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Ukraine, Not Russia, Hacked the U.S. Elections, Kremlin Propaganda Reveals

Despite some signs of buyer's remorse, Russian pundits are still defending Trump and now looking to Europe

By Alexey Kovalev

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Pixabay, edited by The Moscow Times

After obsessing over Donald Trump's presidency for the past two weeks, Russian TV propaganda shifted its coverage noticeably this Sunday, signaling a new foreign policy agenda in Moscow. Ukraine has returned to the headlines, and television pundits are once again mounting a coordinated, aggressive campaign against the EU, propping up Russia's allies and undermining its rivals.

On every major Russian TV network, the leading story this Sunday evening was Ukraine, where renewed hostilities in the Donbas have rekindled war-zone coverage. Dmitry Kiselyov,

the flamboyant host of "Vesti Nedeli," declared Ukraine "the hottest spot in Europe." All the atrocities committed so far in Ukraine's "civil war," Kiselyov said, are the work of the Ukrainian Army and its allies in the "Nazi volunteer battalions."

Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, another favorite bugbear on Russian television, also came in for criticism: they're clueless foreigners who don't understand the locals and turn a blind eye to the blood spilled by Kiev's armed forces, Kiselyov told viewers.

Despite the Ukrainian military's rising casualties, Kiselyov warned that the recent spike in violence is playing into President Poroshenko's hands. The more frostbitten corpses Kiev abandons on the battlefield, the more money pours in from the West, and the more favors Poroshenko can expect from hawks in the United States.

Related article: Russian State TV Praises Trump for Avoiding 'Democracy' in Inauguration Speech

Though focus this week shifted away from Donald Trump, Ukraine's relationship with the White House still got major attention on Russian TV, thanks in part to Vladimir Putin, who raised the subject last Thursday at a joint press conference in Budapest with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Poroshenko, Putin said, failed to hedge his bets by investing all his efforts in electing Hillary Clinton. Now Ukraine's leader is struggling to come to terms with the Trump administration, Putin said.

Inspired by the Russian president's damning remarks, Dmitry Kiselyov naturally took the rhetoric to the next level, declaring that it wasn't Russia that interfered in America's election, but Ukraine! He then described in detail a largely inconsequential subplot to the U.S. presidential race: the so-called "Manafort ledger," which alleged financial ties between the pro-Russian Party of Regions and Trump's then campaign chairman, Paul Manafort. The leak cost Manafort his position but barely made a dent in Trump's ratings.

Embed:

> Anyone remember the "Manafort ledger"? According to Russian TV, it was no less than "New Watergate". pic.twitter.com/Q7tw0PB5IO
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) 6 февраля 2017 г.

Most Americans probably don't even remember the Manafort scandal, but Kiselyov told his audience that it was "the New Watergate," claiming U.S. security agencies conspired with Ukrainian lobbyists to undermine Trump's campaign, while Kiev's own intelligence community pushed the "Russian hackers" allegations into the mainstream media's narrative.

Kiselyov then argued that "PropOrNot," a shady group of anonymous experts who blacklist media outlets supposedly in league with Russian propaganda, was modeled on "Mirotvorets" (The Peacemaker), a notorious Ukrainian website that has "doxxed" journalists working in Ukraine's embattled east. To support his argument, Kiselyov enlisted the unlikely help of Adrian Chen's investigation, published in The New Yorker, which cast doubt on PropOrNot's claims of expertise and criticized the U.S. media's initial embrace of the project.

The irony that his investigation had become ammunition for the Kremlin's "chief propagandist" was not lost on Chen:

Embed:

> I heard you like propaganda so I put propaganda about propaganda in your propaganda. https://t.co/vSbeb0Mubq
>
> — Adrian Chen (@AdrianChen) February 5, 2017

Russia's Sunday television punditry wasn't all about beating up on Ukraine, however. The European Union got slapped around, too. Piggybacking on Putin's recent visit to Budapest, Russian TV praised Hungary's leader Viktor Orban's pivot towards Moscow.

The television coverage looked coordinated, with all major networks taking the same approach to the same stories, vox-popping an "ordinary Hungarian man" (every channel was careful to choose a different one) who dutifully denounced the "immoral and counterproductive" sanctions against Russia, while praising the prospects for renewed Russian-Hungarian business ties.

The characters who popped up on Sunday were cherry picked to tug at viewers' heartstrings. Vesti Nedeli used a worker at a poultry factory, while hawkish Senator Alexei Pushkov's show "Postscriptum" found an elderly shopper in Budapest who, speaking in charmingly broken Russian, recalled the good old days when Socialist Hungary could export pork and goose meat to the Soviet Union.

On all networks, this nostalgic moment was also an opportunity to criticize the EU. Postscriptum called Hungary "a lone island of common sense in the Russophobic sea of the EU." With his typical aversion to subtlety, Dmitry Kiselyov aired a banner reading, in Russian, "Is the Euro FUBAR?"

Embed:

> "Euro FUBAR?", asks Russian TV. pic.twitter.com/L9I0WSmWbs
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) 5 февраля 2017 г.

Pundits characterized the European Union as an ineffective bureaucracy overflowing with migrants and weak, bickering leaders. Kiselyov went on to describe the French presidential elections as "the dirtiest campaign in France's history," and other TV hosts prominently used the latest Wikileaks revelations to portray Marine Le Pen's competitors in an unflattering light. Francois Fillon is corrupt and near dropping out of the race, elevating Emmanuel Macron to the second spot in national polls. But the young and promising Macron is a former Rotschild bank employee, Kiselyov warned, and "an appointee of the globalist elite" and probably a closeted homosexual — all three an anathema to the conspiracy-prone, anti-Semitic and homophobic demographic that also happens to love Kiselyov's television show.

Facing creeps like these, Marine Le Pen shines as a pro-Moscow, anti-NATO and anti-EU heroine, and Russian television makes it abundantly clear that she is the Kremlin's preferred candidate. Channel One also dedicated significant airtime to propping up similar populist politicians and parties elsewhere, like Hungary's Jobbik nationalist movement and the Italian regionalist political party Lega Nord. Valery Fadeev, who hosts "Times on Sunday," also slammed Germany, accusing it of cozying up to the U.S. to protect its privileged position in the EU.

Related article: Trump Facing Down 'Coup D'Etat,' Says Russian State Media

Donald Trump took a backseat this week, but Russian television still shielded him from attacks by "the biased media" and "that sore loser George Soros, who wages a civil war against Trump."

Still, though, the first signs of "Trumpgrets" are beginning to show.

Voskresnoe Vremya's Valery Fadeev criticized Trump's "Muslim ban" for being "badly written and clumsily implemented" and the "first major blow to the new administration." Postscriptum's Alexei Pushkov took issue with Trump's envoy to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, who in her very first statement to the Security Council called Crimea "a part of Ukraine" and vowed to keep sanctions in place until the peninsula is returned to its rightful sovereign.

Related article: Trump's UN Ambassador Condemns Russia for Ukraine 'Aggression'

In an impressive feat of rhetorical acrobatics, however, Pushkov still found a way to reconcile Haley's heretical notion with Moscow's enduring admiration for Donald Trump, theorizing that her remarks were actually penned by her predecessor, Samantha Power, Barack Obama's "red-headed hysterical Russia-hater." Maybe, Pushkov wondered hopefully, Haley's hostility was just an homage to diplomatic continuity.

Other channels praised Trump's "Muslim ban" and mocked its opponents, with Kiselyov cropping Madeleine Albright's photograph to depict the former secretary of state in a niqab, "which would be a good fit for her," he said.

All Russian TV channels last week also valiantly defended Donald Trump and his supporters from "leftist troublemakers." Kiselyov's show came out in support of Breitbart's Milo

Yiannopoulos, whose appearance at UC Berkeley was cancelled after violent protests. Kiselyov conveniently failed to mention that Yiannopoulos' open homosexuality and occasional crossdressing would put him at risk of a criminal conviction for "illegal gay propaganda" in Russia.

Embed:

> Next on Vesti Nedeli: defending poor Milo from "aggressive leftists". No mention that Milo is a walking sentence for "homosexual propaganda" pic.twitter.com/MGvhJA2jPd
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) 5 февраля 2017 г.

Kiselyov also welcomed Trump's tweet denouncing the "professional anarchists, thugs and paid protesters" supposedly bent on derailing his presidency. Pushkov's show took it one step further and repeated, almost word for word, the allegations published in U.S. conservative media like The Daily Caller, claiming that George Soros personally engineered the mass protests following Trump's inauguration last month.

Given its firm conviction that any public demonstration against the Kremlin's interests is a phony, staged event, it's only natural that Russian propaganda embraces the way America's new president dismisses his critics. Pushkov even called Soros a "sore loser," echoing Trump, who obsesses over "winning."

And there's a greater irony when it comes to George Soros' supposed role in America today: Moscow has blamed Soros for all the destructive upheavals that have swept Russia's periphery in the past two decades — the dreaded "color revolutions" in Yugoslavia, Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Now, Russian television pundits report gleefully, the U.S. is also getting a taste of this poison.

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