

How Kremlin Media Covers the Hacking Scandal

The world according to Russian state television

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Sad news! Russian television's “chief propagandist,” Dmitry Kiselyov, is still on his winter holiday and thus unable to bring us his through-the-looking-glass version of world events this week. Without Kiselyov, Russian state TV news is somewhat less colorful. But The Moscow Times remains committed to its weekly roundups of how the Kremlin media covers global news and has gone ahead without him.

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Extreme temperatures in Russia trumped the world's number one story this week — Russian cyber-attacks during the U.S. presidential election — on state television. Editors were forced

to do something rare on state TV: cover local Russian news. ☒But let's be real: international affairs still stole the show. With 12 days to go until the inauguration of President Donald Trump, the focus soon shifted back to Washington and the accusations of electoral meddling Moscow faces.

Hacking? LOL.

State show Vesti, which airs on the state television channel Rossiya 1, opened with a segment titled "Trump Is Not Impressed," laughing off a report by Washington's Office of the Director of National Intelligence that concluded "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election." Vesti's anchor called American accusations against the Kremlin "nothing more than political double play."

After Snowden's revelations that the N.S.A. hacked a U.N. video conference and listened in on E.U. leaders — including Francois Hollande and Angela Merkel — he said that the report was the outgoing Obama administration's attempt to undermine a legitimately-elected leader.

The show invited Margarita Simonyan, the American-educated editor-in-chief of the Kremlin-funded international television channel RT, to comment on the report's findings. U.S. agencies had concluded that her channel was aggressively producing pro-Trump content and thus contributing to Russian state-sponsored interference. Speaking on the phone to Vesti, Simonyan said the report lacked "elementary sourcing," was using "badly translated articles" and "taking facts from years ago and portraying them as new." When the report was released on Friday, Simonyan tweeted: "Aaaah, the C.I.A. report came out! It's the laugh of the year! The main proof of Russian influence on American elections is my show from six years ago. I'm not joking!"

Other pro-Kremlin commentators in Russia's state media also took to Twitter to laugh off the report. "First Obama introduces sanctions against Russia for a "cyber attack" and then the secret services prepare a report. Looks idiotic," wrote Vladimir Solovyov, the host of a daily talk show on Russian television. In contrast, Kremlin pundits cheered the president-elect when he tweeted that "having a good relationship with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing. Only 'stupid' people, or fools, would think that is bad!"

On the whole, state television shrugged off the accusations and told Russians not to worry. Discussions on the cyber attacks, Vesti's anchor said, were only really happening in Democrat circles. And that party, according to them, has been reduced to a joke — so much so that it hired Moscow-born tech expert Dmitry Alperovitch, whom Vesti's anchor described as "Russophobic" and close to anti-Russian Ukrainian oligarchs, to advise it on cyber security.

According to Russian television, the American media establishment is "beginning to admit" that accusations of hacking are a "show" controlled by the outgoing Obama administration with the aim of putting pressure on the legitimately elected new president in order to harm relations with Russia. For the moment, Vesti says, it has had "the opposite effect."

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Psst, G.I. Joe, You're a 'Human Shield' for the Balts

Russian media also reported on the fresh deployments of American troops to Eastern Europe. Channel One, another government TV channel, said U.S. soldiers were greeted with protests as they traveled from Germany to Poland. "NATO has stopped pretending that its aim is to flex its muscles against Russia," said the news presenter.

The deployment of the troops, according to the report, was timed on purpose. "It is no coincidence that Obama has fast-forwarded moving American soldiers to Europe," said the Channel One anchor. According to him, this was supposed to be the job of the new president, but as Trump "does not believe" the hacking stories and the "hysterically Russophobic" Eastern Europeans, Obama chose to jeopardize the president-elect's Russia policy right before his departure.

"The Balts and Poles feel calmer when American tanks are standing nearby," said the news anchor. He then asked: "I wonder whether American soldiers feel calmer knowing that the Balts and Poles see them as a human shield?"

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Victorious, But Uncertain

Russian television's news reports suggest Moscow is feeling optimistic about a potential new relationship with the U.S., but Kremlin media still shows some skepticism as to exactly what kind of approach the new man in the White House will choose. "Some Republicans," Vesti's Washington correspondent reminded viewers, "still favor a hard approach on Russia."

On Sunday, Trump's incoming chief of staff, Reince Priebus, told Fox News that the president-elect is taking seriously U.S. intelligence reports blaming Moscow for cyber-attacks on U.S. institutions. It was the first time a senior member of Trump's entourage admitted possible Russian interference in the recent presidential election.

Trump's team says it will announce its policy and what to do about the cyber attacks after Trump's inauguration. So Moscow, like the rest of the world, will have to wait until Jan. 20.

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