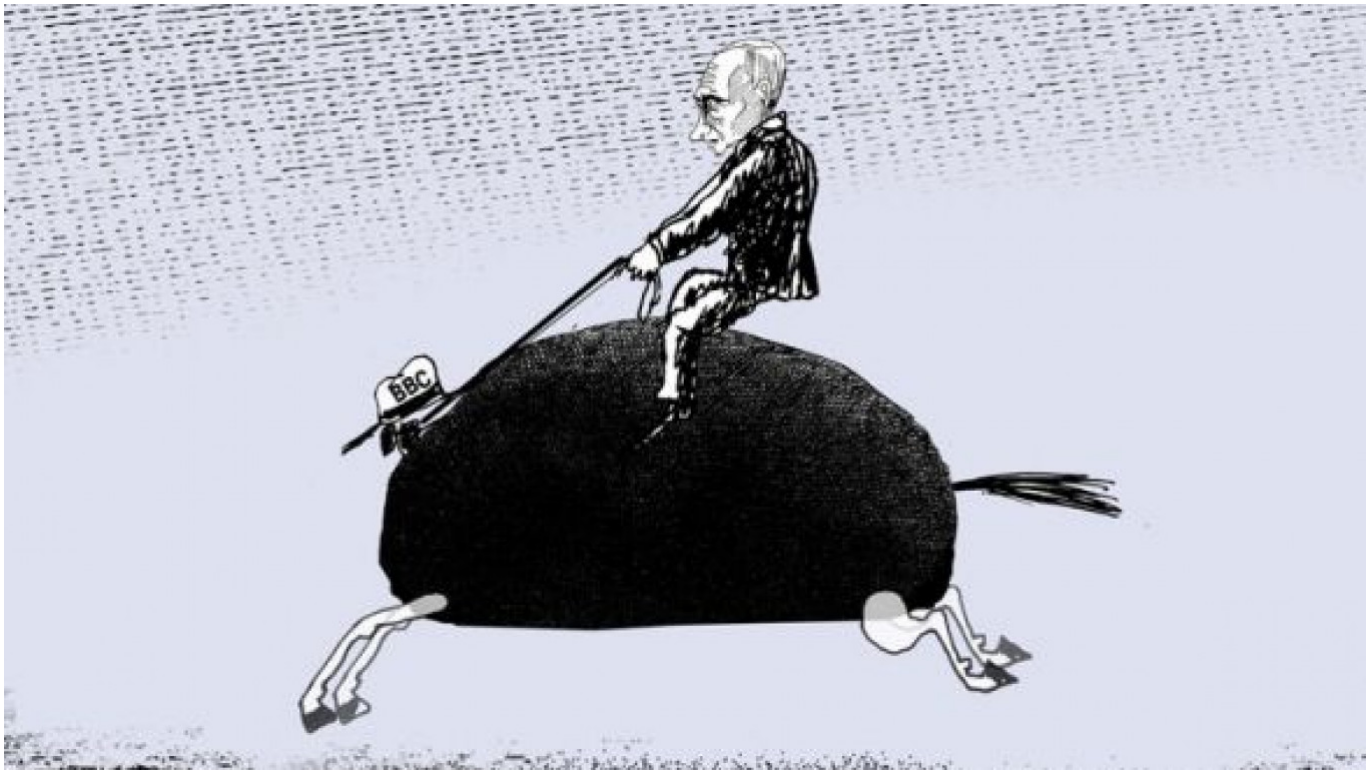
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British Spy Story Tailor-Made for an Election Year

By Victor Davidoff

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In 2006, an exposé about British "spy stones" in a film by pro-Kremlin television journalist Arkady Mamontov set off a media storm. The story was so advantageous for the Kremlin that many commentators suspected that the device was not real and that the whole story was a fabrication created to justify a government attack on nongovernmental organizations that were active in Russia. At the time, dozens of NGOs were barred from receiving foreign grants and simply disappeared. Several major foreign foundations were also forced to stop their activities in Russia.

Five years later, the notorious spy stones completed a complicated trajectory to return in the film "Putin, Russia and the West," shot for the BBC. In the film, Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's former chief of staff, indirectly admits that the devices were used by British intelligence services for contact with their agents.

On Jan. 19, the film was announced on the BBC's official site. In less than 72 hours, its footage became a part of a new Mamontov documentary, once again directed against Russia's political

opposition. As in 2006, the timing and message were suspiciously good for Putin. On his blog on Ekho Moskvy, well-known Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky wrote: "I don't have any doubt that this is an FSB operation. They deftly used the BBC film 'Putin, Russia and the West' to resurrect old propaganda just when mass demonstrations are going on in Moscow before the presidential election."

Bukovsky isn't the only one with doubts. Andrei Illarionov, Putin's former economic adviser and now his political opponent, wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "This whole story is like a game in which the public only knows part of the information. And it looks like a game with players other than the Russian authorities."

Popular LiveJournal blogger Anton Nosik even accuses the filmmakers of taking Russian state money through the PR agency Ketchum, which has a contract to "improve the image of Russia in the West." But he doesn't provide any evidence for this.

The film certainly does raise a number of questions. Its pro-Putin bias is clear. For example, in describing Putin's rise to power, the filmmakers make no mention of perhaps the most mysterious and important events that contributed to his consolidation of power — the bombing of apartment buildings in Moscow and other cities in 1999.

The film is also filled with factual errors. For example, it referred to a war waged against "Chechen rebel separatists," when in fact it was being carried out against the legitimate government of then-President Aslan Maskhadov, which was recognized by Moscow. Overall, the film buys into the Kremlin version of history: Putin came to power, put an end to the "chaos of the 1990s," took the country back from the oligarchs and gave Russians prosperity.

But you don't need conspiracy theories to explain this particular version of events. In the democratic West, there have always been people who have defended dictators, from Fidel Castro to Saddam Hussein. They didn't get paid from foreign bank accounts. They were simply left wing and anti-American.

The dominant theory among the left in the West is that Putin's anti-democratic crusade is a largely legitimate reaction to the hostile policies of the West, especially the United States. The BBC film follows this general guideline.

In Moscow, these theories are retranslated as official propaganda. The spy-stone episode takes up more than half of Mamontov's film, but the emphasis is on new accusations against the country's political opposition and human rights activists. The film shows the U.S. passport of veteran human rights activist Lyudmila Alexeyeva, which she was granted in 1981 after being stripped of Soviet citizenship. It also shows footage of a group of opposition leaders leaving the U.S. Embassy in Moscow after attending a meeting with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns. (In an interview with Kommersant last week, U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul said he co-hosted the meeting as a matter of protocol only and hardly said a word.)

Putin's propaganda machine is generating a wide variety of accusations against his political opponents. For example, Lifenews.ru called claimed that opposition leader Boris Nemtsov allegedly spent the New Year's holidays in Dubai with a call girl. Nemtsov was furious: The "call girl" turned out to be his companion of three years. "When someone calls my

girlfriend 'a prostitute,' to be honest, I want to bash him in the face," he wrote on his LiveJournal blog. He plans to sue the online tabloid for slander.

The new smear campaign against opposition leaders hints at the answer to the question most hotly debated these days: Will Putin 2.0 be more liberal than Putin 1.0? People who believe this is true cite the clear signs of liberalization after the recent protests. Those who don't believe it — including Bukovsky and Illarionov — think that this is just a tactical and very temporary maneuver, which will be followed by election fraud, crackdown and a longer-term policy of autocratic rule.

But signs point to a Putin 1.5. For a while, the Kremlin will be tightening some screws while loosening others. But that can't go on forever. How long it will go on and what will come afterward remain to be seen.

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