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U.S. Politics Caught in a 'Russian Trap'

By Maxim Trudolyubov

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Well-informed American friends once told me that a campaign that highlighted "getting along" with Russia and heaped praises on a Russian leader would be impossible in the United States. There is no constituency that wants it, I was told, and there are lots of constituencies that do not want it: Baltic, Polish, Ukrainian communities; former Cold Warriors among the punditry; and all kinds of people influenced by the bad press Russia habitually gets.

Russia becoming an issue on any major U.S. politician's agenda would be highly unlikely, I was told many times. U.S. overall trade turnover with Russia ($21 billion in 2015) was 30 times less than that with China and three times less than that with

Saudi Arabia. This is why Russia-related rhetoric is cheap and politicians can afford to be scathing without the fear of undermining any serious interests. As well, other foreign and domestic issues normally overshadow Russia for those competing for the White House.

The conventional wisdom about the role of Russia in American political campaigns now seems to be obsolete.

The Republican candidate Donald Trump has shattered the Republican orthodoxy on Russia, promising to get along with Moscow and heaping praise on Russian president Vladimir Putin. Russia looms increasingly large in this year's presidential campaign not just as a foreign policy theme but as a feared puppet master behind Trump and as an alleged perpetrator of the DNC computer network hack and other attempts to meddle with the American political process.

A conspiracy-toned discussion of an alleged connection between Donald Trump and the Kremlin, Russia's center of power, has quickly become mainstream. Andrew Rosenthal inquired in his New York Times column whether Trump is obsessed with Putin and Russia. Paul Krugman, a left-wing economist and a New York Times columnist, called Trump a "Siberian candidate." Hillary Clinton is running against Vladimir Putin, declared Jeffrey Goldberg, writing for the Atlantic. Franklin Foer's piece about Trump and his manager Paul Manafort's and foreign policy adviser Carter Page's dealings with Russian and Russian-speaking businessmen is headlined "Putin's Puppet."

All of this sounds endlessly ironic to a Russian who for years has been watching Russian political managers manipulate a threat of foreign intervention to put all independent players under effective control. The Russian opposition has long been demonized as "U.S. stooges." The Russian state has initiated legislation that allows it to label any NGO using foreign funding a "foreign agent." Moscow put a cap on foreign ownership of media companies, arguing that foreign publishers essentially represent foreign interests and influence Russian politics. Denouncing Putin's opponents, independent politicians, and even provocative singers and artists as the puppets of some hostile external force has been a daily routine for the Russian state-run media for many years now.

An additional layer of irony comes from the fact that Putin, at least publicly, has shown little interest in Trump. Putin has called Trump "colorful" (which Trump, using his "truthful hyperbole," blew up into "genius") and welcomed Trump's plan to restore Russian-American relations, that's basically it. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, has been

a subject of the Kremlin's passion and anger.
"She set the tone for some actors in our
country and gave them a signal," Putin once said. As pointed out by Steven Lee Myers and Neil MacFarquhar
in a recent piece for the
New York Times, Putin went on to
"accuse [Clinton] of engaging in 'active work,' an old term of art for covert
KGB operations." When she compared Russia's intervention in Ukraine to Hitler's moves in the 1930s, Putin said she had "never been too graceful with her statements."

The June hacker attack on the DNC servers looks like something that could be traced to the perpetrators, thus proving or refuting the Russian connection. On Monday the Federal Bureau of Investigation said it was
looking into the hacker attack
, the first
acknowledgment from the agency that it is probing the incident. Some commentators suggest that if Russia was behind the attack and did help leak the emails it was to get back at Clinton rather than to help Trump directly. It could be an attempt to "stir the pot," as Russia has done with the support of insurgent parties in Europe,
said Matthew Rojansky
, the
director of the Kennan Institute, when interviewed by the
New York Times. Putin, Rojansky
said, had to be aware that direct intervention could well backfire with American voters, especially those in swing states like Ohio and Pennsylvania with roots in Poland, Ukraine, or the Baltics.

The Russian political elite may indeed favor Trump, but this does not strike me as necessarily obvious. Trump may prove too disruptive even by Russian standards: his policies, if applied as advertised, may lead to regional conflicts and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, which is not in Russia's national interest, Vladimir Frolov, an astute commentator on Russian foreign policy,
wrote recently
.

What Moscow has already achieved is that it has made everybody believe that Putin supports Trump. This alone has proved sufficient to sow the dragon's teeth of suspicion and distrust on the American political field. The words "puppet," "agent," and "stooge" dot the pages of the American press, mostly the liberal press. I don't know whether the Kremlin even has a favorite in the U.S. elections, but I do know what Russia's ruling politicians love to watch. They love seeing others get caught in what one might call a "Russian trap": when others are caught doing the very thing they accuse Moscow of doing. They enjoy watching those who accuse Moscow of calling its opponents "foreign agents" do the same to their own political opponents. The same is true for accusations of corruption or the use of doping in sports. This proves Moscow's political creed beautifully: everyone is just like us, everything else is pretense.

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