

PBS' Anti-Russia Propaganda Series

PBS has joined the anti-Russia propaganda stampede with a five-part documentary series that recycles the false and deceptive claims that have become Official Washington's dangerous new groupthink, reports Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

The U.S.-government-supported Public Broadcasting System (PBS) recently ran a five-part series dubbed "Inside Putin's Russia". With a different theme each night, it purports to give a realistic look at Russia today. The image conveyed is of a Russia that is undemocratic with widespread state repression, violence and propaganda. Following are significant distortions and falsehoods in the five-part documentary.

Episode 1: "How Putin Redefined what it means to be Russian"

In this episode, the documentary:

-Claims that Russian identity is based on "projection of power." In reality, "projection of power" characterizes the U.S. much more than Russia. For the past two centuries the United States has expanded across the continent and globe. The last century is documented in the book *Overthrow: American's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*. The U.S. currently has nearly 800 foreign military bases in over 70 countries. In contrast, Russia has military bases in only two countries beyond the former Soviet Union: Syria and Vietnam.

-Ignores crucial information about events in Ukraine. Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine and Crimea are presented as examples of "projection of power." But basic facts are omitted from the documentary. There is no mention of the violent February 2014 coup in Kiev nor the involvement of neoconservatives such as Sen. John McCain and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland in supporting and encouraging the overthrow of Ukraine's elected government. In a December 2013 speech, Nuland outlined her intense involvement in Ukraine including U.S. insistence that Ukraine choose a "European future" since the U.S. had "invested \$5 billion to assist." Days before the coup in February 2014, Nuland was captured on audio planning the composition of the coup leadership.

-Ignores Crimea's historic connections with Russia and the Ukrainian violence. The documentary says, "In 2014 in Crimea, Russia helped install separatist leaders who rushed through a referendum that led to Crimea's annexation." This gives the misleading impression the decision was Russian, not Crimean.

Even the New York Times report on March 16, 2014, acknowledged that, "The

outcome, in a region that shares a language and centuries of history with Russia, was a foregone conclusion even before exit polls showed more than 93 percent of voters favoring secession.”

The documentary fails to mention the fear of violence after Crimean travelers to Kiev were beaten and killed by Ukrainian hyper-nationalists. One of the first decisions of the Kiev coup government was to declare that Russian would no longer be an official language. A good overview including video interviews with Crimeans is in this video, contrasting sharply with the implications of the PBS documentary.

–Trivializes Russian opposition to NATO expansion. The documentary suggests Russians feel “humiliated” by NATO expanding to their borders. This distorts a serious military concern into a subjective, emotional issue. In 2002, the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and started construction of missile defense systems which could be used in tandem with a nuclear first strike. In recent years, NATO troops and missiles have been installed at Russia’s borders. Imagine the response if Russian troops and missiles were placed at the U.S. border in Canada and Mexico.

–Falsely claims that coup violence in Odessa was “exaggerated.”

The documentary says that Russians who went to help defend civilians in eastern Ukraine were convinced by Russian “propaganda” where “dozens of pro-Russian separatists died in Odessa, Ukraine” but “Russian media exaggerated the attack.” In reality, the Odessa attack killed at least 42 people and injured 100. This video shows the sequence of events with the initial attack on peaceful protesters followed by fire-bomb attacks in the building. Fire trucks were prevented from reaching the building to put out the fire and rescue citizens inside.

Episode 2: “Inside Russia’s Propaganda Machine.”

In this episode, the documentary:

–Suggests Russians are aggressive and threatening. The documentary highlights a Russian TV broadcaster who is translated to say, “Russia is the only country in the world that is realistically capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash.” And later, “If you can persuade a person, you don’t need to kill him ... if you aren’t able to persuade, then you will have to kill.” We do not know the context or accuracy of these translated statements. However on the basis of my own travels in Russia and the experience of many other Americans, these statements are strange and uncharacteristic.

At the popular and government level, Russians are typically at pains to call the

U.S. a “partner” and to wish for peace and better relations. With 27 million killed in World War 2, most Russians are very conscious of the consequences of war and deeply want peace. Russians vividly recall the Russia-U.S. alliance during WW2 and seek a return to friendly collaboration. The film producers must have heard this message and desire for peace expressed by many Russians many times. But the documentary only presents this uncharacteristic aggressive message.

–Inaccurately suggests that producers of a private TV network received angry public messages because they were exposing corruption. In reality, the angry public response was because the TV station ran a poll asking viewers if the Soviet Union should have surrendered to Nazi Germany to save lives during the siege of Leningrad.

–Falsely suggests that RT (Russia Today TV) typically features Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis. This is a grotesque distortion. Anyone who watches RT will know that American personalities such as Chris Hedges, Larry King and Ed Schultz are regulars on RT. Interviewees on international affairs generally come from the left side of the political spectrum – the opposite of what is suggested.

–Uncritically repeats the conspiracy theory that Russia hacked the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Hillary Clinton emails. The findings have been disputed by the publisher of the emails, Julian Assange of Wikileaks, as well as Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. A recent forensic examination confirms that this was a leak not a hack (inside job done by local data transfer NOT a hack over the internet) and points to “Guccifer 2.0”, the presumptive “hacker,” being a hoax intentionally created to implicate Russia.

–Falsely suggests that anti-Clinton social media messaging during 2016 was significantly caused by Russian government trolls. Hillary Clinton was strongly opposed by significant portions of both the left and right. There were probably hundreds of thousands of Americans who shared anti-Clinton social media messages.

–Claims that research showing a Google search engine bias in favor of Hillary Clinton was “quickly debunked.” The documentary ignores the original article describing the potential effect of search-engine bias, which was published in the prestigious *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. The author is Dr. Robert Epstein, former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today* magazine. Contradicting the claim that this research was “debunked,” this academic article estimates the effect of the Google bias and how the bias went away AFTER the election. The response from Google and very shallow Snopes “fact check” are effectively rebutted by the lead author here. In neo-McCarthyist style, the documentary smears the findings and claims they were “laundered” after being

published by the Russian "Sputnik" media.

–Suggests the "idea that President Kennedy was killed by the CIA" was "planted" by the Soviet intelligence agency KGB. Many impressive American books have been written supporting this contention, from New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's book to David Talbot's 2015 book *Devil's Chessboard: Allen Dulles, the CIA and Deep State*. Claiming that this accusation is based on KGB "disinformation" is another grotesque distortion. It is not revealing disinformation; this is an example of disinformation.

Episode 3: "Why are so many from this Russian republic fighting for Isis?"

In this episode, the documentary:

–Rationalizes and almost justifies Russian Muslims traveling to join ISIS. The documentary suggests that religious repression and discrimination is a cause of ISIS recruitment and that "Dagestanis who fought for ISIS continue a decades-old legacy here of radicalism and militancy."

–Ignores the role of the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in promoting Islamist fundamentalism in Dagestan. As described by Robert Dreyfus in the book *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*: "the Casey-ISI (CIA and Pakistan Secret Service) actions aided the growth of a significant network of right-wing, Islamist extremists who, to this day, plague the governments of the former Soviet republics ... In particular, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Liberation Party, the powerful Islamist groups in Chechnya and Dagestan."

–Ignores the role of the US and allies in facilitating ISIS. As journalist Patrick Cockburn has written, "In the 20 years between 1996 and 2016, the CIA and British security and foreign policy agencies have consistently given priority to maintaining their partnership with powerful Sunni states over the elimination of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and Isis."

Journalist Nafeez Ahmed exposed the role of Turkey here, "A former senior counter-terrorism official in Turkey has blown the whistle on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's deliberate sponsorship of the Islamic State (ISIS) as a geopolitical tool to expand Turkey's regional influence and sideline his political opponents at home."

Elements of the U.S. military/intelligence suggested the establishment of ISIS to "isolate the Syrian regime." This was revealed in the classified 2012 report of the Defense Intelligence Agency that "THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING A DECLARED OR UNDECLARED SALAFIST PRINCIPALITY IN EASTERN SYRIA (HASAKA AND DER ZOR), AND THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THE SUPPORTING POWERS TO THE

OPPOSITION WANT, IN ORDER TO ISOLATE THE SYRIAN REGIME”

In short, ISIS recruitment from Muslim communities in Russia and worldwide has been spurred by the policies and actions of the U.S. and allies such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This is what Dreyfus calls *The Devil’s Game*, but is ignored in the documentary.

Episode 4: “The Deadly Risk of Standing up to Putin”

In this episode, the documentary:

–Suggests that critics of Putin and the Russian government face “consequences” including death. These accusations are widespread in the West but largely based on the claims of different U.S.-supported “activists.” One of the most famous cases, and the one on which U.S. congressional sanctions against Russia are based, is that of Sergei Magnitsky. Magnitsky’s death was the subject of a documentary, which has been effectively banned in the U.S. In the course of researching what happened, the filmmaker learned that the truth was very different than has been told in the West and promoted by hedge-fund executive William Browder. Gilbert Doctorow outlines what happens in his review of the film [here](#):

“*Magnitsky Act: Behind the Scenes*’ is an amazing film which takes us through the thought processes, the evidence sorting of the well-known independent film maker Andrei Nekrasov as he approached an assignment that was at the outset meant to be one more public confirmation of the narrative Browder has sold to the US Congress and to the American and European political elites. That story was all about a 36 year old whistle-blower ‘attorney’ (actually a bookkeeper) named Sergei Magnitsky who denounced on Browder’s behalf the theft of Russian taxes to his boss’s companies amounting to \$230 million and who was rewarded for his efforts by arrest, torture and murder in detainment by the officials who perpetrated the theft. This shocking tale drove legislation that was a major landmark in the descent of US-Russian relations under President Barack Obama to a level rivaling the worst days of the Cold War.

“At the end of the film we understand that this story was concocted by William Browder to cover up his own criminal theft of the money in question, that Magnitsky was not a whistleblower, but on the contrary was likely an assistant and abettor to the fraud and theft that Browder organized, that he was not murdered by corrupt Russian police but died in prison from banal neglect of his medical condition.”

The PBS documentary quotes an opposition leader, Vladimir Kara-Murza, saying “We have no free and fair elections. We have censorship in the media. We have

political prisoners, more than 100 political prisoners now in Russia, today.” Kara-Murza now lives in Washington “for his safety” but returns to Russia periodically. He claims to have been poisoned several times.

Opponents of the Russian government are quick to accuse but the evidence is largely hearsay and speculation. Public polls of citizens in Russia repeatedly indicate that Putin and the government have widespread popularity, in contrast with the accusations in this documentary that they rule by intimidation and violence.

Episode 5: “What Russians think about Trump and the U.S.”

Based on the content, the final episode should be titled “What the U.S. establishment and media thinks of Putin and Russia.” In this episode, the documentary:

–Features accusations by CIA Director Mike Pompeo that Russian President Putin, “ is a man for whom veracity doesn’t translate into English.” An objective documentary would take CIA claims about “veracity” with a healthy dose of skepticism. Just a few years ago, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper was confirmed to have lied under oath to Congress. Former CIA chief of counterintelligence James Angleton said in his dying days, “Fundamentally, the founding fathers of U.S. intelligence were liars. The better you lied and the more you betrayed, the more likely you got promoted.” So it is curious to see the PBS documentary uncritically presenting the new CIA director as a judge of veracity.

–Implies that President Trump is out of line to question “the U.S. intelligence community’s unanimous assessment that Russia hacked the 2016 election.” It has been recently exposed that the “unanimous assessment” was, in reality, by “hand-picked” analysts at three agencies, under DNI Clapper’s oversight, not all 17 agencies and that the National Security Agency did NOT have “high confidence” in a key finding. The “assessment,” which the Jan. 6 report acknowledged was NOT an establishment of fact, was based on the forensics of a private company, CrowdStrike, with a checkered record in this field, and the dubious Christopher Steele dossier, a collection of “opposition research” reports against Donald Trump, paid for unidentified allies of Hillary Clinton and compiled by Steele, an ex-British intelligence agent.

In March 2017, CrowdStrike was found to have made false claims in another investigation of an alleged Russian “hack.” Yet, neither the CIA nor FBI examined the Democratic National Committee’s computers. If the issue was as important as it supposedly has now become, the FBI should have issued a subpoena

to do its own examination. Why the DNC rejected the FBI request, and why the FBI did not insist, raises serious questions given the enormous publicity and accusations that have followed.

–Uncritically features two US politicians making loose accusations and effectively criminalizing “contacts” with Russians. Sen. James Lankford, R-Oklahoma, says President Trump is “pushing out some messages that are consistent with the Kremlin policies ... there’s no question that the Russians were trying to hack into our elections.” Yet, former U.S. intelligence officers with experience in these areas recently presented evidence raising significant questions about this conventional wisdom.

On the Democratic side, Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia indicates the Senate investigation reached its conclusion before it began. He said, “The goal of this investigation is not only to reconfirm Russian intervention and explain that to the American public, but to also see if there were any contacts between Trump and the Russians.”

In the current environment, to have “contacts” with Russians has been criminalized. Instead of questioning the validity or wisdom of this position, the documentary presents it with seeming approval.

–Uncritically promotes false statements and reckless threats. Sen. Lankford says “We believe strongly that what Russia continues to do to be able to threaten Ukraine, threaten its neighbors, threaten NATO, to continue to pry into not only our elections, but other elections, is destabilizing, and it demands a response. They have yet to have a consequence to what they did in the election time. And they should.”

Lankford’s assertions are presented as facts but are debatable or false. For example, security services in Germany, France and the U.K. all found that – despite the international accusations – there was NO evidence of Russian interference in their recent elections.

–Justifies and promotes “punishment” of Russia. The belligerent approach of Lankford and Warner is continued by PBS host Judy Woodruff and narrator Nick Schifrin. The U.S. is portrayed as a vulnerable victim with a future that is “foreboding”. Russia is portrayed as threatening and needing some punishment soon: “The Russian government doesn’t feel like the United States government really penalized them for what happened last year... a lot of officials here in Washington agree with that... Russia should have paid for what they did last year.”

This threatening talk is then followed by the following assessment from the

narrator: "There are analysts in Moscow who think the only thing we can hope is that we avoid war."

In 2002-2003, American mainstream media failed to question or challenge the assertions of the CIA and politicians pushing for the invasion of Iraq. At that time, the false pretense was that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and posed a threat to the U.S.

Much of the media and many of the same politicians are now claiming Russia is an adversary that has "attacked us." This claim is being widely made without serious question or challenge. "Liberal" media seems to be in alliance with hawkish neoconservatives on this issue. Virtually any accusation against Russia and its leader can be made with impunity and without serious evidence.

The PBS documentary "Inside Putin's Russia" aims to expose Russian repression, aggression and disinformation. As shown in the many examples above, the five-part documentary is highly biased and inaccurate. While it shows some features of Russia, it also demonstrates American propaganda in the current tumultuous times.

Rick Sterling is an investigative journalist based in northern California. He can be contacted at rsterling1@gmail.com
