

The New Criterion

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Russian twists

by James Bowman



The RT Studios, Moscow/photo via

In yesterday's *New York Times*, Neil MacFarquhar explained how Russia has been seeking to advance Vladimir Putin's agenda by using both its own, government controlled media outlets—the Sputnik news agency and the RT (or “Russia Today”) TV channel—and false rumors planted on and spread by social media. In Sweden, for example, there is thought to have been a Russian attempt to short-circuit national debate about that country's joining NATO by much posted but completely untrue stories about nuclear weapons on Swedish soil or the immunity from local prosecution of NATO soldiers from other countries in Sweden.

Citing the authority of unnamed “experts,” Mr. MacFarquhar wrote that “the fundamental purpose of *dezinformatsiya*, or Russian disinformation . . . is to undermine the official version of events—even the very idea that there is a true version of events—and foster a kind of policy paralysis.” Sounds pretty bad, right?

The flow of misleading and inaccurate stories is so strong that both NATO and the European Union have established special offices to identify and refute disinformation, particularly claims emanating from Russia. The Kremlin's clandestine methods have surfaced in the United States, too, American officials say, identifying Russian intelligence as the likely source of leaked Democratic National Committee emails that embarrassed Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign.

Hang on just a second, though. See what Mr. MacFarquhar did there? He went straight from Russia's disinformation to its supposed hack of DNC emails without any transition—as if its being “clandestine” made the latter just another example of the former. But the emails were not disinformation but true information that the DNC would have preferred to have kept from the public. Now *who* is it again who is trying “to undermine . . . even the very idea that there is a true version of events”?

This article is the second to be published in the *Times* under the rubric of “Dark Arts: Russia's Stealth Conflict” — “on how Russia covertly projects power.” The first in the series, by Andrew E. Kramer, was published last week and explored the Russian régime's putative history, both before and after President Putin came to power, of assassination both abroad and at home of those perceived to be its enemies. That earlier article quoted William F. Browder, an American financier and the grandson of the head of the Communist Party USA in the 1930s and 1940s, Earl Browder, as saying “All of this sounds like paranoid conspiracy theories. . . . But there are too many of these happening to important people. Captains of industry and lawyers are not dying left, right and center like this in the West.”

This might serve as a reminder, though Mr. Kramer doesn't mention it, of who is most benefited by the spread of “paranoid conspiracy theories,” assumed (by the word “paranoid”) to be false: namely, the perpetrators of actual conspiracy theories. In the same way, the promiscuous charge of lying brought against one's political opponents and now such a lamentable feature of America's political culture, is pretty obviously in no one's interest but those who are the biggest liars themselves, since they know that if everyone is saying it about everyone else, the charge will damage them less, or (as now appears to be the case) not at all.

In fact, as another *Times* correspondent pointed out last week in suggesting that we have entered “the Age of Post-Truth Politics,” we seem to be already at the point where people just assume that politicians and media alike are lying and that the truth is, therefore, unknowable. Or, which comes to the same thing, that it depends on which side you're on—a belief pioneered by the Left back in Grandpa Crowder's day. In other words, “the very idea that there is a true version of events” has already been fatally undermined in our political culture. And it has nothing at all to do with the Russian disinformation campaign. Not that the Russians can't or won't make good use of it.

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