

Inflating the Russian Threat

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media, led by The New York Times, has behaved as classic propagandists, hyping a Russian military “threat” and promoting a new Cold War hysteria, as Jonathan Marshall describes.

By Jonathan Marshall

Readers of the *New York Times* have more to sweat about than hot summer weather in the Big Apple. The paper’s chief military correspondent, Michael Gordon – co-author of the infamous 2002 story about Saddam Hussein’s “quest for A-bomb parts” – has all but warned that war in Europe could break out at any minute with the mighty Russian army.

“Russia is preparing to send as many as 100,000 troops to the eastern edge of NATO territory at the end of the summer,” he reported last month with Eric Schmitt. Sounding like speechwriters for Sen. John McCain, they called the long-planned military exercises with Belarus – known as “Zapad” (Russian for “west”) – “one of the biggest steps yet in the military buildup undertaken by President Vladimir V. Putin and an exercise in intimidation that recalls the most ominous days of the Cold War.”

Gordon and Schmitt added that this latest and greatest example of “Mr. Putin’s saber-rattling,” represents “the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union that so much offensive power has been concentrated in a single command.”

Many other Western news organizations have echoed this story, albeit with less alarmist rhetoric. NBC News warned that “another military challenge may be on the horizon” as “thousands of Russian troops and tanks are preparing to take part in what may be the country’s largest military exercise since the Cold War.”

Reciting the same talking points almost *verbatim*, the London *Guardian* reported days ago that “Russia is preparing to mount what could be one of its biggest military exercises since the Cold War.” Like the *Times*, it cited estimates by “Western officials and analysts” that “up to 100,000 military personnel and logistical support could participate” in the war games next month.

Meanwhile, the Defense Minister of Estonia predicted that “Russia may use large-scale military exercises to move thousands of troops permanently into Belarus later this year in a warning to NATO.” Two Polish military officials speculated darkly that “Having created such a military build-up under the pretext of such exercise, Russia could launch a limited or provocative military hybrid operation to see what happens and further test the waters on

NATO's eastern flank, or in Ukraine, where the Russo-Ukrainian conflict remains in full swing."

The Missing Context

The average reader would never know that U.S. and NATO forces themselves engaged this summer in "their largest military exercises since the end of the Cold War," to quote NPR. Nor would they know that NATO collectively spends 12 times more than Russia on its military, or that its European members alone field nearly 75 percent more military personnel than Russia.

And only the most attentive reader, reaching the bottom of the long *New York Times* story, would have learned that "Russian officials have told NATO that the maneuvers will be far smaller than Western officials are anticipating and will involve fewer than 13,000 troops."

The anti-Putin director of the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies in Minsk points out that only 3,000 Russian military personnel will take part in the exercises in Belarus from September 14 to September 20. "Based on these figures, the military drills are practically the same as the previous Zapad-2013," he said.

He also noted that Belarus has invited no fewer than 80 international observers to calm fears:

"In addition to the accredited military attaches of Western embassies, special delegations from the UN, the International Red Cross . . . and NATO will be invited. This, by the way, is the first time when NATO observers are invited to such exercises. Separately, Belarus arranged for the presence of delegations from Sweden, Norway and Estonia."

NATO has complained – possibly with justification – that Russia and Belarus have not fully complied with their obligations under the Vienna Document of 2011 to provide detailed briefings, progress reports, and opportunities to interview soldiers about the exercise.

NATO and Russia undertook after the Cold War to provide greater transparency about their military exercises to minimize the threat of conflict. In recent years, particularly following the Ukraine crisis, growing political tensions have put a strain on such cooperative measures.

A number of reasonable analysts warn that Russia may sidestep its reporting obligations by dividing its exercises into smaller units, below the threshold of 13,000 personnel that gives members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe the right to observe.

'Probably Exaggerated'

For example, Russia claimed that its Western exercises four years ago kept just within that threshold. But two experts writing for the conservative Jamestown Foundation in Washington, D.C. argued that "if one takes a broader view of what elements constituted a part of the Zapad 2013 exercise, then the total participants number approximately 22,000 men, of which 13,000 exercised on Belarusian territory and more than 9,500 on Russian territory."

The *Guardian* quotes an expert on Russia's military as saying of Zapad-17, "you can't trust what the Russians say. One hundred thousand is probably exaggerated but 18,000 is absolutely realistic."

Even if true, such numbers hardly support viewing the upcoming exercises as an "ominous" threat to the West. A British expert, remarking on the "mythology" that often accompanies such events, noted that "Much of the Western coverage said that the 2009 exercise ended with a simulated nuclear attack on Warsaw, Poland, even though there is no evidence at all from unclassified sources to suggest this was the case."

Michael Kofman, a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Kennan Institute, has debunked many of the unfounded estimates of Zapad-17's size and potential threat to Europe.

"The Russian Ministry of Defense itself likely hopes Western media will report exaggerated figures," he says. "Such headlines help validate the scale and success of the exercise to national leadership in Moscow. In this respect, the entire affair is an exercise in co-dependency and is self-affirming."

Russia unquestionably wants to impress NATO with its military capabilities, Kofman acknowledges, but that's for deterrence.

"Throughout the exercise, Russian armed forces will try to signal that they have the ability to impose substantial costs on a technologically advanced adversary, i.e. the United States," he writes. "Russian thinking is founded on the belief that its military can raise costs for the West such that they will grossly outweigh the potential gains for sustaining hostilities, particularly if the fight is over Belarus."

Threat Inflation Nothing New

The steady drumbeat of warnings about Russian military capabilities and intentions recalls the perennial use of "threat inflation" since the earliest days of the Cold War to sell bigger military budgets and a permanent warfare state.

One of the acknowledged masters of threat inflation was NATO Supreme Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove. Hacked emails exposed his undercover campaign to “leverage, cajole, convince or coerce the U.S. to react” to Russia during the Obama years.

Two years ago, the West German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, ran a lengthy article on Breedlove’s reckless disregard for facts. Following the Minsk ceasefire agreement, at a time of relative quiet in Ukraine between government and pro-Russian forces, Breedlove held an inflammatory press conference to announce that Vladimir Putin had sent Russian armed forces with “well over a thousand combat vehicles, . . . some of their most sophisticated air defense, battalions of artillery” to Eastern Ukraine. The military situation he warned was “getting worse every day.”

German political leaders and intelligence officials were “stunned,” according to the magazine. Their information didn’t match his claims at all.

The same thing had happened soon after the start of the Ukraine crisis in early 2014, triggered by an anti-Russia coup that ousted President Viktor Yanukovich. Breedlove warned of an imminent invasion by 40,000 Russian troops massed on the border – when intelligence officials from other NATO member states had ruled out such an invasion and put the total number of Russian troops at about half that number.

“For months,” the magazine observed, “Breedlove has been commenting on Russian activities in eastern Ukraine, speaking of troop advances on the border, the amassing of munitions and alleged columns of Russian tanks. Over and over again, Breedlove’s numbers have been significantly higher than those in the possession of America’s NATO allies in Europe. As such, he is playing directly into the hands of the hardliners in the US Congress and in NATO.”

Russian troop advances . . . the massing of forces . . . it all sounds familiar. Sure enough, although now retired, Breedlove was one of the first to sound the alarm this year about the Zapad exercise, telling a Senate hearing that it could involve as many as 200,000 troops.

Two years ago, members of the German government condemned Breedlove’s warnings as “dangerous propaganda.” They told *Der Spiegel*, “The West can’t counter Russian propaganda with its own propaganda, ‘rather it must use arguments that are worthy of a constitutional state.’”

The same stricture should surely apply today, as unsupported rhetoric foments unnecessary and dangerous military tensions between the world’s two nuclear superpowers.

How Vladimir Putin Sees the World

Exclusive: The mainstream U.S. media has assumed the role of protecting the American people from alternative viewpoints, which is why Oliver Stone's long-form interviews with Vladimir Putin are such a concern, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There was a time when I thought that it was the responsibility of an American journalist to hear all sides of a dispute and then explain the issue as fairly as possible to the American people, so they would be armed with enough facts to make their own judgments and act as the true sovereigns in a democracy.

I realize how naïve that must sound today as American journalism has shifted to a new paradigm in which the major news outlets view it as their duty to reinforce whatever the establishment narrative is and to dismiss or discredit any inconvenient facts or alternative analyses.

Today, The New York Times, The Washington Post and the rest of the mainstream media permit only the narrowest of alternative views to be expressed or they just pile into the latest groupthink whole hog.

So, that is why director Oliver Stone's four-part series of interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin on "Showtime" will surely draw near-universal outrage and ridicule from the big U.S. media. How dare anyone let Putin explain how he views the challenges facing the world? Can you believe that any right-thinking American would treat the Russian leader with civility and – god forbid – respect?

The new American media paradigm requires either endlessly insulting Putin to his face or aggressively blacking out his explanations, especially if they are based on information that puts the U.S. government in a negative light. The American people must be protected from this "Russian propaganda and disinformation."

In other words, with the mainstream "guardians of truth" forewarning the American people not to watch Stone's "The Putin Interviews," the series will probably draw a relatively small viewership and the demonizing of Putin and Russia will continue unabated.

The American public can thus be spared some disturbing historical revelations

and the unsettling vertigo that comes from hearing information that disrupts “what everyone knows to be true.”

In the “director’s cut” or long-form version of the four-part series that I watched, Stone does allow Putin to offer detailed explanations of his thinking on current crises, but also draws from Putin acknowledgements that might be surprising coming from a Russian leader. He also puts Putin in some uncomfortable binds.

—Regarding the Soviet Union’s development of the nuclear bomb in the late 1940s, Putin said Russian and German scientists were working on the project but got help from participants in the U.S. nuclear program:

“Our intelligence also received a lot of information from the United States. Suffice it to remember the Rosenberg spouses who were electrocuted. They didn’t acquire that information, they were just transferring that information. But who acquired it? The scientists themselves – those who developed the atomic bomb.

“Why did they do that? Because they understood the dangers. They let the genie out of the bottle. And now the genie cannot be put back. And this international team of scientists, I think they were more intelligent than the politicians. They provided this information to the Soviet Union of their own volition to restore the nuclear balance in the world. And what are we doing right now [with the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty]? We’re trying to destroy this balance. And that’s a great mistake.”

—Regarding the origins of modern Islamist terrorism, Putin said: “Al Qaeda is not the result of our activities. It’s the result of the activities of our American friends. It all started during the Soviet war in Afghanistan [in the 1980s] when the American intelligence officers provided support to different forms of Islamic fundamentalism, helping them to fight the Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

“So the Americans themselves nurtured both Al Qaeda and [Osama] bin Laden. But it all spun out of control. And it always happens. And our partners in the United States should have known about that. So they’re to blame.”

Stone noted how President Reagan’s CIA Director William Casey sought to exploit Islamic fundamentalism to destabilize Muslim parts of the Soviet Union and to achieve regime change in Moscow.

Putin added: “Those ideas are still alive. And when those problems in Chechnya and the Caucasus emerged [after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991], the Americans, unfortunately, supported those processes. We [Russians] assumed the Cold War was over, that we had transparent relations, with the rest of the

world, with Europe and the U.S. And we certainly counted on support, but instead, we witnessed that the American Intelligence services supported terrorists.

“I’m going to say something very important, I believe. We had a very confident opinion back then, that our American partners in words were talking about support to Russia, the need to cooperate, including fighting terrorism, but in reality they were using those terrorists to destabilize the internal political situation in Russia.”

–Regarding NATO expansion into Eastern Europe,” Putin said, “There was a deal not to expand NATO eastward. [But] this deal was not enshrined in paper. It was a mistake made by Mr. Gorbachev [the last president of the Soviet Union]. In politics, everything must be enshrined in paper.

“My impression is that in order to justify its existence, NATO has a need of an external foe, there is a constant search for the foe, or some acts of provocation to name someone as an adversary.”

–Regarding NATO missile bases being installed in Eastern Europe, Putin said: “And what are we supposed to do. In this case we have to take countermeasures. We have to aim our missile systems at facilities that are threatening us. The situation becomes more tense. ...

“There are two threats for Russia. The first threat, the placement of these anti-ballistic missiles in the vicinity of our border in the Eastern European countries. The second threat is that the launching pads of these anti-ballistic missiles can be transformed within a few hours into offensive missile launching pads. Look, if these anti-ballistic missiles are placed in Eastern Europe, if those missiles are placed on water, patrolling the Mediterranean and Northern Seas, and in Alaska, almost the whole Russian territory would be encircled by these systems.

“As you can see, that is another great strategic mistake made by our partners [a word that Putin uses to refer to the United States]. Because all these actions are going to be adequately answered by Russia. And this means nothing else but a new cycle of an arms race. ...

“When the Soviet Union collapsed, they [American leaders] were under the illusion that the U.S. was capable of anything, and they could [act] with impunity. That’s always a trap, because in this situation the person or the country begins to commit mistakes. There is no need to analyze the situations, or think about the consequences. And the country becomes inefficient. One mistake follows another. And I think that is the trap the U.S. has found itself

in.”

–Regarding the prospect of nuclear war, Putin said, “I don’t think anyone would survive such a conflict.” Regarding U.S. plans for creating a missile shield, he said, “There is a threat deriving from the illusion of being protected, and this might lead to more aggressive behavior. That is why it is so important to prevent unilateral actions. That is why we propose to work jointly on the anti-ballistic missile system.”

–Regarding the American neoconservatives who now dominate the U.S. foreign policy establishment and the major news media, Stone described “the neoconservative element as being so hungry to make their point, to win their case that it’s dangerous.” Putin responded, “I fear them too.”

–In an interview on Feb. 16, 2016, Stone asked about the U.S. presidential campaign to which Putin replied, “We are going to be ready to work with whoever gets elected by the people of the United States. I said that on several occasions and that’s the truth. I believe nothing is going to change no matter who gets elected. ... The force of the United States bureaucracy is very great. And there are many facts that are not visible to the candidates until they become President. And the moment one gets to real work, he or she feels the burden. ...

“My colleague, Barack Obama, promised to close Guantanamo. He’s failed to do that. But I’m convinced that he sincerely wanted to do that. ... Unlike many partners of ours, we never interfere within the domestic affairs of other countries. That is one of the principles we stick to in our work.”

–In a February 2017 interview, which was added amid the escalation of charges that Russia interfered in the U.S. election, Stone noted that Donald Trump is “your fourth president” and asked, “what changes?”

“Almost nothing,” Putin said with a wry smile. “Life makes some changes for you. But on the whole, everywhere, especially in the United States, the bureaucracy is very strong. And bureaucracy is the one that rules the world.”

Asked about alleged Russian interference to help Trump, Putin responded: “You know, this is a very silly statement. Certainly, we liked President Trump and we still like him because he publicly announced that he was ready to restore American-Russian relations. ... Certainly, we’ve got to wait and see how, in reality, in practice, the relations between our two countries are going to develop. ...”

Stone: “So why did you bother to hack the election then?”

Putin: "We did not hack the election at all. It would be hard to imagine any other country – even a country such as Russia would be capable of seriously influencing the electoral campaign or the outcome of an election. ... any talk about our influencing the outcome of the U.S. election is all lies. They are doing it for a number of reasons.

"First, they are trying to undermine the legitimacy of President Trump, create conditions that must preclude us from normalizing our relations, and they want to create additional instruments to wage an internal political war. And Russia-U.S. relations in this context are just a mere instrument in the internal political fight in the U.S. ... We know all their tricks."

–Regarding cyber-war and the possibility that U.S. intelligence planted malware and back-doors in software sold to Russia, Putin said, "Well, you will probably not believe me, but I'm going to say something strange. Since the early 1990s, we have assumed that the Cold War is over. We thought there was no need to take any additional protective measures because we viewed ourselves as an integral part of the world community.

"We didn't have any equipment of our own. Our companies, our state institutions and administrative departments, they were buying everything – hardware and software. And we've got much equipment from the U.S., from Europe, and equipment is used by the Intelligence Services and by the Defense Ministry. But recently we certainly have become aware of the threat that all of that poses.

"Only during recent years, have we started to think about how we can ensure technological independence, as well as security. Certainly we give it much thought, and we take appropriate measures. ... We had to catch up with others."

In an aside to Putin's translator within earshot of Putin, Stone remarked: "He's acting funny about this story, like he's guilty a bit."

–Regarding the dangers to Russia from U.S. cyber-warfare, Putin said: "It is almost impossible to sow fear among the Russian citizens. ... And secondly, the economies that are more sophisticated, in technological terms, they are more vulnerable to this type of attack. But in any case, this is a very dangerous trend. A very dangerous avenue for competition to pursue and we need some rules to be guided by."

When Stone raised the possibility of a treaty, Putin said, "I don't want to say that, but you are simply drawing this information from me. You make me say that. One and a half years ago, in Autumn 2015, we came up with a proposal that was submitted to our American counterparts. We suggested that we should work these issues through and arrive at a treaty, an agreement on the rules to be guided by

in this field. The Americans didn't respond, they kept silence, they didn't give us any reply."

—Regarding allegations of Putin's wealth, Stone asked, "Is there some way you could make your personal wealth clearer?"

Putin responded indirectly: "I remember when I moved to Moscow from St. Petersburg [in the 1990s], I was astounded and shocked by how many crooks had gathered here in Moscow and their behavior was so astounding, I couldn't get used to it for a very long time. Those people didn't have any scruples at all. ... My task was to differentiate between power and money."

Stone: "So there are no bank accounts in Cyprus?"

Putin: "No, and never have been. That's just nonsense, and if that were the case we would have had to face it a long time ago."

—Although Putin remained disciplined and controlled during the long sit-downs with Stone, the Russian president appeared most uncomfortable when Stone pressed him about his future plans and the risk of a leader viewing himself as indispensable to a nation.

Citing the possibility that Putin would have been in power – as either prime minister or president – for 24 years if he were to run for president again and win, Stone asked, "Do you feel that Russia needs you that badly?"

Putin: "The question you have asked whether Russia needs anyone that bad – Russia itself will decide. An alteration in power certainly has to exist. ... In the end, let me reiterate – the citizens of Russia are going to make the final decision. Concerning the 2018 elections, I'd like to say there are things, things that should have some intrigue and mystery. So I am not going to answer that part of the question."

Stone: "I said if..."

Putin: "We shouldn't speak in the subjunctive mood."

Stone then suggested more transparency in the next election.

A stern Putin responded: "Do you think our goal is to prove anything to anyone? Our goal is to reinforce our country."

Stone: "That is a dangerous argument. It works both ways. Those who abuse power always say it's a question of survival."

Putin: "We are not talking about survival and we are not trying to justify

ourselves. Certainly taking into account all the negative tendencies you've been talking about – the Soviet legacy, the Imperialist legacy, it's something in the past. But we also have to think about the positive legacy. Russia has been built for a thousand years; it has its own traditions. We have our notions of what is just and unjust, we have our own understanding of what defines an efficient government.

“This is not a question of helping someone cling to power or to claim it for myself. This is about ensuring economic growth and sustaining it, improving our defense capabilities, and not just during periods of crisis and difficulties.”

Stone: “Mr. Putin, I don't doubt for one moment your pride in serving Russia or that you are a son of Russia to me, and you have done very well by her. We all know the price of power. When we're in power too long no matter what, the people need us but at the same time we've changed and we don't even know it.”

Putin: “Indeed, this is a very dangerous state. If a person in power feels that they have lost it, this bond connecting this person to the country and to the rank-and-file citizens of the country, then it's time for them to go.”

More to come regarding Putin's account of the Ukraine crisis. Regarding Stone's style and strategy in interviewing Putin, [click here](#).

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Europe May Finally Rethink NATO Costs

Exclusive: By dunning NATO nations to chip more money into the military alliance, President Trump may inadvertently cause some Europeans to rethink the over-the-top anti-Russian propaganda, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

President Donald Trump's politically incorrect behavior at the gathering of NATO leaders in Brussels on Thursday could, in its own circuitous way, spotlight an existential threat to the alliance. Yes, that threat is Russia, but not in the customary sense in which Westerners have been taught to fear the Russian bear. It is a Russia too clever to rise to the bait – a Russia patient enough to

wait for the Brussels bureaucrats and generals to fall of their own weight, pushed by financial exigencies in many NATO countries.

At that point it will become possible to see through the West's alarmist propaganda. It will also become more difficult to stoke artificial fears that Russia, for reasons known only to NATO war planners and neoconservative pundits, will attack NATO. As long as Russian hardliners do not push President Vladimir Putin aside, Moscow will continue to reject its assigned role as *bête noire*.

First a request: Let me ask those of you who believe Russia is planning to invade Europe to put down the *New York Times* for a minute or two. Take a deep cleansing breath, and try to be open to the possibility that heightened tensions in Europe are, rather, largely a result of the ineluctable expansion of NATO eastward over the quarter-century since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

Actually, NATO has doubled in size, despite a U.S. *quid-pro-quo* promise in early 1990 to Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev in early 1990 *not* to expand NATO "one inch" to the east of Germany. The *quid* required of Russia was acquiescence to a reunited Germany within NATO and withdrawal of the 300,000-plus Russian troops stationed in East Germany.

The U.S. reneged on its *quo* side of the bargain as the NATO alliance added country after country east of Germany with eyes on even more – while Russia was not strong enough to stop NATO expansion until February 2014 when, as it turned out, NATO's eyes finally proved too big for its stomach. A U.S.-led coup d'état overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovych and installed new, handpicked leaders in Kiev who favored NATO membership. That crossed Russia's red line; it was determined – and at that point able – to react strongly, and it did.

These are the flat-facts, contrasting with the mainstream U.S. media's propaganda about "Russian aggression." Sadly, readers of the *New York Times* know little to nothing of this recent history.

Today's Russian Challenge

The existential threat to NATO comprises a different kind of Russian "threat," which owes much to the adroitness and *sang froid* of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who flat-out refuses to play his assigned role of a proper enemy – despite the Western media campaign to paint him the devil incarnate.

Over time, even the most sophisticated propaganda wears thin, and more and more Europeans will realize that NATO, in its present form, is an unnecessary, vestigial organ already a quarter-century beyond its expiration date – and that it can flare up painfully, like a diseased appendix. At a time when citizens of many NATO countries are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet, they

will be reluctant to sink still more money into rehab for a vestigial organ.

That there are better uses for the money is already clear, and President Trump's badgering of NATO countries to contribute ever more for defense may well backfire. Some are already asking, "Defense against what?" Under the painful austerity that has been squeezing the Continent since the Wall Street crash nearly a decade ago, a critical mass of European citizens is likely to be able to distinguish reality from propaganda – and perhaps much sooner than anyone anticipates. This might eventually empower the 99 percent, who don't stand to benefit from increased military spending to fight a phantom threat, to insist that NATO leaders stop funding a Cold War bureaucracy that has long since outlived its usefulness.

A military alliance normally dissolves when its *raison d'être* – the military threat it was created to confront – dissolves. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 – more than a quarter century ago – and with it the Warsaw Pact that was established as the military counter to NATO.

Helpful History

NATO's first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, who had been Winston Churchill's chief military assistant during World War II, stated that NATO's purpose was "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." But a lot can change over the course of almost seven decades.

The Russians relinquished their East European empire after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and withdrew their armed forces. There no longer needed to be a concerted priority effort to "keep the Russians out," preoccupied as they were with fixing the economic and social mess they inherited when the USSR fell.

As for "keeping the Germans down," it is not difficult to understand why the Russians, having lost 25 to 27 million in WWII, were a bit chary at the prospect of a reunited Germany. Moscow's concern was allayed somewhat by putting this new Germany under NATO command, since this sharply lessened the chance the Germans would try to acquire nuclear weapons of their own.

But NATO became the "defensive" blob that kept growing and growing, partly because that is what bureaucracies do (unless prevented) and partly because it became a way for U.S. presidents to show their "toughness." By early 2008, NATO had already added ten new members – all of them many "inches" to the east of Germany: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

There were rumors that Ukraine and Georgia were in queue for NATO membership, and Russian complaints were becoming louder and louder. NATO relations with

Russia were going to hell in a hand basket and there was no sign the Washington policymakers gave a hoot.

A leading advocate from the Russo-phobic crowd was the late Zbigniew Brzezinski, who had been President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser and remained in the forefront of those pressing for NATO expansion – to include Ukraine. In 1998, he wrote, "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire."

The relentless expansion of NATO greatly bothered former Sen. Bill Bradley, a longtime expert on Russia and a sober-minded policy analyst. On Jan. 23, 2008, in a talk before the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, he sounded an almost disconsolate note, describing NATO expansion a "terribly sad thing" ... a "blunder of monumental proportions. ...

"We had won the Cold War ... and we kicked them [the Russians] when they were down; we expanded NATO. In the best of circumstances it was bureaucratic inertia in NATO – people had to have a job. In the worst of circumstances it was certain ... irredentist East European types, who believe Russia will forever be the enemy and therefore we have to protect against the time when they might once again be aggressive, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophesy."

As tensions with Russia heightened late last decade, Sen. Bradley added, "Right now we are confronted with something that could have easily been avoided."

Finally Saying Nyet

A week after Bradley's lament, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called in U.S. Ambassador William Burns to read him the riot act. The subject line of Burns's CONFIDENTIAL cable #182 of Feb. 1, 2008, in which he reported Lavrov's remarks to Washington shows that Burns played it straight, choosing not to mince his own or Lavrov's words: "Nyet means nyet: Russia's NATO enlargement redlines."

Here what Ambassador Burns wrote in his summary, which the public knows because the cable was among the thousands leaked to WikiLeaks by Pvt. Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning, for which she was imprisoned for seven years and only recently released (yet the cable has been essentially ignored by the corporate U.S. news media):

"Following a muted first reaction to Ukraine's intent to seek a NATO Membership Action Plan at the Bucharest summit, Foreign Minister Lavrov and other senior officials have reiterated strong opposition, stressing that Russia would view further eastward expansion as a potential military threat. NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains an emotional and neuralgic issue for Russia, but strategic policy considerations also underlie strong opposition to NATO

membership for Ukraine and Georgia.

“In Ukraine, these include fears that the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene. Additionally, the government of Russia and experts continue to claim that Ukrainian NATO membership would have a major impact on Russia’s defense industry, Russian-Ukrainian family connections, and bilateral relations generally.”

So, it is not as though then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other U.S. policymakers were not warned, in very specific terms, of Russia’s redline on Ukrainian membership in NATO. Nevertheless, on April 3, 2008, the final declaration from at a NATO summit in Bucharest asserted: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”

The Ukraine Coup

Six years later, on Feb. 22, 2014, the U.S.-pushed putsch in Ukraine, which George Friedman, then President of the think-tank STRATFOR, labeled “the most blatant coup in history,” put in power a fiercely anti-Russian regime eager to join the Western alliance.

Russia’s reaction was predictable – actually, pretty much predicted by the Russians themselves. But for Western media and “statesmen,” the Ukrainian story begins on Feb. 23, 2014, when Putin and his advisers decided to move quickly to thwart NATO’s designs on Ukraine and take back Crimea where Russia’s only warm-water naval base has been located since the days of Catherine the Great.

U.S. officials (and The New York Times) have made it a practice to white-out the coup d’etat in Kiev and to begin recent European history with Russia’s immediate reaction, thus the relentless presentation of these events as simply “Russian aggression,” as if Russia instigated the crisis, not the U.S.

A particularly blatant example of this came on June 30, 2016, when then U.S. Ambassador to NATO Douglas Lute spoke at a press briefing before the NATO summit in Warsaw:

“Beginning in 2014 ... we’re moving into a new period in NATO’s long history. ... So the first thing that happened in 2014 that marks this change is a newly aggressive, newly assertive Russia under Vladimir Putin. So in late February, early March of 2014, the seizing, the occupying of Crimea followed quickly by the illegal political annexation of Crimea. ... Well, any notion of strategic partnership came to an abrupt halt in the first months of 2014.”

And so, for the nonce, Western propaganda captured the narrative. How long this distortion of history will continue is the question. The evolution of Europe as a whole (including Russia) over the past half-century, together with the profound changes that this evolution has brought, suggest that those of the European Establishment eager to inject life into the vestigial organ called NATO – whether for lucrative profits from arms sales or cushy spots in NATO’s far-flung bureaucracy – are living on borrowed time.

President Trump can keep them off balance by creating uncertainty with respect to how Washington regards its nominal NATO obligation to risk war with Russia should some loose cannon in, say, Estonia, start a shooting match with the Russians. On balance, the uncertainty that Trump has injected may be a good thing. Similarly, to the degree that his pressure for increased defense spending belatedly leads to an objective estimate of the “threat” from Russia, that may be a good thing too.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. A CIA analyst for 27 years, he specialized in Russian foreign policy. He led the CIA’s Soviet Foreign Policy Branch and briefed the President’s Daily Brief one-on-one during President Ronald Reagan’s first term.

NYT Cheers the Rise of Censorship Algorithms

Exclusive: The New York Times is cheering on the Orwellian future for Western “democracy” in which algorithms quickly hunt down and eliminate information that the Times and other mainstream outlets don’t like, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Just days after sporting First Amendment pins at the White House Correspondents Dinner – to celebrate freedom of the press – the mainstream U.S. media is back to celebrating a very different idea: how to use algorithms to purge the Internet of what is deemed “fake news,” i.e. what the mainstream judges to be “misinformation.”

The New York Times, one of the top promoters of this new Orwellian model for censorship, devoted two-thirds of a page in its Tuesday editions to a laudatory piece about high-tech entrepreneurs refining artificial intelligence that can

hunt down and eradicate supposedly “fake news.”

To justify this draconian strategy, the Times cited only a “fake news” report claiming that the French establishment’s preferred presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron had received funding from Saudi Arabia, a bogus story published by a Web site that mimicked the appearance of the newspaper Le Soir and was traced back to a Delaware phone number.

Yet, while such intentionally fabricated articles as well as baseless conspiracy theories are a bane of the Internet – and do deserve hearty condemnation – the Times gives no thought to the potential downside of having a select group of mainstream journalistic entities feeding their judgment about what is true and what is not into some algorithms that would then scrub the Internet of contrary items.

Since the Times is a member of the Google-funded First Draft Coalition – along with other mainstream outlets such as The Washington Post and the pro-NATO propaganda site Bellingcat – this idea of eliminating information that counters what the group asserts is true may seem quite appealing to the Times and the other insiders. After all, it might seem cool to have some high-tech tool that silences your critics automatically.

But you don’t need a huge amount of imagination to see how this combination of mainstream groupthink and artificial intelligence could create an Orwellian future in which only one side of a story gets told and the other side simply disappears from view.

As much as the Times, the Post, Bellingcat and the others see themselves as the fount of all wisdom, the reality is that they have all made significant journalistic errors, sometimes contributing to horrific international crises.

For instance, in 2002, the Times reported that Iraq’s purchase of aluminum tubes revealed a secret nuclear weapons program (when the tubes were really for artillery); the Post wrote as flat-fact that Saddam Hussein was hiding stockpiles of WMD (which in reality didn’t exist); Bellingcat misrepresented the range of a Syrian rocket that delivered sarin on a neighborhood near Damascus in 2013 (creating the impression that the Syrian government was at fault when the rocket apparently came from rebel-controlled territory).

These false accounts – and many others from the mainstream media – were countered in real time by experts who published contrary information on the Internet. But if the First Draft Coalition and these algorithms were in control, the information scrubbers might have purged the dissident assessments as “fake news” or “misinformation.”

Totalitarian Risks

There also should be the fear – even among these self-appointed guardians of “truth” – that their algorithms might someday be put to use by a totalitarian regime to stomp out the last embers of real democracy. However, if you’re looking for such thoughtfulness, you won’t find it in [the Times article](#) by Mark Scott. Instead, the Times glorifies the creators of this Brave New World.

“In the battle against fake news, Andreas Vlachos – a Greek computer scientist living in a northern English town – is on the front lines,” the article reads. “Armed with a decade of machine learning expertise, he is part of a [British start-up](#) that will soon release an automated fact-checking tool ahead of the country’s election in early June. He also is advising a [global competition](#) that pits computer wizards from the United States to China against each other to use artificial intelligence to combat fake news. ...

“As Europe readies for several elections this year after President Trump’s victory in the United States, Mr. Vlachos, 36, is one of a growing number of technology experts worldwide who are harnessing their skills to tackle misinformation online. ... Computer scientists, tech giants and start-ups are using sophisticated algorithms and reams of online data to quickly – and automatically – spot fake news faster than traditional fact-checking groups can.”

The Times quotes the promoters of this high-tech censorship effort without any skepticism:

“‘Algorithms will have to do a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to fighting misinformation,’ said Claire Wardle, head of strategy and research at [First Draft News](#), a nonprofit organization that has teamed up with tech companies and newsrooms to debunk fake reports about elections in the United States and Europe. ‘It’s impossible to do all of this by hand.’”

The article continues: “So far, outright fake news stories have been relatively rare [in Europe]. Instead, false reports have more often come from Europeans on social media taking real news out of context, as well as from [fake claims](#) spread by state-backed groups like Sputnik, the Russian news organization.”

Little Evidence Needed

Though providing no details about Sputnik’s alleged guilt, the Times article links to another Times article from April 17 by Andrew Higgins that accuses Russia’s RT network of “fake news” because it detected a surge in opinion polls for Francois Fillon, who stands accused in the mainstream media of having a positive relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Oddly, however,

further down in the story, Higgins acknowledges that “lately, Mr. Fillon has seen a bump in real opinion polls.”

(Ultimately, Fillon finished a strong third with 20 percent of the vote, one percentage point behind National Front’s Marine Le Pen and four points behind Emmanuel Macron, the two finalists. It’s also curious that the Times would fault RT for getting poll results wrong when the Times published predictions, with 90 percent or more certainty – and 85 percent on Nov. 8 – that Hillary Clinton would win the U.S. presidential election.)

Beyond failing to offer any evidence of Russian guilt in these “fake news” operations, Tuesday’s Times story turns to the NATO propaganda and psychological warfare operation in Latvia, the Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, with its director Janis Sarts warning about “an increased amount of misinformation out there.”

The Stratcom center, which oversees information warfare against NATO’s perceived adversaries, is conducting “a hackathon” this month in search of coders who can develop technology to hunt down news that NATO considers “fake.”

Sarts, however, makes clear that Stratcom’s goal is not only to expunge contradictory information but to eliminate deviant viewpoints before too many people can get to see and hear them. “State-based actors have been trying to amplify specific views to bring them into the mainstream,” Sarts told the Times.

As the Times reports, much of the pressure for shutting down “fake news” has fallen on American tech giants such as Facebook and Google – and they are responding:

“After criticism of its role in spreading false reports during the United States elections, Facebook introduced a fact-checking tool ahead of the Dutch elections in March and the first round of the French presidential election on April 23. It also removed 30,000 accounts in France that had shared fake news, a small fraction of the approximately 33 million Facebook users in the country.”

A Growing Movement

And, according to the Times, this censorship movement is spreading:

“German lawmakers are mulling potential hefty fines against tech companies if they do not clamp down on fake news and online hate speech. Since last year, Google also has funded almost 20 European projects aimed at fact-checking potentially false reports. That includes its support for two British groups looking to use artificial intelligence to automatically fact-check online claims ahead of the country’s June 8 parliamentary election. ...

“David Chavalarias, a French academic, has created a [digital tool](#) that has analyzed more than 80 million Twitter messages about the French election, helping journalists and fact-checkers to quickly review claims that are spread on the social network.

“After the presidential election in the United States last year, Dean Pomerleau, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, also [challenged his followers](#) on Twitter to come up with an algorithm that could distinguish fake claims from real news.

“Working with [Delip Rao](#), a former Google researcher, he offered a \$2,000 prize to anyone who could meet his requirements. By early this year, more than 100 teams from around the world had signed on to Mr. Pomerleau’s [Fake News Challenge](#). Using a database of verified articles and their artificial intelligence expertise, rival groups – a combination of college teams, independent programmers and groups from existing tech companies – already have been able to accurately predict the veracity of certain claims almost 90 percent of the time, Mr. Pomerleau said. He hopes that figure will rise to the mid-90s before his challenge ends in June.”

So, presumably based on what the Times, the Post, Bellingcat and the other esteemed oracles of truth say is true, 90 percent or more of contrary information could soon be vulnerable to the censorship algorithms that can quickly detect and stamp out divergent points of view. Such is the Orwellian future mapped out for Western “democracy,” and The New York Times can’t wait for this tightly regulated – one might say, rigged – “marketplace of ideas” to take over.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Trump Uses Tiny Nation to Insult Russia

In another affront to Russia, President Trump has signed onto Montenegro’s entrance into NATO, as the neocon/liberal-hawk strategy of encircling Russia resumes, writes Ted Snider.

By Ted Snider

Donald Trump has just approved Montenegro's accession into NATO, the latest sign that hopes for a new détente with Russia have been dashed. Though Montenegro is a tiny nation and its inclusion doesn't significantly affect NATO's capabilities, the move does send a clear message to Moscow that Trump is continuing his reversal from his campaign promises of warming up to Russia and cooling off to NATO into the opposite.

The script got flipped, in part, because Democrats and the major U.S. news media battered Trump for months after his election with allegations portraying him as Russia's "Manchurian candidate." Despite the lack of evidence that Trump's campaign had colluded with Moscow, the steady pounding – day after day – took its toll, leading to Trump's capitulation in early April as signified by his missile strike against Syria and his new hostile rhetoric toward the Kremlin.

However, even before Trump's springtime flip-flop, his administration had been signaling that the new President wouldn't change the arc of U.S. foreign policy very much. Immediately upon assuming the role of Secretary of Defense on Jan. 20, retired Marine General James Mattis called NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to assure him of America's commitment to "the fundamental and enduring value of NATO for the security of both Europe and North America."

While they were talking, NATO was building up its forces along Russia's borders as German and Belgian troops moved into Lithuania supposedly to act as a deterrent against Russian "aggression." In mid-February, 500 U.S. troops deployed to Romania and another 120 were deployed to Bulgaria as part of the NATO operation known as Atlantic Resolve.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Alexi Meshkov, revealed Russia's interpretation of the NATO buildup when he said, "This deployment is of course a threat for us."

At the same time, 300 U.S. Marines were arriving in Norway 900 miles from the Russian border. Russia criticized the move as having no military benefit – beyond antagonizing Russia. When Norway joined NATO as a founding member, they made the commitment not to host any foreign forces because of Russian concerns that Norway could serve as a launching ground for an attack on Russia.

At the end of January, U.S. tanks and armored vehicles – part of a 3,500-troop contingent – fired salvos into the air in Poland. General Ben Hodges, the commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, said, "this is not just a training exercise. It's to demonstrate a strategic message that you cannot violate the sovereignty of members of NATO ... Moscow will get the message – I'm confident of it."

Maiden Speech

Days later, Trump's Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley used her maiden speech in the Security Council to issue a "clear and strong condemnation of Russian actions," saying, "I consider it unfortunate that the occasion of my first appearance is one in which I must condemn the aggressive actions of Russia."

She then added that, "The United States continues to condemn and call for an immediate end to the Russian occupation of Crimea. Crimea is a part of Ukraine. Our Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns control over the peninsula to Ukraine."

By mid-February, that hardline message had moved into the White House with press secretary Sean Spicer declaring: "President Trump has made it very clear that he expects the Russian government to de-escalate violence in the Ukraine and return Crimea." The next day, Trump took to his official organ of policy announcement, Twitter, and tweeted that Crimea was "TAKEN by Russia."

In a recent correspondence, Richard Sakwa, professor of Russian and European politics at Kent University and the author of the upcoming book *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*, said, "The renewed confrontation between Russia and the West is not a replay of the Cold War, although many of its . . . features . . . have been revived. Competition between the Atlantic community and Russia has become entrenched as the 'new normal'. . . . Profound shifts in global politics are taking place, reshaping the international system."

Sakwa stressed that, since "International relations today are more perilous than at any time since 1989, . . . we need to understand the dynamics of relations between Russia and the U.S. since 1989."

The Mouse That Roared

Thus, the significance of NATO membership for the tiny Balkan country of Montenegro, which ranks 161st in size among the world's nations and is even smaller than Connecticut. But Montenegro was part of the former Yugoslavia, putting it inside what Russia considers to be its sphere of influence.

There is also Russia's sensitivity about what the Kremlin viewed as a U.S. commitment not to expand NATO eastward as part of Moscow's agreement to let a united Germany join NATO.

At a Feb. 9, 1990 meeting at the Kremlin, President George H.W. Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker, promised Gorbachev that if NATO got Germany and Russia

pulled its troops out of East Germany “there would be no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction one inch to the east.” But, according to Sakwa, this promise specifically meant only that NATO would not spill over from West Germany into East Germany. The promise of not “one inch to the east,” meant only that NATO wouldn’t militarize East Germany.

But the logic of the specific assurance regarding East Germany implies a larger assurance regarding nations to the east of East Germany. Russia wouldn’t have a security concern about East Germany being home to NATO forces if those NATO forces were moving into former Soviet Republics on Russia’s borders as is happening now.

So, the question of militarizing east of Germany never had to explicitly come up: it was implicitly understood. Sakwa says, “The question of NATO enlargement to the other Soviet bloc countries simply did not enter anyone’s head and was not discussed.”

Then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev says it didn’t come up because it was then unthinkable: “Merely the notion that NATO might expand to include the countries in this alliance sounded completely absurd at the time.”

The historical record makes the meaning of the promise clear. The promise was made on two consecutive days: first by the Americans and then by the West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. According to West German foreign ministry documents, on Feb. 10, 1990, the day after James Baker’s promise, West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, told his Soviet counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze, “‘For us . . . one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east.’ And because the conversation revolved mainly around East Germany, Genscher added explicitly: ‘As far as the non-expansion of NATO is concerned, this also applies in general.’”

A few days earlier, on Jan. 31, 1990, Genscher had said in a major speech that there would not be “an expansion of NATO territory to the east, in other words, closer to the borders of the Soviet Union.” This public announcement, again, made the spirit of the promise clear.

Former CIA analyst and chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch Ray McGovern reports that the U.S. ambassador to the USSR at the time of the promise, Jack Matlock – who was present at the talks – told him that “The language used was absolute, and the entire negotiation was in the framework of a general agreement that there would be no use of force by the Soviets and no ‘taking advantage’ by the U.S. ... I don’t see how anybody could view the subsequent expansion of NATO as anything but ‘taking advantage.’”

Matlock is referring to the words of President George H.W. Bush who clearly stated that the U.S. would not derive any “unilateral advantage” from the end of the Cold War, or, as Genscher phrased it, there would be “no shift in the balance of power” between the East and the West. As Matlock said, it is very hard to see how the absorption of the former nations of the Soviet Union is not an “advantage” or a “shift in the balance of power.”

Thumb's Width

Gorbachev says the promise was made not to expand NATO “as much as a thumb's width further to the east.” In 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin said, “And what happened to the assurances our Western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them.”

Putin then went on to remind his audience of the assurances by pointing out that the existence of the NATO promise is not just the perception of him and Gorbachev. It was also the view of the NATO General Secretary Manfred Woerner at the time: “But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr. Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: ‘the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee.’ Where are those guarantees?”

McGovern says that when he asked Viktor Borisovich Kuvaldin, a Gorbachev adviser from 1989-1991, why there was no written agreement, Kuvaldin replied painfully, “We trusted you.”

In 1999, NATO brushed aside Russia's protests and absorbed Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The encroachment toward Russia's borders continued in 2004 by adding Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. In 2009, the Russian sphere of influence was further penetrated with the NATO incursion into Albania and Croatia.

Now, accepting Montenegro into NATO has become a politically popular way for Congress to demonstrate its disdain for Vladimir Putin, even if Montenegro's population isn't all that enthusiastic, splitting roughly down the middle on NATO membership.

Though sometimes called “soft on Russia,” Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also was cheerleading for Montenegro's admission. Then, on April 11, just days after firing 59 Tomahawk missiles at Russia's Syrian allies in retaliation for a supposed chemical weapons incident and amid White House suggestions that the Russians were complicit in the alleged war crime, Trump signed the paperwork on

Montenegro's admittance.

In doing so, Trump added to NATO's encroachment on Russia's borders, dismissed Russia's claim to a sphere of influence – and made clear that his campaign promise of a less confrontational posture against Russia was a thing of the past.

Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in US foreign policy and history.

A Confession on Meeting a Russian

Though now billed as a “spymaster,” Russian Ambassador Kislyak was well known as a social butterfly, meeting a wide range of Americans, including politicians, academics and activists, which led David Swanson to this “confession.”

By David Swanson

It was August 2014. Our secret and nefarious meeting had to be disguised as a public event. So, the Russian Ambassador to the United States, Sergey Ivanovich Kislyak, spoke at the University of Virginia, in an event organized by the Center for Politics, which no doubt has video of the proceedings and was of course in on the conspiracy.

Kislyak was once ambassador to Belgium and to NATO. He served an eight-course Russian dinner for select guests prior to the public forum in an underground lair deep inside Observatory Hill.

Kislyak spoke to a packed auditorium at UVA and took, I think, well over an hour of questions. He spoke frankly, and the questions he was asked by students, professors, and other participants were polite and for the most part far more intelligent than he would have been asked on, for example, *Meet the Press*.

He told the audience that Russia had known there were no WMDs in Iraq, and had known that attacking Iraq would bring “great difficulties” to that country. “And look what is happening today,” he said. He made the same comment about Libya. He spoke of the U.S. and Russia working together to successfully remove chemical weapons from the Syrian government. But he warned against attacking Syria now.

There will be no new Cold War, Kislyak said, but there is now a greater divide in some ways than during the Cold War. Back then, he said, the U.S. Congress sent delegations over to meet with legislators, and the Supreme Court likewise. Now there is no contact. It's easy in the U.S. to be anti-Russian, he said, and

hard to defend Russia. He complained about U.S. economic sanctions against Russia intended to “suffocate” Russian agriculture.

Asked about “annexing” Crimea, Kislyak rejected that characterization, pointed to the armed overthrow of the Ukrainian government and insisted that Kiev must stop bombing its own people and instead talk about federalism within Ukraine.

There were remarkably few questions put to the ambassador that seemed informed by U.S. television “news.” One was from a politics professor who insisted that Kislyak assign blame to Russia over Ukraine. Kislyak didn’t.

Swanson’s ‘Contact’

I always sit in the back, thinking I might leave, but Kislyak was only taking questions from the front. So I moved up and was finally called on for the last question of the evening. For an hour and a half, Kislyak had addressed war and peace and Russian-U.S. relations, but he’d never blamed the U.S. for anything in Ukraine any more than Russia. No one had uttered the word “NATO.”

So I pointed out the then upcoming NATO protests. I recalled the history of Russia being told that NATO would not expand eastward. I asked Kislyak whether NATO ought to be disbanded.

The ambassador said that he had been the first Russian to “present his credentials” to NATO, and that he had “overestimated” NATO’s ability to work with Russia. He’d been disappointed by NATO actions in Serbia, he said, and Libya, by the expansion eastward, by NATO pressure on Ukraine and Poland, and by the pretense that Russia might be about to attack Poland.

“We were promised,” Kislyak said, that NATO would not expand eastward at all upon the reunification of Germany. “And now look.” NATO has declared that Ukraine and Georgia will join NATO, Kislyak pointed out, and NATO says this even while a majority of the people in Ukraine say they’re opposed.

The ambassador used the word “disappointed” a few times.

“We’ll have to take measures to assure our defense,” he said, “but we would have preferred to build on a situation with decreased presence and decreased readiness.”

Wouldn’t we all. I mean, all of us who aren’t interested in risking World War III as long as it can gin up a pretense that Hillary Clinton lost because of Russian evil.

David Swanson is an author, activist, journalist, and radio host. He is director of WorldBeyondWar.org and campaign coordinator for RootsAction.org. Swanson’s

books include War Is A Lie. He blogs at DavidSwanson.org and WarIsACrime.org. He hosts Talk Nation Radio. He is a 2015, 2016, 2017 Nobel Peace Prize Nominee. Follow him on Twitter: @davidcnswanson and FaceBook. [This story previously appeared at <http://davidswanson.org/node/5468>]

NATO's Strange Addition of Montenegro

Exclusive: Official Washington's New Cold Warriors are painting NATO's admission of tiny Montenegro in the stark black-and-white colors of a heroic stand against "Russian aggression" but that misses the real reasons why it's a bad idea, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Any day now, Arizona Senator John McCain promises, the U.S. Senate will vote to approve the incorporation of Montenegro as the 29th member state in the NATO alliance. Though few Americans likely know where to find the tiny Balkan nation on a map, Montenegro has become another dubious focal point of the West's new confrontation with Russia.

At first glance, the case for extending NATO's umbrella over a country with fewer than 2,000 troops isn't obvious. Its seven helicopters are unlikely to make America safer. The Obama administration, which championed this latest in a long line of recent additions to the alliance, actually offered as a rationale the fact that Montenegro had donated some mortar rounds to the anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq and \$1.2 million to NATO's operations in Afghanistan over three years.

That sum is less than a third of what U.S. taxpayers spend in Afghanistan per hour. One critic quipped, "if the West's survival depends on Montenegro's inclusion in NATO, we should all be heading for the bunkers."

Maybe that's why hawks are citing the mere fact of Russia's predictable opposition as a prime reason to support Montenegro's accession. "Backing Montenegro's membership is not only the right thing for the Senate to do, it would send a clear signal that no third party has a veto over NATO enlargement decisions," argues the Heritage Foundation.

And two advocates at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, declared recently that Montenegro will be the key test of whether President Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson "kowtow to their friend Russian President Vladimir Putin" and "acquiesce . . . in another

Yalta” or stand up for “core U.S. goals.”

Raising the specter of Putin and Yalta diverts attention from troubling questions about Montenegro’s political suitability as a partner – and whether it has anything of military value to offer.

NATO ostensibly conditions its acceptance of new members on strict criteria, which include “demonstrating a commitment to the rule of law and human rights; establishing democratic control of armed forces; and promoting stability and well-being through economic liberty, social justice and environmental responsibility.”

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Carpenter assured the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last September that Montenegro supported NATO’s “values of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law.” He must have missed the report from Freedom House, which gave the country a rating of only “partly free” for both political rights and civil liberties.

The organization cited “restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly” and “years of harassment and discrimination against LGBT people.” It also noted “ongoing concerns . . . about the independence of the judiciary and the public broadcaster, as well as numerous failures to effectively prosecute past attacks against media workers.” The country suffers from “a lack of trust in the electoral process among voters,” it added.

Carpenter must also have missed the State Department’s human rights report, which accused Montenegro of numerous violations, including “impunity for war crimes, mistreatment by law enforcement officers of persons in their custody, overcrowded and dilapidated prisons and pretrial detention facilities, violations of the right to peaceful assembly,” and “selective prosecution of political and societal opponents.”

A Bastion of Corruption

As for the “rule of law,” consider that Montenegro’s ruler for nearly three decades, Milo Djukanovi?, was given the 2015 Organized Crime and Corruption “Person of the Year” Award by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), an organization of several hundred investigative journalists who report on corruption in Europe and Central Asia (and are partly financed by USAID).

Citing his success in “creating an oppressive political atmosphere and an economy choked by corruption and money laundering,” the OCCRP said Djukanovi? “has built one of the most dedicated kleptocracies and organized crime havens in the world.”

The organization pointed to his alleged role in cigarette smuggling with notorious Italian crime syndicates; his family's takeover of a former state bank, which became a money laundry for organized crime; his controversial sale of major stretches of the country's coastline to shady foreign oligarchs; and his offer of citizenship to a notorious regional drug kingpin.

Djukanović knows the money is greener to the west of Montenegro than to the east. That's why he's an ardent advocate of joining NATO. (Fewer than 40 percent of Montenegrins in a recent poll agreed – in part because alliance warplanes bombed the country during NATO's campaign against Serbia in 1999.) President Obama congratulated Djukanović on his stand during an official reception in September.

Following national elections in October, Djukanović finally stepped down as prime minister, but he remains head of the ruling party. Taking his place as the country's current prime minister was his hand-picked deputy, Dusko Markovic.

"Markovic, a former state security chief, is considered one of Djukanović's closest confidantes," reported OCCRP. "He was publicly accused by a former head of the country's anti-organized crime police last year of involvement in cigarette smuggling, but was never charged." In 2014, Markovic was also charged by the head of a government investigative commission with obstructing a probe into the murder of a prominent newspaper editor and critic of Djukanović.

Western media have largely ignored such troubling facts. Instead, what little coverage there is of Montenegro focuses on the government's sensational claim that Russians plotted to assassinate Djukanović at the time of the October election.

Markovic recently told Time magazine that his security services at the last minute uncovered a "criminal organization" formed by two Russian military intelligence agents, who planned on election day "to provoke incidents . . . and also possibly an armed conflict" as a pretext for taking power.

The prosecutor in charge of the case says "Russian state authorities" backed the plot to "prevent Montenegro from joining NATO." He vows to indict two alleged Russian plotters and 22 others, including a group of Serbian nationalists, by April 15. Russia's foreign minister called the allegations "baseless," but refuses to extradite any suspects. An independent expert, citing numerous anomalies in the official story, argues the plot was a "rogue operation" by Serbian and Russian nationalist freelancers.

Russia, which has long considered the Balkans to be in its sphere of influence, has a history of intruding in Montenegro's affairs. But absent persuasive

supporting evidence for the government's case, outsiders should bear in mind the cautionary observation by Freedom House that "[Montenegro's] intelligence service has faced sustained criticism from international observers for a perceived lack of professionalism."

Still, it should come as no surprise that anti-Russia hawks haven't let ambiguous evidence deter them from demanding the expansion of NATO.

A *Wall Street Journal* [editorial](#) said the alleged coup plot "gives a good taste of Russia's ambitions – and methods – in Eastern and Central Europe" and concluded with a call for accepting Montenegro's bid to join NATO: "Western security is best served by supporting democratic governments of any size facing pressure from regional bullies. The alternative is to deliver another country into Moscow's grip, and whet its appetite to take another."

Time magazine [commented](#) even more breathlessly that "The aborted coup was a reminder that a new battle for Europe has begun. From the Baltics to the Balkans and the Black Sea to Great Britain, Vladimir Putin is seeking to rebuild Russia's empire more than 25 years after the fall of the Soviet Union." Trump's past criticism of NATO, the magazine warned, has "raised flags that the U.S. might accept Russia's territorial grab."

Such inflammatory comments are stoking the political fires burning around Trump, including investigations of his campaign contacts with Russians, assertions of Moscow's interference with the election, and questions about business connections or personal indiscretions that make him vulnerable to Putin. Trump's stand on Montenegro – still to be determined – will signal whether he remains a critic of NATO or is caving to the New Cold Warriors.

Jonathan Marshall is author of many recent articles on arms issues, including ["Obama's Unkept Promise on Nuclear War,"](#) ["How World War III Could Start,"](#) ["NATO's Provocative Anti-Russian Moves,"](#) ["Escalations in a New Cold War,"](#) and ["Ticking Closer to Midnight."](#)

Where Donald Trump Makes Sense

Many progressives so despise Donald Trump that they decry all his positions even those that make some sense, such as questioning NATO and the dangerous New Cold War with Russia, as ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller explains.

By Graham E. Fuller

With the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States, it's hard to know where first to focus attention. Rage and righteous indignation on all sides are mounting. There is more than enough blame to go around for how the U.S. got itself into this situation. Where it will all go from here is beyond the imagination of the most lurid screenwriters of White House dramas.

Whatever the outrage *du jour* may be, we must not forget that history didn't begin with the 2015-2016 presidential campaign/circus. To believe that is analytically lazy, an easy cop-out, even self-serving. Major elements of these deep domestic pathologies trace back at a minimum to America's fateful actions from the very beginning of this disastrous American Twenty-first Century.

It was in 2000 that the Supreme Court, in an act of sheer partisanship, threw the contested Florida election to George W. Bush. This "decision" did two things: it demonstrated that the politicization of the Supreme Court had now touched the very pinnacle of the U.S. political order. The Court's reputation would never recover from the event.

Second, it enraged many Democrats who felt that the election had been stolen from Al Gore, thereby tainting the presidency of George W. Bush from the outset. Bush's incompetence, ignorance, and domination by dark neocon forces led us into a series of desperate wars in the Middle East that shaped the region down to this day – the Global War on Terror, the collapse of Iraq, Libya, Yemen, an Afghanistan on the ropes, the creation of ISIS on the smoking ruins of Iraq's civil struggle and to the beginning of the Syrian agony whose impact has massively shaken even Europe, and pushed the nature of U.S.-Russian relations towards resuscitation of the Cold War.

Unlike other nations that have undergone terrorist cataclysms but succeeded in rising above it, the United States never survived the psychological shock of 9/11. It is still living with it. U.S. obsession with domestic security – in one of the world's safer environments – even invented a new, Teutonic-sounding word "Homeland" to celebrate the birth of the security state; it also raised the corrosive specter of the "Muslim Other" in our midst.

It was this event that spurred Washington to massively expand the size and number of existing security and intelligence organizations, and create vast multiple layers of new ones. We see how they now compete and stumble around against each other; their very unmanageable size has arguably contributed to an overall deterioration in the quality of U.S. intelligence. A sober grip on the trajectories of world forces seems quite beyond Washington's ken.

Whatever Donald Trump may think about the CIA – and how legitimate any of his

perceptions may or may not be – his dissatisfaction is not entirely out of place; it would be prudent for him to undertake a close, zero-based review of the entire massive and redundant national security structure. More is not better; bigger is not better. The national security structure would be leaner, meaner, and more efficient were it immediately slashed by 50 percent at the outset.

All organizations work hard to preserve their individual corporate fiefdoms; when does a bureaucracy voluntarily ever downsize? Better intelligence is no longer even the real dynamic at work; institutional self-preservation is.

Militarized Foreign Policy

The militarization of American foreign policy grew special wings under the Global War on Terror. It is little wonder that so many of the key senior positions in the Trump cabinet and the White House are now being filled by military men: National Security Advisor, CIA chief, Director of National Intelligence, the NSA, the Secretary of Defense, etc. We narrowly missed a military Secretary of State.

This is not to say that the military cannot produce significant competence at the top, but again the problem with the military – and a military budget that surpasses most of the rest of the world combined – has led to securitization and militarization of foreign policy. Defense trumps State every time. Global threats expand to meet and justify the military budget; military solutions become default approaches to world issues. Where would we be without our threats?

The new national security state has promoted the most dangerous security idea of all – the idea that international security is a zero-sum game; that among great powers everything takes on the character of a win-lose confrontation. Our think tanks earnestly scour the globe for “coming threats.” (I know, I’ve written many of them in my day.)

We cannot contemplate such a thing as a win-win relationship among great powers. Of course the massive resources consumed by the U.S. military (think of the staggering lost opportunity costs) are powerfully backed by the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower presciently warned us about half a century ago.

Now, coming to today’s real third-rail topic: Russia. The obsessive – virtually hysterical – narrative of Russia in U.S. domestic politics today is not really about a true threat to the national security. Russia hasn’t done anything that we don’t routinely do to ourselves (and others). Hacking abounds, it is the new

growth industry.

“Blame Russia” instead is a convenient joint project for several unexpected bed-fellows: Clinton Democrats, embittered by Hillary’s defeat, seeking a scapegoat; Democrats who may detest Trump for quite understandable reasons, and seek to fully delegitimize his presidency at any cost and to refuse any constructive cooperation. What better device than to label him a Russian agent. End of discussion.

In addition, we have the military-industrial-security complex viscerally opposed to any kind of rapprochement with Moscow or talks with Putin; it’s simply bad for business. By all means investigate the Russians. But that is not basically why our nation is in a fix.

We are talking of sacred cows here. NATO is perceived as a God-given good in itself. Yet there are plenty of good, rational reasons for rethinking the place of NATO in the world. Try [the views](#) of the seasoned, beady-eyed conservative geopolitician George Friedman who does exactly that. Or my more [critical blog](#) of last July.

It constitutes neither treason nor ignorance to reconsider these foundations of our future place in a world that no longer resembles that of NATO’s founding. And of course by now NATO has its own priority of deeply-rooted institutional self-preservation at any cost, through promotion of ranges of new missions designed expressly to preserve its role. Serious debate with Europe about what NATO should and should not be is urgently due, but any such rational debate is not to be found in Washington, on this or so many other global strategy issues.

And finally, however emotionally satisfying, where does de-legitimization of the president take us? Rejection of the (highly flawed) electoral system entirely? Good luck at changing it. And who has the right to determine “legitimacy”? Our partisan Supreme Court? Determined citizens? This all represents exceptionally dangerous ground indeed. We’ve been down this de-legitimization route now against George W. Bush and Barack Obama (for differing reasons), and now Trump. It gets uglier with each iteration, but also exceedingly more dangerous to the nation as more and more people join the ranks of “he’s not my president.”

Draining the Swamp?

Trump’s promise to “drain the swamp” in Washington had some allure during the primaries. The swamp goes back decades. Yet very little draining has yet taken place; instead we have a celebration of plutocracy in power as never before.

Money in politics has simply moved yet one further step up the rung, now foreshadowing a permanent future American corporatist governing structure. This

deep, corrosive, bald presence of money in politics has grown by leaps and bounds in this century; no need to go to election 2016 to start bemoaning it.

It is self-deception if we let the coarseness of the Trump image lead us away from the thought that it has ever been much different. And the 90 percent left behind this time will be the chief victims of oppression, poor health, prejudice, discrimination.

The U.S. does not even seem capable of governing itself at this point, and the fault lines are sharpening. The specter of domestic political violence can hardly be excluded in this swirl of personalized politics of black hats and white hats. There is no debate, only vituperation, slander, vilification and demonization.

Drastic failures in U.S. foreign policies going back at least to 2000 have raised ongoing serious doubts in the eyes of the world about U.S. "leadership." More and more countries, friends and rivals, are moving into damage limitation mode in dealing with us; their main task is to prevent the U.S. from dragging the rest of the world into dangerous confrontation.

Like so many others, I too am deeply disturbed at Trump's style, manner, impulses, psychology, and policy preferences. Worse perhaps are their translation into dismaying top personnel choices. Trump himself may not be an ideologue but his appointments mostly are.

But don't let the grossness of the immediate Trump symbol lead us to overlook the degree to which most of this goes back many, many years, and we all had a hand in it in one way or another.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is "Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American's crisis of conscience in Pakistan." (Amazon, Kindle)

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Dreaming Up a Reason for NATO's Relevance

European leaders still rattle their tiny sabers at Russia, but Donald Trump's election has spread confusion across NATO nations that had dutifully climbed aboard the New Cold War express, says ex-British intelligence officer Annie

Machon.

By Annie Machon

A few months ago during the seemingly endless U.S. election, Donald Trump said NATO is not a gift that America can keep giving. In his stated view, the other member states should make a greater financial contribution (the U.S. currently contributes 70 percent of NATO's budget) and, if not, they could not expect automatic protection in the face of an attack.

On Nov. 13, after Trump's victory, NATO Secretary General and former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg wrote a think piece in the U.K.'s *Observer* newspaper, and acknowledged the need for more widespread contributions while crying up the historic importance and future need for NATO by citing growing Russian "assertiveness" (diplo-speak for "aggression") and the threat from international terrorism.

I was invited onto RT to analyze this and am here expanding on some of the points I made in an always-all-too-brief interview.

Stoltenberg was right to acknowledge Trump's concerns about the contributions to NATO. But I think he was also addressing another and already-serving president somewhat closer to home – head of the European Commission and totemic Eurocrat Jean-Claude Juncker – who for a while now has been plotting an integrated European Union army and who ramped up the rhetoric last week after Trump's victory. The head of NATO is naturally not going to be too happy that the E.U. is poaching on his territory as the supposed military defender of Europe.

It was also reported in *The Observer* that France and Germany are planning to announce the acceleration towards an E.U. army over the coming weeks. So much for European-wide consensus. It would appear that Juncker also sees this as a bargaining position in future Brexit negotiations, if Britain ever does get around to triggering Article 50 for withdrawing from the E.U. Any E.U. army would need the U.K.'s contribution – not just the armed forces, which are the second largest in the E.U., but also continued close cooperation with the intelligence agencies.

After all, if both the U.K. post-Brexit and the U.S. after the ascension of Trump become increasingly isolationist and isolated, it would be natural for the two countries to pivot towards each other to the increasing exclusion of Europe. The U.K./U.S. "special relationship" has always been heavily predicated on the uniquely close working relationship of their spies, and the E.U. will fear being left further out in the cold.

So, if Juncker carries on regardless with his vanity E.U. army project and

Britain agrees to contribute post-Brexit, there may be other sweet deals to offer to the U.K. during the Brexit negotiations. At least, that seems to be the position that Juncker is oiling his way towards. But the fundamental question has to be asked: why, now, do we need either a New Model E.U. army or the cavalier NATO?

Stoltenberg tried to address this in his article: "In the last few years we have seen a dramatic deterioration of our security, with a more assertive Russia and turmoil across north Africa and the Middle East. Nato allies have responded together. We have implemented the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence since the cold war. [...] This is deterrence, not aggression. [...] Nato also continues to play a crucial role in the fight against terrorism. Every Nato ally is part of the US-led coalition against Islamic State."

The Dubious Group Think

Let us unpack these comments. Firstly, is Russia indeed becoming more of a military threat, or is this just so much diplomatic grandstanding? After all, is it Russia or NATO that has been more, umm, "assertive" over the last 27 years?

In answer, I refer you back to an article I wrote two years ago after the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Referencing the work of former senior CIA officer and fellow Sam Adams Associate, Ray McGovern, it made clear that a deal was made between the Soviet Union of the time and the U.S. – and that, in return for the withdrawal of 260,000 Soviet troops from East Germany and the reunification of Germany, NATO would not move one inch further east than the German border.

Well, today we can see the result of these negotiations – another 12 countries, most in Eastern Europe and right up to the Russian border, have been assimilated into NATO. Recently within most of these border countries large-scale military exercises have been provocatively and publicly staged, plus missile "defense" systems have been planted in the fertile paranoiac soil of an increasingly aggressive and nationalistic Poland.

Yes, Russia has in retaliation been conducting its own border exercises. The leadership has to be seen to be doing something, otherwise it will appear weak and not protecting its own people. That might be "assertive," but it's certainly not "aggressive."

Nor let us forget the fact that, in 2008, NATO was warm towards the idea of Ukraine and Georgia joining, provided they could meet a few conditions. This would be taking Western forces directly into Russia's backyard. It would be encircling Russia's border with the rest of Europe with a new "Iron Curtain."

And I have to say that **IS** an aggressively political move at the very least.

How did this play out? Well, first stop for the campaign of Russian demonization was Georgia, under Western neocon puppet President Mikhail Saakashvili , invading a small and ethnically Russian segment of Georgia, South Ossetia. Russia responded by protecting the population, and then was excoriated across the Western world as conducting an unprovoked invasion of Georgia. This myth has long been exposed factually, but it is the hysterical headlines of the time that residually stick in most people's minds.

Similarly in Ukraine. In 2014, a coup against the elected head of state, Viktor Yanukovich, apparently partly orchestrated by the U.S. as we know from an intercepted call between the Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for Europe Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt. Interestingly, it was Yanukovich who blocked Ukraine's accession to NATO after his election in 2010, perhaps an additional motivation for the 2014 coup.

All this laid bare the fact that the U.S. had pumped \$5 billion in to subvert the Ukrainian state during the post-Soviet years and that, in the face of European concern about the worsening crisis, the U.S. pronounced – in the tender words of Victoria Nuland – “fuck the E.U.” And yet still the E.U. acquiesced to U.S.-led sanctions against Russia that have hit the E.U. economy hard.

Pot and Kettle

Despite this history of interference in the politics of other nations, the U.S. government accused Russia of meddling in the 2016 presidential elections. The old story of the pot and kettle springs to mind.

Add to this a probably NATO-approved strike on a Russian jet involved in the Syrian conflict earlier this year by NATO member Turkey (at the time one of the closest trading partners of Russia and which, temporarily, caused bilateral damage that has since been repaired) and the military wing of Western interests is not exactly coming up smelling of roses. (The Russian pilot bailed out but was then shot to death by Turkish-backed Syrian rebels on the ground.) Perhaps NATO was just being “assertive.”

So to Stoltenberg's second point of justification for NATO: the success that it has had combating the threat of international terrorism. Where can I start with this? Since NATO invoked Article 5 (when one state is attacked, all must respond) in the wake of the 9/11 attacks against America, Western countries have been dragged into war after illegal war across the Middle East, central Asia and North Africa.

Let us examine the roll call of successes: Afghanistan (now largely back in the

hands of Taliban warlords and supplying ever more heroin to the illegal drug trade that goes toward funding terrorist groups, including ISIS); Iraq, now a basket case and the cradle of ISIS; Libya ditto plus the drugs; Yemeni communities being vaporized with “precision” bombs by U.S. proxy Saudi Arabia; and the bloody catastrophe of Syria of course.

So the NATO Secretary General’s second justification of the organization’s continued existence is not exactly what one would call compelling. But I suppose he had to try, when Juncker’s threatened *folie de grandeur* that is the E.U. army is even less inspiring.

So, back to President-elect Donald Trump. What will he do, faced with this mess of competing Western military/security interests and Euro-bureaucrat careerists? Perhaps his U.S. isolationist position is not so mad, bad and dangerous as the wailings of the Western liberal press would have us believe?

American “exceptionalism” and NATO interventionism have not exactly benefited much of the world since the end of the Cold War. Perhaps the time has indeed come for an American Commander-in-Chief who can indeed cut deals to cut through the saber-rattling rhetoric and, even unintentionally, make a significant contribution to world peace.

Stranger things have happened. After all, outgoing President Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize a mere eight months after his inauguration, more a hoped-for aspiration than a recognition of any accomplishment, and we see how that worked out.

Annie Machon is a former intelligence officer in the UK’s MI5 Security Service (the U.S. counterpart is the FBI).

Russia’s Very Different Reality

Special Report: The demonization of Russian President Putin and Russia, in general, has reached alarming levels in the West with a new “group think” taking hold that ignores Russian realities and interests, writes Natylie Baldwin.

By Natylie Baldwin

In February, the Obama administration announced that it was quadrupling funding for a major increase in NATO troops and weaponry in the countries of Eastern Europe on the border with Russia. Diplomatic relations have faltered between the

two countries over Syria.

And the corporate media in the U.S. and U.K. have again stepped up their demonization of all things Vladimir Putin – he’s corrupt, he personally orders hits on people, is facilitating war crimes in Aleppo, and wants to invade Europe. The media also pushes the idea that Russia is an uncivilized and backwards cesspit.

Considering that Russia is a nuclear superpower, the largest country geographically in the world, and is the sixth largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity (and projected to be number six in 2021 in terms of GDP), the U.S. relationship with Russia is one of the most important and delicate.

In order to have any chance of conducting this relationship in a rational manner, an accurate and nuanced understanding of the country itself and the history of post-Soviet U.S.-Russia relations is essential. This requires cutting through the misinformation and distortion that saturates much of our mainstream news and political discourse.

It’s important to keep in mind that Russia has a 1,000-year history of authoritarian rule and only started its climb out in the late 1980s. It is a transitional society, with elements of both authoritarianism and democracy. Putin, along with Dmitri Medvedev and Mikhail Gorbachev, is the least authoritarian leader that Russia has ever had.

Considering that the U.S. has supposedly been an established democracy for over 200 years, we Americans should consider a few significant problems we still have in order to gain some perspective. Only 55 years ago, African-Americans could not vote and could even be murdered with impunity in many parts of the country.

Today, we have an epidemic of militarized police officers who are shooting first and asking questions later; more and more people on death row are turning out to be innocent; rising inequality threatens our stability; and, a system of deep corruption in terms of campaign financing has compromised our democracy – corruption that is so profound that two political science academics have recently quantified the ways in which we are now officially an oligarchy.

Is this any better than Russia’s corruption because it has been folded into our legal system? We certainly have our own “oligarchs” in the form of the Koch brothers, Bill Gates, and the Walton family. Perhaps we can concede that it’s not very useful to beat on Russia for not being Switzerland after only 25 years.

Russian Sentiment

A recent poll by the independent Levada Center revealed that 66 percent of Russians feel free and 68 percent don't believe it is likely that Russia will revert back to dictatorship. To understand why Russians may see themselves as fairly free, it is important to understand not only their history of authoritarian rule but also some facts and observations about Russia that run counter to the narrative often presented in our mainstream corporate media, which is owned by those same oligarchs that have captured our political system.

When I visited Russia last autumn, one of the first things I observed was that the police in both Moscow and St. Petersburg did not carry guns, only batons. I asked some Russians about this and was told that if an officer had a special assignment, he/she might carry a gun but that generally they did not. This is not consistent with the characterization that most Americans have about Russia being a police state or autocracy.

Speaking of guns, Russian citizens have to abide by much stricter gun control laws than in the U.S. These include the requirement for gun owners to obtain a five-year renewable license. Before the first license is issued, attendance in a firearms safety class and the passing of a federal safety exam is required as well as a background check.

One example of how the Russian gun control laws have helped to prevent the deadly types of mass shootings seen in the U.S. is the hate crime against patrons of a gay club in Yekaterinburg that occurred shortly after the Orlando massacre. Due to the fact that Russians don't easily have access to (illegal) assault weapons, no deaths occurred as a consequence of the violence perpetrated against the patrons by a group of Russian hoodlums who only had small, pneumatic weapons.

Russia has also had a moratorium on the death penalty since 1999 and its high court has upheld it, while Putin has publicly supported it, even in the face of popular sentiment for bringing back executions for certain crimes. Russia's murder rate is still higher than the U.S., but it is important to understand that there is a pattern of major improvement since the Wild West days of the 1990s when journalists who covered Russia, like Angus Roxburgh, acknowledged that people being gunned down in the streets of Moscow was reminiscent of an episode of *The Untouchables* and was a fairly regular occurrence.

In my visit last year, another woman and I traveled together and encountered no problems or threats, even when we walked from the Metro station to our hotel after dark in Moscow. I felt no less safe than I feel walking around after dark near where I work in San Francisco.

Although the visa application to travel to Russia is more stringent than for other European countries, I traveled freely when I was there, took photos wherever I wanted, and went through a similar airport security procedure as in the U.S. The vast majority of people I encountered in Russia were friendly, curious or neutral.

Recession and Resilience

While Russia has suffered from a recession since 2014 and has seen economic gains for its population suspended since the combination of low oil prices and sanctions, there was plenty of food in the markets and people said that the main hardship was inflation, though that has been coming down and is now at an annualized rate of 6.9 percent. The import substitution policies have shown success in the agricultural sector and are just starting to show promise in the industrial sector.

The sense I got from the Russians whom I spoke with was that they'd weather this storm and come out stronger and wiser for it – as they'd had to do in far worse conditions in their history. In spite of the recession, people generally looked healthy, were dressed in Western attire, and young people had their smartphones. In many ways, these people looked indistinguishable from those you'd see in any American city or suburb.

Prior to this economic downturn, Russia had enjoyed consistent increases in quality of life after “the lost weekend” of massive poverty, crime and exploding mortality rates that the Russian people had suffered during the Yeltsin years – giving Boris Yeltsin the distinction of being the least popular leader among Russians of the last 100 years.

As Victor Kramarenko, an engineer and foreign trade relations specialist during the Soviet period and, more recently, a years-long executive with a major American corporation in Moscow, summed up the Yeltsin era: “The Russian economy was devastated. We went from being an industrial power that defeated the Nazis, showed resilience, rebuilt quickly, and had great achievements in aviation and space to a place where morale collapsed and a lack of trust and a pirate mentality emerged.”

Why Is Putin Popular?

The devastation of the Yeltsin era was the state of the nation when Vladimir Putin took the helm in 2000. Having to navigate among ruthless oligarchic clans that Yeltsin had left behind, with no political party to support him and a very real possibility of overthrow or assassination if he wasn't careful, Putin began to surround himself with people he'd trusted throughout his career. This

included, among others, some people from the security services.

As for the epithet that “once a KGB man, always a KGB man,” Putin was actually not some James Bond-style assassin during his time with the spy agency. He served as a mid-level analyst in Dresden for the bulk of his career. Upon his return to Moscow from East Germany in 1990, he turned down a promotion to the agency’s foreign intelligence operations division, opting to re-settle his family in St. Petersburg instead. His increasing dissatisfaction eventually led him to resign from the KGB.

Putin then went to work as a foreign affairs adviser to Anatoly Sobchak in May of 1990. Sobchak, a professor of economic law at Leningrad State University, had emerged in the Gorbachev era as a popular democratic reformer and major critic of the KGB’s abuses. He had just been elected Chairman of the Leningrad City Council.

The following year Sobchak became mayor and appointed Putin as his deputy. According to Allen C. Lynch in his scholarly 2011 political biography, *Vladimir Putin and Russian Statecraft*, in this position, Putin coordinated relations with the military, police, district attorney, customs officials and NGO’s and handled diplomatic matters.

In the six years he served in this capacity, Putin had many impressive achievements, including attracting several Western corporations to the city, signing thousands of joint ventures with foreign companies, establishing a substantial foreign banking presence, legalizing the sale of land, allowing for free privatization of residential property, opening an international trade center, and strengthening municipal banks – which contributed to their remaining solvent in the face of the 1998 financial meltdown.

During the 1991 attempted coup against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, Putin found out that the Leningrad KGB, which supported the coup, planned to arrest Sobchak when he returned to the airport from out of town. Putin quickly gathered a group of trusted men and rode straight up to the plane to protect his boss, a challenge the local KGB chose not to press.

The Corruption Claims

Despite Western assertions of Putin’s corruption, with questionable evidence to support these charges, there is evidence pointing in a very different direction about Putin’s honesty. Sharon Tennison – author, program developer and my travel companion in the country – personally interacted with Putin when he reviewed a program proposal for her at Marienskii City Hall in 1992. Although, it was impossible to know who he would go on to become, Putin made an impression on her

at the time as the only Soviet/Russian official in her experience who had not asked for a bribe or favor.

Tennison also developed extensive contacts with young entrepreneurs throughout the country, including in the St. Petersburg area. Several of these entrepreneurs stated that Putin was the only local bureaucrat who had never charged a bribe for registering their businesses.

This general picture of Putin's honesty is buttressed by biographer Lynch as he addresses Putin's time as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, stating:

"For much of this time, given Sobchak's frequent and protracted absences and his preoccupation with national affairs, Putin assumed the functions of acting mayor. He supervised the drafting and implementation of countless international business deals and policy reforms. These transactions did not always go according to plan, and no doubt many profited handsomely from Putin's admitted inexperience in these matters.

"During his attempt to establish municipal oversight over a series of casinos, for example, the city was cheated. In another case, the city was fleeced for \$120 million for two shipments of cooking oil. Although during this period his mother bought a choice apartment at an exceptionally low price at a city auction, Putin didn't seem to enrich himself personally. In the one specific public charge of corruption that was brought against him, Putin sued in court for slander and won."

Lynch sums up Putin's character as follows: "Putin was not corrupt, at least in the conventional, venal sense. His modest and frankly unfashionable attire bespoke a seeming indifference to personal luxury....Putin was honest, certainly by Russian standards. He lived simply and worked diligently." (Lynch, pp. 32-33)

Richard Sakwa, a British scholar specializing in Russia, has written perhaps the most comprehensive political biography of Putin, covering all three of his presidential terms and how the Russian political system has evolved under his watch, both the positive and the negative. Sakwa interviewed numerous people who have worked with Putin throughout his career, including many who vouched for his honesty and relative sense of decency when handling political reassignments and other delicate internal matters.

Under Putin's leadership as either president or prime minister from 2000 to 2012, Russian citizens saw incomes increase five-fold, the poverty rate cut in half, consistent economic growth, and a safer country. Moreover, Russians enjoy universal health care, one of the highest rates of education in the world (54 percent of Russians have a college degree), and 140 days of paid maternity leave

for women. And despite the misinformation regularly put out by Washington, including by President Barack Obama himself, Russia's average life expectancy is now 71 and has been increasing consistently for several years, rebounding from a stunning decline during the Yeltsin years.

Gradual Improvement

Tennison, who lives part-time in St. Petersburg, has been traveling throughout Russia since 1983, when it was still part of the Soviet Union, and has established a wide network of relationships and connections over three decades. He made the following observations in 2014 on the changes she has seen in Russia since 2000:

“During this time, I’ve traveled throughout Russia several times every year, and have watched the country slowly change under Putin’s watch. Taxes were lowered, inflation lessened, and laws slowly put into place. Schools and hospitals began improving. Small businesses were growing, agriculture was showing improvement, and stores were becoming stocked with food.

“Highways were being laid across the country, new rails and modern trains appeared even in far out places, and the banking industry was becoming dependable. Russia was beginning to look like a decent country – certainly not where Russians hoped it to be long term, but improving incrementally for the first time in their memories.”

She goes on to describe similar developments further out from the major cities, including in the Urals, Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk and Perm. New museums, municipal buildings and supermarkets, well-maintained streets, modern street lights and regular snow plowing in the winter were all observed.

During this period, Russia also became a creditor nation with relatively low foreign debt, substantial foreign and gold reserves, and a rainy day fund built up during the prosperous years. These are some of the reasons why Putin has consistently had approval ratings between 60 percent and his high of 89 percent in late 2015.

The vast majority of Russians credit Putin with taking a nation that was on the verge of being a failed state, turning it around and creating concrete improvements in their lives. In my many conversations, Russians described him as a leader possessing patience, organization and determination. Overall, they believe his good qualities outweigh his flaws.

Russians also expressed support for his handling of foreign affairs. More specifically, they see him as standing up to numerous provocations from the U.S. and its NATO club.

Russian Interests

Putin is first and foremost a Russian patriot and pragmatist whose priorities, in addition to raising Russians' living standards, are the security and stability of the country.

Russia has a long history of invasions from all directions due to its lack of natural barriers like oceans and mountain ranges. In the Twentieth Century, it was invaded twice within a 25-year period by Germany. Some 27 million Soviet citizens, including 19 million civilians, perished in fighting off the Nazi Wehrmacht, leaving one-third of their country destroyed. By comparison, the U.S. lost approximately 405,000 and suffered no fighting or damage on its homeland. With this background, Soviet leader Gorbachev was understandably hesitant to allow a reunified Germany into NATO at the close of the Cold War.

By the time of the Malta meeting between Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush in December of 1989, the Berlin Wall had fallen and Washington had promised it would not "take advantage" of Gorbachev's decision to eschew using force to maintain control of Central/Eastern Europe. Two months later, Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker, negotiated a gentleman's agreement with Gorbachev that, in exchange for allowing a reunified Germany as a NATO member, NATO would not expand "one inch to the east."

Baker's argument was that NATO membership would have a restraining influence on a unified Germany as opposed to a militarily independent state. According to Viktor Kuvardin, an adviser to Gorbachev at the time, the Soviet leader did not press for the agreement in writing because he trusted Washington to abide by its promise.

Research by academic Mary Sarotte, published in the *Diplomatic History Journal* in 2010, which included interviews with participants and review of notes and other documentation from the meetings, indicates that American politicians' subsequent denials that such an agreement was made are disingenuous. A November 2009 investigation by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* came to the same conclusion.

After the Cold War, France and Germany believed that the best way to bring Russia into the Western fold and encourage its evolution as a democracy was through cooperation and gradual integration. But the U.S., which saw an intense lobbying campaign by the military-industrial complex and political pandering to certain constituencies, soon began pushing for NATO expansion as well as imposing neoliberal economic reforms, i.e., privatization of the economy and shrinking of the social safety net. Both policies were carried out under the pretext of spreading democracy and both have elicited strong resentment in

Russia.

Overtures to the West

During Putin's first two terms as president, he made overtures to the U.S. and NATO in the hopes of some reciprocity and acknowledgment of Russia's interests. For example, after the 9/11 attacks, Putin was the first world leader to call President George W. Bush to offer his condolences and support. His reasoning was two-fold: one, he saw the U.S. and Russia as having a mutual interest in fighting Islamist terrorism; second, he knew that he had a tall order in successfully addressing the many profound problems facing Russia at the time.

He would need to put as much time, energy and resources as he could muster into the project of rehabilitating his country, which meant not wasting them on unnecessary conflict with the world's lone superpower. Going against the advice of most of his security team, he provided logistical and intelligence support as well as access to military bases on behalf of the U.S. operation in Afghanistan.

In return for this assistance, Putin received the equivalent of a swift kick in the shins from the neoconservative Bush administration in the form of a unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to pursue a "missile defense shield" in 2002 and the accession of seven more nations of Eastern Europe into NATO in 2004. (Three others – Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic – had joined in 1999)

Seemingly undeterred, in 2008, Putin ordered the Russian Foreign Ministry to draft a proposal that Dmitry Medvedev took to Brussels, outlining a security plan that would cover all of the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, obviating the need for NATO's continued existence, much less its expansion.

The preamble stated that: "the use of force or the threat of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other way inconsistent with the goals and principles of the Charter of the United Nations is inadmissible in their mutual relations, as well as international relations in general."

It also reiterated the intent to cooperatively address any security concerns that may arise among members. The body of the document contains mechanisms for how concerns or breaches of security could be handled. This proposal was sent to the leaders of relevant nations as well as the heads of European Union, NATO and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, emphasizing that Russia was open to suggestions and negotiation on the plan.

Putin and Medvedev heard crickets in response to their proposal.

Ratcheting Up Tensions

Not long afterward, Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili, egged on by elements in Washington, staged a military incursion into South Ossetia, killing Russian peacekeepers and prompting a strong military response by Russia. The 2009 E.U. fact-finding report on the war between Georgia and Russia does not support the insistence by Washington and the corporate media that Russia started the war.

Five years later, Ukraine, a country where the southeastern area had historically been part of the Russian Empire and the central and western areas part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, became the flashpoint. The E.U., led by Germany, recklessly tried to pressure Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to sign an Association Agreement that contained terms that would be unwise for the leader of an already poor and divided nation on Russia's border to agree to. These included requirements that would result in major economic losses and a security clause that implied integration with NATO.

Again, elements from Washington engaged in provocations. A leaked phone call between Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland (a neoconservative from the Bush years whose rise at the State Department was facilitated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt revealed them discussing who would take over Ukraine's leadership several weeks before Yanukovich was illegally overthrown in a violent putsch on Feb. 22, 2014. Footage of Nuland handing out pastries to the protesters also surfaced.

Contrary to repeated claims by the West that the violence on the Maidan, especially sniper fire that killed both police and protesters on Feb. 20, 2014, was the result of Yanukovich's forces or even Russian provocateurs, several credible sources indicate that neo-fascist forces, such as Svoboda and Right Sector, had hijacked the Maidan movement and were the responsible parties.

The first source is Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet during an intercepted phone conversation dated Feb. 26, 2014 in which he reports to then-E.U. High Commissioner Catherine Ashton that his on-the-ground sources told him:

"What was quite disturbing, the same oligarch told that well, all the evidence shows that the people who were killed by snipers from both sides, among policemen and people from the streets that they were the same snipers, killing people from both sides. ... So that and then she [Dr. Olga Bolgomets] also showed me some photos, she said that as medical doctor, she can, you know, say that it's the same handwriting, the same type of bullets, and it's really disturbing that now the new coalition they don't want to investigate what exactly happened, so that now there is stronger and stronger understanding that behind the

snipers, it was not Yanukovich, but it was somebody from the new coalition.”

This assessment was later supported by an April 2014 investigation by Germany’s ARD TV. An even more in-depth forensic investigation undertaken by Dr. Ivan Katchanovksi, a Canadian academic whose family originally hails from western Ukraine, also concluded that neo-fascist elements of the Maidan movement were culpable.

These extremists had refused to abide by a Feb. 21, 2014 agreement hammered out by Poland, France, Germany and the Yanukovich government in which the latter had agreed to reduced powers and early elections. Interestingly, these European countries have never publicly explained why they abandoned their role as guarantors of the agreement as the violence of Maidan escalated when the putsch occurred the following day.

Considering that none of these three sources can plausibly be accused of being Putin apologists, it casts the West’s whole narrative of “Putin aggression” in a very different light, including the subsequent referendum in Crimea in which 96 percent of the voters favored seceding from Ukraine and rejoining Russia in spring 2014.

View from Crimea

When I visited the three Crimean cities of Simferopol, Yalta and Sevastopol, I had conversations with a cross-section of people, from cab drivers and bus riders to small business owners and participants in what is variously referred to by the locals as “The Crimean Spring” and “The Third Defense of Sevastopol.” I came away with three conclusions.

The first is that Crimeans, who are mostly ethnic Russians who speak Russian, were genuinely alarmed by the ultra-nationalist rhetoric and violence coming out of Kiev, which resulted in what they viewed as an illegal coup by extremist elements of the Maidan movement, supported by Washington.

As Tatyana, a professional tour guide in Yalta told me: “No one asked us if we wanted to go along with Maidan. There are Russians as well as people who are a mix of Russian and Ukrainian here. We are not against Ukraine as many of us have relatives there, but Maidan was not simply a spontaneous protest. We are aware of the phone call with Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt, we saw the photos of her with Yatsenyuk, Tiagnibok [leader of Svoboda, the neo-fascist group that was condemned by the E.U. in 2012], and Klitschko on television. We saw the images of her handing out cookies to the protesters.”

These extremists had attacked ethnic Russians from Crimea who had participated in anti-Maidan protests and the attackers were reportedly on their way into the

Crimean peninsula. As a result, Crimeans began to organize self-defense units to protect their communities.

Secondly, Crimeans did not necessarily think Russia would accept their requests for help. Crimea had been part of Russia from the time of Catherine the Great's reign in the Eighteenth Century. But during the Soviet era, Premier Nikita Khrushchev gifted Crimea to Ukraine.

Since both Russia and Ukraine were part of the Soviet Union at the time, this was not a problem. However, when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Crimea remained in Ukraine as an autonomous region, while the naval base at Sevastopol was retained by Russia via a lease with the Kiev government. Between 1991 and 2013, Crimeans had voted several times to be reunited with Russia, only to have their requests ignored.

Putin, as any Russian leader would have, viewed the events of February 2014 as a threat to Russia's naval base and only warm water port. Knowing that the Crimean population had repeatedly expressed its desire to be part of Russia, Putin decided on an operation to assist the native Crimeans in blocking both marauding ultra-nationalists and representatives of the coup government from interfering in activities that would facilitate Crimea's quick reintegration into Russia.

Support for Reunification

Crimeans told me that they knew the so-called "little green men" were Russian soldiers legally stationed at the naval base who had donned unmarked uniforms. They also told me that they viewed them as protectors who allowed them to peacefully conduct their referendum, not as invaders. Suggestions that these Russian soldiers had pressured them to vote at gunpoint were dismissed as ridiculous.

Third, Crimeans were very happy to be part of Russia. Though they acknowledged that there was still a lot of work to be done, they viewed the future with hope. These sentiments have been borne out in several Western opinion polls (Gallup, Pew, GfK, and Levada-Open Democracy) over the past two years.

When the topic of sanctions came up during a meeting with small business professionals in Simferopol, one of them stated, "We are suffering under the sanctions, but the sanctions will not make us go back to where we don't want to be. There are still many Crimeans willing to fight if it were to become necessary."

In a similar vein, one participant in the self-defense forces of Sevastopol, Nicolai Kachin, told me: "Sevastopol was the first city to rise up in Crimea. If residents hadn't stood up to defend themselves, war would be raging in Crimea

worse than in the Donbass.”

The Donbass is a region of southeastern Ukraine where Russian speakers had similar concerns. The West has typically characterized the Donbass rebels as puppets of Russia with no legitimate grievances or indigenous support. However, American Russia scholar Nicolai Petro, who spent a year in Ukraine and was in country when the upheaval occurred, has cited sociological surveys of Donbass residents from March, April and May of 2014 in which the results show that majorities considered the Right Sector to be dangerous and influential and the Maidan protests to be illegal and representing “an armed overthrow of the government, organized by the opposition, with the assistance of the West.”

Kiev’s subsequent decision to start an “anti-terrorist operation” against the Donbass region, instead of negotiating a resolution, has only hardened the view of Crimeans that their reunification with Russia was correct and saved them from a similar fate.

Alternative Approaches

One is left to wonder if this could have all been avoided if the West had engaged Russia in good faith on its proposal for a pan-western security architecture in 2008, instead of pushing what amounts to a very dangerous zero-sum game in Russia’s backyard. Attempts to press for the eventual inclusion of Ukraine (and Georgia) into NATO have been ongoing since at least the George W. Bush administration when Condoleezza Rice had a heated discussion with Putin about it during a meeting in 2006.

When Rice tried to assert that each country had the right to decide for itself which alliances to join, Putin explained that Ukraine had many ethnic and political divisions and that such a move could create instability in the country. Polling had reflected that the majority of Ukrainians at the time did not favor joining NATO. This, of course, was in addition to the fact that having a hostile military alliance right on its Western border was understandably perceived as a national security threat to Russia.

These points were reiterated in a conversation between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and then-Ambassador to Russia William Burns as reflected in a confidential cable to Washington from February 2008 titled “Nyet Means Nyet: Russia’s NATO Enlargement Red Lines.”

In the cable, Burns states that Russia warned that pushing Ukraine into NATO could provoke a civil war and that Russia would consequently have to decide whether to intervene or not – a decision Lavrov emphasized Russia did not want

to be faced with.

At a minimum, Washington needs to recognize what America's preeminent Russia expert, Stephen F. Cohen, has noted. That is that we need a pragmatic partnership with Russia if we are to have any hope of addressing the most pressing challenges facing humanity: nuclear disarmament, catastrophic climate change, terrorism and global inequalities that have become destabilizing.

If one studies Putin's speeches, along with major interviews, which are available in good English translations on the Kremlin website, one can deduce that Putin is an intelligent and rational actor who could be a partner to Washington in areas of mutual interest – as he has indeed demonstrated with respect to eliminating the Syrian government's chemical weapons and assisting in the Iran nuclear deal.

Putin has been clear and consistent for years that he requires Russia's interests to be taken into account, including its security. And this is as it should be. He was elected to represent and pursue Russia's interests, not to serve Washington if he gets nothing in return. Unfortunately, Western corporate media routinely quotes Putin out of context or pretends that it is impossible to understand him because of their cartoonish characterization of him as a "thug."

Challenges for Russia

Corruption

Corruption has been an intractable problem for centuries in Russia since the administrative state and its attendant tribute paying and harsh bureaucracy were established by the Mongols in the Thirteenth Century.

Indeed, it is one of the major issues Putin has publicly admitted he has failed so far to adequately resolve. Although there has been some progress as is reflected in Russia's rapid rise in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business scores and the Coopers Waterhouse findings for 2016 that Russia has reduced economic crime by 12 percent in the last two years, it is recognized by both Putin and the Russian public that substantially more needs to be done.

Political and Civil Rights

Russians can travel freely as long as they can afford it. Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists are generally free to worship as they please. There is little overt censorship and all the Russians I spoke to said they had access to Western media through both satellite and the Internet, although they all found it to be very distorted and inaccurate in its portrayal of their country and their leader. There is a variety of opinion represented in print media, and

even on pro-government Russian TV it is not unusual for a pro-Western viewpoint to be included on political talk shows.

There is still considerable room for improvement for journalists in Russia. However, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, deaths of journalists have actually gone down in the Putin era of governance compared to the Yeltsin era. One would be hard-pressed to know that judging by the way Western politicians and media have undertaken an over-the-top vilification campaign against Putin but gushed that Yeltsin was a “democrat.”

As for the fate of Anna Politkovskaya, the idea that Putin was behind her murder has been promiscuously bandied about in the West, but no evidence has ever been presented. Moreover, her employers at *Novaya Gazeta* believe the Chechen leadership was behind her death, not the Russian government. Those who carried out the murder have been convicted in Russian court and are now in prison, but it is troubling that whoever ordered it remains at large.

Civil society development has had a setback with the foreign agents law. While some civil society activists whom I spoke to acknowledged that Western provocateurs were a problem, there were many authentic NGO's that were being caught in the dragnet and the law is consequently viewed among them as a mistake that needs to be rectified. The Russian population in general is divided on this legislation. In response to some of the criticism, in May of this year, the Duma amended the law to exclude charities and cultural organizations.

There have still been some openings for modest civil society development. For example, an independent organization of citizens called the Public Council has developed since 2014 in the city of Krasnodar. It has successfully worked to get the local authorities to start taking the needs and desires of citizens into account when making decisions and enacting policies.

Among other things, they have stopped the destruction of old trees, buildings and parks as well as networked with youth groups and infrastructure specialists, including foreign experts in urban planning, public arts, transportation and city marketing. They have organized periodic cleanup and renovation days sponsored by local businesses that donate equipment, and are working to connect the city's hiking trails and protect its 16 lakes.

Not only have they received no opposition from Russian authorities, they have begun to gain positive recognition as well as interest from other Russian cities looking to replicate their model.

Another example is a civic education program to teach democracy skills to Russians designed by an independent American named Charles Heberle. The program

has been under implementation in a province near St. Petersburg and has had the quiet backing of the Putin government since the early 2000's.

As the French and Germans wisely recognized at the end of the Cold War, it would serve the goal of encouraging Russia's evolution toward more openness and democracy if their deep and historical fears of hostility, invasion and exploitation are not provoked. If given the time and space, without U.S. meddling, Russia will address its own internal problems and evolve into a system that will reflect its unique geography, culture and political history.

Natylie Baldwin is co-author of *Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard & How the West Was Checkmated*, available from Tayen Lane Publishing. In October of 2015, she traveled to 6 cities in the Russian Federation and has written several articles based on her conversations and interviews with a cross-section of Russians. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in various publications including Consortium News, Russia Insider, OpEd News, The New York Journal of Books, The Common Line, Santa Fe Sun Monthly, Dissident Voice, Energy Bulletin, Newtopia Magazine, and the Lakeshore. She blogs at natyliesbaldwin.com.
