

The Perils of Overestimating Putin

The West's worries over where Putin will strike next is playing right into his hands.

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Vladimir Putin / Kremlin.ru

From Brexit, to the rise of the far right and everything in between, some Western commentators are eager to pin every negative turn in the United States or Europe on Vladimir Putin. And yet, some recent actions orchestrated by Moscow suggest that Russia may not be as all-powerful as Europe and the U.S. increasingly believe it to be.

The poisoning of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, the hacking of anti-doping agencies and a cyber attack in the Hague, not to mention the U.S. presidential election interference have all contributed to a growing paranoia about Vladimir Putin's capabilities. Accordingly, hyper-anticipation of Putin's next moves permeate the Russia-related narratives in the west.

Paradoxically, this is playing straight into Putin's hands.

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On more than one occasion, Kremlin-funded media have spun Russophobia in the West as further “evidence” of why the United States and Europe cannot — and should not — be trusted. This tactic has also allowed news anchors who parrot the Kremlin line to expertly shift criticism from the Russian authorities back onto the West.

It is possible that Putin's regime benefits from the resurgence of these Cold War stereotypes. The revival of the “us” vs. “them” paradigm implicitly elevates Russia to a global superpower again.

When the West attributes its problems to the hidden hand of the Russian leader, it fails to take actions to address the root of the problem. For example, following the 2016 U.S. election, in which Russia intervened and very possibly changed the outcome, Americans focused almost exclusively on Moscow's role and completely ignored all the other ways that the elections are poorly administered, discriminatory and undemocratic.

This led Americans to be unprepared for problems of voter suppression, poor ballot design and inefficient counting procedures that very likely impacted the outcome of key races in the U.S. states of Florida, Georgia and elsewhere in the 2018 midterm elections. It turns out that Russia was not as involved in our elections this time around, leaving the American people to make a mess of them by themselves.

It has been nearly two decades since Western journalists began asking: "Who is Mr. Putin." Yet, the question remains unanswered. Or, rather, the question has been answered in too many ways. It has morphed into whether the West underestimates or instead overestimates Mr. Putin, as well as Russia more generally.

The answer varies based on the specific actions conducted by his regime in the near abroad and the global arena i.e. There is no clear-cut, one-size-fits-all approach to the former FSB chief. The Putin phenomenon may persist simultaneously as one of the most oversimplified, yet overanalyzed and overestimated topics of Western liberal discourse.

Ironically, there is also danger in blatantly underestimating Putin, as Barack Obama sometimes did. The former U.S. president believed that the mere act of Russia flexing its muscle abroad stemmed not from a place of strength but rather an array of deep-seated weaknesses dating back to the Soviet era, and the more recent instability and chaos of the 1990s.

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Putin has invested considerable energy and resources into countering this view. He has aimed to demonstrate that even though the West may not accept or respect Russia as an equal power, it will be forced to take Russia into account.

Putin has replaced his earlier efforts to win the respect of Euro-Atlantic alliances with

igniting fear in them while trying to reassert Russia's "great power" status. As his messianic mission to reclaim Russia's greatness continues to dictate many of Kremlin's actions both at home and abroad, the constant ebb and flow of Russophobia in the U.S. will ultimately help, not hinder, the Putin regime.

Overestimating the Kremlin's role on the world stage through a lens colored by anti-Russia sentiments will continue to cloud America's ability to see the real chinks in Russia's armor. It will also ensure that the United States turns blind eye to critical issues on the domestic front.

Instead of over-analyzing Putin, it may be more productive for the United States to focus on its internal divisions and frail political institutions. In the long run, these issues will likely prove to be a more dangerous weapon in causing a rift in American society, with or without Russia's malignant interference.

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