

The 'Trump Dossier,' or How Russia Helped America Break Itself

Getting Trump elected was not Putin's goal. The Kremlin just wanted to sow discord and delegitimize the United States' democratic institutions. Mission accomplished?

There can be little doubt that Russia actively seeks to undermine the legitimacy of the American government, its capacity to act, its unity of purpose. There can be a great deal of legitimate doubt as to quite how far the Russian state and its agents expected or tried to go when the Kremlin made the decision to interfere in the 2016 U.S. elections. There can be considerable suspicion that the process has acquired a momentum all its own, and that America is tearing itself apart with little need of Russian help.

In many ways, one can blame the so-called [Trump Dossier](#), a collection of often dubious and dramatic allegations about the then-candidate collected by former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele. On commission first to "Never Trump" Republicans and then to Democrats, Steele assembled a dossier that painted a damning portrait of a candidate of low morals, deep greed, and shallow perspectives who posed a high risk to American political and state institutions.

In general terms, the dossier may well accurately characterize the U.S. president's character. The problem is that the details given of Trump's alleged Russian links were so often questionable and, indeed, [open to being disproved](#). Steele, an agent-runner who had not been back to Russia since the late 1990s, somehow was citing multiple sources with extraordinary access,

including senior figures in the Kremlin. The Russians had, it alleged, been grooming Trump as a political agent of influence for years (which would seem to suggest that they had a quite astonishing degree of political prescience)—but then, nonetheless, placed control of this most secret of programs in the hands of Vladimir Putin’s urbane but not always especially discreet press spokesman, Dmitry Peskov.

The trouble with the Trump Dossier is that it’s a recognizable product of a specific milieu: If you spend an evening or two in the bars where Moscow’s chattering classes hang out, you’ll hear an equal complement of political tall tales about Putin and his presidential administration. The inner circle of the Kremlin is secretly gay; Putin is a [pedophile](#); there has been a “[slow-motion coup](#)” and Putin is now just a figurehead. Moscow is a breeding ground for conspiracy theories because it is very far from a healthy or open society: Decisions are made within a very narrowly-drawn and tightly-controlled circle; the legislature is a pantomime caricature of a parliament; “public consultations” are carefully managed; even institutions such as the foreign ministry no longer have any real traction on policy. In such an environment, everyone gossips, everyone speculates, everyone competes to have the most interesting bits of samovar conversation. The kind of gossip that fills the Trump Dossier is common currency in Moscow, even if very little of it has any authority behind it aside from the speaker’s own imagination.

Any experienced observer learns to filter gossip for the stray useful clues that are sometimes hidden within curlicues of fantasy. The author of the Trump Dossier, though, appears enthusiastically to have transcribed every bit of tittle-tattle that fit the overarching narrative of a grand Kremlin scheme to elevate Donald Trump to the presidency.

It is tempting to assume the Russians are now sitting back, eating popcorn, and watching the unfolding drama in America with glee. And yet, truth be

told, they are worried.

In doing so, the dossier not only fatally overestimated the Kremlin—it also fatally underestimated it. Stock clichés about Russians notwithstanding, Putin is not a chess player. He does not have carefully calculated long-term schemes planned out a dozen moves ahead. He and his people are improvisers and opportunists. They try to create multiple potential points of leverage, never knowing which may prove useful and which not. They take advantage of the fact that they can operate covertly, break the rules, act without worrying about legislative oversight or constitutional niceties.

They understand their tradecraft very well. They understand Western democracies dangerously badly. It is not just the way that Russian attempts to meddle in elections in Europe, from [Austria](#) to [France](#), managed to ensure that their preferred candidates lost; they have also managed to alienate former bridge-builders such as Germany's [Angela Merkel](#) and have made loyalists of the once-fractious Russian-speaking minorities of the Baltic States.

The suggestion of a cunning conspiracy years in the making is a questionable one: Person after person in Russia's foreign-policy, national-security, and expert community last year told me there was no chance of Trump being elected. In a telling example of the way members of the Russian establishment mirror-image, assuming that Western democracy is like Russian pseudo-democracy, one airily assured me that “the American establishment would not allow this to happen.”

Instead, the Russians, like most everyone else, “knew” Hillary Clinton would be president; unlike members of the Western media and political classes, the Russians saw Clinton as a threat. In the Kremlin's worldview, Clinton is a hawk of the most interventionist kind, a fervent supporter of American

[*gibridnaya voina*](#)—“hybrid war”—and policy of regime change through subversion and artfully manufactured and manipulated public protest. Ukraine’s Maidan Revolution, the other “colored revolutions” of post-Soviet Eurasia, the Arab Spring and the anti-Assad rising in Syria—these were, in the eyes of Moscow’s hawks, made in America and blessed by Hillary Clinton.

The aim of the Kremlin’s meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign was not to elect the supposedly unelectable Trump but to sow the fields with salt for Hillary Clinton. While patriotic blowhards in the parliament were [popping champagne corks](#) when Trump won, serious political strategists in Moscow were looking shocked. The point of the Kremlin’s information-warfare campaign was to weaken President Clinton, distract her, and prevent her from being able to assemble the kind of political consensus for the onslaught on Russian interests they assumed she was bent on. So, stir up trouble in her base. Bring her legitimacy into question. Light a dozen political fires she would have to put out before she could even think about foreign policy.

This kind of multidirectional, brush-fire-information-warfare campaign—not a single overarching conspiracy directed toward a specific aim—is what Russia specializes in these days. The Kremlin practices what I have called “[authoritarian entrepreneurialism](#)” rather than the ruthless centralized command and control of the Soviet model. Putin and his circle sketch out in broad terms what they would like to happen, and agents of the state scurry to interpret and meet those desires. From journalists and press agencies, through diplomats and spies, to pundits and hackers, Russian state agents were bent on undermining the legitimacy and coherence of the United States.

The Kremlin’s approach to information warfare and subversion sacrifices some of the authoritarian state’s capacity to focus its resources on a single strategic aim. It also can lead to duplication of effort and even fratricidal

collisions, such as the simultaneous attempts to present today's Ukraine as controlled by both Jews and Nazis. Yet by allowing the Kremlin to weaponize the creative imaginations of its agents and allies, this centrally inspired (but in practice, rather undirected) form of hostile entrepreneurial activity creates a challenge that is, in many ways, too diffuse for the target to predict or resist. This is not a great white shark of the infosphere, directed by Moscow Centre, but a shoal of piranhas; while you fight one off, the rest are rending the flesh off your bones. What is the point of “myth-busting” or “fact-checking” false rumors and stories one by one when none of the individual stories are that important to any larger aim—and new ones are being spawned by the dozen?

The 2016 Kremlin invasion of the United States' information space was about weakening Washington, not deciding who would sit in the White House. The aim was not to win the political battle so much as to make it as bloody, Pyrrhic and divisive as possible: The point was to turn the election into a shit-show. Freedom of speech, plurality of opinion, the goal of consensus—all the things that make a democracy great are, in the Russians' eyes, points of vulnerability to be exploited through state-inspired information warfare. Objective truths became buried in a landslide of rumors, lies, half-truths, fake news, and conspiracy theories. Existing social, political, and racial fault lines were exploited and levered open, often by seeming to support both extremes.

Because the aim was not as simple as to elect Trump, though, but rather to weaken the world's last superpower, the campaign is by no means over. Instead, it has pivoted to take advantage of the polarizing influence of President Trump. Some of Russia's info-warriors and their convenient dupes are now seeking to discredit Trump, thereby damaging the institutions of the state and America's now-questionable global leadership by proxy. Others are among his most rabid defenders—especially when defending Trump can be a way of undermining the credibility of the U.S. intelligence community, which has itself been fractured and has joined the fray.

This seeming multiplicity of purpose may seem confusing—but it's not really that hard to understand. Just as Moscow's RT television channel has offered a platform for alt-right demagogues and [Texan secessionists](#), as well to Occupy-movement leftists and pro-Palestinian activists, so, too, its political and covert campaigns are equal-opportunity subversive—everyone is invited to the party. Intelligence-community leaks against Trump are portrayed as evidence that the shadowy “deep state” is defying the democratic will of the people. Meanwhile, the Kremlin itself publishes photos taken by a Russian photographer inside the Oval Office (to the White House's chagrin) and, as one Moscow source put it to me, they “needle the Democrats until they will burn down the White House just to get at Trump.”

The real tragedy, from the Western standpoint, is that a passion for conspiracy theory and polarizing positions can very [quickly acquire its own momentum](#). Most of those currently ripping America apart are Americans, who are doing so because they believe it is their patriotic duty to stand up to Moscow. Others are Trump supporters who are enraged by what they see as a conspiracy to smear their hero and weaken America. They are both right—and they are both missing the larger point of the campaign in which they serve as unwitting agents of influence. The damage they inflict on each other, and on American political and state institutions, is precisely what the Kremlin wants: a self-sustaining process that erodes the country's democratic legitimacy and reduces the scope for compromise and consensus, even without another single Russian hack, leak, or disinformation operation.

At the same time, the Kremlin is also realizing it should have been more careful in what it wished for. It is tempting to assume the Russians are now sitting back, eating popcorn, and watching the unfolding drama in America with glee. And yet, truth be told, they are worried.

I was in Moscow when Damascus' chemical weapons attack—or, at least, the

TV coverage of its aftermath—prompted Donald Trump’s decision to launch a cruise missile strike on the Syrian Shayrat airbase. The next day, one Russian foreign-ministry insider was candidly downbeat in his assessment that all their worst fears had been vindicated: They now faced a U.S. president who could and would change state policy in unpredictable ways literally overnight, felt no need to telegraph his moves or sound out responses in advance, and had a relatively low threshold for the use of force.

Putin has long capitalized on American restraint and predictability. In carefully crafting for himself a persona as an unpredictable risk-taker, he has relied on Washington to be the responsible adult in the relationship. However, the Russian diplomat I spoke with feared those days were over, with an American president who no longer felt constrained by working institutions or was even willing to believe his own government, and no longer felt the need or saw the possibility of creating any kind of bipartisan policy consensus. Such a president, he felt, was a danger not just to the United States but to everyone. Much the same could be said about the self-sustaining political firestorm that is now burning in Washington.

You can help support Tablet’s unique brand of Jewish journalism. [Click here to donate today.](#)

Mark Galeotti is Senior Researcher at UMV, the Institute for International Relations Prague, and head of its Center for European Security. He blogs at [In Moscow’s Shadows](#) and tweets as [@MarkGaleotti](#).