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No Beacon On the Hill: Trump's Win in the Mirror of the Soviet Collapse

There is one fundamental difference between the crisis of the communist system and today's crisis of the liberal democratic order.

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Yelena Kenunen / TASS

Western mainstream media and centrist politicians are losing influence, the old left-right divide is in decline, the ranks of the critics of some decades-old policies and institutions of the West are swelling.

Moscow has started wars, initiated disinformation campaigns, and undertaken hacking missions throughout the world. Moscow has run a roster of propaganda outlets and has supported disruptive political forces in other countries.

Is there a connection between the two sets of facts? Could the latter even be seen as the reason for the former? There has been so much talk about a possible cause-and-effect link between Russian meddling and recent political changes in the West that when U.S. security officials declared they actually knew something about it, their statements sounded bland and unimaginative. (As if they were supposed to sound imaginative: I'd bet Russia's intelligence reports, were they declassified, would sound as dull).

There is no doubt that the declassified version of the report presented last week by the office of the Director of U.S. National Intelligence is based on real facts. It is the historical context that makes it sound underwhelming.

The report has the Russian president Vladimir Putin order an influence campaign aimed at the U.S. and sees Moscow as attempting to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process and denigrate Secretary Clinton.

All true. More than that, as a Russian, I would say that Russia's state-run media rarely do anything but engage in attempts to denigrate Western leaders and undermine public trust in institutions (and not just American institutions, for that matter). This is what Moscow's media do on a daily basis because the Kremlin considers the institutions of the West hostile and uses all available policy tools to retaliate. And yes, the Kremlin thinks the media are policy tools, and is convinced everybody else thinks so too.

The U.S. intelligence assessment mentions Russian news media highlighting "a lack of democracy" in America, excessive surveillance, police brutality, and other injustices. "Not only are these perfectly legitimate subjects for journalism, but these are also the mainstay themes of American reporting on Russia," writes Kevin Rothrock, web editor at the Moscow Times, an independent English-language publication in Moscow.

The way the Kremlin has always reacted to reports about corruption or arbitrary police rule, or the state of Russia's penal institutions, is by generating similar reports about the West. Whatever the other party says the answer is always the same: "Look who's talking." This age-old technique, dubbed "whataboutism," is in essence an appeal to hypocrisy; its only purpose is to discredit the opponent, not to refute the original argument.

Moscow politicians consider smear campaigns legitimate instruments of both domestic and international politics. Moscow does not even pretend to play by some rules of gentlemanly conduct. The problem with accusing Russia of undertaking campaigns to delegitimize the opponent is that Moscow's ruling politicians are convinced the West has used similar tools for decades and that Russia has just been responding in kind.

And it is not just the Russians who look at it this way. "The Russians are not trying to bring down the U.S. government. They're trying to delegitimize it. This is upsetting," wrote Ian Bremmer, president of Eurasia Group, in an astute observation. "But we do it to them too."

The interesting question is, why did these methods work this time—if they did work? The Soviet Union used this approach throughout its history but somehow was a lot less successful at it than post-Soviet Russia. One has to keep in mind that the people who are now running Russia and its security agencies have lived through an ordeal of watching their political system collapse. They have been learning from their victorious opponents ever since,

including from the successful U.S. intelligence operations of Cold War fame.

Russia's rulers are of course convinced that smart intelligence work did play a major role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. And, of course, thoughts of a payback did enter their minds more than once.

But being who they are—intelligence officers by training—they exaggerate the role smart operatives and their expertise play in social and political life. The USSR did not collapse because the U.S. government sent spies into it and supported alternative news and culture. The Soviet Union went down because its own citizens lost all trust in aging Soviet politicians and the kind of political system they represented. Soviet society of the 1970s and 1980s was consumed with self-doubt.

In the same vein, one can hardly believe that a combination of overt and covert special operations, of trolling and hacking can influence an election in a country of 320 million population that is a 200-year-old democracy. The West's and the U.S. political turbulence is far too complex a process to be caused by propaganda campaigns or hacking missions. The tools used by Moscow are not unique and are hardly crucial to what is going on.

There is one fundamental difference between the crisis of the communist system and today's crisis of the liberal democratic order. There was a "beacon on the hill" back then, and there seems to be no such thing now. Many of those who supported radical political reforms in Russia 25 years ago saw the U.S. as an example of a political system from which there was a lot to learn. If not the U.S. itself and its policies, then U.S. institutions, their long traditions and effectiveness, their ability to act independently from the executive, were and still are the envy of many in Russia.

It is not the ability of security agents, let alone propagandists, to meddle with U.S. institutions that is truly alarming. What truly begs explanation, at least from the standpoint of a citizen of the benign authoritarian regime that is today's Russia, is how it happened that trust in some of the institutions we thought so crucial became eroded. The press, the central bank, government scientists (particularly those involved in the global warming controversy) and intelligence agencies, even the artistic community (see the latest exchange between Meryl Streep and Donald Trump) all came under pressure.

What I personally will be watching for in U.S. politics in the new year and beyond is the ability of the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the legislature, self-organized groups, and other institutions of society to stand up to the executive and prove that political power does not need to flow vertically to be efficient.

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