

**Testimony for the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, June 7, 2016,  
“Russia’s Violation of Borders, Treaties and Human Rights”**

David Satter

The leaders of post-Soviet Russia, a supposedly democratic country, have used wars to achieve internal political objectives. The first Chechen war was “a small victorious war” that was calculated to raise the popularity of President Yeltsin which suffered because of the lawless process of privatization and resulting impoverishment of the Russian people. The second Chechen war was intended to save those who had pillaged the country and assure Putin’s elevation to power. In perhaps the greatest political provocation since the burning of the Reichstag, four apartment buildings in Buinaksk, Moscow, and Volgodonsk were blown up in 1999 and the attack was blamed on Chechen terrorists. In fact, there is overwhelming evidence that the bombings were carried out not by Chechens but by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). This evidence includes but is not limited to the fact that FSB agents were arrested after placing a bomb in a fifth building in the city of Ryazan southeast of Moscow and Gennady Seleznev, the speaker of the State Duma, announced the bombing in Volgodonsk September 16, 1999 three days before it occurred.

The bombings were used as a pretext for a new war in Chechnya and success in fighting this war brought Putin to power. In other words, there is overwhelming evidence that Putin rules as a result of an act of terror against his own people.

The war in Ukraine was also undertaken to distract the Russian people. In this case, it was intended to blind them to the real lesson of Maidan revolt - the possibility of a people to spontaneously and freely organize against a kleptocratic regime. The war in Syria, in turn, was undertaken in order to distract attention from the lack of success in Ukraine. The ambitious plans to carve out a “New Russia” from sovereign Ukrainian territory were at least temporarily frozen in the face of Western sanctions and stiff Ukrainian military resistance.

Calls by presidential candidates for a “grand bargain” with Russia which, in fact, only repeat the premise of the “reset policy” are therefore naïve and misguided. The only bargain that the U.S. can obtain are on terms that no President concerned to honor American principles could accept – the right of Russia to suppress its people and attack its neighbors. If such terms were accepted, the Russian leaders would immediately escalate their demands.

The following are some of the areas in which Russian actions represent a danger to the U.S., its neighbors or civilized principles.

**Ukraine:** Russia is guilty of aggression against Ukraine, having deliberately started a war on an invented pretext in order to destabilize the Ukrainian government and discredit the Ukrainian anti-criminal Maidan revolution. The war in Ukraine is sometimes referred to as a “hybrid war.” But this term is incorrect. What is taking place is a real war with full Russian participation but under conditions in which Russia’s role is hidden. A better term for what is going on is “concealed war.” Russia is seeking to achieve success with the help of pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine who, along with Russian volunteers and regular Russian forces are fighting

the Ukrainian Army. But the operation is a full scale invasion and was organized by Russia from the start.

In light of the possible destabilizing consequences of Russia's aggression for international security, the situation requires a greater commitment on the part of the U.S. to the defense of Ukraine. The Minsk-2 agreement in which a Russian cease fire was purchased with the help of a commitment to allow Russia to change the nature of Ukrainian statehood cannot be the base of a resolution of the conflict. According to the latest UN figures, more than 9,000 persons have been killed in a war that has no purpose except to reinforce the Putin regime's hold on power. Arming Ukraine with defensive lethal weapons to be used on their sovereign territory and the toughening of the sanctions regime can help to raise the cost of aggression and restore the international order.

**The Baltics:** Russia is no match for NATO or the U.S. in an all-out war but it could provoke a localized conflict in the Baltics where it has strategic superiority and then threaten to use nuclear weapons, presenting NATO with a choice of escalation or backing down. This is perhaps the greatest strategic threat to the U.S. at the present time because a failure to defend one of the Baltic NATO members would destroy the effectiveness of NATO as a whole.

The Russians are clearly ready to take risks. On April 14, a Russian SU-27 fighter jet flew dangerously close to a U.S. RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft over the Baltic Sea. It came to within 50 feet of the plane and conducted a barrel roll starting from the left side of the aircraft, going over the aircraft and ending up to the right of the aircraft. This incident came two days after a simulated Russian aerial assault against the guided missile destroyer U.S.S. Donald Cook in the Baltic Sea. One of the jets came to within 30 feet of the warship. This was the most reckless flyover of a U.S. ship by a Russian jet since the Cold War. Neither of these incidents could have occurred by accident.

The air incidents are a message that the Russians want the U.S. out of the Baltic region. They have been accompanied by Russian prevention of U.S. and allied flights over the heavily militarized Kaliningrad region that are allowed under the Open Skies Treaty, the latest of a number of violations of that treaty.

Russian intimidation, however, does not need to succeed. The Russian leaders are not ideological. The effort that they have invested in amassing personal fortunes attests to this. They will not risk their hold on power on behalf of a conflict they know they will lose. The proper response to Russian tactics is therefore a commensurate strengthening of NATO's Baltic defenses.

**Indiscriminate violence:** The Russian authorities act with a complete disregard for human life. This is of concern to the U.S. not only on humanitarian grounds but also because Russian violence can claim the lives of Americans and can have consequences for Americans.

In Syria, the Russian bombing is indiscriminate. According to the Violations Documentation Center, which seeks to document the attacks by all sides, the civilian death toll from Russian strikes by mid-March was over 2,000. In January alone, according to the Syria Network for Human Rights, another monitoring organization, Russian air strikes killed 679 civilians, including 94 children and 73 women. This exceeded the number of civilians killed by

the Syrian Army, which is also guilty of indiscriminate bombing. For purposes of comparison, the total number of civilians killed by ISIS in January was 98, the number killed by the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra front was 42.

Russian forces have intentionally bombed civilian areas to spread fear and clear areas where government ground troops were preparing to advance. This is consistent with Soviet military doctrine, employed by both sides in the Ukrainian war and an important factor in the death toll in that conflict. The bombing of civilian targets in Syria, including bakeries and hospitals, also increases the flow of refugees towards Turkey and Europe, exacerbating internal tensions in those regions and creating pressure to accept a resolution of the Syrian crisis on Russian terms.

Americans were among the victims when on July 17, 2014 Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was shot down over Eastern Ukraine killing all 298 persons on board. The Dutch Safety Board confirmed that MH17 was destroyed by a missile fired from a Russian made BUK anti-aircraft battery. The Putin regime, in complete disregard for the safety of innocent international air travelers, had transferred missiles capable of shooting down planes flying at over 30,000 feet to a quickly assembled army fighting in an area traversed by one of the busiest commercial air corridors in the world.

There was an American victims, Sandy Booker of Oklahoma, in the 2002 Moscow theater siege in which the Russian authorities flooded a theater with lethal gas. In all cases, the Russian leaders need to be put on notice that the indiscriminate killing of hostages in “anti-terrorist” operations will not be tolerated and the deaths of any Americans will lead to serious sanctions.

The Putin regime is not a normal government but a regime that is at war furtively with its own people. The Putin regime claims an approval rating of 85 to 87 per cent but they have found it necessary to create a 400,000 member national guard for suppressing domestic disturbances and have passed a new law making it legal for FSB agents to fire without warning into a crowd.

In fact, the Russian leaders fear their own people and have no compunction against using violence against them. As a result of the sanctions and the fall in the price of oil, Russia last year lost 1.5 per cent of its gross national product. The existing sanctions have made it difficult for Russian banks and enterprises, both state and private to refinance their debts and have cut off Western technology to the gas and oil industry. If this state of affairs continues, the consequences for the economic development of the country will be catastrophic.

In light of the dangers that the present Russian regime represents, it is important for the U.S. to understand the importance of psychological deterrence. Restraining the behavior of the Putin regime requires creating the impression in both word and deed that violations will meet with a serious response. One little explored way of doing this is with truthful information. The Russian authorities have benefited from the 17 year refusal of U.S. officials to raise the many unanswered questions about the 1999 Russian apartment bombings that brought Putin to power and also the delicacy with which the U.S. has discussed the obvious signs of official involvement in the murders of such opposition figures as journalist Anna Politkovskaya, Duma deputies Yuri Shchekochikhin and Sergei Yushenkov and opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, among others. The U.S. should weigh the example of the court in the United Kingdom which found that Putin

“probably” approved the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, the former FSB officer poisoned with radioactive polonium in London in 2006 and seek to emulate it.

The “reset” policy toward Russia, now largely discredited, could have been avoided if U.S. officials had considered the significance of the murders of Politkovskaya and Litvinenko only two years earlier.

The willingness to insist on the truth about the Russian regime’s crimes will not in and of itself deter Russian aggressivity including the regime’s repression of its own people. But insofar as deterrence is also a matter of psychology, it will reinforce steps at the policy level to convince the Russian leaders that it is simply not in their interest to act in defiance of civilized rules.

The Russian leaders need to be convinced that the U.S. is fully aware of their true character. This will encourage restraint and discourage miscalculation. It will also act in Russia’s long term interest, encouraging changes that will make it possible for Russia one day to take its deserved place in the world of Western nations.

