers but, to get them to turn out, someone

²⁰Savage 2018.

²¹Karatnycky 2005.

²²Diani 1992; cf. James and Van Seters 2014.

²³Goldstone 2011; Way 2011; Hess 2014.

needs to initiate the protest while, if they initiate protests alone or in a small group, they can easily be arrested by the authorities.²⁴ Much recent debate has focused on the contribution of social media as a new and relatively efficient form of horizontal communication between protesters but again such networks seem to form during the event rather than to presage them; revolutionary groups who organize through social media before the revolution are quite susceptible to interference by the authorities.²⁵ This is why triggers events, such as blatant election fraud, are so important for aspiring protesters, as they can expect a large number of people at the same time to be angry enough to protest. Protests jumping from one country to another in a revolutionary wave have a similar effect.²⁶ In effect the trigger event turns a dissolute mass into an actor.

Security services of autocratic regimes spend much effort trying to identify potential protest leaders. It is possible to fashion a sociological profile of such individuals but very hard to fine-tune it to such an extent that it can be used to pinpoint the next protest's leaders. Authoritarian regimes can arrest members of activist groups, if they can find them, or institute forms of repression which inhibit or disrupt their activities. It is true that activist groups form a crucial component of revolutions because their members are more skilled than the average protester, better trained and knowledgeable about effective tactics. In this sense they indeed provide a degree of organization to the larger group.²⁷ But there are usually many activist groups, most of them small and quite loosely organized themselves, and it is hard to tell in advance which of them will prove decisive in the event. It is impossible to measure how many revolts were prevented by the security services' efforts against potential leaders or how they affected the success rate of those that did occur but it should be noted that those revolts that did occur (approximately 1.5 per year worldwide)²⁸ always found activists willing and able to help organize them.

The lack of an adversary prior to democratic revolts deprives the deterrent actor of a part of his arsenal. When there is no clear organization, there are no backchannels for secret negotiations, no threats to intimidate the leadership, no bribes to drop a collective demand in return for personal reward.²⁹ These options return in time, when new leaders emerge out of the revolt, but even then leaders are unlikely to disown the revolution that made them and their control over their followers is likely insufficient to take them along. More importantly, carrots and

²⁴Tucker 2007; Tilly 1978.

²⁵Hussain and Howard 2013; Rod and Weidmann 2015; Little 2016.

²⁶Hale 2013; Saideman 2012; Snow and Benford 1992.

²⁷Rod and Weidman 2015.

²⁸Kinsman 2011; after 2011 popular revolts in Maldives, Central African Republic, Tunisia, Ukraine, Thailand, Abkhazia, Hong Kong, Burkina Faso, Burundi, South Korea, Jordan, Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Armenia, Nicaragua, Haiti and Bolivia kept up the pace (19 in 9 years). This list includes both successful and unsuccessful revolts but not regional rebellions, small-scale protests and social movements with limited aims.

²⁹Seely 2017.

sticks aimed specifically at leaders cannot be used when they have not yet emerged, so this does nothing to deter potential revolters.

This leaves the deterrent actor with one remaining option: targeting the people at large. In terms of communication this means public diplomacy. Byman and Waxman point to “audience costs” increasing the risk that a threat backfires.³⁰ Leaders do not want to be seen caving in to foreign demands; they and their supporters are prone to anger instead. The lack of backchannel, or even a confidential diplomatic channel, thus complicates matters for the coercer. To avoid overcoercion, as Byman and Waxman call it, coercing states can refrain from specific threats and speak more vaguely about dire consequences. This may explain the passive form in this passage from Putin’s UN speech:

Sooner or later, this logic of confrontation was bound to spark off a major geopolitical crisis. And that is exactly what happened in Ukraine, where the people’s widespread frustration with the government was used for instigating a coup d’état from abroad. This has triggered a civil war.³¹

The audience knows that there would have been no civil war without Russian intervention; Putin is speaking about himself, he is implying that it might happen again, but the passive form allows him to cast civil war as a warning rather than a threat.

16.5 Punishment and Threat

Byman and Waxman helpfully provide an analysis of coercive mechanisms, the next section liberally borrows from their work. As explained above, neither they nor subsequent students of coercion have extended the analysis to popular movements. However, they include strategies to weaken an adversary state and to hurt the population in order to put pressure on the government (Byman and Waxman call them unrest strategies), from which we may simply leave out the second step.³²

Russia intervened in Georgia in 1991, 2003 and 2008, and in Ukraine in 2005 and again in 2014, each time except 2008 directly after a democratic revolution. (In 2008 Russia intervened to prevent Georgia retaking a separatist province which was created after the 1991 revolution.) In each of these cases it mixed economic sanctions with support to insurgents. Economic sanctions include cutting of delivery of natural gas at subsidized prices, driving up the cost of living in the target country. Embargoes reduce exports, forcing companies to reduce production and lay off workers, leading to unemployment. The destruction of physical assets in war also imposes economic hardship on the population. The effect of economic pain is not only that it hurts directly but also that it negates one of the most salient promises

³⁰Byman and Waxman 2002, p. 36; Weeks 2008; cf. Fearon 1994.

³¹Putin 2015.

³²Byman and Waxman 2002, pp. 65–72, 76–78.

of democratic revolution; after all economic malaise and rampant corruption are two of their most important drivers.³³

Support to insurgents is Russia's signature mode of intervention. The ethnic composition of most ex-Soviet republics is such that minorities are prominent in some regions, even if they do not make up a majority in them, and they have tended, with some prodding from Moscow, to clamour for autonomy or even independence. There is no doubt that Russian intelligence supported radical separatist groups and probably created some out of thin air. Russian support propped up separatist "governments" in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South-Ossetia and the Donbass. The material consequences of war include administrative paralysis, loss of economic assets, social fragmentation and displacement of population. Each of these hurts the population as a whole.³⁴ Another important effect of such insurgencies is loss of territory and national humiliation. This too strikes at the hopes of the revolutionaries, at least the many among them who hated the regime for putting the interest of their patron over those of their countrymen.

The effects of Russia's intervention are enhanced by the conditions of social and political confusion in the immediate aftermath of revolution. Political and administrative confusion limit the ability of the new government to counter effectively. Government positions are unfilled, chains of command interrupted, the security services (a crucial support for the old regime until the final moments) in disarray. Divisions between various former opposition groups offer opportunities for divide and rule for Russia to exploit. These are ideal moments for an intervention, particularly in hybrid form so as to seemingly offer chances for reconciliation (inhibiting strong countermeasures) and harness support from elements of the old government coalition.³⁵ Crucially, hybrid intervention through domestic opposition groups (however artificial) masks the extent of foreign agency, thereby limiting the rally around the flag effect in the short term. It also maintains a degree (however limited) of plausible deniability and thus a chance of diplomatic de-escalation in the medium term (including with Western supporters of the democratizers). In Abkhazia and South-Ossetia diplomatic de-escalation resulted in Russian troops stationed in separatist territory as "peacekeepers". In the long term, hybridity's mask allows Putin to present the pain he inflicted as a warning rather than a direct threat.

I already briefly touched on the temporal dimension above, namely, outlining the differences between domestic repression and intervention. There I placed intervention after a democratic revolt; but it can also be viewed as before another democratic revolt. Deterrence depends on credibility, which draws on the deterrer's past record of imposing the conditions that they are threatening for the future. Thus

³³Hale 2013.

³⁴Byman and Waxman 2002, pp. 117–120, analyze support for an insurgency from the perspective of pressuring a regime, in line with their perspective on pressuring a population; I again leave out the second part.

³⁵Bohomolov and Lytvynenko 2012; Tsygankov 2013; Wilson 2015.

Russia's interventions are a warning to future protesters as well as a punishment. From this perspective such interventions have two targets: one to punish and one to deter. Byman and Waxman warn that: “Unrest strategies frequently fail, however, because the population cannot sufficiently influence decision making or because the coercive threat backfires, increasing popular support for defiance.”³⁶ The first argument does not apply here because the population is itself the decision-maker. The second does not apply because the population punished is not the same as the population being deterred. Naturally this does require that the second population is aware of the pains suffered by the first. This means that the coercer must find a way to turn the short-term effects of intervention in the immediate aftermath of revolution into a long-term deterrent of the next wave. Hence final part of the puzzle: communicating the costs of defiance to an amorphous future actor at an unspecified future time.

16.6 Keeping the Threat Alive

Russia has the power to hurt democratic protesters where it counts, directly targeting the promise of a better life after the revolt. It also has the power to extend the hurt, propping up separatist governments, keeping tensions alive and thereby ensuring regular incidents of low-level violence with a risk of escalation—and that risk manageable as long as Moscow maintains its influence on the separatists. Russia has also repeatedly created crises over the delivery of natural gas, using late payments and price fluctuations as an excuse. There is a use to these crises beyond further punishment: it keeps the pain on the front page of newspapers.

Consider the limitations already named: not knowing the leadership or the organizational shape or structure of his future adversary, the coercer must use public diplomacy; but the application of coercion to the population as a whole risks angry resistance while an open threat in the presence of an audience rewards defiance and increases the cost of compliance. We have already seen that Putin formulates carefully according to a rhetorical strategy that obscures his own role. Still, the risk of the threat backfiring can be reduced further if the message were carried by another medium. News media, which report the failing aspirations of previous democratic revolts and the pains suffered by the people who fought for them, have the same deterrent effect. Note that the effect does not depend on the framing; it is sufficient that the news reports remind the potential revolter of the pain and punishment. It serves Russia's interests, then, to periodically feed the media stories of this kind by manufacturing incidents.

This interest in keeping the threat alive fits with another salient feature of Russian policy with regard to its near abroad: the large number of frozen conflicts. Russia has not used its clear military advantage to push for a definitive settlement of

³⁶Byman and Waxman 2002, p. 65.

armed conflicts in which it involved itself but has contented itself with ceasefires. It maintains these at some cost to itself by stationing troops in the breakaway republics. Presumably it gains something from the conflicts' unresolved state. Analysis of these conflicts generally focuses on local nationalisms, while acknowledging that Russia's interest in them lies rather in preventing the affected countries from allying with the West.³⁷ In this respect the presence of Russian forces on their territory and the possibility of using them if the conflict were, at Moscow's discretion, to flare up again, restrains the governments of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. From the perspective adopted in this chapter, the advantage lies rather in the warning to other peoples in Russia's orbit.

Rather than viewing frozen conflicts as outcomes or results of Russia's foreign policy, they should be seen as instruments. They are better described with the term "managed instability"³⁸ as this term makes it explicit that Russia is in control of the situation and is applying the pain strategically. If the above analysis is correct, it does so not only to influence events in the target country but also to signal to potential democratic protesters elsewhere that a revolution carries tremendous costs.

16.7 Conclusion

This chapter combined insights from the literatures on democratic revolutions and social movements on the one hand, and deterrence and coercion on the other. Together they gave greater insight in an under investigated aspect of Russian foreign policy, namely the way in which it deters democratic revolts against governments in its sphere of influence. As exploratory research the conclusions presented here cannot be taken as the last word on the matter but should be seen rather as directions for further research.

As we have seen, the threat is formed out of previous instances of punishment after a revolution, its credibility maintained by nonresolution of the resulting "separatist" conflicts. Gradually, over a long period of time, the creation and periodic flaring up of frozen conflicts build up the shadow of the future. The strategy outlined in this chapter is an example of general deterrence, a long-term threat that prevents an action whether it is planned or not. By contrast immediate deterrence is directed at a specific, planned event; with respect to democratic revolts the absence of a coherent actor prior to the uprising makes such specificity impossible.

The particular condition of facing an unknown adversary also imposes more stringent constraints on communicating threats than usual because it eliminates back channels and forces the coercer to rely on public diplomacy. Thus the crucial element in the strategy is communicating the threat of punishment in a way that

³⁷Coyle 2017.

³⁸Tolstrup 2009; contra Seely 2017.

avoids blowback. The chapter has emphasized the importance of signaling in support of deterrence, not just by words but also by deeds. Research in coercive diplomacy has recognized this long ago³⁹ but the analysis had not been extended to social movements; this chapter suggests it may be even more important in such cases than between state actors or between states and violent non-state actors which usually possess some sort of organizational structure.

The combination of a carefully worded “warning” by Putin and news reports of gruesome events elsewhere avoids adding insult to injury and allows for greater diplomatic flexibility. Hybrid operations and managed instability both aid in communicating the threat. In this sense, the research here supports and extends Robert Seely’s conclusion that Russia’s current leadership has successfully fused warfare and statecraft.⁴⁰

Like Seely, I view Russia’s goals as largely defensive; the strategy outlined here is tailor-made to deter democratic revolutions against its allies in the near abroad. The particular combination of tools used in the strategy cannot be copied wholesale to other theaters, though further research may discover applications of some of its elements, or combinations of elements, that could be used elsewhere. Counterstrategies, including assistance from other powerful states, have been deliberately left out of consideration here. Obviously these would be relevant topics for further research.

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³⁹George 1991.

⁴⁰Seely 2017.

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