SCEEUS COMMENTARY
NO. 9, 2024

SCEEUS STOCKHOLM CENTRE FOR EASTERN EUROPEAN STUDIES

Russia's Manipulation and Subversion of Borders

Martin Kragh

13 June 2024

At dawn on 23 May 2024, Russian border guards appeared on the Narva River, which separates the Russian Federation from Estonia. They removed buoys that had for decades been used by Estonian border guards to mark Russian territorial waters, thus preventing navigational errors. Shortly before, a cryptic document appeared on the Russian Defence Ministry's website. It expressed a unilateral interest in redrawing the Russian Federation's maritime borders with Finland and Lithuania.

These actions come at a time of heightened international tensions caused by Russia's war against Ukraine, as well as by Russian antagonistic actions in the Baltic Sea. For the past several months, Russia has been interfering with GPS navigation in the region, presumably from a base in Kaliningrad. Russia has also exploited migrants in order to create problems at the Finnish border. This behaviour is not new, however. Already in 2015, Russian naval ships interfered with the installation of a Swedish-Lithuanian electric cable in international waters.

Taken separately, each of these actions can be attributed to a mistake, a provocation, or perhaps a threat—indeed, their significance should not be exaggerated. Taken together, however, they form a pattern with a basic logic stemming from the fact that the Russian government has never been entirely comfortable within its own internationally recognized borders. As a result, we have seen decades of ongoing conflicts—over borders, populations and influence—throughout the Eurasian region, as well as along the Arctic coastlines.

The crux of the matter is this: Russia's strategy of subversion and interference is a feature, not a bug. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and also before that, Russian leaders have been consistent in their belief that security is a zero-sum game, and that their country can only bolster its interests through the creation of buffer zones and spheres of influence. With little or only limited pushback, they are likely to persist in this approach to the outside world.

As noted by historian Igor Torbakov, this situation derives from the incomplete process that began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia inherited a territorial landmass larger than that of any other country, the greater part of which consisted of former Tsarist Russian and/or Soviet territories. At the same time, there arose the complex question of

Russian identity and an official discourse about an “authentic Russia” imagined as reaching far beyond the official borders of the Russian Federation. Exactly where these mental or cultural boundaries should be drawn in relation to the country’s internationally recognized borders has continued to be a subject of debate.

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there has been a duality in how Russian leaders have viewed international law. On the one hand, Russia’s first president Boris Yeltsin spoke of the importance of multilateralism and the principles of international law. On the other hand, the Kremlin considered the so-called “near abroad”—from Belarus and Ukraine, to the Caucasus and Central Asia—to be a Russian “privileged sphere of interest.” The Kremlin considered countries in this broad region to be not entirely sovereign and thus destined for integration with Russia.

From the start, the Russian Federation’s foreign policy has been shaped by two interrelated goals. First, to strengthen Russia’s influence in the fourteen other former Soviet republics that are now independent states. Second, to strengthen Russia’s status and role in international politics. These two goals tend to overlap, and they have been pursued in a variety of ways: through diplomacy, energy and trade policy, as well as through obviously subversive tactics such as border provocations, propaganda and direct military interventions.

The historical context is essential. As in the Russian Empire that collapsed in 1917, the Soviet Union’s internal borders were always fluid. In the 1930s, three new republics—Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakstan—were established in areas that had previously belonged to the Russian Soviet Republic. In keeping with this tradition, the Crimean Peninsula was transferred from Russia to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in 1954. This was an administrative decision that was “corrected” 70 years later, when the Russian military annexed it “back”.

Russia’s territory expanded westward after the Second World War, when the borders of Finland, Poland and Rumania’s borders were redrawn. Köningsberg was annexed from Germany and renamed as Kaliningrad. The Russian Soviet Republic expanded eastward when Joseph Stalin took the Kuril Islands and Southern Sakhalin, as well as Tuva, which was an independent state between the world wars. Dozens of revisions to internal and external borders took place in the twentieth century. The strategy was basic realpolitik: to create, in all geographical directions, an outer perimeter of regions and buffer zones strong enough to protect the country from any imaginable threat.

The problems with this became apparent when the Soviet system collapsed. What had previously been internal borders within the Soviet Union suddenly became internationally recognized borders of new states, and they thus acquired increased significance for security policy. “The Caucasus is by tradition a Russian sphere of interest,” explained the Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev in 1992, “and we have no intention to leave it”. In a 1993 discussion of the status of post-Soviet space, he remarked that this is “the region in which our most vital interests are concentrated . . . We will not give up regions which have comprised a Russian sphere of interest for centuries, nor will we shy away from these words”.

Border conflicts and irredentism were a way for the Kremlin to position itself vis-à-vis its neighbours—diplomatically, politically, and militarily, and to get a foothold in countries that had become independent. Russia’s nationalist vice president Alexander Rutskoi claimed in 1992 that Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula was ”covered in Russian blood and belonged to Russia”. Imperial nostalgia and a sense of unjust loss of territory, status and influence

became recurring elements in the language of Russian foreign policy. This obsession with Russia's former great-power status became an almost constant refrain under Vladimir Putin.

For over three decades now, Russia has been exploiting regional division and conflicts for its own purposes. In 1992, the Russian military occupied the Moldavian enclave of Transnistria, and in 1993 it intervened in in Georgia on behalf the separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia also inserted itself into Nagorno-Karabakh during the war between Armenia and Azerbaizhan, while selling weapons to both sides. This prevented the establishment of stable states, giving the Kremlin a political and diplomatic pretence for sending "peacekeeping troops".

This skilful manipulation culminated in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, followed by military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Putin's insistence that it was a matter of "local self-defence forces" and that Russia's only interest was to secure peace and stability followed a familiar script. Surprisingly enough, this rhetoric gained diplomatic traction to the point that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) refused to call the aggression a Russian attack. Until the full-scale invasion eight years later, it was referred to as "the conflict in and around Ukraine", which was in fact a deceptive and misleading diplomatic euphemism.

Similar tactics have been used elsewhere. In Southeastern Europe, the Kremlin has sought alliances with Serbia and Republika Srpska (part of Bosnia and Herzegovina). Encouraged by Russia, these states have challenged existing borders as well as attempts to normalize diplomatic relations on a regional level. In Syria, where the Russian military intervened to save Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2015, a bloody civil war still rages alongside a humanitarian crisis and escalating lawlessness. The Kremlin has acted in similar ways in Libya, where Russia has supported the recognized government in Tripoli since 2018 and, simultaneously, the warlord Khalifa Haftar in the eastern part of the country.

Moscow has bolstered its military capacity in the Arctic with new submarines, ice-breakers and naval ships. Ever since a small (and, from the perspective of international law, meaningless) titanium Russian flag was planted on the seabed in 2007, Russia has been establishing new military bases on islands in the Arctic Sea. These have subsequently been used as a precedent for claims regarding the extension of Russian territorial waters. A key region in Russian defence planning, the Artcic and is expected to gain importance as a shipping waterway as the so-called Northern Sea Route becomes more navigable due to climate change. Latetly, the Russian military has conducted more provocative maneuvers in the region, coming close to Danish and Norwegian territory.

None of this should come as a surprise. Like European empires of the nineteenth century, Russia has continued to divide and conquer, establishing buffer zones and spheres of interest. It has largely succeeded at this, without encountering any coordinated response from the West. At the same time, governments in countries that suffer from instability and crisis are more susceptible to authoritarianism, which tends to alienate Western governments, thus giving Moscow more opportunities to establish its presence and influence.

Martin Kragh
Deputy Director at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies,
Associate Professor at the Institute of Russian and Eurasian Studies,
Uppsala University.

About SCEEUS

The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent Centre, funded by the Swedish Government, established in 2021. The Centre conducts policy relevant analysis on Russia and Eastern Europe and serves as a platform and meeting place for national and international discussions and exchanges on Russia and Eastern Europe. Guest Commentaries are written based on the views of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of SCEEUS.

© 2024 Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies

Previous SCEEUS Publications:

Lev Rubinstein: The Death of a Poet in Russia Today by Zakhar Ishov
SCEEUS Guest Commentary No. 14, 2024

Defence Expenditures, Secrecy and State Programmes in the Russian Federal Budget: A Closer Look at the Data by Erik Andermo & Martin Kragh
SCEEUS Report No. 6, 2024

SCEEUS STOCKHOLM CENTRE FOR EASTERN EUROPEAN STUDIES