

Blockbuster Guardian Leaks Cannot Yet Either Be Discounted Nor Accepted

Boring as it may be, I'll neither take the Guardian's blockbuster story as gospel truth nor cynical fake. I'll just wait and see how this plays out.

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In a world awash with disinformation and misinformation, genuine whistleblowers and fake leaks, it is often difficult to know what to believe. The tendency, all too often, is to accept what fits our prejudices and interests, and reject as “fake news” that which does not.

The irony is that this applies as much to the old men in the Kremlin with their selective and partial interpretation of the world outside its walls, as to the reception of a new, purported leak in the British *Guardian* newspaper.

The story, [splashed yesterday](#), is of “what are assessed to be leaked Kremlin documents” which claim that a gathering of the Security Council (SovBez) on Jan. 22, 2016, authorized a coordinated intelligence campaign to support Donald Trump as “the most promising candidate” from Russia’s perspective, because, as an “impulsive, mentally unstable and unbalanced individual who suffers from an inferiority complex” he would further “the destabilization of the U.S.’s sociopolitical system.”

The claim is that Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was put in charge of a multi-agency task force that set out to launch “measures to act on the information environment of the object” to install the “mentally unstable” Trump in the White House.

Of course, that Russia meddled in the 2016 presidential elections is impossible seriously to deny, and taken at face value, these leaks provide invaluable detail as to quite why, how and when this was decided, and the specific aim of the operation.

The trouble is, though, that if the modern age has taught us anything it is that we need to be careful in taking any much-hyped exclusives and insider accounts at face value.

After all, I was living in Prague in 2016, when it was suddenly invaded by a host of journalists looking for evidence that Trump’s lawyer Michael Cohen had secretly met a Russian official there. They never found anything. The trigger had been the infamous “Steele Dossier,” at the time circulating in media circles, even if not yet public.

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So far, we have only seen a few screenshots of the documents, in surprisingly pixelated form. More to the point, we have no idea of how the *Guardian* acquired them. It is simply implausible that some disgruntled member of the SovBez Secretariat — one of the most highly-classified bodies in Russia, very broadly comparable to the U.S. National Security Council staff or the U.K.’s National Security Secretariat — would have simply handed them over.

The obvious assumption is that this came from a Western intelligence source. That could mean a document hacked out of Security Council computer systems through a channel now closed (as it would not be compromised while still active), or perhaps a document brought over by Oleg Smolenkov, who defected to the U.S. in 2017. Smolenkov worked in the Presidential Administration — of which the SovBez is technically a part — although it is unclear what kind of classified access he had.

Or it could be a hoax, a piece of deliberate disinformation generated by the Russians to perpetuate the myth of their capacity to disrupt a U.S. ripe for “social explosion” — or by a Western agency eager once again to turn the spotlight on the Kremlin’s meddling, perhaps as a rebuke to recent adventurism.

After all, what little we have seen about the document has already attracted questions about everything from its [language](#) to its [apparent foreknowledge](#) of the kind of disruption American society would undergo. All such niggles can be explained away, though.

Perhaps more interesting are some more substantive questions.

Why would Shoigu — a man not known for this kind of “active measures” — be put in charge, instead of the more logical choice of Nikolai Patrushev, SovBez secretary, KGB and FSB veteran and already de facto intelligence coordinator?

Why is the discussion purely about Trump’s “virtues” and not the perceived threat posed by Hillary Clinton? It was clear, after all, that there was a genuine, if frankly paranoid belief that as president she would embark on a campaign to bring regime change to Russia, built on the assumption that she had been behind the 2011-12 Bolotnaya Protests. Why is this taking place in early 2016, when at least some of the campaign of meddling appears to have already started by then? Is this really marked “Secret,” when that is actually the lowest of the three levels of classification in the Russian system (below Top Secret and Top Secret/Especially Important)?

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With its critical personal assessments of Trump (“nyah-nyah: Putin never loved you!”), its vague references to *kompromat* (“you see, we told you it existed!”), it is hard not to wonder how come this appears just too perfect to appeal to a certain Western constituency.

And yet, none of that is enough to dismiss it. There is a certain disingenuous disrespect in splashing this story, with not even a broad sense of its provenance and so little scope for it to be assessed independently.

The *Guardian* claims that “Western intelligence agencies” have known about the documents for some time and unnamed “independent experts... say they appear to be genuine.” Andrei Soldatov, one of the world’s leading experts on Russian spookdom, is quoted, but he is more cautious, simply saying that the leak “reflects reality” and is “consistent with the procedures of the security services and the Security Council.”

So what is my considered opinion? It’s that at this stage, I don’t know. Yes, Russia meddled (and still meddles). Yes, these documents could be entirely accurate.

But these are also days of spin and subterfuge, whereby conflicts are as often fought through disinformation and “strategic communications” as firepower, and in which 24/7 news cycles and social media can turn today’s rumour or hoax into tomorrow’s established fact.

So, boring as it may be, I’ll neither take the *Guardian*’s admittedly blockbuster story as gospel truth nor cynical fake. I’ll just wait and see how this plays out.

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