

Questioning the Russia-gate 'Motive'

A key pillar of the Russia-gate affair is the assumption that Russia's leaders wanted to stop Hillary Clinton and boost Donald Trump, but the Kremlin's views on last year's election were much more nuanced, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The American public is now experiencing mass paranoia over Russia-gate, hysteria about Russia supposedly corrupting and manipulating the U.S. political system. This panic originated with Obama administration holdovers in the intelligence community who outlined the narrative while providing few if any facts – and it has been carried forward by Democrats, some Republicans hostile to President Trump, and by the U.S. mainstream media.

The Russia-gate frenzy has similarities to the madness that followed the 9/11 attacks when public passions were manipulated to serve the geopolitical agenda of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. In that case, civil liberties that had become accepted norms in the U.S. were suddenly cast aside – and the public was deceptively led into the invasion of Iraq.

In both cases – the Iraq War and Russia-gate – the U.S. intelligence community played central roles by – regarding Iraq – promoting false intelligence that Iraq was hiding WMD and had ties to Al Qaeda and – in the Russian case – assessing (without presenting evidence) that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the hacking of Democratic emails and their publication via WikiLeaks to hurt Hillary Clinton's campaign and to help elect Donald Trump.

While the Iraq deception was driven by the neoconservatives in the Bush-Cheney administration, the Russia paranoia was started by the nominally left-of-center administration of Barack Obama in the closing months of his presidency. It has been fanned ever since by liberals and centrists in the Democratic Party and the never-Trump contingent in the Republican Party as well as the mainstream media – with the goal of either removing Trump from office or politically crippling him and his administration, i.e., to reverse the results of the 2016 election or, as some might say, reverse the “mistake” of the 2016 election.

Because promoters of the Russia-gate hysteria talk about the Kremlin's “war” on the U.S. political process, the frenzy also carries extreme dangers, even greater than the death and destruction from the Iraq War. Russia is the only country on earth capable of turning the United States into ashes within a day. And even as U.S. journalists and politicians have casually – and sloppily – hyped the Russia-gate affair, the Russians have taken the growls of hostility

from the United States very seriously.

Rumbles of War

If Russia is preparing for war, as the latest issue of *Newsweek* magazine tells us, we have no one but our political leaders and media pundits to blame. They have no concern for Russian national sensitivities and the “red lines” that the Russians have drawn. U.S. senators and congressmen listen only to what U.S. “experts” think the Russian interests should be if they are to fit into a U.S.-run world. That is why the Senate can vote 98-2 in favor of elevating President Obama’s executive sanctions against Russia into federal law as happened this past summer so President Trump can’t reverse them.

There have been a few U.S. journalists and academics who have examined the actual facts of the Russia-gate story and found them lacking in substance if not showing outright signs of fabrication, including Consortiumnews.com, Truthdig.com, and Antiwar.com. But they make up a very small minority.

Instead the major U.S. media has taken the Jan. 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” accusing the Russians of meddling in the 2016 election as unassailable truth despite its stunning lack of evidence. According to President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, that “assessment” came from a “hand-picked” group of analysts from the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency, not the “all 17 intelligence agencies consensus” that the public was repeatedly told.

Perhaps the most significant challenge to the Russia-did-the-hacking “assessment” came from a study of the available forensic evidence by a group of former U.S. intelligence officers with relevant technical expertise from Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.

The VIPS’ analysis of the known download speed of one batch of Democratic emails concluded in July that the emails were likely extracted by a local download, not an external hack over the Internet, i.e., an inside job by someone with direct access to the computers. But the VIPS findings were largely ignored by the U.S. mainstream media, which has treated the original “assessment” by those “hand-picked” analysts as unchallengeable if not flat fact.

Besides the conventional wisdom that Russia did “hack” the emails and somehow slipped the emails to WikiLeaks, there is another core assumption of the Jan. 6 report – that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the hack of the Democratic emails and their publication through WikiLeaks because of his contempt for Hillary Clinton and his desire for Trump to win.

Indeed, the Jan. 6 “assessment” treats this supposed motive as the central

evidence of Russian guilt, since actual physical or testimonial evidence is lacking. Yet what is also missing from the report is any recognition of other attitudes among the Russian political elite that would go against the report's thesis, including whether Putin would have taken such a risk in the face of a widespread consensus that Clinton was the near-certain winner – and the strong possibility that any Russian operation would be exposed. An evenhanded intelligence “assessment” would have included these counter-arguments even if in the end they were cast aside. But the Jan. 6 report offered no such context or balance.

A View from Moscow

However, from my perspective – having participated in some of the leading Russian public affairs programs in 2016 – I heard Russian insiders close to President Putin expressing grave doubts about whether a Trump presidency would be good for Russia.

Political talk shows are a very popular component of Russian television programming on all channels, both state-run and commercial channels. They are mostly carried on prime time in the evening but also are showing up in mid-afternoon where they have displaced soap operas and cooking lessons as entertainment for housewives and pensioners.

The shows are broadcast live either to the Moscow time zone or to the Far East time zone. Given the fact that Russia extends over nine time zones, they are also video recorded and reshowed locally at prime time. In the case of the highest quality and most watched programs produced by Vesti 24 for the Rossiya One channel, they also are posted in their entirety and in the original Russian on Youtube.

The panelists come from a rather small pool of Russian legislators, including chairmen of the relevant committees of the Duma (lower house) and Federation Council (upper house); leading journalists; think tank professors; and retired military brass. The politicians are drawn from among the most visible and colorful personalities in the Duma parties, but also extend to Liberal parties such as Yabloko, which failed to cross the five-percent threshold in legislative elections and thus received no seats in parliament.

(Since I live in Brussels, I was flown by the various channels who paid airfare and hotel accommodation in Moscow. That is to say, my expenses were covered but there was no honorarium. I make this explicit acknowledgement to rebut in advance any notion that I and other outside panelists were in any way “paid by the Kremlin” or restricted in our freedom of speech on air.)

During the period under review, I appeared on both state channels, Rossiya-1 and Pervy Kanal, as well as on the major commercial television channel, NTV. My debut on the No. 1 talk show in Russia, "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev," on Sept. 11, 2016, was particularly useful because I had a chance to speak with the host, Vladimir Soloviev, for five minutes before the program.

I put to him the question that interested me the most: whom did he want to see win the U.S. presidential election. Without hesitation, Soloviev told me that he did not want to see Trump win because the celebrity businessman was volatile, unpredictable – and weak. Soloviev added that he and other politically knowledgeable Russians did not expect improved relations with the U.S. regardless of who won. He rejected the notion that Trump's tossing the neocons out of government would be a great thing in and of itself.

The Devil You Know

Soloviev's resistance to the idea that Trump could be a good thing was not just an example of Russians' prioritizing stability, the principle "better the devil you know," meaning Hillary Clinton. During a chat with a Russian ambassador, someone also close to power, I heard the firm belief that the United States is like a big steamship which has its own inertia and cannot be turned around, that presidents come and go but American foreign policy remains the same.

This view may be called cynical or realistic, depending on your taste, but it is reflective of the thinking that came out from many of the panelists in the talk shows.

To appreciate what weight the opinions of Vladimir Soloviev carry, you have to consider just who he is – that his talk show is the most professional from among numerous rival shows and attracts the most important politicians and expert guests. But even more to the point, he is as close to Putin as journalists can get and is familiar with the President's thinking.

In April 2015, Soloviev conducted a two-hour interview with Putin that was aired on Rossiya 1 under the title "The President." In early January 2016, the television documentary "World Order," co-written and directed by Soloviev, set out in forceful terms Putin's views on American and Western attempts to stamp out Russian sovereignty that first were spoken at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 and have evolved and become ever more frank since.

Soloviev has a Ph.D. in economics from the Institute of World Economics and International Relations of the USSR Academy of Sciences. He was an active entrepreneur in the 1990s and spent some time back then in the U.S., where his activities included teaching economics at the University of Alabama. He is

fluent in English and has been an unofficial emissary of the Kremlin to the U.S. at various times.

For all of these reasons, I believe it is safe to say that Vladimir Soloviev represents the thinking of Russian elites close to Putin, if not the views of Putin himself.

I encountered similar skepticism about Trump elsewhere as well. On Sept. 27, 2016, I took part in the “Sixty Minutes” talk show on Rossiya 1 that presented a post-mortem of the first Trump-Clinton debate the day before.

Presenter Yevgeny Popov and his wife and co-presenter Olga Skabeyeva made a point that was largely missing in Western news coverage – that the Democrats and Republicans had largely switched positions on the use of military force, with Clinton taking the more hawkish position and Trump the more dovish stance.

Doubting Trump

Yet, Russian politicians and journalists on the panel were split down the middle on whether Trump or Clinton was their preferred next occupant of the Oval Office. The Trump skeptics noted that he was impulsive and could not be trusted to act with prudence if there was some crisis or accidental clash between U.S. and Russian forces in the field, for example.

They took the cynical view that the more dovish positions that Trump took earlier were purely tactical, to differentiate himself from his Republican competitors and then Clinton. Thus, these analysts felt that Trump could turn out to be no friend of Russia on the day after the elections.

One Trump doubter called Trump a “non-systemic” politician – or anti-establishment. But that is not a compliment in the Russian context. It has the odious connotation applied to Alexei Navalny and some members of the U.S.- and E.U.-backed Parnas political movement, suggesting seditious intent.

The Oct. 20 program “Evening with Vladimir Soloviev,” which I watched on television from abroad, was devoted to the third Clinton-Trump debate. My main takeaway from the show was that there was a bemused unanimity on the very diverse panel that the U.S. presidential campaign was awful, with both candidates having serious weaknesses of character and/or careers. Particular attention was devoted to the very one-sided position of the U.S. mass media and the centrist establishments of both parties favoring Hillary Clinton.

Though flamboyant in his language, nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy,

leader of the LDPR Party, touched on a number of core concerns:

“The debates were weak. The two cannot greet one another on stage, cannot say goodbye to one another at the end. They barely can get out the texts that have been prepared for them by their respective staffs. Repeating on stage what one may have said in the locker room. Billions of people around the world conclude with one word: disgrace! This is the worst electoral campaign ever.

“And mostly what we see is the style of the campaign. However much people criticize the USSR – the old fogies who ran it, one and the same, supposedly the conscience of the world. Now we see the same thing in the USA: the exceptional country – the country that has bases everywhere, soldiers everywhere, is bombing everywhere in some city or other. ...

“Hillary has some kind of dependency. A passion for power – and that is dangerous for the person who will have her finger on the nuclear button. If she wins, on November 9th the world will be at the brink of a big war.”

Zhirinovsky made no secret of his partiality for Trump, calling him “clean” and “a good man” whereas Clinton has “blood on her hands” for the deaths of hundreds of thousands due to her policies as Secretary of State. But then again, Zhirinovsky has made his political career over more than 30 years precisely by making outrageous statements that run up against what the Russian political establishment says aloud.

Zhirinovsky had been the loudest voice in Russian politics in favor of Turkey and its president Erdogan, a position which he came to regret when the Turks shot down a Russian jet at the Syrian border, causing a rupture in bilateral relations.

The final word on Russia’s electoral preferences during the Oct. 20 show was given by the moderator, Vladimir Soloviev: “There can be no illusions. Both Trump and Clinton have a very bad attitude toward Russia. What Trump said about us and Syria was no compliment at all. The main theme of American political life right now is McCarthyism and anti-Russian hysteria.”

This being Russia, one might assume that the deeply negative views of the ongoing presidential election reflected a general hostility toward the United States as a country. But nothing of the sort came out from the discussion. To be sure, there was the odd outburst from Zhirinovsky. But otherwise the panelists, including Zhirinovsky, displayed informed respect and even admiration for what the U.S. has achieved and represents as a country. But the panelists concluded that the U.S. has a political leadership at the national level that is unworthy and inappropriate to its position in the world.

Yet, back in the U.S., the ongoing hysteria over Russia-gate and the perceived threat that Russia poses to U.S. national interests, risks tilting the world into nuclear war.

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