

## The Putin Regime, Populism Promotion and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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We know two things about the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. First, Donald Trump used "fake news" and populist, nationalist, racist and misogynistic appeals to attack Hillary Clinton and win the Electoral College.<sup>i</sup> Second, the Russians used Russia Today, Sputnik, Twitter, Facebook and the Drudge Report to distribute fake news, exploit social tensions in the United States, undercut Hillary Clinton's campaign and mobilize support for Donald Trump.<sup>ii</sup> While they may or may not have colluded, therefore, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin were certainly on the same page. They were Hillary-bashers and populism-promoters.

In this memo, I take a step back from this sorry story of an American election gone ugly and address three questions that, surprisingly enough, have been largely ignored in the ongoing discussions about Trump's victory and Russia's role in it. First, why did the Putin regime intervene in U.S. politics? Second, what did they hope to accomplish? Finally, what do the answers to these questions tell us about Russian promotion of right-wing populism in the United States?

### Tit-for-Tat

Most analysts would readily agree that the Russians intervened in U.S. politics in general and the 2016 Presidential election in particular, because they harbored serious grievances against the United States. Where they would disagree, however, is how they define those grievances. For many specialists in international relations, the key factors are threats to Russian national security as a result of, for example, U.S. recognition of Kosovo as an independent state and U.S. support of the eastward expansion of the European Union and especially NATO. Put simply, therefore, the United States, along with its European allies, took a number of actions in the years following the end of the Cold War that threatened Russian national security. While this explanation has some merit, it has two deficiencies. It ignores Russian domestic politics (which always plays a critical role in Russian foreign policy), and it fails to explain why Russian interventions in the U.S. took the forms that it did. Why did the Russians decide to intervene in the U.S. election and fan divisive social issues?

By contrast, I would argue that the Russians were angry with the U.S., because, particularly in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia over the past twenty-five years, the U.S. had aggressively pursued a foreign policy of challenging dictatorships and promoting democratic change. From the Russian perspective, U.S. democracy

promotion carried a dual threat—to the security of the Russian state and to the survival of Putin’s regime. As a result, the Russian leadership felt that strong counter-measures were required. They reasoned, quite naturally, that, if the United States, a democracy, pursued policies that weakened autocracies and pushed for democratic change in Russia’s neighborhood, then Russia, an authoritarian regime, should respond by doing the opposite; that is, weakening democracies and supporting authoritarian politics. To re-purpose a familiar phrase from the Cold War: insofar as American politics was concerned, the Russians were playing tit-for-tat.

As Putin knows very well, in part from his time in the KGB, the United States has long been in the business of regime change. Since the mid-1980s and particularly since the end of the Cold War, the United States has focused much of its attention on promoting democracy (though it still, as during the Cold War, sometimes chooses to support dictators). Moreover, because so many new democracies have come into being since the mid-1970s and it has become common practice over the past thirty years for authoritarian regimes to hybridize with democracy by holding competitive elections, but not on an even playing field, the U.S. has made elections a, if not *the* key site for furthering its agenda of democratic change.

In practice, this has meant one of two types of actions: either helping incumbents in new democracies win re-election, especially when their competitors are seen as threats to democratic politics, or providing assistance to opposition parties, candidates and civil society groups so that they are in a stronger position to defeat “authoritarian incumbents” or their anointed successors at the polls. While the 1996 re-election of Boris Yel’tsin in Russia is a prime example of the first type of U.S. involvement in foreign elections (a role for the United States that Putin likely noticed), the “color revolutions” in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia, or the cross-national wave of electoral transitions from authoritarian incumbents (or their anointed successors) to more democratic rulers in Slovakia in 1998, Croatia and Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 are examples of the second.<sup>iii</sup>

#### The Color Revolutions and Russia<sup>iv</sup>

The Putin regime sees the color revolutions as an existential threat. This is not paranoia; it is a fair reading. In every case the color revolutions led to the unexpected defeat of a long-serving authoritarian incumbent or his designated successor. Moreover, many of them took place on the borders of Russia and in regimes that closely resembled Putin’s with respect to not just a communist past, but also the combination of authoritarian politics and ostensibly democratic institutions. In addition, the color revolutions demonstrated an ability to spread easily across state borders, and leadership turnover was followed in every case (except for Kyrgyzstan) by the establishment of closer ties between these countries and the West (a pattern that links this analysis to the account, outlined earlier, of specialists in international relations). Finally, aside from their impact on who rules

and regime-type, the color revolutions have often been followed by significant political instability—as in, for instance, Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan (all of which border Russia).

For the Putin regime, therefore, the color revolutions are a threat because Russia could very well be next. Indeed, the regime sees the color revolutions as a triple threat. They undercut Russian national security; they could put an end to Putin’s rule; and they de-stabilize the international system.

The Russian leadership, including military leaders, such as Sergei Shoigu (the Minister of Defense) and Valery Gerasimov (the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces), see the United States as *the* major force behind all forms of political instability in authoritarian states, ranging from electoral turnovers to popular uprisings. As a result, from their vantage point, a central strategy of U.S. foreign policy is to use elections and popular unrest (which often went together in the case of the color revolutions) to undermine authoritarian leaders and authoritarian regimes.

In response to these electoral threats, Putin has observed: “For us this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything so that nothing similar happens in Russia.” Doing “everything” has meant, first, taking preemptive measures at home and abroad to contain the spread of the color revolutions and thereby insulate the Russian regime from the virus. One example of the Russian strategy of “diffusion-proofing” is the regime’s response to the popular uprising in Ukraine that took place in the late fall of 2013 and the subsequent collapse of the Yanukovich regime in February, 2014. On the international front, the Putin regime annexed Crimea and de-stabilized eastern Ukraine. On the domestic front, it mobilized Russian patriotism and traditional culture, while expanding state control over the media and NGOs. What makes this example so useful for our purposes is that Ukraine was in some ways a dress rehearsal for Russian interventions in U.S. politics. Here, I refer, for example, not just to Russia’s involvement in Ukrainian elections since at least the late 1990s, but also, in the particular case of 2014 to the present, Russia’s use of disinformation to mobilize Putin’s support at home and fan nationalist tensions and popular anger against the political establishment in eastern Ukraine. One could argue, therefore, that, with respect to its actions in the United States, Russia in effect took its Ukrainian experiment with nationalism and populism on the road—not just to the United States, which is the focus of this memo, but also Europe.

#### How and What

Doing “everything” also meant that Russia needed to weaken the United States. It is true that the Russian interpretation of the color revolutions exaggerates significantly the role of the U.S., especially in electoral turnovers and popular uprisings outside of the European and Eurasian examples; under-estimates the role of local forces in generating electoral change; and misrepresents the kinds of actions the U.S. took and the amount and kinds of resources the U.S. provided. Nonetheless,

the fact remains that, in the Russian understanding of world politics, the U.S. was behind the color revolutions in their region. As a result, the United States fully deserved a dose of its own medicine.

What did this mean? First, it is far from accidental that, in intervening in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, the Russians modeled themselves on the Americans by adopting an election-centered approach to regime de-stabilization. They used elections to weaken democracies just as the Americans used elections to weaken dictatorships. They did so, moreover, in the same way--by supporting the opposition and attacking representatives of the establishment.

Second, their goal in the United States was to accomplish precisely what they saw as the goals driving U.S. electoral interventions abroad; that is, at the least to undercut the margin of victory of the candidate they opposed (Hillary Clinton in the case of the U.S.) and at most to contribute to her defeat and the victory of the candidate they preferred (Donald Trump). In addition, they wanted in the process to de-stabilize the United States, which could happen in a variety of ways—for example, by sowing doubts among Americans about the integrity of their elections; undermining Hillary Clinton’s ability to govern as a result of the combination of a thin mandate and anger about the electoral results on the part of some of the constituencies that Donald Trump had mobilized; or putting Donald Trump “over the top.” In the final scenario, the United States would be ruled by a dangerous populist/nationalist/racist and, for that matter, narcissist who would only make a bad political situation –for example, the toxic combination of political polarization and weak institutions in the United States—worse. The Russians were also unlikely to forget, I am guessing, that Trump owed a lot to the Russian oligarchs for rescuing him from some very bad real estate deals over the years.

Finally, while they borrowed the idea of election-engineering from the United States, some of the methods they used to accomplish their electoral goals seem to have been collected closer to home. From what we have learned thus far from the various ongoing investigations, the Russian toolkit combined, for example, practices developed in Ukraine, Moldova and other countries in the near abroad; policies enacted at home with respect to the government’s control over the media and elections; and even used during the Cold War by not just the Soviets, but also in fact the United States. The parallels between U.S. actions in response to the electoral victory of Salvador Allende in Chile in the early 1970s and recent Russian actions in the United States, for example, are striking. <sup>v</sup>

#### Conclusion: Populism Promotion

I presented three arguments in this memo. First, tit-for-tat explains why and how Russia intervened in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. If the U.S. could play electoral games abroad, so could the Russians. Second, the Russians felt that they had little choice but to emulate the U.S. model of carrying out “electoral revolutions” abroad. This is because the Putin regime sees the United States (and likely Donald

Trump) as vulnerable to external manipulation, and U.S. electoral interventions, particularly in Russia's neighborhood, as existential threats to both the Putin regime and Russian national security. Finally, by accident and by Russian design, the 2016 American electoral cycle placed Russia in the luxurious position of being able to benefit from virtually all of the political scenarios that were likely to play out in the United States. If Donald Trump won, Russia would have an ally in the White House. If Hillary Clinton won, she would govern with a limited mandate and carry all the baggage associated with an extraordinarily divisive election. Finally, in either case the election, again thanks in part to Russia, would de-stabilize the United States—by deepening polarization, weakening already compromised political institutions, including political parties and calling the legitimacy of the election into question.

The question then becomes: what do these three arguments suggest about Russia's role in supporting populist politics in the United States?<sup>vi</sup> On the one hand, it is clear from this analysis that the Russians responded to U.S. democracy promotion with a policy of populism promotion. This was reflected in their support of Donald Trump and his classically populist positions of opposing the establishment (including not just the political establishment, but also the mainstream media and the scientific community); placing himself above political institutions, while questioning them and trying to mold them for his own purposes; and designating himself as the (only) leader of "the (real) people." At the same time, both Trump and the Russians used nationalism and racism, along with public concerns about immigration and Islam, to reach out to the extreme right. What we saw, in short, was a shared project: right-wing populism. Finally, although not addressed in this memo, Russia has also supported populist politics (usually of the right, though Greece is an exception) in Europe for at least a decade.

All that recognized, however, the case for Russian populism promotion must take into account three other points. One is that the Russians did not invent populist attitudes in the West. Instead, they tapped into existing populist sentiments—especially, for example, the trend of declining public trust in governing institutions, political leaders and mainstream political parties in Europe and the United States. Another is that there is little evidence that the Russian campaign has been successful at winning many new friends in the West—though there has been a doubling (17 to 34%) of Republicans that have a favorable view of Putin over the past three months. Finally, the Russians are both exploiting and supporting populist sentiments, not because of any ideological affinity (which was a key driver of tit-for-tat during the Cold War), but, rather, because they serve Russian purposes so well. The Russians want to de-stabilize the United States, and right-wing populist politics and the election of Donald Trump do an excellent job of accomplishing both objectives.

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<sup>i</sup> I draw a distinction among these appeals, rather than use populism as a summary term, because I see each of these issues/styles of politics as separate, though often overlapping, and because I do not assume that all forms of populism are racist, nationalist, etc. I am thinking here, of course, of the role of populist movements in U.S. history in supporting progressive policies and expanding, rather than contracting the political community.

<sup>ii</sup> I think we can go further and argue that Russian support could very well have been decisive for Trump's victory. Note, for example, how much misinformation they spread; their exploitation of social tensions in the United States around such issues as immigration, Islam, race, and LGBT rights; their sponsorship of Wikileaks, especially the "October surprise" (though Comey should have been more than "mildly nauseous" about how the Russians played him and how his actions influenced the election); the long Russian campaign against Hillary (starting certainly in 2014 but likely before that), including their support of extreme right groups opposing her; the Russians' targeting of Twitter attacks on Hillary in the swing states during the last month of the campaign; and the likelihood that Trump would never have run for the Presidency had not the Russians saved him from financial ruin in the 1990s. All this is not to mention that a mere 80,000 votes delivered the Electoral College to Donald Trump. The question then becomes: why have so many analysts been so quick to discount the impact of Russian meddling and explaining the outcome of this election as a function of Hillary (her high negatives, her personality, her campaign), Trump (the issues he used, his political style and his status as a political outsider), an angry white working class, or the willingness of such a high percentage of Republican party identifiers to vote for Trump? I think there are three reasons. One is that it is both natural and easy to trot out the familiar explanations, rather than grapple with more unfamiliar ones. Another is that the preference for the known over the unknown leads to a double standard. While it is true that it is virtually impossible to prove that Russian interventions put Trump "over the top," the same is in fact true for other factors, such as the white working class or Republican party identifiers, that have been put forward as the key to the outcome of the 2016 election. Finally, many analysts seem to assume that, if the Russians did not change the votes after they were cast, they did not influence the outcome of the election. That argument, of course, overlooks the two other ways that the Russians could—and likely did—influence the results of the election. I refer here to individual-level decisions about whether to vote, and, if voting, for whom to vote.

<sup>iii</sup> Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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<sup>iv</sup> This discussion is based on several articles. See Valerie Bunce and Aida Hozic, ““Diffusion-Proofing and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine” *Demokratizatsiya*, 24, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 435-456; Valerie Bunce, “The Prospects for a Color Revolution in Russia,” *Daedalus*, 146, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 22-41; Keith Darden, “Russians Revanche: External Threats and Regime Reactions.” *Daedalus*, 146, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 128-141; and Karrie Koesel and Valerie Bunce, ““Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations Against Authoritarian Rulers”, *Perspectives on Politics*, 11, no. 3 (September 2013): 753-768.

<sup>v</sup> Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability*. (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archives, 2013).

<sup>vi</sup> I have tried to be careful in this memo not to assume that Donald Trump’s use of populism and his victory in the Electoral College means that populist sentiments have grown in the United States, either prior to Trump’s candidacy or in reaction to it. See, for instance, Larry Bartels, “The ‘Wave’ of Right-Wing Populism is a Myth,” *The Monkey Cage*, June 17, 2017 and, for the case of Europe, Chase Foster and Jeffrey Frieden, “Europeans Have Lost their Faith in Governments and Institutions? Why? We Did the Research,” *The Monkey Cage*, September 22, 2017.