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That Whole Showdown With America Was Obama's Fault

Russian TV Propaganda Does a U-Turn on Anti-Americanism

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Pixabay, edited by The Moscow Times

Following the phone call this Saturday between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, Russian state television completely abandoned its trademark anti-Americanism.

The readout published on the Kremlin's official website was curt but unusually warm. Donald Trump, it said, "asked to convey his wishes of happiness and prosperity to the Russian people, saying that the American people have warm feelings towards Russia and its citizens." Putin, not mincing words, "emphasized that the feeling is mutual, adding that for over two centuries Russia has supported the United States, was its ally during the two world wars, and now sees the U.S. as a major partner in fighting international terrorism."

Even by the Kremlin's standards, the readout was vague about the actual content of the phone call, which was Trump's first direct contact with Putin since entering the White House.

Despite the scarcity of details, the Kremlin did convey the gist of the conversation, and Russia's state propaganda machine promptly followed the cues, reversing years of anti-American punditry on a dime: Oceania has never been at war with Eurasia, TV show hosts now explained. Russia has always been friends with the U.S. — never mind that talking heads have until now been busy whipping up anti-Western and specifically anti-American hysteria.

Barack Obama, Moscow's great bogeyman, is still a ghostly presence on Russian television's flagship news show hosted by Dmitry Kiselyov, the Kremlin's so-called "chief propagandist," who began Sunday's episode by declaring the arrival of the "anti-Obama" and explaining that "Donald Trump is fulfilling his election promises and getting rid of Obama's pathetic legacy."

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This has been the rallying cry of Russia's political establishment, ever since Trump managed to defeat Hillary Clinton by winning the Electoral College: thanks to Obama's policies, his administration, and his very personality, the former president is to blame for the deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations. Luckily, the story goes, Donald Trump will fix all that, and hopes run high that he will soon lift U.S. sanctions against Russia, and perhaps even order joint airstrikes in Syria and recognize Moscow's annexation of Crimea.

Flattering Russians who've cheered the Kremlin's enhanced international role, Kiselyov said the Putin-Trump phone call was one of the most anticipated global events in recent memory. The TV pundit then spent minutes dissecting a photograph taken in the Oval Office, presumably during Trump's conversation with Putin, speculating about Rex Tillerson's conspicuous absence in the room, suggesting that Trump held him back because he hasn't yet been confirmed by the Senate as secretary of state.

Kiselyov then at length identified all the men who were in the room, offering a lesson in presidential personnel that is probably more detailed than anything ever aired about the people who work alongside Vladimir Putin. Each got a terse but approving assessment by Kiselyov: "General Flynn. Opposed the military ouster of Bashar Assad. Visited Moscow. Held negotiations with Russian counterparts. Was invited to RT's 10th anniversary, where he met Putin." Reince Priebus, Trump's chief of staff, got a special mention for being an Orthodox Christian.

The phone call, it turns out, lasted just 45 minutes — and the actual conversation was even shorter, given the time interpreters needed to facilitate the back and forth. It wasn't nearly enough to cover the "enormity" of the challenges facing Russia and the U.S., Kiselyov explained.

In the next segment, titled "Trump and the Press," Kiselyov rushed valiantly to defend Donald Trump from the "immoral" reporters "clawing" at him "on the smallest pretense." Kiselyov, the head anchor on a television network infamous for its hatchet jobs disguised as "journalistic investigations," said that the U.S. media has "declared an all-out war" on the

45th president.

For example, take the sad fate of Barron Trump, the president's 10-year-old son: the media won't leave him alone, despite the White House's appeals to the First Family's privacy rights. NBC's Katie Rich apologized for joking that Barron might become America's "first home-schooled shooter," but she was fired anyway. The New York Times was compelled to apologize to its readers for its "unacceptable" coverage of the presidential race, Kiselyov claimed, apparently forgetting that he himself once had to apologize for presenting a hastily forged Nazi document as proof of nefarious plans by the Ukrainian government.

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Not content with chiding the conspiring American media, Kiselyov then turned to the "Hollywood celebrities" "praised to high heaven" by the media "for not doing a song or dance for Trump." But the battle fatigue is showing, Kiselyov noted happily. Why, the pundit asked, did 73-year-old actor Robert de Niro humiliate himself in front of a large crowd by reading from a piece of paper — as if using a "crib sheet" to get away with "not doing his homework"?

The show also drew attention to former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's announcement that she "stands ready to register as Muslim out of solidarity," but it mistranslated her pledge as a promise to "convert to Islam."

Embed:

> So @madeleine said she is "ready to register as Muslim in solidarity," and Kisleyov's show translated this as "ready to convert to Islam." ◙ pic.twitter.com/kDLWGHAkMu
>
> — Kevin Rothrock (@KevinRothrock) January 30, 2017

Meanwhile Donald Trump is on the offensive, Kiselyov continued. The White House's team is not abandoning its idea of "diluting" the "elite" D.C. press corps with radio show hosts and bloggers. The mainstream journalists, Kiselyov said, have so far been too entrenched, but now they will feel the "fresh breath" of a larger media community and even the entire Internet, where social media users, he said, have often been critical of the media's "provocations" against Trump.

After all, Kiselyov said, scathing articles in the press and protests in the streets do not accurately reflect the real state of affairs. For such "truth," the Russian pundit argued, you need to look at the Dow Jones Index, which hit the 20,000 mark in Trump's first week in office.

Donald Trump's adversaries are many, viewers are told. His enemies are trying to paint him as the enemy of an entire religion, which is how protesters are depicting the new president.

Who are the people behind these rallies? According to Kiselyov's show, it is the mayors of sanctuary cities that simply need "cheap labor" and "informers" embedded in America's "ethnic ghettos."

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By this point in the show, Kisleyov's show had spent 30 minutes of its two-hour broadcast covering Trump's first week in office — even more than the show devoted to Vladimir Putin's first week back in the Kremlin, after he began his third term as president in 2012.

Putin's return five years ago ushered in a new era in Russia's news media, elevating propagandists like Kiselyov to positions of enormous influence. For years, Russia's prime-time television shows depicted Barack Obama as the personification of everything wrong about the United States, and Donald Trump's apparent rejection of American "messianism" has made him Obama's long-awaited Manichaean opposite.

After raising the bar of rabid anti-Americanism impossibly high, TV pundits like Kiselyov are visibly relieved simply to write off the whole conflict as an ex-president's legacy, and to start praising Trump with the fervor once reserved for deriding Barack Obama.

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