

Putin Won. Will He Again?

By Eric Chenoweth

Over the past four years, an authoritarian-minded president has posed a continuous challenge to American democracy. With victory in doubt in the 2020 presidential election, he now even refuses to commit to a peaceful transfer of power and openly states he is stacking the Supreme Court in order to determine a contested outcome in his favor.

An equally serious constitutional challenge has been obscured in the tumult of the 2020 presidential campaign. The republic's democratic institutions have failed to respond to a hostile foreign power's ongoing intervention to influence both America's politics and the outcome of its presidential elections. Despite all the attention given Russia's intervention in 2016, no significant bipartisan action was ever taken by Congress or the government sufficient to deter Russia in its ongoing active measures operations.

The reasons for this failure are as alarming as when the American public was first presented information of Russia's interference.

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Early in 2017, the U.S. Intelligence Community Assessment described the unprecedented scope and nature of Russia's intervention and stated the purposes of the Putin-directed operation. These were: to undermine "public faith in the U.S. democratic process"; to damage "Hillary Clinton's candidacy and potential presidency"; and to aid "President-elect Trump's election chances." The ICA also stated, "Russian efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order" and U.S. democracy.

Two-and-a-half years later the Mueller Report revealed the sense of victory in Moscow upon the announcement of Trump's election. "Putin has won," a high-level Kremlin official immediately texted a colleague. What, then, did Putin win?

One predictable gain for Putin has been the fulfillment of the goal of weakening American democracy and the "U.S.-led democratic order." Donald Trump has done what he promised to do as a candidate: disrupted the world's previously most stable modern democracy and diminished the U.S. position in democratic alliances and international institutions. Trump himself has become the world's chief propagandist undermining "trust in the U.S. democratic process." Meanwhile, his continuous alienation of allies has led the leaders of European democracies to doubt that America's commitment to NATO will survive a second Trump term.

Still, as the Intelligence Community Assessment itself noted, the reasons that Vladimir Putin "developed a preference" for Donald Trump went beyond his obvious capacity to disrupt U.S. politics and alliances. They pertained to Russian national interest and geopolitical affinity.

Putin did not hide these reasons. As a candidate, Trump pledged to pursue (in Putin's words) "normal relations" with Russia and put an end to "American hegemony." In office, Trump has advanced those purposes and consistently pursued warm relations with Putin, disengagement from overseas commitments, and reorienting U.S. foreign policy around "America First" (and away from defending a "U.S.-led democratic order"). Putin's geopolitical vision has thus been emboldened — not deterred — as he seeks to restore Russia as a Great Power, entrench and expand Russia's imperial dominion, and deploy asymmetric warfare to undermine Putin's perceived enemies (NATO, the EU, and Western democracy generally).

Political and personal affinity was also obvious. A connective illiberal tissue links Trumpism and Putinism (national and racial chauvinism, for one). So does an authoritarian style. Putin has three governing constructs: kleptocracy (fusing state and individual wealth); a national security state (to maintain political stability); and "civilizational" ideology (defending Russian culture, faith and tradition against Islamism and Western liberalism). Trump corresponds in approach (if not yet in scale). He mixes personal and state financial interests, uses national security agencies to protect his power, and acts to safeguard American "greatness" from anti-civilizational forces, now including the purported dangers of anarchism, socialism, and "radical Democrats." Trump has openly stated his admiration for Putin's "leadership" and eagerly established "good relations" with Putin personally.

We often hear that Special Counsel Robert Mueller failed by not seeking to uncover supposed financial *kompromat* that would show Putin's "hold" on Trump as a Russian asset. But speculation of the unknown distracted from confronting the known. What the Mueller investigation revealed over two years was the core of the Trump-Putin relationship: a common pursuit in determining the occupant of the White House out of mutual interest.

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Trump's and Putin's core relationship has meant that the alarming scope of Russia's intervention and the equally alarming level of Russian ties to Trump's campaign were consistently denied, covered up and — when exposed to public light — transmuted into a "hoax" by U.S. and Russian presidents, their administrations, and their propaganda arms. But what guaranteed that no significant action would ever be taken in response to Russia's influence operations in the U.S. was perhaps the most alarming of all: Republican elected leaders tied their party's fortunes to protecting the president at all costs.

As a result, it did not matter to Republicans that the Final Report of Special Counsel Robert Mueller assembled a mountain of evidence demonstrating the scale of Russia's active measures operation; or the Trump campaign's solicitation, welcoming, use and likely guiding of it; or even the illegal obstruction of an investigation into a foreign conspiracy by Trump, his associates and Russia itself.¹ For Republicans, the only relevant finding was that the Special Counsel's Office

¹ See "[A Mouse Gives Birth To A Mountain: What The Mueller Report Tells Us](#)" by Eric Chenoweth, Albert Shanker Blog, May 22, 2019.

did not have sufficient direct evidence to prove an actual conspiracy, or agreement, between the Russian government and members of Trump's campaign.

General news media contributed to fogging public perception with front-page banner headline stories that presented as fact the false assertions of Trump's Attorney General that the Mueller Report found "no collusion, no obstruction." Democratic leaders also contributed by deciding not to include the Mueller Report's findings in articles of impeachment relating to Trump's illegally seeking foreign help for his re-election. This implicitly made the active cover up of a Russian conspiracy to put Trump in power unimpeachable. In the end, of course, the Republican imperative to protect Trump meant that even direct proof of Trump's withholding of military assistance in order to solicit foreign help for re-election — and doing so based on Russian disinformation — was found to be an excusable use of presidential power.

Despite the slow uncovering of the full nature of Russia's election interference in 2016 — including the hacking and penetration of state election infrastructure, election software companies, and political campaigns — Republican leadership prevented any comprehensive legislation to address weaknesses in U.S. electoral processes (such as requiring paper ballot backup systems or requiring software companies and state electoral systems to federally secure their web sites). The Senate Majority Leader and the Trump Administration blocked nearly all legislation in this area, even with bipartisan sponsorship, including a proposed law to make it illegal to share proprietary campaign data with foreign operatives and one requiring political campaigns to notify federal law enforcement agencies of foreign offers of election assistance.

In five reports released over the past year, the bipartisan Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI), which carried out its own nearly four-year investigation, presented another mountain of evidence of an "aggressive, multifaceted" and sophisticated attack by Russia taking advantage of racial and political divisions and vulnerabilities in our democratic system. These reports present the Russian attack as having a clear impact on the 2016 election. Further, the fifth report's counter-intelligence findings affirmed that the Trump campaign's chairman and deputy chairman — who enriched themselves over ten years aiding Russian state objectives — gave the military intelligence officer assigned to them internal polling data and strategy needed for a foreign effort to aid the campaign. Despite the SSCI carrying out the investigation and issuing the reports on a bipartisan basis, Republican members of the SSCI again transmuted facts in a separate declaration. According to the Republicans, the SSCI's findings, including that the Russian state had penetrated a U.S. presidential campaign at the highest level, demonstrated "no collusion."

Such obfuscation for Trump and Putin has not only impeded bipartisan legislative action against foreign interference in U.S. elections, it has also made the Republican Party an effective part of Russia's active measures to influence American politics and aid Trump's re-election. Since the SSCI issued its final report in August, for example, Republican leaders and Trump-appointed intelligence officials have collaborated to misdirect the American public about the nature and scale of Russian interference in the 2020 election as well as to facilitate the dissemination of Russian disinformation that delegitimizes the Mueller investigation, denigrates the president's election opponent, and raises doubts about the integrity of the election process. Trump-Republican propaganda is now indistinguishable from Russian disinformation (and vice versa).

The challenges facing America democracy are manifold as it carries out a national election in a time of pandemic and an economic and political crisis. While the origins of these political challenges are indeed domestic in nature, they are compounded by an ongoing foreign conspiracy to affect U.S. politics. As America's election system and electoral process remain vulnerable to foreign intervention, Trump's and the Republican Party's political interests have converged with Russian intelligence objectives in the U.S. And so, as Russia works to "boost" Trump to a second term, it is up to American media to help citizens see what is happening. It is up to American citizens whether or not Putin wins again.

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