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What's the Deal With Russophobia Anyway

Is Russophobia real or is it an invention of a revanchist Kremlin ? The answer, surprisingly, is both.

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Is Russophobia real or is it an invention of a revanchist Kremlin hell-bent on controlling its neighbors and undermining Western nations? The answer, surprisingly, is both.

Stereotypes of foreign weirdos you don't like are nothing new, and Russophobia certainly qualifies, if you would like a short description of the term. It helps to remember, on the other hand, that we can trace back the emergence of modern Russophobia to Napoleon's France, where it was dictated by the politics of the time.

No, Vladimir Putin didn't invent the term in order to justify his foreign policy — though his

government has certainly been known to co-opt it.

I respectfully disagree with colleagues who today insist that Russophobia is merely the idea that Russia is a threat — it's silly to suggest that the actions of the Russian government, for example, don't threaten anyone, or that it is "phobic" to bring attention to the threat itself.

I also disagree with the outlandish idea that Russophobia is "racism." Russians, and post-Soviet people who are frequently read as Russian, are not a race.

On the other hand, due to Putin's own actions, as well as the Robert Mueller investigation and President Donald Trump's unabashed public fawning over Putin, interest in Russia has been renewed. Not all of that interest is coming from a healthy place.

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Internet grifters playing "catch a Russian spy" in order to draw attention to themselves and parlay that attention into gigs certainly employ genuine Russophobia — the idea that Russians are a dangerous Other. For them, it's a marketing tool.

As a woman who's not from Russia but who obviously has Russian roots, I can confidently tell you that stereotypes of all Russian women as potential honeypots are enjoying a renaissance.

The case against Maria Butina hasn't helped — in general, it's wise to remember that Russian officials do use young women in their dirty political games, and that this is a sad and deeply misogynist tactic. The sexy Russian spy is a glamorous Hollywood trope, but in reality, these women are treated like lumber or like oil, i.e. as a natural resource, not as people.

More importantly, the idea that it was Russians, and not millions of American people, who elected Trump, a demagogue, to the highest office of the land, has certainly enjoyed some appeal.

It feels good to shift the blame onto shadowy foreign conspirators — certainly much better than facing the fact that trust in our institutions is eroding and real, actual racism is on the rise, and that these are the conditions that made Trump possible in the first place.

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None of this means Russians and people of post-Soviet extraction, on the whole, are somehow now getting a glimpse of the darkest recesses of American prejudice — as some writers have bizarrely suggested.

We're a country where refugee children from Latin America are being placed in cages and black children are being shot — and *no one is being held accountable* — next to that, Russophobia barely qualifies as a serious topic of discussion, let alone as some powerful, oppressive force.

It's also incorrect to imply that the Russian government isn't aggressively undermining American interests, and that modern Russian revanchism is fictitious, a product of paranoia.

The threat is overblown in some instances — Russians posing as American activists to post dumb memes on Facebook for your dad to read aren't swaying entire elections just yet — and severely overlooked in others.

We are, for example, paying too little attention to how Putin is propping up a murderous dictator in Syria even though Russia once had genuine power to help scale down the conflict there and avoid much of the bloodshed of the last few years — and that decency and common sense were not an option for Russia as per its involvement in this war, precisely because Putin cares so much about sticking it to the Americans at every turn.

It would ultimately help us to remember that Russian authoritarianism is actually a deeply Russophobic phenomenon. Russian authoritarianism justifies itself by arguing that Russians are wild and crazy, in need of a "strong hand," a big daddy of a leader who will guide them toward glory.

It's why the mechanisms of Russian governance are so inefficient, and why ordinary Russian citizens keep going on TV to beg daddy for a new cancer clinic or a kindergarten in their hometown.

A government reduces its citizens to the status of children, and yet it's everyone else who's Russophobic? Give me a break.

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