

HCSS StratMon 2015

FROM ASSERTIVENESS TO AGGRESSION

2014 AS A WATERSHED YEAR FOR
RUSSIAN FOREIGN AND SECURITY
POLICY



HCSS helps governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector to understand the fast-changing environment and seeks to anticipate the challenges of the future with practical policy solutions and advice.



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FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

HCSS StratMon 2015

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies

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KEY FINDINGS

- 2014 was a watershed year for the Russian Federation and for its relationship with the West. HCSS has already chronicled Russia's growing international assertiveness in its contribution to the Dutch government's Strategic Monitor last year¹. But this year we conclude that this assertiveness has now morphed into a different category altogether: naked aggression.
- Russia became the first European country since the end of World War II to forcefully expand its own territory at the expense of another European country. This is an egregious transgression of many deeply-felt international and – especially – European habits, norms, conventions and laws that no ethno-cultural, historical, religious or other pretexts can obfuscate.
- 2014 was the year in which Russia's aggression also 'struck home' in The Netherlands, as almost 200 Dutch citizens fell victim to the downing of a civilian airliner (MH17) over a conflict zone in which, by President Putin's own admission, Russia had directly interfered. For a country that has nurtured long and deep ties with Russia and that had made extraordinary efforts to commit itself to Russia's transformation, this represented a major shock that is likely to reverberate for a long time to come.
- The Russian 'transition' away from a Soviet-style country, polity, economy, society and military is increasingly out of sync with international trends.
- To the West, Russia's (self-proclaimed) exceptionalism manifested itself most visibly and painfully in 2014 in its foreign and security policy. This is what this *Issue Brief* is primarily devoted to. But we note that we are also working on a bigger report in which we try to identify and examine the (mostly, though not exclusively) worrisome trends in various other

¹ De Spiegeleire et al., *Assessing Assertions of Assertiveness*.

‘structural’ developments in Russian contemporary society. Many of these profound changes have in our view not been fully internalized yet by many European policy makers, let alone by our publics.

- HCSS has, for the past few years, been designing and developing a portfolio of data-sets and tools that allow us to monitor the assertiveness of any given country but specifically also of great powers who, as we highlighted in our contribution to the Strategic Monitor last year, in many ways still matter disproportionately to the international system. Contrary to more traditional analytical approaches to foreign and security policy analysis, these new data-sets and tools allow analysts and policymakers alike to dig much wider *and* deeper than ever before into the empirics of international interactions. There are still many caveats associated with these datasets, but they are improving rapidly and dramatically. Now that we looked more closely into them for this *Issue Brief*, we were positively impressed by both their depth, their breadth, and their *prima facie* validity. They still *can*, and *have to* be improved; but even at this (early) stage they do already, in our opinion, offer significant analytical value added over extant approaches that are characterized by virtually limitless degrees of both empirical and interpretive ‘license’
- Our foreign policy findings reveal a ‘Russian assertiveness story’ for 2014 that nicely captures both the dynamics over time and the changing geographical focus that our datasets reveal. After a brief ‘lull’ in Russian assertiveness in the beginning of the year (which was also due to the special circumstances surrounding the winter Olympic in Sochi), February and March saw major spikes in Russian assertiveness as the country’s political leadership ‘woke up’ to (or started focusing on) the events on the Maydan and then set its mind on annexing Crimea. After this *de facto* (but not *de jure*) annexation, we see Russian assertiveness becoming significantly more subdued – especially also militarily. We see Russian diplomacy becoming more active and we observe an outlier peak in Russia’s rapprochement with China – a peak that, contrary to Russian rhetoric about a ‘pivot’ to the Asia-Pacific region, is not sustained throughout the rest of the year. In July, however, we see first Russian military and then also economic assertiveness reaching new heights with the events in Donbass. If the Crimean land grab was indeed accompanied by little bloodshed, the terrible clashes between Russia-(also militarily) supported separatists and official Ukrainian

government and militia forces in Donbass led – for the first time since the Balkan wars – to massive casualties in a European conflict theater. After this assertiveness spike in July-August, the ‘theater’ of Russian assertiveness first shifts to the economic realm (with Russia’s counter-sanctions), but then again becomes more subdued towards the end of the year.

- We derive two main lessons from our attempt to use a global dataset with *all* event data for *all* countries in the world since 1979 to tell the story of *one* great power’s assertiveness in *one* year (2014). On the one hand, we felt that the automatically generated GDELT event-dataset performed remarkably well in identifying the key story points behind Russia’s assertiveness last year. There is nothing ‘Russia-specific’ about GDELT’s automated approach. And yet it was able to quite reliably identify the main episodes in the story without any human ‘manipulation’. But whereas it was able to chronicle the *quantitative* changes, we at the same time also felt it was unable to identify the *qualitative* change in Russian foreign policy behavior that the annexation of Crimea represented. Our own take-away from this is that we (still) need both. As foreign and security policy analysts, we would like to continue to use and refine these data sets. We are currently working with the developers of both GDELT and Phoenix to see how ‘we’ can – collaboratively – improve the data sources, ‘dictionaries’ of actors and events and the actual event-coding software. We strongly feel our SDOs would greatly benefit from this effort. But there remain some ‘big picture’ interpretive questions where machine learning still needs human experts to improve its algorithms.
- Because of 2014’s relatively unexpected ‘military’ turn in Russian assertiveness (and aggression), we also spent some time trying to ‘tell’ that part of the story in an evidence-based way. We reached out to various international think tanks and research organizations to bundle our efforts in order to get a better grip on the (also internationally comparative) empirics behind Russia’s military stance. We continue to vigorously pursue this course of (collaborative) action, but we were unable to produce results in time for the production of this *Issue Brief*. We therefore decided to use some (widely used) international datasets on military expenditures, arms exports and troop levels compared to the labor force to paint the ‘bigger picture’ of Russia’s painful attempt to move from a Soviet-style (legacy) force to a modern, more mobile and (cost-) effective security provider. We also

developed one new approach to generate a (non-labor intensive) data-set on Russia military exercises that we feel shows some promise². But mostly, we tried to piece together what actually changed in the Russian military last year in a more traditional way – by surveying the writings of presumable authoritative sources (like the Russian president or his Minister of Defense; but also other – Western – analysts and sources). Also here, it is quite easy to document the ‘quantitative’ side. All Russian services have received unprecedented amounts of new equipment in 2014. The same applies to the –still dominant – strategic nuclear deterrent force – which, after Crimea, can also increasingly be seen as a ‘compellent’³ force. The readiness improvement efforts through military exercises in 2014 were unprecedented for the entire post-Soviet period. We were personally most shocked by the ways in which the Russian military is now trying to militarize Russian society – by all indicators successfully so. Whereas the ‘West’ lionizes TV ‘formats’ like ‘The Voice’, Russian viewers seem equally entranced by game shows that have tanks crews competing with each other in firing exchanges with (expensive) live ammunition. But however impressive these various quantitative or impressionistic trends may be – and we strongly feel they are – for us, the main ‘watershed’ event was still remains direct the use of the Russian military ‘force’ for the territorial aggrandizement of the country.

- Summing up: 2014 represents a clear ‘wake-up call that our defense and security organizations (SDOs) have to start taking both Russia itself and the both old *and* new high-end challenges it represents much more seriously again.
- This unexpected and greatly regrettable wake-up call has quite a few ‘functional’ consequences for the strategic orientation and navigation guidance⁴ of our SDOs. It implies that we have to start taking a much closer look at how we can deal with this new combination of ‘old’ (nuclear, kinetic-conventional, direct) and new (‘hybrid’, non-kinetic, indirect) military challenges in terms of prevention and response; in terms of deterrence and

2 See footnote 20.

3 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

4 De Spiegeleire et al., *STRONG in the 21st Century. Strategic Orientation and Navigation under Deep Uncertainty*.

compellence. It implies that we have to start taking ‘old-fashioned’ territorial conquest more seriously once again as a (comprehensive) security challenge – and HCSS’ contribution to the strategic monitor this year formulates a number of concrete policy recommendations on that score.⁵

- HCSS is working on another bigger report in which we endeavor to formulate some policy recommendations for how the West can deal with this ‘new’ Russia (and also develop a new method for ‘designing’ such policy options). But the main policy recommendation of this *Issue Brief* is just that – besides any ‘functional’ implications of what is happening in Russia, we also have to start focusing again on Russia as a geographical entity. Our knowledge on that part of Europe has fallen precipitously since the end of the Cold War. That was a conscious and not altogether irrational choice, given the shrinking importance of Russia as a security actor. But unfortunately, that is changing again. The (analytical) infrastructure that the West had built up during the Cold War for making sense of Russia has atrophied – throughout the DOTMLPF-I chain. There is, in our opinion, no need to resurrect that Cold War edifice, But there clearly is a need for a better attempt to bundle our knowledge on this country in such a way that it can become actionable for out SDOs.

5 HCSS Stratmon 2015: Annual Report.

1 INTRODUCTION

2014 was a watershed year for the Russian Federation. In HCSS' contribution to the Strategic Monitor last year, we documented Russia's relatively high and growing (also comparatively speaking) levels of international assertiveness.⁶ This year, that assertiveness morphed into naked aggression. Russia became the first European country since the end of World War II to forcefully expand its own territory by unceremoniously annexing 20,000 km² that legitimately belonged to another European country – with the broad support (and even enthusiasm) of the overwhelming majority of its population. In 2014, the 'entente' between Russia and the West, which had never been truly cordial in the first place, was shattered. For The Netherlands, a country with long and deep ties with Russia and one that had made extraordinary efforts to commit itself to Russia's transformation, 2014 was the year when Russia's assertiveness 'struck home', as almost 200 Dutch citizens became the victims of the downing of MH17.

When viewed from the West, change in Russia manifested itself primarily through the country's external assertiveness. But the actual changes in Russia run much deeper than 'just' foreign and security policy. 2014 also proved a watershed in Russia's domestic political, societal, economic and even cultural development. HCSS will delve into all of these areas in more depth in our upcoming report on designing 'new' policy options for dealing with a 'new' Russia. Many of these profound changes – which in our view have not been fully internalized by many European policy makers, let alone by our publics – predated 2014. Quite a few of them remain ambiguous. But the year 2014 revealed that the deep societal transformations that have occurred and continue to occur in Central Europe – that many in the West (and the East) had been hoping would gradually envelop Russia itself as well – are now in deep trouble there. Most (though not all) of the deeper structural developments unfolding in

6 De Spiegeleire et al., *Assessing Assertions of Assertiveness*.

Russia give cause for concern in terms of both old and new political, societal and economic pathologies that bedevil the country. But these concerns, in our view, are dwarfed by the increased dangers that derive from the massive upsurge in unpredictability that now emanates from Europe's Eastern borders.

The rationale behind this *Issue Brief* changed over the course of the year. Our initial objective was to further develop the tool- and datasets that we introduced last year in our *Assessing Assertions of Assertiveness*⁷ study to monitor and comparatively assess the assertiveness of all great powers (and not just Russia and China). As we noted last year, there is much historical and empirical evidence that 'great powers' are different and that they matter disproportionately in the international system. We suggested that a better monitoring mechanism for tracking the levels and types of assertiveness displayed by the great powers might greatly enhance our defense and security organizations' strategic anticipation. HCSS has now set up an infrastructure that allows us to monitor, on a daily basis, global trends in assertiveness for all countries, great and small. Part of this effort is still visible in this *Issue Brief* – more specifically in the data used in the section dealing with the main developments in Russian foreign policy last year.

But in light of the dramatic events that unfolded in 2014 along the European Union's Eastern borders and that directly impacted The Netherlands, we decided to re-orient our 'assertiveness' focus on Russia. This dovetailed nicely with another project we are completing, regarding what has changed in Russia more generally and what that means for how we (the West/Europe/the Netherlands) deal with it. Given the –unexpected – military turn that Russia's assertiveness took, we also decided to add a brief section with some major trends and some specific developments from 2014 in that area as well. So whereas this *Issue Brief* still examines the 'assertiveness' phenomenon, it does so exclusively from the vantage point of the new Russian challenge(s).

This 'Issue Brief' therefore contains two main sections that describe and assess Russia's assertiveness – one in the foreign policy and one in the military realm. As always, we try to put the 'evidence' center-stage by either constructing new datasets (as in the foreign policy section) or by piecing together – in a more

7 Ibid.

traditional way – whatever elements of evidence are available (as in the military section). In the final section of this *Issue Brief* we venture some conclusions on the substance (“Was 2014 really a watershed year for Russia and, if so, why?”), on the method (“Where do we stand with our data- and toolset for monitoring countries’ assertiveness and what are the next steps?”) and on the policy implications of all of this.

2 RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

This section sets out to chronicle Russian assertiveness in its foreign and security policies throughout 2014. Unfortunately, foreign policy analysis is a field in which systematic datasets are virtually non-existent.⁸ This leaves any discussion about what is happening in this area wide open to virtually unlimited degrees of empirical and interpretive ‘license’. How do we know that analysts have carefully collected and weighed all relevant pieces of factual and rhetorical evidence before they draw conclusions? What methods did they use to select the sources they used in their research? How do we factually verify or falsify any hypotheses or theories they adduce?

To remedy this highly unsatisfactory situation, HCSS has been exploring new data- and toolsets that offer us the chance to automatically extract – and thus track – events from a large number of global media publications on a daily basis. In our 2014 study on the growing assertiveness of Russia and China⁹, we used – among other things – the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDEL^T)¹⁰. This is a dataset that came online in 2012 and contains events that have been (and are being) automatically extracted from a large set of newspaper sources. Extracted events always contain (at least) a ‘source actor’ (“who is doing something here?”); an ‘event type’ (“what it is that this actor is doing?”); and a ‘target actor’ (“whom is the source actor doing this to?”). Not all of these events reflect assertiveness – most just represent the everyday churn of international

8 Potter, “Methods of Foreign Policy Analysis.” There are numerous datasets in the field of international economics and a few in the field of international security (mostly focusing on war and conflict), but no one directly dealing with foreign policy. The – to our knowledge – currently best compilation of datasets in the field of international studies (International Studies Association, “Datasets - ISA Compendium Discussion Site.”), for instance, does not contain a single cross-sectional, longitudinal dataset focused on the study of foreign policy.

9 De Spiegeleire et al., *Assessing Assertions of Assertiveness*.

10 Leetaru and Schrodt, “GDEL^T”; Ulfelder, “The State of the Art in the Production of Political Event Data”; Ginn, “Distilling Event Data from News Articles.” See also Ward et al., “Comparing GDEL^T and ICEWS Event Data”; Yonamine, “Predicting Future Levels of Violence in Afghanistan Districts Using GDEL^T”; Keertipati et al., “Multi-Level Analysis of Peace and Conflict Data in GDEL^T.”

interactions. HCSS therefore last year developed a way to recode a subset of this larger set of events into different types of assertiveness.

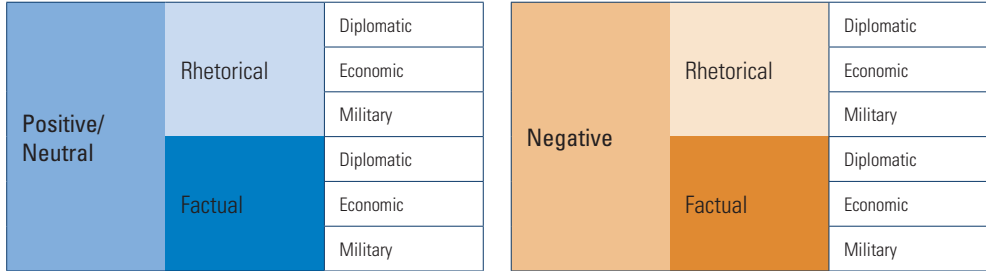


FIGURE 1 HCSS ASSERTIVENESS CODING SCHEME

How did we decide whether a particular event that was automatically extracted from a newspaper article belonged to one of these different categories of assertiveness? The coding software behind GDELT labels any ‘event type’ with a code. HCSS has identified all ‘event codes’ that we feel convey some element of ‘assertiveness’ and has recoded those based on the scheme presented in Figure 1.

Figure 2 provides some examples of this recoding for one particular type of assertiveness: ‘rhetorical negative’ types of assertiveness: instances where an actor expresses negative forms of assertiveness (without necessarily actuating it into concrete actions). It shows that any event that had been coded as one actor ‘demanding’, ‘accusing’ or ‘threatening’ another actor would be coded as a rhetorical negative event. We then still differentiated between diplomatic (e.g. accusing of aggression), economic (e.g. threatening to boycott, embargo or sanction) or military (e.g. threaten with military force). Our foreign policy analysis section thus maintains the same coding scheme as last year. The data behind the visuals we present this year are the raw aggregated number of events per week.¹¹ We will now present the main findings from this analysis in both a chronological and geographical way.

11 This year, HCSS has been transitioning to a new tool- and dataset (El:Diablo and Phoenix) that was created by the Open Event Dataset Alliance (“Open Event Data Alliance.”) and uses a different approach to some key challenges in event coding (Schrodt, Beiler, and Idris, “Three’s a Charm?”). We have the system up and running in our data warehouse, but were as yet unable to include a systematic dataset for the entire year 2014. Next iterations of this work will be able to draw upon both systems, as well as – hopefully – on the ICEWS dataset that was collected by Lockheed Martin for the US Defense Department (Lockheed Martin, “Worldwide Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (W-ICEWS).”).

Rhetorical	Negative	Diplomatic	131	Threaten non-force, not specified below			
			101	Demand information, investigation			
			1053	Demand release of persons or property			
			103	Demand aid, protection, or peacekeeping			
			1053	Demand release of persons or property			
			103	Demand material aid, not specified below			
			1055	Demand that target allows international involvement (non-mediation)			
			105	Demand mediation			
			106	Demand withdrawal			
			107	Demand ceasefire			
			111	Criticize or denounce			
			1121	Accuse of crime, corruption			
			112	Accuse, not specified below			
			1122	Accuse of human rights abuses			
			1123	Accuse of aggression			
			1124	Accuse of war crimes			
			1125	Accuse of espionage, treason			
			114	Complain officially			
			115	Bring lawsuit against			
			1311	Threaten to reduce or stop aid			
			1313	Threaten to reduce or break relations			
			134	Threaten to halt negotiations			
			135	Threaten to halt mediation			
			136	Threaten to halt international involvement (non-mediation)			
			139	Give ultimatum			
					Economic	1011	Demand economic cooperation
						1054	Demand easing of economic sanctions, boycott, or embargo
						1031	Demand economic aid
						1312	Threaten to boycott, embargo, or sanction
					Military	1012	Demand military cooperation
						1056	Demand de-escalation of military engagement
						1032	Demand military aid
						1034	Demand military protection or peacekeeping
						138	Threaten to use military force, not specified below
						1381	Threaten blockade
				1382		Threaten occupation	
				1383		Threaten unconventional violence	
				1384		Threaten conventional attack	
				1385		Threaten attack with WMD	

FIGURE 2 EXAMPLE OF HCSS ASSERTIVENESS RECODING

2.1 CHRONOLOGY OF RUSSIAN ASSERTIVENESS

Figure 3 shows how Russia’s (in red) overall assertiveness developed over the course of the year. For the sake of comparison, we have also added the comparable figures for China (in light blue), the European Union (in dark blue)¹² and the United States (in green).

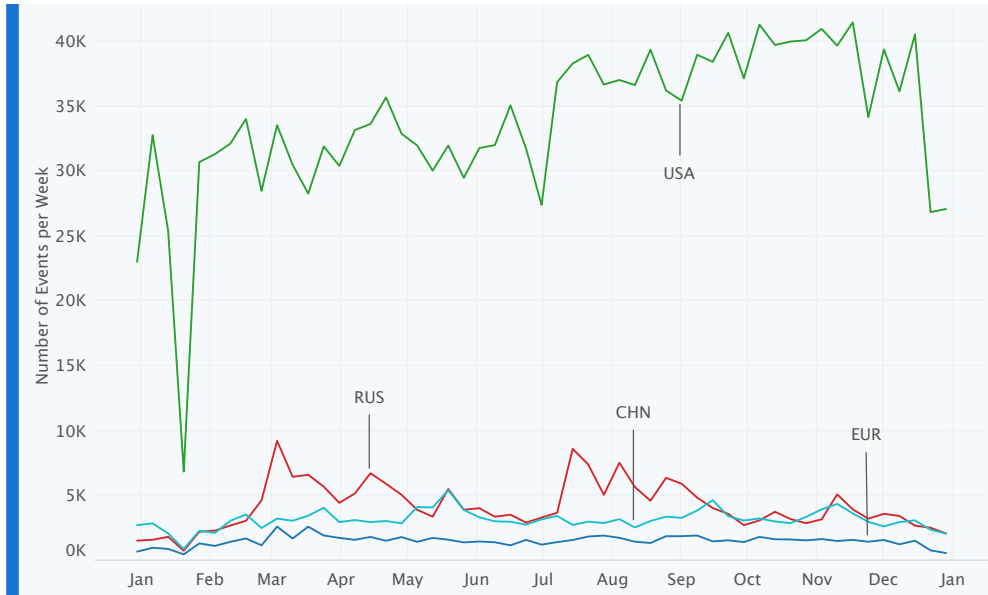


FIGURE 3 COMPARATIVE OVERALL ASSERTIVENESS CHINA, EU, RUSSIA AND US - 2014

What strikes us immediately in Figure 3 is the disproportionate assertiveness gap between the world’s sole remaining superpower – the United States (green) – and its two main (possible) contenders – China (yellow) and Russia (red). We suggest this is partially an accurate reflection of the United States’ uniquely active and assertive global posture, but partially also a statistical artifact inflated by the preponderance of US news coverage in the (only English-language) GDELT-sources and to the international media’s strong focus on US

12 The code that was used for this figure were all actor codes that started with ‘EUR’, which is the actor code that refers to the European Union as an institution.

international policy.¹³ Being a hegemon clearly matters, also in news coverage. We would make the mirror argument for the findings on the European Union, which is reputedly poorly covered in the international (even English-language European) press.¹⁴ As to the differences between China and Russia: just like last year, when we looked at the period 1997-2013, we observe also this year that Russian assertiveness remains higher than its Chinese equivalent. But we also note that the ‘assertiveness gap’ between China and Russia, which we saw narrowing last year, has now virtually disappeared in this dataset and that for a few weeks China even surpassed Russia.

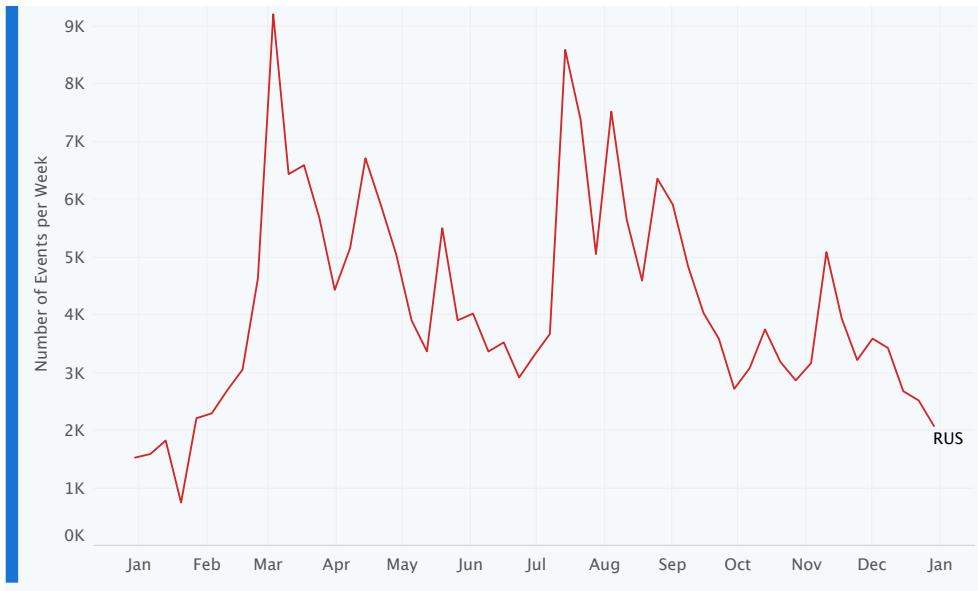


FIGURE 4 RUSSIA - OVERALL ASSERTIVENESS

If we isolate the overall Russian assertiveness story from the others (Figure 4) we identify 5 major episodes. Some of them overlap in time, but they nicely paint the major shifts that occurred during this ominous year.

13 Unfortunately, our event attraction capabilities for most other languages other than English were extremely limited. But great progress is being made in this area as well (The GDELT Project, “GDELT Translingual: Translating the Planet.”). We suspect that, as these data start coming in, we will see some marginal (but probably not dramatic) adjustments to this US predominance.

14 Boomgaarden et al., “Across Time and Space.”

- January-early Feb: Russia partially caught off-guard and/or laying low (because of the Olympics)
- February-March: ‘Russia Unbound’ – Part I (Crimea)
- May-June: Pivot to Asia
- July-August: ‘Russia Unbound’ – Part II (Donbass + (counter-)sanctions)
- September-December: Reality Sinks in

In the remainder of this section, we will describe these 5 periods in some more detail.¹⁵

2.1.1 BEFORE THE STORM

When we look at Figure 4 we immediately notice some clear ‘peaks’ from mid-February onwards. But the data for the first few weeks of the year also tell an interesting story. Throughout this period, massive demonstrations took place in Kyiv’s central square (Independence Square, or ‘Maydan nezalezhnosity’ in Ukrainian). These protests had been triggered by Ukrainian President Yanukovych’s decision in November 2013 – immediately on the heels of a visit to President Putin – to suspend negotiations with the European Union over an association and a ‘deep and comprehensive free trade’ agreement. In January 2014, the Yanukovych regime tried to suppress these protests by having the Ukrainian Rada, dominated by representatives of his party, pass a number of amendments (the so-called ‘dictatorship laws’) that would have severely curtailed various freedoms in Ukraine, including the freedom to demonstrate. If Yanukovych thought this escalation would deter Ukrainian citizens from braving icy temperatures to gather on the Maydan, he was deeply mistaken. For the next few weeks Kyiv descended into an ever more violent spiral of destruction and polarization between Maydan demonstrators and the police in Kyiv itself, but also increasingly between the different parts of the country. The protests forced the Yanukovych regime to repeal the amendments, but to the energized crowds on the Maydan this concession was clearly too little, too late.

One might have expected that Russia, which had clearly indicated its dissatisfaction with Ukraine’s pro-Western aspirations, would have been fulminating against these events in its large Western neighbor. But a striking

¹⁵ All events described here will not be individually footnoted. Sources that were used include the various GDELT newspaper sources, as well as some broader overviews of these events.

finding from Figure 4 is how relatively low Russian assertiveness levels remained during the first few weeks of the year – even beyond the traditional cyclical policy lull around the (extended) year-end holidays. This suggests that the Kremlin underestimated the resolve of the Ukrainian people and the potential ripple effects of this revolution for Russia itself and was to some extent caught off guard by them.

Another factor behind these surprisingly low levels of Russian assertiveness in this period was probably the fact that the southern Russian city of Sochi hosted the twenty-second Olympic Winter Games from February 7 and 23. These games had been planned, at exorbitant expense, as the culmination of what many Russians saw as an increasingly successful ‘re-assertion’ by President Putin of Russia’s interests and reputation in the international arena. Although the games did garner Russia some international kudos, unfolding events in Kyiv quickly spoiled the president’s and the country’s jubilant mood.

2.1.2 RUSSIA UNBOUND – PART I (MAYDAN/CRIMEA)

As we see in Figure 4, the third week of February 2014 marked a clear turning point in Russia’s assertiveness. That was the week in which the worst clashes took place in Kyiv after the Rada refused to accept the Maydan’s leaders’ demand to roll back the – contested – constitution to its 2004 version with greatly diminished presidential powers. Given Ukraine’s fragile governance system, this political stalemate led to the first large-scale bloodshed on February 20, when 50 protesters and three policemen were shot. The next day, after mediation from various foreign ministers of EU countries, Yanukovich and Ukrainian opposition leaders signed a deal to try to end the political crisis in the country. Maydan protesters rejected the deal and continued to demand the resignation of the President. This precipitated the unexpectedly quick disintegration of the entire Yanukovich regime. That same day, the Rada proposed that Yanukovich be impeached. That very night, Maydan protestors seized control over Kiev’s key administrative buildings and Yanukovich fled the capital. On February 23, Alexander Turchynov was appointed acting president and on February 27, a new government was formed.

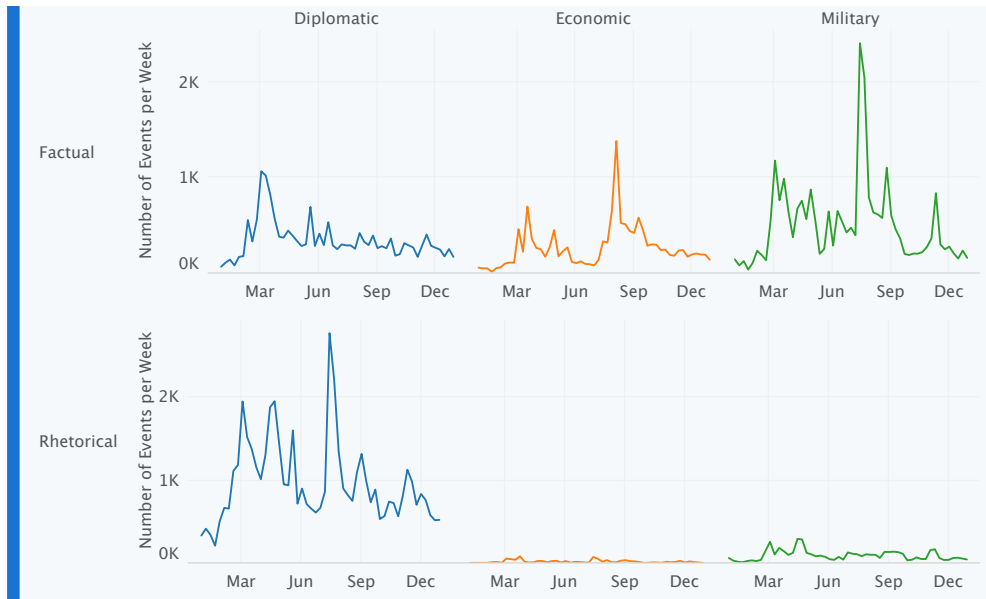


FIGURE 5 TYPES OF NEGATIVE RUSSIAN ASSERTIVENESS - 2014

From that moment onwards, Russia has left behind any inhibitions it may have had, leading to the first major spike in Russian assertiveness. Figure 5 highlights the different types of Russian (negative) assertiveness that were still aggregated in Figure 4. It shows that that the first ‘wake-up’ peak was primarily of a diplomatic (both rhetorical and factual) nature and that the economic and military rhetoric remained fairly subdued. But as we also found in last year’s analysis, Russia still spoke relatively softly (especially on economic and military matters – diplomatic chatter was, usually, much more active), but it clearly started wielding its economic and especially military stick. The latter became obvious when, in the days after February 27, (unmarked) Russian Special Forces, by President Putin’s own admission, played an active role in helping local politicians and militias to physically seize and occupy key government buildings and the airport in Simferopol, the capital of Crimea.

From there on, events moved with unprecedented speed. On February 27, it became clear that Kyiv’s writ no longer extended to the Crimean peninsula, where the Ukrainian armed forces that were stationed there had lost control over events. On March 1, Russian President Vladimir Putin formally requested the Russian Federation Council for its permission to “use the armed forces of

the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine until the socio-political situation in that country normalizes.” Hours later, the Russian Federation Council voted unanimously to grant permission to use military force in Ukraine. Emboldened by this extraordinary Russian move, the Crimean parliament – in a clear violation of the Ukrainian constitution – voted on March 6 to formally accede to the Russian Federation and to put this decision before the Crimean people in the form of a referendum. 10 days later, the hastily organized referendum on whether to join Russia produced an official turnout of 83% with 96.77% (Crimea) and 95.6% (Sevastopol) voting in favor. This vote was condemned by the EU, the US, Ukrainian and the representatives of the Crimean Tatar community as violating Ukraine’s constitution and international law. The next day the Crimean parliament officially declared its independence from Ukraine and requested full accession to the Russian Federation, thus ending Crimea’s 60 years as a Ukrainian territory. On March 18, Russia and the separatist government of Crimea signed a treaty of accession of the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol into the Russian Federation. On March 27, the UN General Assembly passed a non-binding Resolution 68/262 that declared the Crimean referendum invalid and the incorporation of Crimea into Russia illegal. The annexation by Russia of almost 30,000km² of Ukrainian territory was a fact – *de facto*, even if not *de jure*.

This year we also have developed the ability to break down the data by ‘target’. Figure 6 shows all GDELT events that were coded as events in which Russia behaved ‘assertively’ towards any one of the following four selected actors: China, the EU, Ukraine and the US. We observe that in the third week of February, Ukraine started becoming the dominant target of overall Russian assertiveness. We immediately also see similar spikes (though at a much lower level) for the United States and – at a still lower level – the European Union.

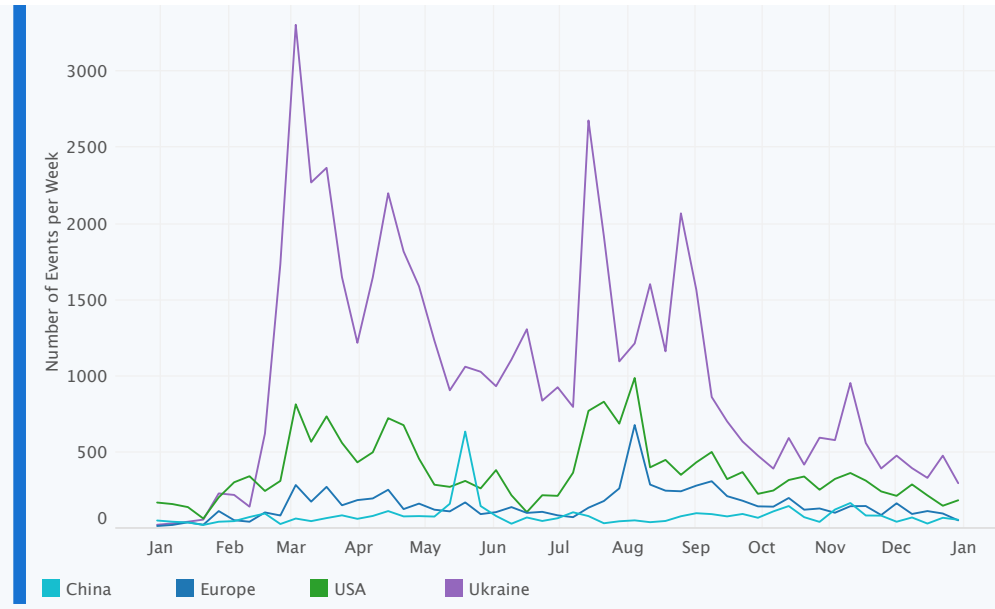


FIGURE 6 RUSSIAN OVERALL ASSERTIVENESS - BY TARGET

When we look at some of the underlying data, however, we see that this was not uniformly the case for all types of assertiveness. Figure 7, for instance, shows that the United States continued to be the main target for Russia’s factual negative economic assertiveness, with the EU also scoring significantly higher on this than on overall assertiveness. But also here, the February-March period peak is clearly distinguishable.

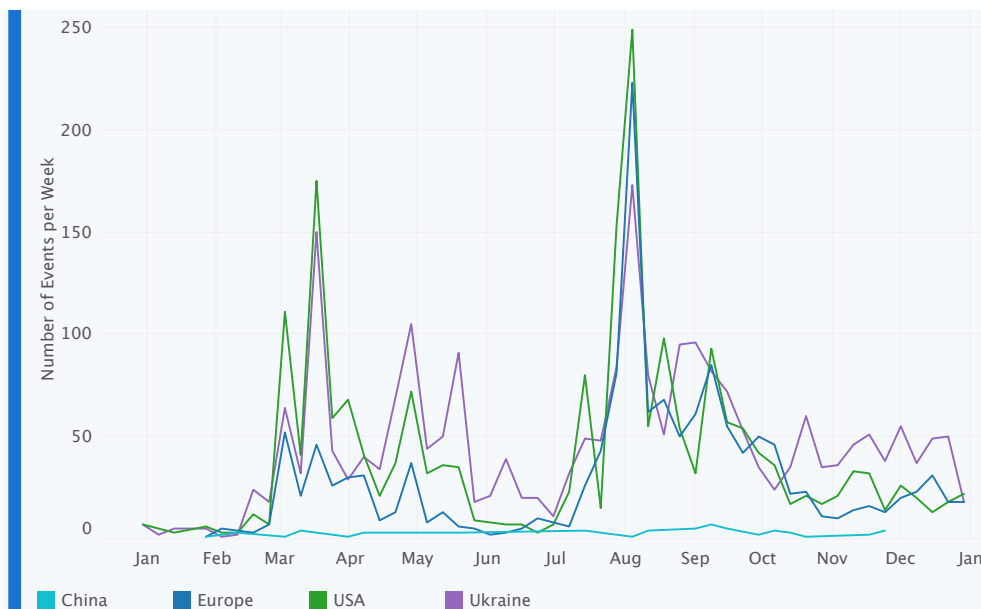


FIGURE 7 RUSSIAN FACTUAL NEGATIVE ECONOMIC ASSERTIVENESS TOWARDS CHINA, THE EU, UKRAINE AND THE US

2.1.3 ISOLATION FROM WEST AND PIVOT TO CHINA

The European Union and the United States responded to the annexation of Crimea by implementing travel bans and freezing assets of prominent Russians belonging to the political and economic elite close to Putin – the first of what were to become many incremental sanctions against Russia throughout the year. The dramatic worsening of Russia’s reputation was also particularly noticeable during president Putin’s trip to Western Europe (June 5-6) to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, followed by the G7 summit in Brussels. For the first time since 1997, world leaders met as the G7 rather than as the G8 after the expulsion of Russia due to its takeover of Crimea.

The growing Western opprobrium that was heaped on Russia led to a much more active Russian diplomatic effort to defend and assert its interests in the international arena, which we also see in our dataset.

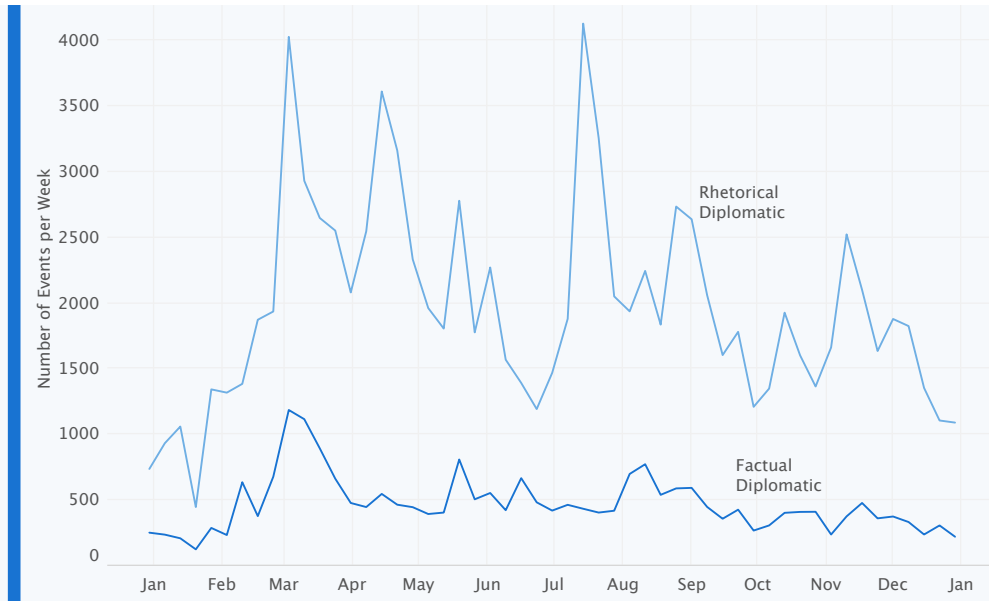


FIGURE 8 RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC ASSERTIVENESS - 2014

Figure 8 shows how Russian diplomatic verbal assertiveness peaks for the first time in the last weeks of February during the dramatic – including in the realm of international diplomacy – events around the Maydan and then a bit later around the annexation of the Crimea. But these efforts really peaked in June–July – a trend in diplomatic rhetoric that interestingly enough is not reflected in factual diplomatic action.

In this period, Russia’s pivot towards China, which had been in works for quite some time, received a visible new push. Russia’s increasing isolation from the West pushed the Kremlin to accelerate its quest for new economic alternatives among more sympathetic regimes in Eurasia. Shortly before the G7 convened in Brussels, Russia’s Gazprom and China’s CNCP signed a thirty-year contract to supply Russian gas to China at what is widely thought to be a discount price. The \$400 billion gas deal required China to make a \$25 billion advance payment to Gazprom to start the construction of a pipeline from Russia toward the Pacific named the ‘Power of Siberia.’ We do recognize this pivot to some extent in the data, shown in Figure 9, for Russia’s factual economic assertiveness in this period: both the main outlier with the signing of the gas deal, but also a steady (slight) increase during the remainder of the year.

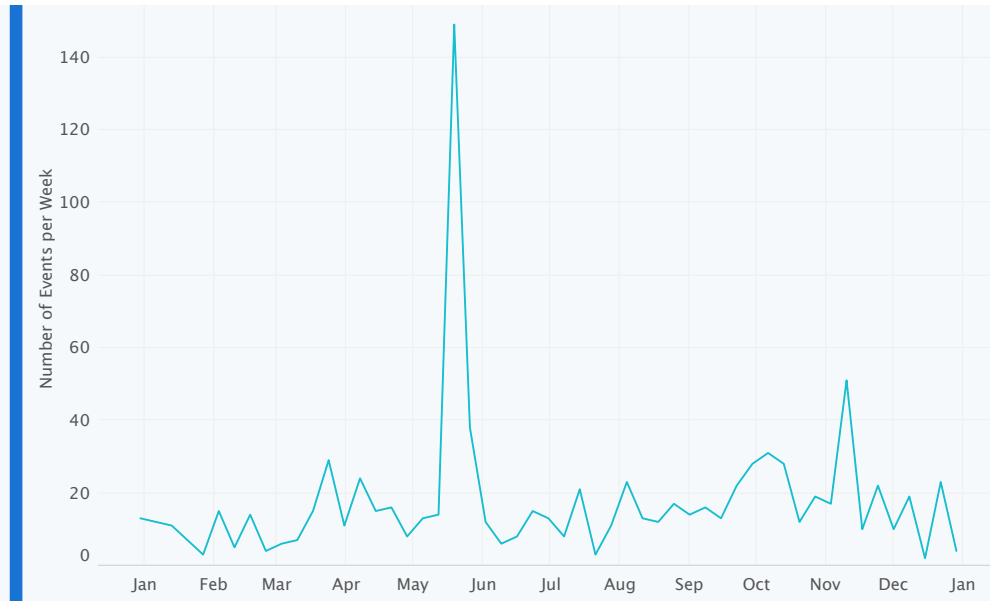


FIGURE 9 RUSSIAN POSITIVE FACTUAL ECONOMIC ASSERTIVENESS TOWARDS CHINA

Russian policy makers and analysts are quite vocal in claiming that Russia is now radically shifting its focus from the West to China. Our GDELT-data do not reveal any such dramatic shift. In the ‘targets’ of Russian overall– i.e. positive *and* negative – assertiveness (Figure 6) we fail to observe a striking upturn in Russia’s targeting of China vis-à-vis its targeting of the European Union and/or the United States. Even if we just zoom in on the positive type of assertiveness and if we break those data down into diplomatic, economic and military forms (as we do in Figure 10), we fail to detect the sharp rise in China focus that the policy discourse would suggest.

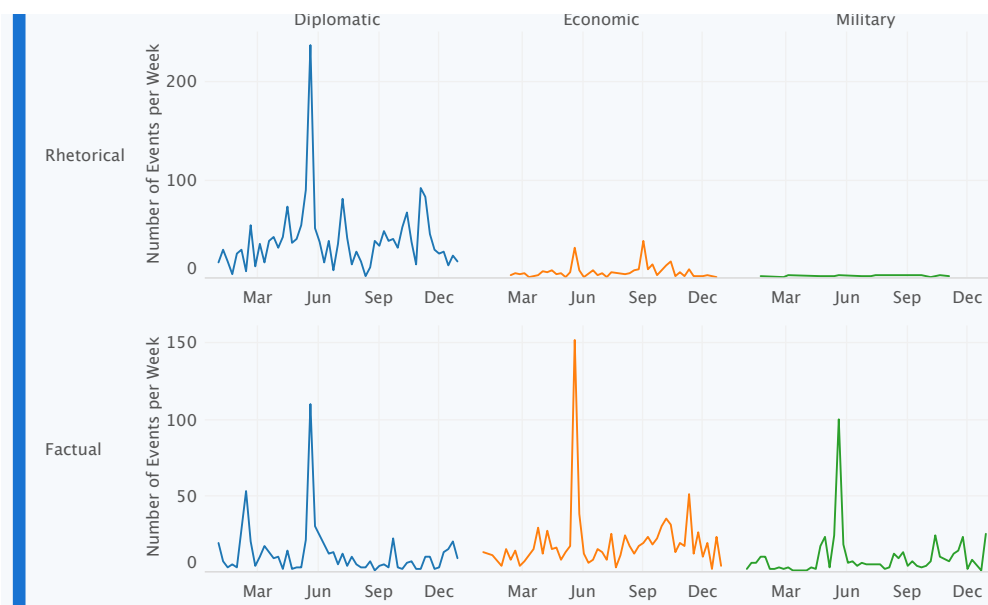


FIGURE 10 RUSSIAN POSITIVE ASSERTIVENESS TOWARDS CHINA - ALL TYPES

2.1.4 RUSSIA UNBOUND – PART II (DONBASS)

After the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, the center of gravity of the civil war in Ukraine – which very much remained the dominant foreign policy preoccupation of the Russia Federation throughout this entire period – shifted to the country’s other Russian-speaking regions. Residents of these Eastern and Southern parts of the country, which previously constituted deposed President Yanukovich’s support base, felt disenfranchised by developments in their capital and they started protesting against the government in Kiev. Especially one of the early decisions of the new pro-Western Parliament, the rescinding of a law on languages that allowed the use of the Russian language in the Russian-speaking parts of the country, sparked growing waves of protest demonstrations there. Especially in the country’s industrial heartland, the Donbass, pro-Russian protesters started emulating the Crimean precedent by occupying some key government building and proclaiming the self-styled Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR). After having thus claimed *de facto* control of these two regional capitals, the pro-Russian groups started expanding their territorial control. By mid-April they controlled all most strategic objects in other key Donbass cities. In response to these developments, the acting Ukrainian President, Oleksandr Turchynov, launched a major ‘anti-terror’ operation against

these separatist movements in Donbass. The scene for many months of bloody battle between these groups was set.

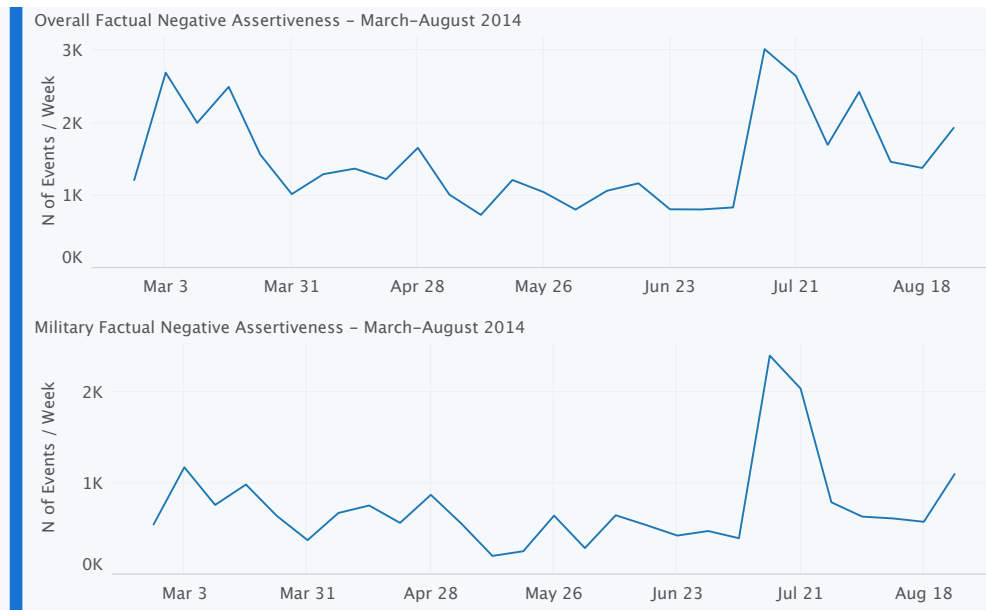


FIGURE 11 MARCH-JULY CLIMBDOWN AND DONBASS PEAK

We see in Figure 11 after the Crimea annexation Russia’s factual assertiveness exhibited a relative climb-down across the board and even – though less markedly so – in the military realm. This somewhat more subdued attitude also seemed to make its mark in most of Ukraine’s conflict zones in the country’s East. By summer time official Ukrainian forces seemed to be making inroads in reclaiming territory. But early July once again witnessed a dramatic reversal of fortune, which we find back in Figure 11 as the biggest spike in overall assertiveness, and also more specifically in its negative military type. Russian direct and indirect support to the separatist forces increased significantly, leading to increased casualties and renewed (counter-) offensives by the rebels throughout the Donbass. It was in this period that on the fateful day of July 17, 2014, a Boeing 777 operated by Malaysian Airlines en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur (flight MH17) crashed over the conflict zone near the village of Hrabove in Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine. All of the 283 passengers (including 196 Dutch citizens) and 15 crew members on board lost their lives that day.

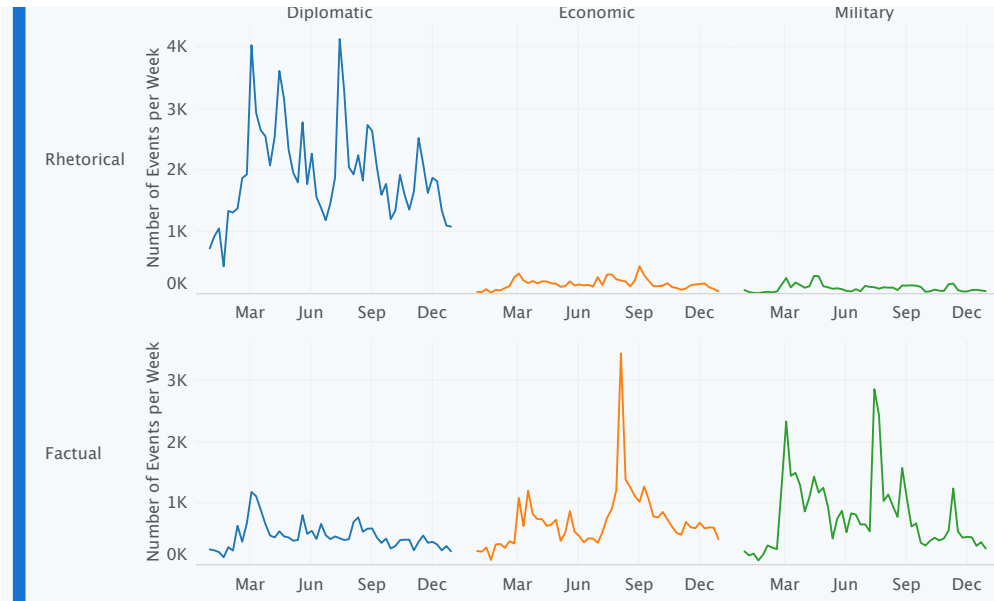


FIGURE 12 OVERALL RUSSIAN ASSERTIVENESS TYPES

The downing of MH17 qualitatively changed the world’s attitude towards the conflict and towards the conflicting sides specifically. As we also see on Figure 12, Russia’s assertiveness remains very high during these weeks, but shifts from the military to the diplomatic and economic realm. This was related to the international sanctions the international community imposed on Russia, which became more isolated than it had been at any time since the end of the Cold War. In late July, the United States and the European Union issued stronger sanctions in response to Russia’s aggression in eastern Ukraine. They targeted key sectors of the Russian economy that are closely connected to the ruling elite, including energy, defense, and finance. On August 7, Russia retaliated by banning food imports from the United States, Canada, the European Union, Australia, and Norway for one year. The ban covers a wide range of meats, dairy, vegetables, fruit, nuts, seafood, baby food, coffee, and olive oil. According to the Russian authorities, the embargo was designed to “ensure the security of the Russian Federation” and stimulate the development of Russia’s agrarian sector.

2.1.5 REALITY SINKS IN

In the period from the Fall of 2014 until the end of the year, Russia's assertiveness is dialed down again— first to the levels of the early (prior to the Donbass escalation) summer and then to even lower levels (Figure 4). This period also coincides with the severe economic impact of Western economic sanctions and – even more so – the collapsing price of oil on an already weakening Russian economy. As Russia started experiencing and confronting the economic consequences, we also see its assertiveness levels decline until the end of the year. We also see on the graphs, however, that in the first 3 months of 2015 Russia's assertiveness is on the rise again – including in the dangerous military realm to which we will turn in the next section, but not before taking a closer look at the overall geographical focus of Russia's assertiveness

2.2 GEOGRAPHY OF RUSSIAN ASSERTIVENESS

HCSS now also has the ability to break down the assertiveness data by targeted countries. What we see in Figure 13 is Russia's overall assertiveness vis-a-vis other countries over the entire year 2014. The color code reflects the balance between 'positive' and 'negative' assertive events targeted by Russia at that country. So dark red colored countries – like Ukraine or the United States – are countries that are targeted negatively by Russia, whereas dark green countries – like China, Belarus or Iran – are ones that Russia targets more positively.

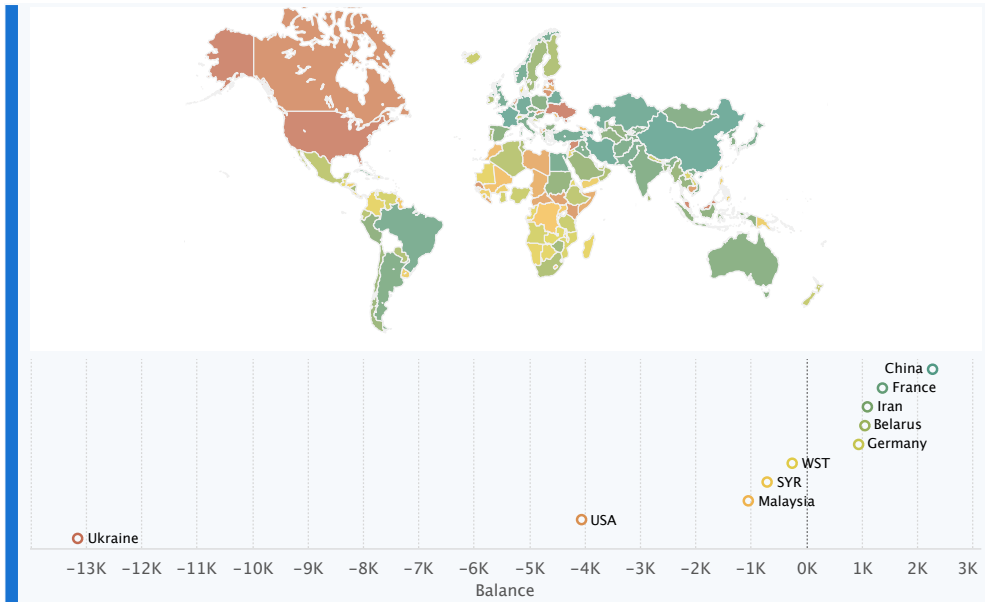


FIGURE 13 RUSSIAN OVERALL ASSERTIVENESS - BY TARGET/WORLD

Figure 13 provides a quite unique overview of where in the world Russia tried to assert itself last year – and in which way. We still see quite a bit of green on the map, especially in Asia (including, interestingly, Japan), but also in Latin America – and even across Western Europe. North America (even Mexico) and Australia (but not New Zealand) are the countries where Russia’s assertiveness is clearly negative.

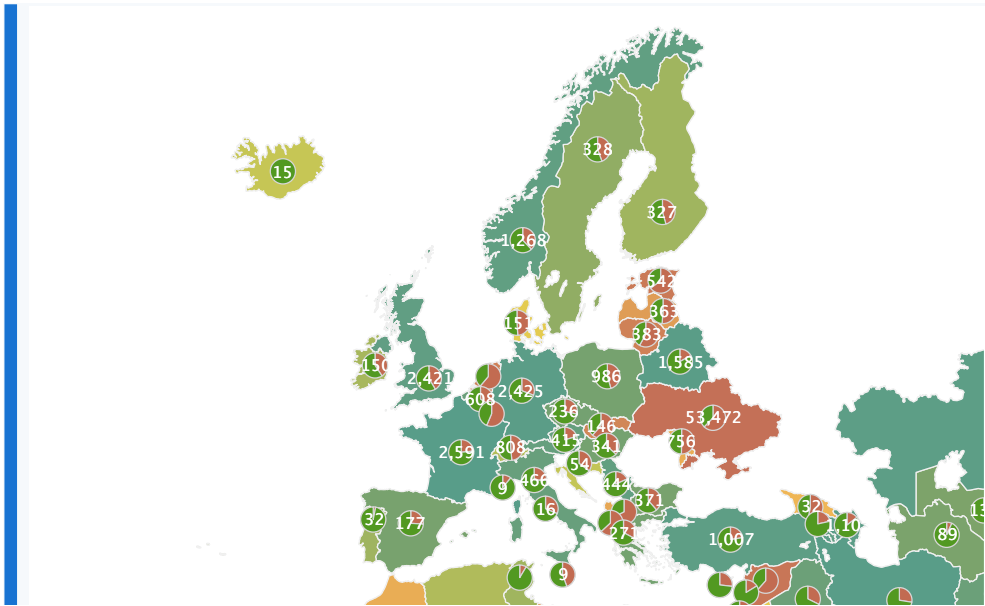


FIGURE 14 RUSSIAN OVERALL ASSERTIVENESS - BY TARGET/EUROPE

If we zoom in to just Europe (Figure 14¹⁶), we see that – over the entire year – a number of countries were specifically targeted by Russia in a negative way. That Ukraine is by far the most targeted country here will not come as a surprise. The same goes for countries like the United Kingdom, Estonia and Lithuania (where President Grybauskaitė has assumed a leading role in the opposition against Russia). But the quite negative scores for The Netherlands and – especially – Switzerland can certainly be called surprising.

16 In this map we also provide little pie charts for each country that show the balance between positive assertive (green) and negative assertive (red) events for that type and that also give the absolute number of positive events for that country. The color in which the whole country is displayed reflects the percentile of that country's relative ranking on that type of assertiveness: the darkest red country is the most negative one for that type, whereas the darkest green country is the most positive one.

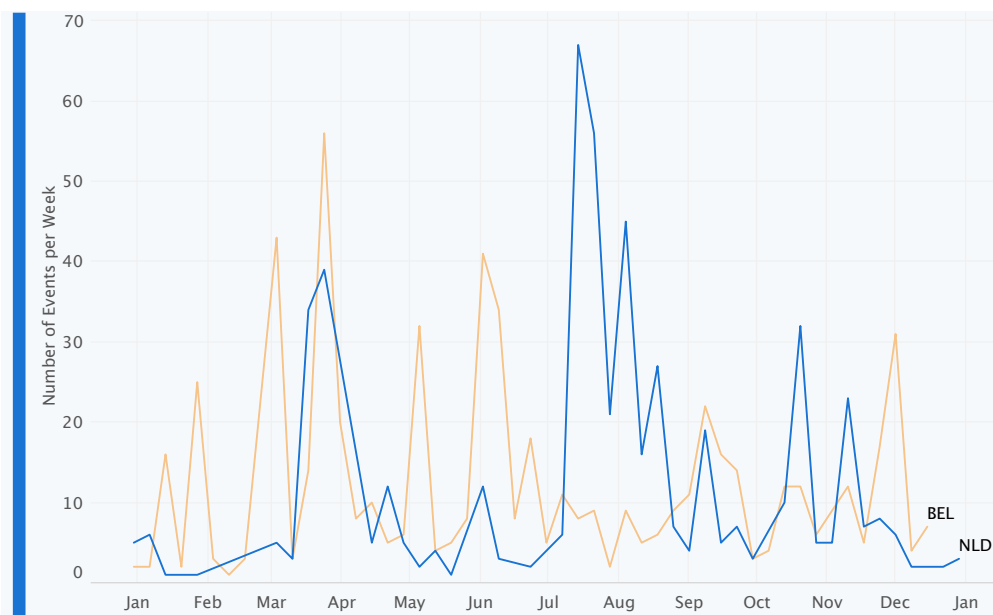


FIGURE 15 RUSSIAN OVERALL ASSERTIVENESS -THE NETHERLANDS (COMPARED TO BELGIUM)

Figure 15 plots the 2014 GDELT Russia assertiveness findings for The Netherlands (with Belgium in the background for comparison). We have to point out that the automated coder still has a hard time to differentiate between Brussels as a capital the Belgium and as the capital of Europe. But we clearly find some of the - by now familiar - peaks in the Dutch data, such as the ‘Crimea’-peak in March and the Donbass (/MH17) peak in July. This is somewhat different from Belgium, however, where we also clearly see the February Maydan peak, some peaks around the (EU-related) sanctions, and where the July and August events seem to have triggered significantly fewer assertive signals from the side of Russia.

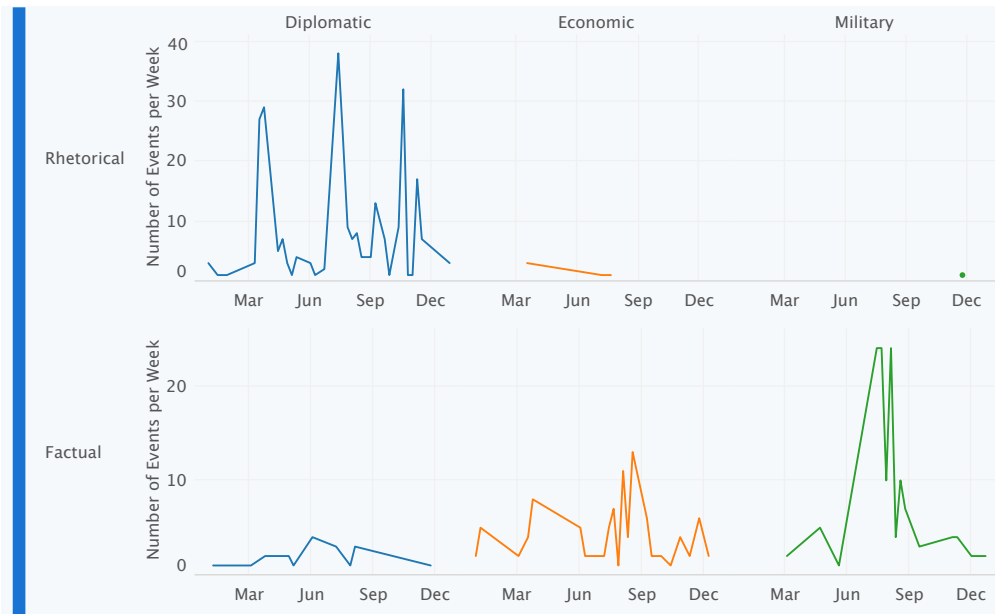


FIGURE 16 RUSSIAN OVERALL ASSERTIVENESS -THE NETHERLANDS, ALL TYPES

Breaking down Figure 15 into the different types of (overall) assertiveness, as in Figure 16, allows us to make a couple of further interesting observations. A first one is how Russian traditional ‘diplomatic’ rhetoric still dwarfs the other types of rhetoric. Especially the low number of occurrences of economic – or even – military – assertiveness towards The Netherlands is surprising, although we surmise that the inclusion of translingual GDELT event data from other countries (including The Netherlands) may rectify that (probably) somewhat distorted picture to some extent¹⁷. The second striking observation is the relatively high level of factual military assertiveness that Russia seems to have displayed towards a small country like the Netherlands (and also the uptick in early 2015, is intriguing).

17 The GDELT Project, “GDELT Translingual: Translating the Planet.”

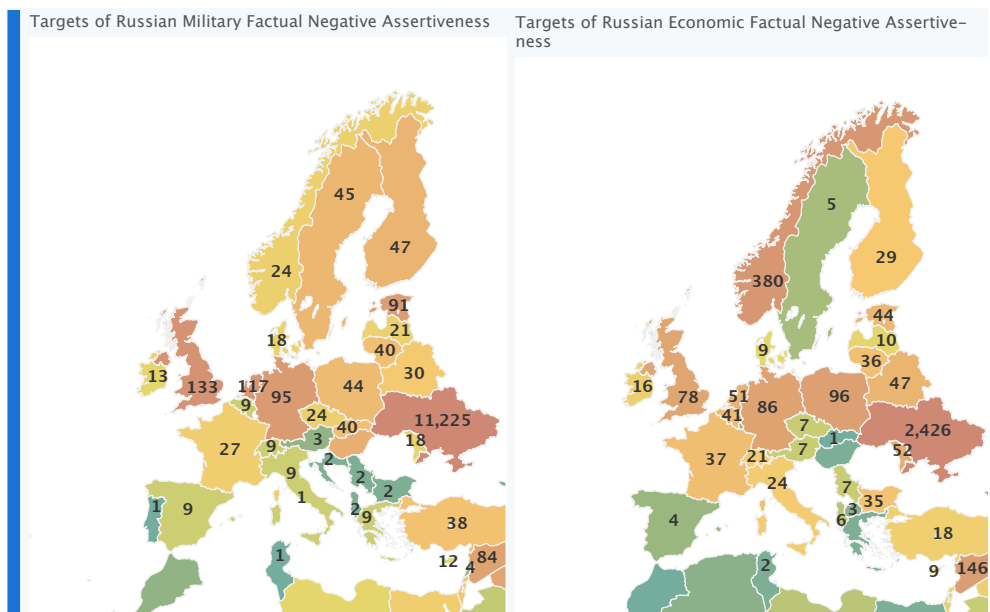


FIGURE 17 RUSSIAN FACTUAL NEGATIVE MILITARY AND ECONOMIC ASSERTIVENESS - BY TARGET/EUROPE

We also present 2 geographical ‘deep-dives’ into the European findings on Russia’s economic and military assertiveness. Figure 17 maps the data for negative factual military and economic assertiveness. We first of all want to draw attention to the fact that whereas Figure 14 (*overall* assertiveness towards Europe) was still colored primarily green, the *factual* military and economic pictures presented in Figure 17 no longer show much green. On both accounts, Ukraine sticks out, of course, but on the military side so do the scores for the United Kingdom, Germany (!) and the Netherlands. We find that of all European countries (in declining order) Italy, Portugal, Greece, Bulgaria and Austria receive the least negative treatment in the military area. Once again, the fairly negative score of The Netherlands is a point of interest here. When we compare Russia’s negative *military* signals towards Europe to its negative *economic* signals, we note that there are no great differences between the two for France, Germany (whose negative score on both might have been a surprise in previous years – but 2014 was also a watershed in German-Russian relations) and the United Kingdom – as well as for Finland, the Baltics and The Netherlands. It is interesting that Sweden scores worse in the military than in the economic realm, whereas for Norway the opposite is the case.

3 RUSSIAN MILITARY POLICY

For the Russian Armed Forces, 2014 was a watershed year as well. As President Putin has openly admitted in a number of surprisingly candid interviews¹⁸, they were used directly (even if covertly, in the guise of ‘polite little green men’) in the territorial aggrandizement of the Russian Federation for the first time since the Soviet Union militarily invaded and then occupied the Baltic states in June 1940¹⁹. In many ways, however, the Crimean annexation was but the tip of the iceberg. 2014 also witnessed an unprecedented acceleration of a number of other worrisome military trends that had already been discernible for a few years.

3.1 MAJOR TRENDS

The Soviet Union, one of the two ‘poles’ of the ‘bipolar’ international system, was by all accounts a military peer competitor to the West. Whereas we will (thankfully) never find out how much of a peer it really was in this realm, the economic burden that this put on an already increasingly struggling economic model proved unsustainable. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation – not unlike the West – cashed in on a ‘peace dividend’. Defense expenditures came down significantly and the state of the Russian military was generally acknowledged – also in Russia – to have deteriorated considerably.

Although we have no composite indicators of (Soviet/) Russian military prowess, the following graph shows at least a few components of what could presumably go into such an index, going back to 1995. It includes, from top to bottom, the price of oil (as a reference point), the number of Russian troops as a percentage

18 Putin, “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin”; “О Чём Рассказал Путин В Интервью Для Фильма «Крым. Путь На Родину?»”

19 There were other somewhat similar cases like this after that, like the Kurils (from Japan) in 1945, the Serpent Island (from Romania) in 1948, the Damanski Island (from China) in 1969 – but those were either very small pieces of territory or did not see direct military involvement with an eye towards subsequent annexation. For reference – Crimea is about the size of Belgium.

of the total labor force, yearly Russian military expenditures expressed in constant (2011) US dollars, Russian military expenditures as a percentage of Russian GDP, the value of Russian arms transports, and the amount of times ‘military’ in general (as a proxy for the prominence of the military in Russian society) and ‘military exercises’²⁰ in particular are mentioned in one of the richest full-text newspaper databases in the Russian language (Factiva).



FIGURE 18 MILITARY TRENDS

²⁰ For both of these cases, we did a search on Factiva for all grammatical variations of the word ‘military’ and of the term ‘military exercise’ in any Russian-language newspaper published in Russia. The figures shown here are the absolute yearly figures of the number of articles in which these occurred.

As (most of) these figures show, the downward trend (which predated the time period displayed in these graphs) started to reverse by the late 1990s, just before Vladimir Putin came to power. Particularly noteworthy here are the steady increases in military expenditures (in absolute figures, but much less so relative to the Russian GDP) and arms exports. This led, by most accounts, to a quantitative and qualitative improvement in Russia's military capabilities across the board. As an authoritative review by the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) from 2013 – i.e. prior to the events described in this report – summarized: “Russian conventional capability has increased and will continue to do so during the coming ten-year period. Increased spending on defence and especially on procurement will mean that units are better trained and better equipped.”²¹

Most available datasets in this area tend to have a lag of 1 to 2 years before figures become available. We therefore made an extra effort – as we did for our foreign policy analysis – to generate some more up-to-date figures. The ones that we were able to produce – the two bottom ones – show quite dramatic upticks for 2014.

3.2 RUSSIAN MILITARY: FROM SOVIET TO ?

In the first 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's conventional armed forces had quickly deteriorated, as Russia's new democratic leadership relied on a combination of a still formidable nuclear deterrent with a desire to forge a better relationship with the West. This period saw numerous attempts to modernize Russia's armed forces, none of which made much of dent in their ‘Soviet’ armor. The main result was a continuous gradual downsizing of the old Soviet conventional forces both in size and in quality. What remained were some vestigial remnants of the Soviet conventional Armed Forces with cadre or skeleton units still mostly imbued with Soviet-style aspects of manning, doctrine, training and equipping²².

21 Hedenskog et al., *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective - 2013*.

22 Blank, *Russian Military Politics and Russia's 2010 Defense Doctrine*; de Haas, “MILITARY REFORM IN RUSSIA”; Renz, “Russian Military Capabilities after 20 Years of Reform”; Renz and Thornton, “Russian Military Modernization”; Marshall, “Russia's Struggle for Military Reform.”

Already in his first two presidential mandates (2000–2008), President Putin had made regular references to the need for more serious reform²³ but he too initially appeared unable to turn the tide. In 2008, however, the questionable performance of the Russian Armed Forces in the war against small Georgia seems to have triggered real change. The windfall gains of historically unusually high oil prices for the Russian budget also made this new focus financially much more feasible. The ruling duumvirate of Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin essentially gave then-Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov *carte blanche* to launch a more radical and durable new reform effort. The main focus was on creating smaller, mobile, flexible forces, with improved combat capability and higher combat readiness, to be used rapidly in modern conflicts.²⁴ These reforms are now widely seen to have been more successful than their precursors, even if they too have also been fraught with unforeseen difficulties and setbacks²⁵. As one Western expert stated: “In the five years of Anatoly Serdyukov’s tenure as defense minister, the Russian military underwent one of the most significant reforms of any period since the formation of the modern Soviet Army during and immediately after World War II.”

During the period 2008–2012, Vladimir Putin, in his capacity as Prime Minister, appears to have focused primarily on the reorganization of the defense industry companies that he felt would prove crucial in moving toward his high ambition to have 70 percent ‘new’ or ‘modern’ weapons and equipment by 2020.²⁶ But already in the run-up to the presidential elections of 2012 he made clear that we was ready for real change. In a long programmatic article published prior to the 2012 presidential elections in the official Russian newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta*²⁷, President Putin emphasized that the Georgian war had demonstrated once and for all that the Soviet legacy model had fully exhausted itself and that Russia’s Armed Forces were no longer a match for the quickly evolving threat environment. He argued that the country needed a fundamentally “new army”.

23 Плугатарев, “‘Иновационная армия’ что это?”; Мясников, “Задача для нового главковерха”; Еленский, “Шок И Трепет’ Нового Армейского Облика.”

24 Bartles, “Defense Reforms of Russian Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov.”

25 Herspring and McDermott, “Serdyukov Promotes Systemic Russian Military Reform”; Herspring, “Anatoly Serdyukov and the Russian Military”; Herspring and McDermott, “Chaplains, Political Officers, and the Russian Armed Forces.”

26 McDermott, “The Brain of the Russian Army.”

27 Путин, “Быть Сильными.”

In November 2012, Serdyukov was fired as Defense Minister on corruption charges and replaced by Sergey Shoigu, the long-serving (civilian) Minister for Emergency Situations, who initiated a number of reviews of the ‘progress’ of the reform during his first six months in office²⁸. Throughout 2013, Shoigu focused his attention on improving operational readiness, continuing the bold re-armament plans and expediting the transition to a more professional military force²⁹. By the end of 2014, President Putin was visibly pleased with his Minister whilst chairing the expanded meeting of the collegium of the Ministry of Defense at the opening new state of the art national command and control center. He thanked his military top brass for their performance during the ‘Crimean events’ and ominously added that the Russian Armed Forces would impress their competitors even more with their advanced technology and effectiveness after the ongoing modernization plan would be fully completed.”

We propose to take a closer look at the main changes in the key components in the Russian Armed Forces.

3.2.1 GROUND FORCES

The ground forces are the largest service in the Russian military. In 2014, the number of ‘contract’ soldiers for the first time exceeded the number of conscripted soldiers within an overall end strength of 295 thousand troops. As of 2013, the ground forces consisted of about 80 brigades³⁰. Until recently, their armaments were based primarily on Soviet-era designs. This led the then Chief of the Russian General Staff, Army General Makarov, to almost fully stop buying all the equipment for the Ground Forces that was produced by the Russian defense industrial base³¹. In 2012, military leaders announced that they would no longer accept modified versions of Soviet-era designs and instead invest in research and development to produce fully modern types of equipment within five years³². General Makarov also – belatedly – embraced Western ideas about network-centrism, which has become another key driver for the modernization of the Russian Ground Forces.

28 Gorenburg, *The Russian Military Under Sergei Shoigu. Will the Reform Continue?*.

29 Ibid.

30 Gorenburg, “Capabilities of the Russian Ground Forces.”

31 “Генштаб Попросили Не Комментировать.”

32 Gorenburg, “Capabilities of the Russian Ground Forces.”

Most of the efforts on the Ground Forces has focused on a still relatively small number (maybe up to 25% of the total number of ground forces) of elite forces consisting of rapid reaction units that are highly professional, well equipped and well trained and have high morale. President Putin made sure to single out their performance in his account of the Crimean operation. “Nonetheless, too much focus on the new personal equipment, weapons, vehicles and tactical-communications equipment in evidence during the Crimea mission can be misleading. The troops involved in the operation mainly comprised elite special-operations groups from the Southern Military District and the Airborne Assault Troops (VDV), which have long been given priority over regular ground forces in terms of training, equipment and funding. Therefore, lessons from the Crimea operation do not reflect the overall state of the Russian armed forces, for which change in these areas has been positive but less striking. Due to the chronic under-manning and conscription issues now characteristic of the Russian Army, even these elite formations could not be used in their entirety. On the whole, the operation was a test of elite units and special forces, and they performed well.”³³

Doctrinally, it is becoming increasingly clear that this service is starting to shed its Soviet era focus on mass and numbers to fight a large-scale frontal war in favor of a more ‘Western-style’ focus on much better networked mobile units that can provide rapid response capabilities for small regional and local conflicts. Whereas much of the thinking behind this shift was probably triggered by possible contingencies along Russia’s Southern borders (Caucasus, Central Asia), it is clear that these trends also present new threats along its Western borders.

These new additions to the Ground Forces that Defense Minister Shoygu made public in December 2014 certainly to give an idea of the amplitude of the new Russian effort (and we do want to emphasize that these are still overwhelmingly Soviet-style systems):

- Vehicles for different purposes - 4956 pieces.
- Upgraded T-72B3 - 294 pieces.
- Military armored vehicles of different classes - 296 pieces.
- anti-aircraft missile system S-300V4 - 2 pieces.
- (dual-capable) missile system Iskander-M - 2 pieces.

33 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2015*.

3.2.2 AIR FORCE

Despite the decay of the 1990s and early 2000s, the Russian Air Force remains the second largest in the world. It has approximately 2,500 aircraft in service, 75-80% of which are operational. Since the 2009 reform, the Air Force is spread over 60 bases, each of which reports to one of four operational strategic commands.

Russia's latest State Armament Program (SAP-2020) heralds a big boost to the Russian Air Force. An investment of over 4 trillion rubles (130 billion dollars) would result in the acquisition of more than 600 modern aircraft, including fifth-generation fighters, as well as more than 1,000 helicopters and a range of air defence systems. The strong emphasis on combat aircraft (another one of those legacies of the Cold War) remains while transport and refueling capabilities remain a weak point³⁴. Russia was relatively late in starting to develop unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), but some progress is now also being made in this area³⁵.

In 2014, 142 new aircraft and 135 new helicopters were taken in service by the Russian Air Force. These include:

- Aircraft
 - Multi-purpose Su-30 and Su-35S - 53 pieces.
 - Front-line fighter-bomber Su-34 - 16 pieces.
 - fighter-interceptor MiG-31 BM - 18 pieces.
 - Transport and training aircraft of different brands - 28 pieces.
- Helicopters
 - Attack - 46 pieces.
 - Commando transport - 72 pieces.
- Air Defense (which is no longer a separate service as it has been merged with the Air Force)
 - 7 new anti-aircraft missile systems S-400

34 Gorenburg, "Russian Air Force Capabilities and Procurement Plans."

35 The Russian Air Force received as many 79 UAS in 2014 (179) as it did in the entire period prior to 2014Шойгу, "Отчет На Расширенном Заседании Коллегии Минобороны России Об Итогах Деятельности За 2014 Г.". For an example of new Russian UAV design, see "Russia Readies Hybrid Amphibious Drone for Test Flight."

3.2.3 NAVY

For many years the Russian navy was a low priority for Russian political (and military) leaders. Money and politics saw to it that the Russian Navy went into a deep decline — the Kursk disaster in 2000 being the most significant manifestation of this — with underfunding that has led to the decay of many older platforms. The Russian navy remains primarily a Soviet legacy force. There are relatively few new warships in service at present and the ones that have been commissioned in recent years are all relatively small. In terms of large surface units, the navy only operates what it was able to save during the years when it received virtually no funding. Whereas the Soviet navy focused on building ships designed to take on carrier groups, the new Russian navy will be primarily focused on defending against smaller adversaries closer to home, at least in the short term.

Russia intends to restore its navy's global reach, but given the time needed to renovate shipyards, develop new designs, and build large ships, the effort will not be fully launched until the 2020s. The earliest that Russia could build a new aircraft carrier is 2027, while new destroyers are still on drawing board, with the first unlikely to be commissioned for ten years³⁶.

In 2014, the Russian Navy received one nuclear submarine Project 885 'Severodvinsk', equipped with cruise missiles, and one new generation diesel-electric submarine. This is supposed to be the first in the new, recently established submarine command for Black Sea Fleet. The Russian surface fleet added 5 warships and 10 combat boats of different classes in 2014³⁷.

3.2.4 NUCLEAR DETERRENT

Russia's strategic nuclear forces, which absorb a third of the country's defense budget, are still seen as the country's main military 'trump card' by the country's political and military leadership³⁸. As announced by official Russian state televisions, in 2014 Russia's nuclear triad received "the maximum amount of refurbishing that could conceivably be achieved in one year".-Three regiments of the Strategic Missile Forces were completed renewed and received 18

36 Gorenburg, "Russian Naval Shipbuilding Plans."

37 Шойгу, "Отчет На Расширенном Заседании Коллегии Минобороны России Об Итогах Деятельности За 2014 Г."

38 "Putin's New Model Army."

intercontinental ballistic missiles RS-24 ‘Yars’, each of which carry 3-4 independently targetable nuclear warheads. Long-range strategic aviation received 7 modernized strategic bombers Tu-160 and Tu-95MS. The naval leg of the triad received a new Borei class strategic nuclear submarine ‘Yuriy Dolgorukiy, equipped with the new ‘Bulava’ missile. It was also announced that in the near future two additional submarines of this class would be added to the fleet: the ‘Prince Vladimir’ and ‘Prince Oleg’ – all references to Russian imperial princes. In total, Russia’s nuclear deterrent received 38 new intercontinental ballistic missiles this year, 22 of them designed to retrofit submarines. Russia itself no considers 56% of the country’s nuclear arsenal ‘modern’.

3.2.5 MILITARY TRAINING

The sharp uptick in combat training that had been recorded by FOI for 2013 gathered even more steam in 2014³⁹. Figure 19 represents HCSS’ attempt to start building a dataset for capturing this potentially quite important precursor (‘leading indicator’) to military conflict⁴⁰ and clearly makes this point quite dramatically.

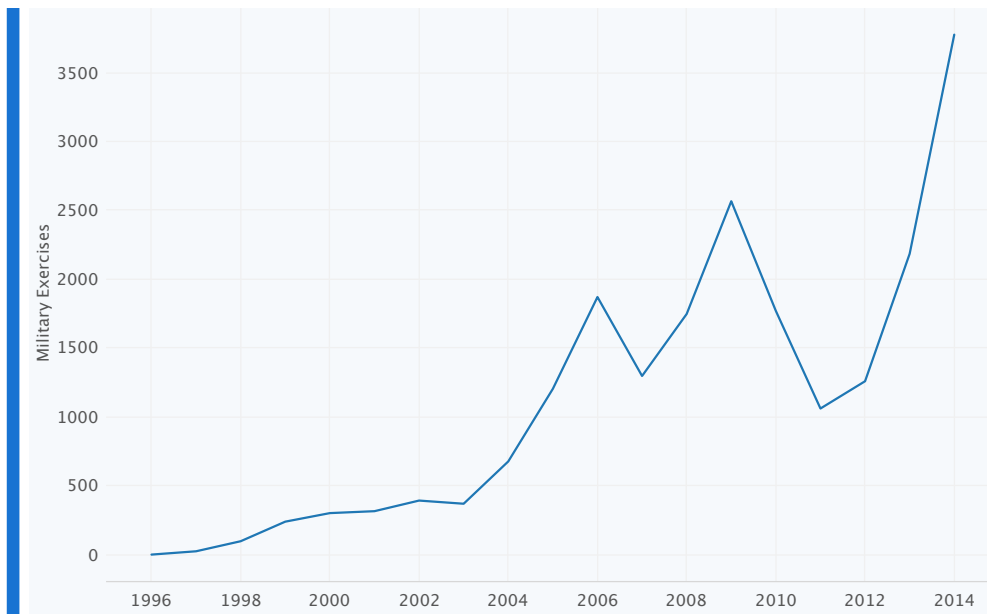


FIGURE 19 TRENDS IN MILITARY EXERCISES

39 Carlsson, Norberg, and Westerlund, “Military Capability of Russia’s Armed Forces in 2013.”

40 See footnote 15.

Russia continues to use exercises to use snap inspections and exercises to identify areas for improvement. According to public Russian sources, the number of exercises conducted increased by 1.5 times. The now already infamous ‘spot checks’ of readiness of the forces continued throughout the Western, Central and Eastern Military Districts. The ones that took place from 26 February to 3 March in two military districts simultaneously received special attention in the West because they accompanied the unfolding events first in Crimean and then in Eastern Ukraine and were widely seen in the West as providing “cover for the covert concentration of incursion forces, as well as providing diversionary political effect”⁴¹.

The highlight of the year in this sense, however, was ‘Vostok-2014’ – a large-scale live exercise that was unprecedented in its scale in the history of modern Russia. 155,000 troops participated in the exercise that took place on the territory of 13 subjects of the Russian Federation with 8,000 units of military equipment, 85 ships and 650 aircrafts.

Russia’s growing military focus on the North (the Arctic) was also reflected in a unique landing of an Airborne Battalion on the North Pole. After the landing of Marines, with the help of experienced polar explorers, learn to move correctly, overcome obstacles and survive in extremely-low temperatures.

3.3 MILITARIZATION OF SOCIETY

One the most worrisome aspects of the ‘new’ Russia that – like most of the elements of military policy reviewed this year – greatly intensified in 2014, is the growing militarization of Russian society. This has been going on for a few years already⁴², although, as for many other indicators that are surveyed here, we have no systematic – let alone systematically comparative – datasets to monitor the full extent and detail of this militarization. In the absence of such ‘hard’ indicators, we will therefore merely survey a few indications of this ominous trend.

A first clear indication is the revival of Soviet-era institutions that were supposed to forge the link between Soviet society and its Armed Forces and to make

41 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2015*, 159.

42 As with all of the trends described in this report, there are many explanations that have been proffered.

service in the armed forces more attractive. The first one of these is the DOSAAF (Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Fleet), a youth sports and leisure organization with strong ties to the Armed Forces and has received generous funding for running youth events such as parachute jumping and military sports that may raise interest among young people for service in the Armed Forces. Another example is a Stalin-era fitness program, known under its acronym ‘GTO’ (“Gotov k Trudu i Oborone” [“Ready for Labor and Defense”]) that had to ensure that citizens were ready to work and fight for the Soviet Union. GTO specified tests that had to be passed based on standardized fitness norms for various age groups so. Those who passed were given gold and silver badges that they wore with pride. The program has now been reactivated and funded by leftover cash from the Sochi Winter Olympics.

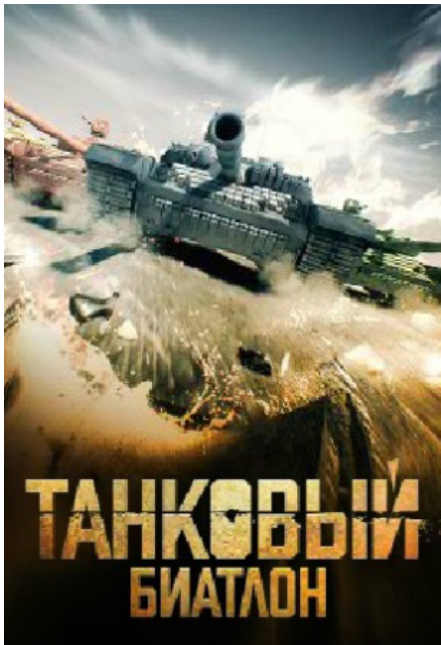


FIGURE 20 TANK BIATLON’ ON RUSSIAN TV



FIGURE 21 THE RUSSIAN MOD ‘KIDS’ WEBSITE

But alongside the rebirth of these Soviet-era mostly ‘analogue’ programs Russian policymakers are also applying more ‘modern’ and digital methods to stir the military-patriotic sentiments of the Russian population. One of the most visible elements in this is the massive use of TV, which is somehow reminiscent of the Soviet period, but with a new and more ‘modern’ twist. Although internet

penetration rates are already fairly high and growing across the whole country, television remains the media source Russian households spend most time on. The military as a professional group had already become much more visible on Russian television for quite some time. In 2014, the Ministry of Defense (often through the 'Creative Association 'Zvezda') sponsored more than 120 documentaries with central television- and radio-stations and 200 television- and radio programs⁴³. The most striking development in this context in 2014 was the probably the appearance of generously funded and highly popular TV shows like 'Tank biathlon' and 'Aviadarts' that are watched by millions of Russian viewers⁴⁴. 'Tank biathlon' for instance, is a mechanized military sport that was invented by the Russian military. It bears some similarities to the regular (Olympic) sport of biathlon but uses tanks instead of skis. In the televised competition, (international) tank crews have to navigate through rough terrain while firing at various targets (presumably at prohibitive costs).

The Ministry of Defense, in coordination with the Ministry of Education, also instigated programs for basic survival training that have schoolchildren as their target audience. A website for children with military comics, computer games, etc. is now available on the Ministry's homepage⁴⁵.

43 Шойгу, "Отчет На Расширенном Заседании Коллегии Минобороны России Об Итогах Деятельности За 2014 Г.," 15.

44 In preparing for these TV shows, preliminary competitions were held with 125 armored divisions and 85 pilots. These televised events themselves were attended by more than 600 tank crews and about 500 aircraft. In total, these events involved over 21 thousand soldiers.

45 "Детям : Министерство Обороны Российской Федерации."

4 CONCLUSION

In this conclusion we just want to highlight the key take-aways of the changes that have taken place in the foreign and defense realms in Russia, on what they mean for European (and global) security, and – finally – on what our effort this year taught us with respect to the ways in which we can monitor other countries' assertiveness. We end with some general policy recommendations

4.1 WATERSHED

We submit that 2014 was indeed a watershed year for Russia and for its interactions with Europe and the West. It may be tempting to argue that many of the findings described in this *Issue Brief* were already presaged in previous years. HCSS has indeed been focusing on Russia's (and China's) increased foreign assertiveness in a report we published last year that was dedicated to that topic. In that report, we chronicled the gradual but steady rise of Russia's assertiveness since 1979 and had also noted a renewed uptick since President Putin's return to power in 2012.

Figure 22 presents the same data we produced for our report last year for the period 1979-2013, but then reworked and extended to this date (and people who visit the HCSS StratBase web platform can find daily updates there).

We point out that this visual was – as all the other ones in this report – created without any form of human interference. What we see here are just the events that were automatically coded by GDEL-Tabari, the event coder built into GDEL. As we see, GDEL-Tabari was able to accurately identify the main 'peaks' in Russian assertiveness, as some deep experts might be able to – but in a much more fine-grained way than would be humanly possible. This new approach also allows us to zoom in on the different types of assertiveness. Figure 18, for instance, shows the development of Russia's both negative military and economic assertiveness.

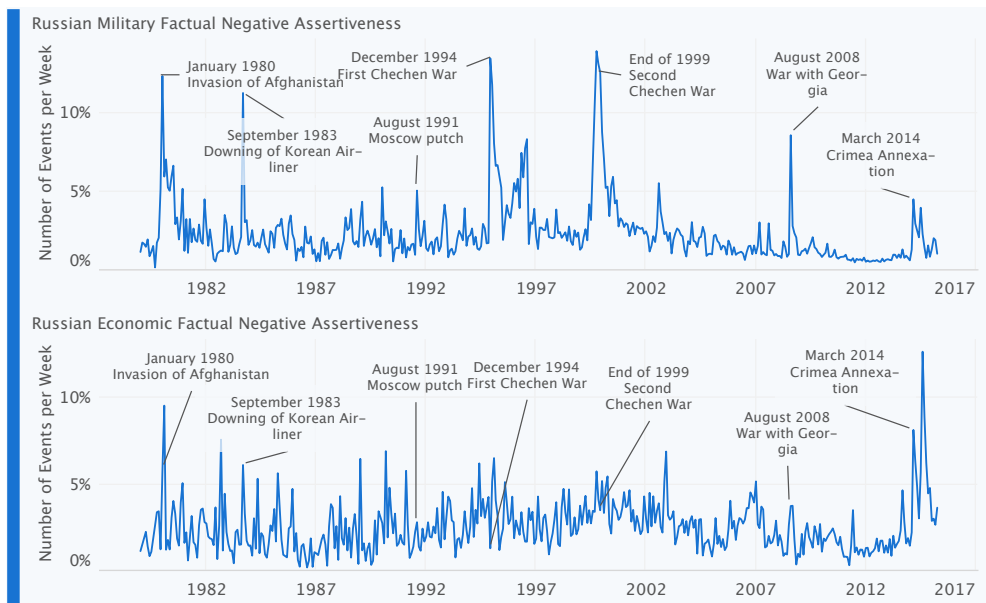


FIGURE 22 FACTUAL NEGATIVE MILITARY AND ECONOMIC ASSERTIVENESS (1979-2015)

We even more clearly see the peak events that we already detected in Figure 17 accentuated in the military part of Figure 18. We also see, however, how Russia’s ‘economic’ assertiveness logic clearly diverges from its ‘military’ assertiveness logic. A good example of this is in the year we focused on in this report – 2014, when Russia’s military assertiveness, that was indeed factually more subdued than in the full out military attack on Georgia in 2008, peaked in March, whereas Russian economic assertiveness climaxed in August 2014 when President Putin signed his decree “On the use of specific economic measures”. We also note that the height of this ‘economic’ (negative) assertiveness peak is unprecedented throughout this entire period – an extraordinary conclusion in its own right. The fact that a system that fully automated the extraction of almost one billion events from a wide range of newspapers for more than 35 years was able to identify such details for one country with such *prima facie*⁴⁶ validity gives

46 One of the weaknesses of (the historical data from) GDELT is that it was impossible (for copyright reasons) to drill down to the actual newspaper from which the event data had been extracted. The great promise, in our eyes, of the new El:Diablo pipeline that we now have been running for the past few months (but with insufficient reliability to enable us to replace GDELT as the main source for this year’s analysis) is that we are able to do precisely that: to validate these event coders at the micro-level instead of at the macro-level.

us confidence in the current and – a fortiori – future usefulness of these data- and toolsets for our field. We look forward to the day that such datasets (with all of their well-known strengths and weakness) will become as ubiquitous as the financial and economic datasets that are so unremittingly produced and examined by analysts in those sectors.

There is, however, also a second –in our view equally salubrious – lesson that we infer from these visuals. The line graph of Figure 17 suggests that overall Russian assertiveness has actually been declining since the end of the Soviet Union. It also shows – not implausibly - that events like the two Chechen wars and the August 2008 war with Georgia represented more virulent forms of assertiveness than the events in Ukraine in 2014. We already suggested that the use of proxies and the covert direct use of Russian military forces represent a very different, and ostensibly less forceful form of assertiveness. But this is where we argue that – at this stage of development of artificial intelligence – human analysts might still have a comparative advantage. We submit that we are no longer just talking about rising assertiveness. As we stated in the introduction of this *Issue Brief* and as we have illustrated throughout it, assertiveness has now transgressed into a qualitatively different type of forcefulness: naked territorial aggression. The type of reckless and short-sighted aggression that Europe thought/hoped it had exorcised from its own soil and from its immediate neighborhood. No ethno-cultural, historical, religious or other pretexts, no offenses or mistakes that others may or may not have committed can mask the incontrovertible fact that by crossing this legal, political, military and emotional Rubicon Russia has isolated itself from the global mainstream.

In our assessment, the events we described in this *Issue Brief* did not merely represent a further notch of the assertiveness ratchet, but a truly qualitative leap into a new category. Russia morphed this year from a prickly partner that had steadily been behaving ever more assertively into an unapologetic non-status quo power apparently bent on territorial aggrandizement at the expense of other states. This puts it into a decidedly different category of foreign policy actor than most other nations – more akin to Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or Slobodan Milosevic’ Serbia. It is true that the numbers of human casualties in this case are – thankfully – significantly lower than in the aforementioned categorical equivalents. But the categorical equivalence is

unmistakably there. Our survey in this year's Strategic Monitor of what we know about territorial conflict clearly spells out how 'different' territorial conflict is from other types of conflict. It also highlights the dangers that are connected to this. As it steps into this 'new' – all too well known – territory, Russia conjures up ghosts of times (hoped) past.

4.2 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Contrary to the other analyses that represent this year's contribution by HCSS to the Dutch government's Strategic Monitor, this *Issue Brief* offers only one key policy recommendation. This is also due to the fact that HCSS will publish a bigger report later this year which will provide a broader analysis – beyond the foreign and defense assertiveness aspects that were the subject of this *Issue Brief* – of why we see 2014 as a watershed year for Russia itself and for its relations with the West. That report will not only present an argued trade-off analysis of various policy options but also a novel approach on how to develop such policy recommendations in a more systematic, inclusive and deliberate way. In the meanwhile we refer the more impatient amongst our readers who are eager for some policy ideas to the generic policy recommendations we formulated for how Western Defense and Security Organizations (WDSOs) can deal with the re-emergence of territorial conflict – also in our immediate neighborhoods.

But there is one important policy implication that we already want to highlight in this *Issue Brief* and that relates to our own field – which is the field of policy analysis. During the Cold War, the West built up an impressive research infrastructure and knowledge base on what was then the overriding strategic challenger: the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, that historically quite unique infrastructure largely disintegrated – first in the United States, but then also in Western Europe. And while pockets of deep knowledge remain, much of those are partial and fragmented. They also tend to miss the singular 'big picture' policy-focus that was so characteristic for the Cold War effort. As HCSS last year once again turned its attention, after a long period of relative neglect, to the policy-relevant debates on Russia, we were struck by their relatively weak and/or fragmented empirical basis. This is all the more astounding when we compare this with the Soviet antecedents, when the availability of and access to (reliable) Soviet data was extremely limited, but

when extraordinary efforts were made to compile datasets for better informed and evidence-based analysis. Today, we have an abundance of datasets, many of them collected by Russian officials (increasingly based on international standards), analysts and scholars. We also have far more tools to put our finger on ‘the Russian pulse’ – not in the least through the enormous full-text corpora that are available online (websites, newspapers, periodicals, social networks, etc.) and the many data- and textmining tools that we now have at our disposal. And yet much of our analysis does not fully reflect the insights that can be culled from those datasets and tools. 2014 suggests that we should do – and can – do better. This *Issue Brief* at least tried to make some progress on the assertiveness monitoring front.

HCSS has decided to pick up this gauntlet. As a contribution to the ‘Strategic Monitor’ – the Dutch government’s attempt to provide a better anticipatory capability for policy-makers but also for other Dutch stakeholders – we will over the next few weeks and months be issuing a number of products on what has been happening and is happening to Russia. We have been collating a database of about 900 indicators, covering various aspects of Russia’s recent and current development that we have put in an interactive visualization on our new web-based platform. We are also completing a ‘Futurebase’, a knowledge base with various insights about Russia’s future that we have collected from a variety of ‘small’, ‘bigish’ and ‘big’ data. We are updating a number of scenarios for the future of Russia that we developed a few years ago and are also looking at what those means for Western policymaking. Finally, we will also be publishing a report on what has changed in Russia last year and on how to ‘design’ a new strategic options portfolio for dealing with this ‘new’ Russia.

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