

Europeans Contest US Anti-Russian Hype

Besides the Brexit rejection of U.S.-style neoliberal economics, some European voices are protesting, finally, the U.S.-led, anti-Russian propaganda campaign that has justified an expensive new Cold War, notes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

A significant crack has been unexpectedly opened in the wall of Europe's disciplined obedience to the United States. I'm not only referring to the possible long-term consequences for U.S.-European relations in the wake of Britain's decision to leave the European Union, but the unlikely blow against Washington's information war on Moscow delivered by Germany's foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who a week ago shockingly accused the North Atlantic Treaty Organization of "war-mongering" against Russia.

Since the Bush administration's twisting of events in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, which the E.U. blamed on Georgia, Western populations have been subjected to the steady message that Russia is a "threat" to the West and is guilty of "aggression." This reached a peak with the false narrative of events in Ukraine, in which blatant evidence of the West's complicity in a violent *coups d'état* was omitted from corporate media accounts, while Russia's assistance to eastern Ukrainians resisting the *coup* has been framed as a Russian "invasion."

The disinformation campaign has reached the depths of popular culture, including the EuroVision song contest and sports doping scandals, to ensure widespread popular support for U.S. hostile intentions against Russia.

The Russian "aggression" narrative, based largely on lies of omission, has prepared the way for the U.S. to install a missile-shield in Romania with offensive capabilities and to stage significant NATO war games with 31,000 troops on Russia's borders. For the first time in 75 years, German troops retraced the steps of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.

U.S. Designs on Russia

The U.S. is eyeing a post-Putin Russia in which a Wall Street-friendly leader like Boris Yeltsin can be restored to reopen the country to Western exploitation. But Vladimir Putin is no Yeltsin and has proven a tough nut for the U.S. to crack. Washington's *modus operandi* is to continually provoke and blame an opponent until it stands up for itself, as Putin's Russia has done, then accuse it of "aggression" and attack in "self-defense."

In this way, Washington builds popular support for its own version of events and

resistance to the other side of the story. Unfortunately it is not a new trick in the U.S. playbook.

“The statesmen will invent cheap lies, putting the blame upon the nation that is attacked, and every man will be glad of those conscience-soothing falsities, and will diligently study them, and refuse to examine any refutations of them; and thus he will by and by convince himself the war is just, and will thank God for the better sleep he enjoys after this process of grotesque self-deception,” wrote Mark Twain.

So suddenly, after many years of an air-tight, anti-Russia campaign believed unquestioningly by hundreds of millions of Westerners, comes Steinmeier last week blurting out the most significant truth about Russia uttered by a Western official perhaps in decades.

“What we shouldn’t do now is inflame the situation further through saber-rattling and warmongering,” Steinmeier stunningly told *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper. “Whoever believes that a symbolic tank parade on the alliance’s eastern border will bring security is mistaken.”

Instead Steinmeier called for dialogue with Moscow. “We are well-advised to not create pretexts to renew an old confrontation,” he said, saying it would be “fatal to search only for military solutions and a policy of deterrence.”

In keeping with the U.S. propaganda strategy, the U.S. corporate media virtually ignored the remarks, which should have been front-page news. *The New York Times* did not report Steinmeier’s statement, but two days later ran a Reuter’s story only online leading with the U.S. military’s rejection of his remarks.

NATO General: Russia is No Threat

Just a day after Steinmeier was quoted in *Bild*, General Petr Pavel, chairman of NATO’s military committee, dropped another bombshell. Pavel told a Brussels press conference flat out that Russia *was not at a threat* to the West.

“It is not the aim of NATO to create a military barrier against broad-scale Russian aggression, because such aggression is not on the agenda and no intelligence assessment suggests such a thing,” he said.

What? What happened to Russian “aggression” and the Russian “threat?” What is the meaning then of the fear of Russia pounded every day into the heads of Western citizens? Is it all a lie? Two extraordinary on-the-record admissions by two men, Steinmeier, the foreign minister of Europe’s most powerful nation, and an active NATO general in charge of the military committee, both revealing that what Western officials repeat every day is indeed a lie, a lie that may be

acknowledged in private but would never before be mentioned in public.

Two years ago I was in a background briefing with a senior European ambassador at his country's U.N. mission in New York and could hardly believe my ears when he said talk about Russia's threat to Eastern Europe was "all hype" designed to give NATO "a reason to exist." Yet this same ambassador in public Security Council meetings would viciously attack Russia.

But the hype is about more than just saving NATO. The fear campaign feeds the American and European military industries and most importantly puts pressure on the Russian government, which the U.S. wants overthrown.

Were these remarks made out of the exasperation of knowing all along that the Russian threat is hype? Were they made out of genuine concern that things could get out of hand under reckless and delusional leaders in Washington leading to a hot war with Russia?

Neither man has been disciplined for speaking out. Does this signal a change in official German thinking? Will German businessmen who deal with Russia and have opposed sanctions against Moscow over Ukraine, which were forced on Germany by the U.S., be listened to?

Were Steinmeier's remarks a one-off act of rebellion, or is Germany indeed considering defying Washington on sanctions and regime change in Moscow? Is the German government finally going to act in Germany's own interests? Such a move would spark a European defiance of the United States not seen since the days when Charles de Gaulle pulled France out of NATO in 1966 to preserve French independence.

The last time European governments broke with Washington on a major issue was the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Then France and Germany joined Russia on the U.N. Security Council in blocking the war's authorization (although Britain supported it). But France and Germany then voted for a resolution several months later that essentially condoned the invasion.

It's Up to the European Public

One has to ask whether a conditioned German public is ready to see through the lies about Russia. Last November, I flew from St. Petersburg to Berlin and discussed this very question with a number of well-educated Germans.

I had visited Russia for the first time since 1995, 20 years before to the month. Those were the days of the Yeltsin-Jeffery Sachs Russia, of the unbridled neoliberal capitalism of the Wall Street-oligarch alliance that plundered the country leaving millions of Russians destitute. Outside train stations I saw

homeless encampments replete with campfires. Policemen were stopping motorists for bribes. I ran from two men intent on robbing me until I lost them in a Metro station. That's the Russia the neocons in Washington and the knaves and buccaneers on Wall Street want to see again.

The Russia I saw in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 20 years later, was orderly and prosperous, as modern as any European city. It is a testament to Russia's resistance to American attempts to restore its political and financial control. Russia is a capitalist country. But on its own terms. It is fully aware of American machinations to undermine it.

In Berlin I met several Germans, educated, liberal and completely aware, unlike most Americans, of how the United States has abused its post-World War II power. And yet when I asked them all why there are still U.S. military bases in Germany 70 years after the war and 25 years after the Cold War ended, and who the Americans were protecting them from, the universal answer was: Russia.

History shows European fears of Russia to be completely overblown. Germany and other Western powers have invaded Russia three times in the last two centuries: France in 1812, U.S., Britain and France in the 1918 Russian Civil War, and Germany again in 1941. Except for Imperial Russia's incursion into East Prussia after war was declared on it in 1914, the reverse has never been true.

In his memoirs Harry Truman admitted that false fear of Russia was the "tragedy and shame of our time" during the Cold War that he had much to do with in part to revive the U.S. post-war economy with military spending. George Kennan, the State Department official who advised a non-military containment of the Soviet Union, conceded as early as 1947 that Soviet moves in Eastern Europe were defensive and constituted no threat. In the 1990s, Kennan also decried NATO's expansion towards Russia's borders.

With its vast natural resources, Russia has been the big prize for the West for centuries, and is still today in neocon-driven Washington. But Germany, especially, has benefited from trade with Russia and has no need to join the U.S. imperial project.

The British voters' decision, days after Steinmeier's extraordinary remark, could herald significant change in Europe, which may be approaching an historical junction in its relationship with the United States. Growing anti-E.U. sentiment has spread across the continent, including calls for similar referenda in several countries.

British voters evidently saw through the hype about the Russian "threat," as a majority did not buy British Prime Minister David Cameron's scare tactic ahead

of the vote that Brexit would make it harder to “combat Russian aggression.”

Britain has been called Washington’s Trojan horse in the E.U. The thinking is that without Britain, the E.U. would be freer to chart its own course. But as Alexander Mercouris explained [here](#), Obama bypasses London to call Merkel directly with his demands. Still, [removing](#) Britain’s voice from the E.U., though more crucially not from NATO, opens space for more independent voices in Europe to emerge.

“I worry that we will have less clout on our own,” former British Ambassador to the United States Peter Westmacott told *The New York Times*. “In the future, we won’t have as much influence on Europe’s response to Putin’s transgressions, Iran’s nuclear ambitions, or the E.U.’s foreign and security policy. ... And we will be less able to ensure it is U.S.-friendly.”

But that could be a good thing. If German leaders conclude the United States is pushing Europe into a disastrous war with Russia, could we see a Charles de Gaulle moment in Berlin? Merkel doesn’t seem to have it in her. Three days after Steinmeier’s remarks, she told a news conference she [favored](#) increased German spending for NATO to counter Russian “threats.”

Instead it will require a revolt by an awakened citizenry against the E.U. and elected European governments that refuse to stand up to Washington, mostly because it benefits their own class interests, to the detriment of the majority.

The Future of the EU

European social democracy had been probably the best social and political system ever devised on earth, maybe the best that is humanly possible. Europe could have been a model for the world as a neutral power committed to social justice. As late as 1988, Jacques Delors, then president of the European Commission, promised the British Trades Union Congress that the E.U. would be a “social market.”

Instead the E.U. allowed itself to be sold out to unelected and unaccountable neoliberal technocrats now in charge in Brussels. European voters, perhaps not fully understanding the consequences, elected neoliberal national governments slavishly taking Washington’s foreign policy orders. But Brexit shows those voters are getting educated. Unity is a great ideal but E.U. leaders have refused to accept that it has to benefit all Europeans.

The E.U.’s Lisbon Treaty is the only constitution in the world that has neoliberal policies written into it. If it won’t reform – and the arrogance of the E.U.’s leaders tells us it won’t – it will be up to the people of Europe to diminish or dismantle the E.U. through additional referenda. That would give

liberated European nations the chance to elect anti-neoliberal national governments, accountable to the voters, which can also chart foreign policies independent of Washington.

The danger is that the right-wing sentiment that has driven a large part of the anti-Establishment movements in Europe (and the U.S.) may elect governments that grow even closer to Washington and impose even harsher neoliberal policies.

That is a risk that may need to be taken in the hope that the anti-Establishment left and right can coalesce around shared interests to put an end to the elitist European project.

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Brexit and Trump: Populism or Manipulation?

The Brexit vote, like Donald Trump's campaign, is less a populist uprising against the elites than a contest of one elite over another in manipulating popular sentiments, argues ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Some explanations for the outcome of the British vote to leave the European Union are specific to Britain. This includes the divisions within the governing Conservative Party over E.U. membership (divisions that led Prime Minister David Cameron to conceive of the referendum in the first place) and the lackluster defense of membership by the leader of the opposition.

Other reasons, on which much of the immediate post-referendum commentary has focused, go far beyond Britain. The Brexit vote was partly an expression of nationalism that has become so strong a tendency in the politics of so many nations that it can be considered the prime defining characteristic of the current era.

It also was an expression of xenophobia that is shaping much of the politics of the very European continent from which the Brexiteers want to separate themselves and has become a major part of the U.S. presidential campaign in the

form of Donald Trump's candidacy.

The vote exhibits something else that transcends Britain: most of those who voted for Brexit were voting against their own interests, certainly as defined by whatever affects their economic well-being. The economic case for remaining in the E.U. was strong to overwhelming. The issue was not one on which honest and competent economists split evenly, or anything close to evenly.

The reaction of financial markets, including in Britain, to the vote was a resounding affirmation of which side had the stronger economic case. Assertions by Brexiteers that most of the benefits of accessing the European market could be secured without the costs and burdens of membership are belied by the experience of non-members such as Norway and by analysis of what will be the E.U.'s interests and motives in negotiating economic agreements with a non-member Britain.

And the portions of the British electorate that voted most heavily in favor of leaving, including many of the less well educated and less well off, will feel some of the worst effects of non-membership. One of the first attention-getting voting results Thursday night came from Sunderland in what turned out to be a heavily pro-Brexit English northeast, notwithstanding that one of its biggest employers is a Nissan automobile factory that was built there because of its access to the EU market.

Going against one's own interests in this way can be explained, and has been explained, as a protest vote: an expression of anger and a use of the heart more than the head. It can be anger about one's own economic situation, or about faceless bureaucrats in Brussels, or about strange-looking immigrants, or something else, and the anger can be translated directly into a vote without an intermediary step of applying reason regarding what electoral outcome would best serve one's own interest. Certainly many of the votes cast in Britain on Thursday can be described as this kind of emotional, unthinking act.

A Misfired Protest Vote

Another kind of protest vote involves somewhat more calculation, but a calculation about the outcome of the vote. The prevailing expectation on the eve of the vote, as reflected in the odds set by British bookies, was that Remain would prevail over Leave, and some voters thought they could make a protest gesture by voting to leave without their vote making any difference in the outcome.

The actual outcome is a severe lesson in the danger of using one's vote this way. Supporters of Bernie Sanders who are contemplating sending some sort of

message by voting for Donald Trump should take careful notice.

But beyond these categories of voters is another reason many people vote against their own interests; they are simply mistaken about which outcomes would help and which would hurt those interests. Many British voters genuinely believed that erecting higher barriers to the cross-border movement of people, goods, and capital would make them better off than the alternative.

The situations of some of those people made them correct, but most such people were mistaken. We see the same phenomenon all the time in the United States, in the form of working-class people voting for politicians who enact policies that favor the one percent and disfavor the working class.

Simply put, people are ignorant. The ignorance is underscored in Britain by lots of people scrambling after the vote to learn what this European Union business is all about. It is underscored in the United States by Trump declaring after one of his primary election victories, "I love the poorly educated."

Venturing into this subject risks getting one branded as elitist. Much interpretation of the vote in Britain has been phrased in populism-vs.-elites terms. But at the level of the individual voter and his or her interests, this is a mistaken conception.

The ignorance that causes many people to vote contrary to their interests is not all spontaneously generated. Much of it is nurtured by elites for their own purposes. The contest is more one of elites versus other elites.

In Britain, Boris Johnson, by championing the Brexit cause, now is in good position to replace his fellow Etonian Cameron as prime minister. In the United States, politicians stoke economic discontent, security fears, and urges over social issues to win votes from the hoi polloi while enacting economic policies that are more in the interests of elites who finance their campaigns. And currently it is the maybe-billionaire Trump who is riding a similar formula to a presidential nomination.

There is no ready way to overcome self-damaging ignorance within the electorate. Many problems are involved besides the impossibility of making masses of ignorant people smart quickly. In the United States, the mess that constitutes campaign finance law in the post-*Citizens United* era is one of the bigger problems.

Vigorous efforts to make politicians accountable to the truth certainly help but can only go so far. Trump, for example, has overloaded the circuits of fact-checkers by unashamedly telling one whopper after another. And the cultivation of damaging ignorance is not simply a matter of factual truth and individual

falsehoods.

It is at least as much a matter of insufficient respect for knowledge and for expertise based on knowledge. Knowledge and expertise in this context are not to be confused with Straussian claims by an elite to having special insight into what is good for a nation or for mankind.

Rather, it is knowledge comparable to what is contained in the strong judgment of economists about the consequences of Brexit, or what the overwhelming majority of climate scientists say about human-induced global warming – and to which the only dissenters are elites who have a narrow interest in arguing otherwise, or masses whose ignorance has been encouraged by those elites.

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