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# No One Benefits From Renewed Demonizing of Russia

## The continued presentation of a Russian threat that is both outsized and out of control is profoundly problematic for the West itself.

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**Andrei Nikerichev / Moskva News Agency**

New year, but no new rhetoric it seems. Moscow — admittedly often a geopolitical rival of the West's — is again being pilloried as some kind of existential threat in ways as inaccurate as they are counterproductive, for West and Russia alike.

After the storming of the Capitol on Jan. 6, there was no shortage of people happy to draw some kind of Russian connection, however tenuous.

The presence of two Russian-speakers who turned out to be from Moldova was initially used to imply some kind of Kremlin fingerprints, there were claims — later debunked — of Russian

chants, and likewise of an alleged Ukrainian "infowarrior" linked to a Putin ally.

More indirectly, Nancy Pelosi drew on the tired "Putin is smiling" meme to present the whole mess as "the biggest gift" to Putin, and reiterating her view that Trump was "a complete tool of Putin." She was hardly alone. (While, to be sure, the most hawkish pundits cheered, and a degree of schadenfreude must have been present, we should also remember that an unstable America is a dangerous and unpredictable one for Moscow — and Putin himself seems no fan of the mob, on whoever's side it may be.)

Nor is the current flurry of rhetoric limited to the U.S. There has been a renewed spate of intemperate talk on the other side of the Atlantic about Russia as an existential threat and Putin as an all-powerful dictator with an irrational enmity for the West.

In a new podcast series from Sky News, retired British special forces commander Lt. Gen. Sir Graeme Lamb said that a Kremlin committed to "killing our way of life" was ratcheting up covert campaigns against the West such that "we're being boiled like a frog."

Perhaps more alarmingly, he drew direct claims with the 1930s, suggesting that if the West did not act more decisively it could find itself in the same situation as in 1939.

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In fairness, Gen. Sir Nick Carter, current head of Britain's armed forces, and Ben Wallace, the defense secretary, were rather more statesmanlike.

However, drawing implicit parallels between today's Russia and 1930s Germany, seeing Russian manipulation behind every crisis and confrontation in the West, remain pervasive and problematic themes in Western public discourse — and they are dangerous for everyone.

## Misdiagnosing the problem

Let's set aside Sir Graeme's misleading and insulting parallels as an outlier. Even so, the continued presentation of a Russian threat that is both outsized and out of control is profoundly problematic for the West itself.

There are smart and well-informed analysts of Moscow's politics, who understand that Kremlin policy is often reacting to perceived Western slights and pressures, and that it is often both pragmatic and risk-averse.

However, if their political masters are seduced by the easy caricature of Putin as Sauron to the Russian Mordor and assume both that everything they do is hostile and that they are driven not by self-interest but an irrational hatred, then this will distort policy.

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This is all the more important at such a crucial moment.

The Biden administration will likely embark on no "re-sets" but nonetheless will have to

develop a Russia policy for the next four years.

The European Union, emerging from the Brexit discussions and eventually from the COVID crisis, will likely be considering its place in the world and thus its relationship with Moscow. The activities of a newly-aggressive China will force a recalculation of Realpolitik across the globe.

In other words, this is a time for clarity of vision and honesty of assessment, not cheap shots and crass caricature.

### Misprescribing responses

After all, the thing is that Russia *does* conduct political warfare against the West.

It does assassinate — or attempt to assassinate — those whom it considers traitors. It does screech out *infoshum* — "info-noise" — to try and drown out inconvenient truths and painful news. It does maintain an extensive array of agencies and instrumentalities devoted to active measures, to meddling, subverting and distracting the West.

It's not doing it all the time, though, nor in every case, and not for the reasons often advanced. The Kremlin is not trying to advance some ideological agenda based on authoritarianism and kleptocracy across the world.

It is not trying to re-establish the Soviet Union or the tsarist empire. It is not preparing for, much less seeking, any kind of military confrontation with the West.

Glib, inaccurate assumptions about "what Putin wants" and "what Putin likes" that paint him as a cross between Joseph Stalin and a Bond movie villain will distort Western policymaking in dangerous and unproductive ways.

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It means it will respond to the threats it imagines rather than those that it really faces, and miss the opportunities — which do exist — for small-scale and practical cooperation, because it refuses to accept that this is even possible.

### Playing to the Kremlin's narrative

This rhetoric also, by vicious irony, plays to the Kremlin's own narratives, that it faces an implacably and unreasonably "Russophobic" West, that is by extension doing everything it can to unleash *gibridnaya voina* and the dreaded color revolutions on Moscow and its allies.

This is the underlying rationale behind the increasingly intolerant new laws on "foreign agents," as well as one of the lines of attack against Alexei Navalny. In effect, if the West likes you, that can only because you are either their pawn or otherwise useful to them in their campaign against Russia, and so you are a knowing or naïve weapon against the Motherland.

Some people advancing this line actually believe it.

Clearly many advising and influencing Putin — and perhaps even Putin himself — genuinely do hold a rather paranoid vision of the world, one mirroring the most hawkish Russia-bashers in the West. Others simply play along, because this is the official line.

However, just as the West is at a foreign policy crossroads, so too Russia is making crucial decisions about its domestic approach, leaning towards a more repressive model of politics.

The more its leaders genuinely consider themselves under threat from a hostile and meddling West, and the more they can convince at least some of their subjects, then the more likely it is that they will continue this drift into confrontation abroad, clamp-down at home.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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