The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The U.S. Needs a Post-Mueller Reality Check

The conspiracy narrative wasn't borne out. Now Americans should dismiss the idea of a Russian "hybrid war."

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March 31, 2019

Kremlin.ru

In "Gruffalo," Julia Donaldson's children's book, an enterprising mouse casts an oversized shadow to scare a powerful but naive monster. It's clear now that the myth of a Donald Trump-Vladimir Putin conspiracy presented the Russian president as an exaggerated threat, when he is more of a mouse. American Russia watchers should be looking for other mistakes of this kind.

The concept of a Russian "hybrid war," fought simultaneously with weapons, cyber intrusions and propaganda, is a good place to start this reappraisal.

The conspiracy theory about Trump as a Russian asset was grotesque and implausible, the plot of a cheap Cold War-era spy thriller. The narrative was built on the shakiest of foundations: A retired British spy's unattributed fantasies, an obscure Russian lawyer's lobbying efforts in the U.S. on behalf of her client, a real estate project that never even got as far as serious discussions and, most recently, on a campaign manager's decision to share some polling data with a Russian national.

Yet serious people chose to believe it, as they once believed in the might of the Soviet empire. As the Soviet Union fell apart, I remember many conversations with American visitors astounded to discover how wrong they'd been once they saw how much of the giant's supposed power had been a Potemkin village.

I'm not sure Americans were all that easy to deceive then or now, though: It just fit certain political agendas to see Russia as a mighty adversary.

That's the case with the "hybrid war" narrative, too: It sustains an industry of information warriors. But the narrative is as flawed as the conspiracy theory of Trump as a Russian asset was.

It's easy to determine that Russia never adopted a "hybrid war" strategy. Chief of General Staff General Valery Gerasimov has only spoken, time and time again, of the need to respond to a putative Western hybrid assault, including with information warfare and economic pressure to complement military force.

But in saying that, Gerasimov has himself been pushing a conspiracy theory popular with the Kremlin —that the U.S. is trying to engineer regime change in Russia by various means, including a "fifth column."

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American Russia watchers don't need to buy the inversion of that Russian conspiracy theory that makes Russia the hybrid villain.

It's worth entertaining the idea that some hostile actions by Russia — including social network trolling by a private but pro-Kremlin team of hirelings, hacking by a group of military intelligence officers, military and paramilitary activity in Ukraine, disinformation by state-owned media, the operation in Syria — aren't really part of a coordinated effort.

It's time, perhaps, to take another look at the Russia analyst Mark Galeotti's concept of "adhocracy" – a chaotic set-up in which various "policy entrepreneurs" propose or even do things they think might please Putin because they are in line with his broad vision of Russia's role in the world.1

These attempts to ingratiate can range from the 2016 trolling operation in the U.S. to efforts at creating back channels to improve the Russian-U.S. relationship (the mission of Maria Butina, the gun activist and graduate student who is to be sentenced next month in the U.S. for serving as an unregistered Russian agent, falls into that category).

Even the military, and especially military intelligence, can act "entrepreneurially." These

efforts sometimes damage Putin's cause and backfire for Russian national interests. The accidental downing of the Malaysian passenger airliner over eastern Ukraine in 2014 is a tragic example of such a misbegotten initiative.

It could be useful to view Russian actions toward the U.S. and the West in general as multivector, chaotic, competitive, ad hoc and opportunistic. Putin's underlying vision of the West as an adversary and Russia as a fortress might be compellingly simple, but the impulses it brings to life aren't.

Some of Russia's actions might not even be hostile but are aimed at bridge-building and much-needed day-to-day deconfliction. Others, like the ham-handed trolling or the clumsy state propaganda, don't deserve the seriousness with which they are treated (that seriousness is matched only by the Kremlin's often comic suspicion of Western platforms and media).

Other measures, like the hacking, can be countered with generic cybersecurity, and have nothing to do with fighting off a monumental Russian threat: It doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things if Russian military intelligence steals those emails or a 14-year-old hacker does (and shops them to Russian, Chinese, North Korean and any other spies, or just to Wikileaks).

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There can be no holistic approach to tackling all of these various challenges, especially not without missing the hopeful, and potentially useful, attempts to establish more normal communication.

A united front is only needed where real, lethal wars are fought — Ukraine, for one, needs the West's continued support to stay on a European path. Putin's nuclear weapons-rattling deserves close attention, too.

But in the U.S., other parts of Russia's supposed hybrid strategy have been blown out of proportion and seen as part of an evil plan that's as unlikely to exist as a criminal Trump-Putin conspiracy always was. In the post-Russiagate era, this needs to be corrected and attention reallocated. It could help make the U.S.-Russian relationship less hysterical, if not more friendly.

1. Galeotti, too, has written of "hybrid war." That's where I disagree with him: The concept of adhocracy, to me, contradicts the hybrid strategy narrative.

This opinion piece was first published by Bloomberg View

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