

Julia Davis

# In Their Own Words

How Russian Propagandists  
Reveal Putin's Intentions



With a foreword by Timothy Snyder

Ukrainian Voices, vol. 54

*ibidem*

Julia Davis

## **In Their Own Words**

How Russian Propagandists Reveal Putin's Intentions

With a foreword by Timothy Snyder

# UKRAINIAN VOICES

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Julia Davis

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“Julia Davis’s work has long been obligatory reading for anyone who seeks to understand Russia. Her new book now provides a chronological account of how the Kremlin’s most popular propagandists shaped the agenda and prepared the Russian population to accept the liquidation of their own opposition, the invasion of Ukraine, and the genocide of Ukrainians.”

— Anne Applebaum, author of *Gulag: A History* and *Red Famine*

“This collection of articles provides analysis of Russia’s domestic and international propaganda, with an unmistakable trend. State-controlled propagandists cultivate popular opinion well in advance of what the government is planning, including but not limited to the invasion of Ukraine and interference in foreign elections. Outrageous and unlikely propaganda narratives have a tendency to become a reality, months and years later. These narratives are replete with warnings of what the Kremlin would like to do in the future — ignoring them might prove very costly in the long run.”

— Admiral James Stavridis,  
16th Supreme Allied Commander of NATO and author most recently of *2054* a novel of geopolitics and artificial intelligence

“Few in the West have ever experienced the bizarre and dehumanizing propaganda that now dominates all Russian media. Julia Davis, however, has kept a steady eye on this electronic madness and this book is a must-read for anyone who wishes to understand the darkness that has overtaken Russia.”

— Tom Nichols, Professor Emeritus, Naval War College

## Foreword

Russian propaganda is in the shadow of America. Whereas the America only covers Russia when there is something to cover, and sometimes not even then, Russian propaganda television starts every night from the premise that whatever has happened is America's doing. This does not reflect reality—or a typical American's experience of reality. It does reflect the problem that Russian propaganda is meant to solve. Since Vladimir Putin is the boss of bosses in an oligarchical regime where domestic policy is impossible, the propagandists must direct attention to the world beyond Russia in a way that makes Russia's leadership seem righteous.

Russian propagandists do this in the confidence that no one beyond Russia is watching, but Julia Davis has been. From this collection of her articles, we can understand the propagandists' job description, but also the tensions they feel when the outside world causes them problems. Their basic posture is that America is in a constant war with the Russian Federation. Because Russia cannot fight and cannot win any actual war of that description, the propagandists are most comfortable when America is turned against itself. They talk almost never about Russian domestic politics, but obsess over every piece of evidence of American domestic weakness.

Donald Trump is their favorite weapon against America. Trump is described as a friend and ally, "our Trumpushka" and "Donald Fredovych". Out of office, he is described as Russia's great hope. He is "sorely missed"; Russia is "ready to elect you again". Russia's propagandists had no trouble predicting that Trump would try a coup when he lost in 2020, because that is a familiar sort of behavior to them. They rejoiced when he did, because they thought that this could lead to a civil war in the United States. Their coverage of Trump's coup attempt was at first highly positive. When it failed, a very awkward pivot was made to the position that it had all been some sort of provocation by the Democrats.

One of the things that Russian propagandists expect not to be noticed, but which is brought home here, is that they believe that

Trump is an idiot. Of course, it's hard to see, from their perspective, how they can believe anything else (except, perhaps, that he is a traitor, as also sometimes hinted). In their public worldview, destroying the United States is the main aim, and here is an American who follows their talking points.

The same goes for Tucker Carlson. He is celebrated on Russian television, of course, and his clips replayed. But Russian propagandists naturally think anyone beyond Russia who is on their side must not be very bright, and they cannot quite stop themselves from saying so. It is the one point on which they are completely sincere.

It is important to note, and Julia Davis gives us all the details, the hypocrisy of the anti-American pose. A leading Russian propagandist sent his girlfriend to America to give birth so that his child would have US citizenship. Propagandists are clearly personally hurt by sanctions that separate them from their property in the European Union or make it harder for them to travel abroad. They send their children to study and work in the West, they don't have any real animus towards the West. This is, I think, one more reason why they can't resist thinking of Americans on their side as idiots.

When Putin ordered a full-scale war on Ukraine, the propagandists suddenly had a problem. Before the attack, as we are reminded in this book, there was great confidence among Russian propagandists that Ukraine would fall to Russia in "two days" or even "ten minutes." But when Russia actually did undertake a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it set off a chain of events that the propagandists found hard to master.

For one thing, they had been cut out of the loop. The invasion was meant to be its own propaganda, a "special military operation" that overthrew the Ukrainian government in three days, followed by a victory parade and a warm welcome by the Ukrainian masses. This did not happen, and was based upon a worldview (Putin's) that was both obviously wrong and impossible to criticize.

Russian propagandists switched immediately to the comfortable idea that the war was really against America, and that America had initiated. Rereading Julia Davis's essays, I was struck by how quickly this happened – within a few days.

The Ukrainians themselves had to be dehumanized. This was a direct consequence of the senselessness of the war. Russians had to be made to feel that they were somehow superior, and that war had some kind of logic. The premise of the war, as Putin had made clear, was that there was not really a Ukrainian state or nation; this was all a conspiracy, and would collapse immediately. If, as it emerged, more Ukrainians defended themselves than expected, that did not mean that Ukraine was real; it just meant that logic of the special military operation, killing the elites, had to be extended ever further downward into the population.

As Julia Davis shows, Russian propagandists use openly genocidal language over and over again, urging the extermination of vermin, worms, demons, zombies, etc. Putin's grotesque "denazification" framing of the war is genocidal. If all Ukrainians are defined as Nazis by nature, then it is right to kill them all. The "Nazi" claim has never had anything to do with political reality (the actual fascists, the ones in Russia, are calling for genocide), and always had everything to do with justifying that murderous project. After the Hamas attack on Israel, there was a split in the Russian media elite between Russia's non-Nazi fascists and the Nazi ones. This too is chronicled here.

When reading Julia Davis's essays carefully, it becomes clear that America is not just needed as a propaganda target, but as a de facto ally, called in by the propagandists to correct the (unmentionable) mistakes made by their own (supposedly infallible) dictator. Russia needs Trump because it cannot manage on its own. Trump allows them to claim that everything is America's fault and that this is confirmed by America's own leadership. And then everything can go on in Russia as before.

Russia needs America to bail it out of its war with Ukraine. When you read Julia Davis's summaries of Russian propaganda day after day, it is abundantly clear that the propagandists themselves (despite all of the bluster) are aware that the war did not go according to plan, and indeed is going very badly. Again and again they are put in impossible positions: when Ukraine takes territory; when Russia fails to take territory; when more Russians have to be mobilized; when Yevgeny Prigozhin tries a coup. They cannot



criticize Putin, and they know that Putin cannot win unaided: and so they root for his allies abroad.

This itself is worth emphasizing, at a time when many Europeans and Americans seem to be asking how Ukraine can win. The answer is simple. Ukraine can win if Europeans and Americans believe it can, and continue to help. Ironically, that emerges quite clearly from these pages. Russia's propagandists know this. They are relying entirely on their own domain, that of discourse.

The war is not going well for Russia on the actual battlefield. The Europeans and the Americans are bearing essentially no costs. But if they can somehow decide that they are weary, Russia can win.

Russia can't win its own war, is propagandists' evident conclusion, but America can win Russia's war for it. America is of course not all-powerful, as the Russian propagandists claim to believe, but on this point they are right. Their discussions of Ukraine, like their discussions of Russia and everything else, focus entirely on what is happening inside the United States. The regime they serve, and the senseless and genocidal war it began, can be bought some time, if and only if the United States fails to support Ukraine. And so the heroes of Russia's war, in Russia's own propaganda, become the Americans who support it.

*Timothy D. Snyder*  
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## Preface

This abbreviated anthology of articles illuminates a fascinating time in modern Russian history, through the lens of analysis of Moscow's propaganda tactics. The Kremlin's cadre of state-controlled propagandists is tasked with laying the groundwork for the actions planned by the regime of Vladimir Putin and Russian state-controlled media provides crucial clues about sinister goals that the government is planning to pursue: from election interference to invasions, with the end goal of a new world order—with Russia at the helm.

This journey starts with a pre-invasion assumption that the West is incapable of a strong stance or international unity in opposing Russian aggression against the neighboring countries. Putin's propagandists cheer for war against Ukraine, predicting it would be quick and victorious—and the response from the US and allies would be limited to some mild sanctions, à la Crimea. Misreading the ability of the West to unite against Russian aggression and miscalculating Russia's capabilities in confronting determined Ukrainians, Russia ended up in a quagmire of its own creation.

Putin's decorated propagandists find themselves facing unpleasant consequences—with the possibility of future scrutiny and potential prosecutions for their proactive incitement of genocide.

They unravel, along with the Kremlin, having to tell multiple conflicting stories, condemn the same players they used to lionize and facing the possibility of a civil war in Russia—and not in Western countries, as they've so frequently predicted and openly wished for. Backed into the corner, they resort to nuclear threats and demand even more blood from Ukraine, whose only crime is its desire for democracy and freedom.

Russian propaganda is a weapon of a murderous regime in its pursuit of global domination. Understanding it is a key to analyzing the aspirations of the Kremlin and the methods it uses with the goal of controlling the minds of domestic and international populations.

In a 1948 speech to the British House of Commons, Winston Churchill said, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Modern history is unfolding before our eyes. Look through the window of the state media’s house of mirrors to decipher what Putin’s Russia would like to do—not only to Ukraine, but to the entire world, if the West allows the Kremlin to get away with it.

## Russians Praise Trump, Taunt Zelensky, as Ukraine Signs On to Peace-Plan Proposal

“Trump let Zelensky down. Three times he told him: ‘Go meet with Putin,’” gloated one prominent Russian TV host.

Originally published by *The Daily Beast* on October 03, 2019

Existential dread washed over the face of the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, as he sat next to the American president during their joint press conference on the sidelines of the U.N. Donald Trump, as the face of Ukraine’s most powerful ally in its struggle against Russian aggression, was telling him: “I really hope you and President Putin get together and can solve your problem.”

Having lost more than 13,000 people in an ongoing conflict with its belligerent neighbor, Ukraine was now being told to make a deal with the aggressor, because—according to President Trump—“President Putin would like to do something.”

During the same conference, Zelensky pleaded with Trump for help with returning the territories occupied and annexed by Russia, and, egged on by Trump—and contrary to the facts—complained that Europe wasn’t doing as much as the United States to help Ukraine. In reality, European institutions spent nearly double the amount supplied by the United States: \$425.2 million in 2016-2017, as compared to \$204.4 million spent by the U.S.

While that disclosure infuriated Ukraine’s European allies, Trump in the now infamous July 25 phone call with Zelensky blamed Ukraine’s troubles on the Obama administration, dismissively concluding “it’s just one of those things” and directing Zelensky to ask for more help from Europe. Since the call’s release, Ukrainians have nicknamed their president “Monica Zelensky,” as a jab referring to his part in the ongoing impeachment proceedings against Trump.

Backed into the corner and seeming to stand alone there, Zelensky made a step toward a deal with Putin by officially signing up Ukraine to the Steinmeier Formula. The agreement provides the pathway to a summit that would bring Zelensky face-to-face with Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Emmanuel Macron, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Russia demanded written codification of the Steinmeier Formula by Ukraine as a key precondition to the next Normandy summit. It interprets the clauses of the Minsk “accords” (agreements between the Ukrainian authorities and Russia-backed separatists) in line with Russia’s preferences and therefore enjoys the Kremlin’s seal of approval.

The formula further calls for elections to be conducted under the supervision of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in the territories held by Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. It was signed on October 1 by representatives of Ukraine, Russia, the separatist pseudo-republics of Luhansk and Donetsk (LPR and DPR), and the OSCE in Minsk. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the signing of the Steinmeier Formula agreement as a “positive” development.

Senator Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Federation Council’s foreign affairs committee, who is under U.S. sanctions for “worldwide malign activity,” said the signing represents “without a doubt, a victory for common sense and an overall success.” In stark contrast to Russia’s jubilation, hundreds of Ukrainians in Kyiv have protested, demanding “no capitulation” to the Kremlin and its proxies.

The most controversial aspect of the Steinmeier Formula is that it provides for local elections to take place in the occupied parts of Ukraine before Kyiv has control of the border and prior to the withdrawal of the Russian-backed forces. This condition doesn’t seem to match up with Zelensky’s understanding of the agreement. After signing on to the Steinmeier Formula, the Ukrainian president declared during a news conference that the elections would not be held “under the barrel of a gun” and would take place only when no troops remain in the separatist-held areas.

"What Ukraine was so afraid of has happened... Zelensky doesn't understand what he signed," concluded Vladimir Solovyov, the host of the nightly *The Evening With Vladimir Solovyov* on Russian state television.

The heads of Russia-backed separatist pseudo-republics in eastern Ukraine openly proclaimed in a public statement that "the Kyiv authorities won't get any control over the border" and vowed that LPR and DPR will make decisions "about integration with Russia" of their own accord. "Forget about controlling the border, once and for all," exclaimed political scientist Sergey Kurginyan, appearing on *The Evening With Vladimir Solovyov*.

During a panel discussion at the Russian Energy Week forum, Putin said that Zelensky "will have to decide how the relations between Ukraine and Donbas will develop," pointedly referring to Ukraine's own region as a separate geopolitical entity. Putin opined that Ukraine "did much better when it was a part of the Soviet Union, along with Russia." Appearing on Russia's state television program *60 Minutes*, Oleg Nilov, member of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, asserted that Ukraine was "forced to sign" the Steinmeier Formula – and proceeded to threaten the country with "the Israeli formula" of taking all the land Russia wants, if Kyiv reneges on the deal.

"Come back to the Soviet Union," urged Karen Shakhnazarov, CEO of Mosfilm Studio, appearing on *The Evening With Vladimir Solovyov*. The talk-show host Solovyov concurred and reminded the guests that the USSR was originally formed by a treaty that united the Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian and Transcaucasian republics.

"Trump let Zelensky down. Three times he told him: 'Go meet with Putin,'" said Olga Skabeeva, the host of *60 Minutes*. During the same program, Nikolai Platoshkin, head of the International Relations Department at Moscow University for the Humanities, predicted that once all the "formulas" have been exhausted, LPR and DPR will ultimately become a part of the Russian Federation. Skabeeva concurred: "The sooner the better." She surmised: "After his 'triumphant' meeting with the American president, Zelensky had no choice but to lie back and enjoy it... We know what happened in the United States. You have nowhere left to go."



## Russia's State TV Calls Trump Their 'Agent'

Russian commentators note, rightly, that “sooner or later, the Democrats will come back into power,” and they’re already joking about offering Trump asylum.

Originally published by *The Daily Beast* on December 16, 2019

Sometimes a picture doesn't have to be worth a thousand words. Just a few will do. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov returned home from his visit with President Donald Trump in the Oval Office last week, Russian state media were gloating over the spectacle. TV channel Rossiya 1 aired a segment entitled “Puppet Master and ‘Agent’ –How to Understand Lavrov’s Meeting With Trump.”

*Vesti Nedeli*, a Sunday news show on the same network, pointed out that it was Trump, personally, who asked Lavrov to pose standing near as Trump sat at his desk. It’s almost the literal image of a power behind the throne.

And in the meantime, much to Russia’s satisfaction, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is still waiting for that critical White House meeting with the American president: the famous “quid pro quo” for Zelensky announcing an investigation that would smear Democratic challenger Joe Biden. Zelensky hasn’t done that, and as of now, no meeting has been set.

Russian state television still views the impending impeachment as a bump in the road that won’t lead to Trump’s removal from office. But President Vladimir Putin’s propaganda brigades enjoy watching the heightened divisions in the United States, and how it hurts relations between the U.S. and Ukraine. They’ve also added a cynical new narrative filled with half-joking ironies as they look at the American president’s bleak prospects when he does leave office.



Appearing on *Sunday Evening With Vladimir Solovyov*, Mikhail Gusman, first deputy director general of ITAR-TASS, Russia's oldest and largest news agency, predicted: "Sooner or later, the Democrats will come back into power. The next term or the term after that, it doesn't matter... I have an even more unpleasant forecast for Trump. After the White House, he will face a very unhappy period."

The host, Vladimir Solovyov, smugly asked: "Should we get another apartment in Rostov ready?" Solovyov's allusion was to the situation of Viktor Yanukovich, former president of Ukraine, who was forced to flee to Russia in 2014 and settled in the city of Rostov-on-Don.

Such parallels between Yanukovich and Trump are being drawn not only because of their common association with Paul Manafort, adviser to the first, campaign chairman for the second, but also because Russian experts and politicians consider both of them to be openly pro-Kremlin.

Tightly controlled Russian state-television programs constantly reiterate that Trump doesn't care about Ukraine and gave Putin no reasons to even contemplate concessions in the run-up to the recent Normandy Four summit in Paris.

State-television news shows use every opportunity to demoralize the Ukrainians with a set of talking points based on the U.S. president's distaste for their beleaguered country. The host of *Who's Against* on Rossiya-1, Dmitry Kulikov, along with pro-Kremlin guests, took repeated jabs at the Ukrainian panelist, boasting about the meeting between Trump and Lavrov.

"There are no disagreements or contradictions between Trump and Russia," argued Valery Korovin, director of the Center for Geopolitical Expertise, appearing on the state-television channel Rossiya-24. Korovin insisted that the Democrats in Congress are the main antagonists in the relationship between Russia and the United States.

Dmitry Kiselyov, the host of the Sunday news show *Vesti Nedeli*, accused the Democrats of joining forces with Hollywood, carrying out various conspiracies in order to undermine Trump's popularity. Reporting for *Vesti Nedeli* from Washington, Mikhail

Antonov used the term “the Cold War,” a fraught rhetorical twist to describe the clash between Trump and the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives.

Appearing on *Sunday Evening With Vladimir Solovyov*, Mikhail Gusman noted: “The scariest part of our relationship with America is that the level of trust between our countries, our governments, our political powers, is precisely at zero.”

“But not between the presidents,” chimed in the host.

Rudy Giuliani, acting as the president’s personal attorney and determined to divert attention from Trump’s impeachment to former Vice President Biden’s alleged corruption, recently embarked on an “evidence-gathering” trip to Ukraine.

Shortly after Giuliani’s return to the United States, Russian state television started airing video clips of his OAN (One America News Network) “documentary.” It purports to prove Kyiv’s meddling in U.S. elections and accuses former Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch of “lying under oath in Congress to whitewash [Joe] Biden’s corruption.” Giuliani’s efforts on behalf of President Trump are bound to pay propaganda dividends for the Kremlin.

Putin has expressed undisguised delight with the crusade led by Trump and Giuliani to whitewash Moscow’s interference in the U.S. elections and pin the blame on Kyiv. Last month, the Russian president smugly remarked “Thank God no one is accusing us of interfering in the U.S. elections anymore. Now they’re accusing Ukraine.”

Rossiya-1 reporter Valentin Bogdanov surmised that by now the majority of American Republicans believe that Ukraine interfered in the U.S. elections, with the show airing various clips from Fox News.

The absurdity of such claims spawned by the Russian security services puts the hypocrisy of the Republicans on full display. The Kremlin, having argued for years that democracy is a sham and the West is devoid of morals and principles, can now showcase the GOP as its “Exhibit A.”

Appearing on *The Evening With Vladimir Solovyov* in October, political scientist Dmitry Evstafiev argued that Trump has to destroy the Republican Party in order to secure his own long-term

survival. The impeachment proceedings seemed to expedite the process, with the GOP's self-immolation for the sake of its "Dear Leader."

Prompted by the head-spinning swerve of the Republicans, Tucker Carlson of Fox News even argued that, in the Ukrainian conflict, the U.S. should be taking the side of Russia. Kremlin-controlled Russian state media doesn't suffer from a similar lack of clarity.

Appearing on Solovyov's show, Semyon Bagdasarov, director of the Moscow-based Center for Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies, exclaimed: "The United States is the enemy. It is our enemy. It is a hostile state that aims to destroy our country... We are at war!"

## Did Russian Prime Minister Medvedev Drop a Grim Hint About Putin's Latest Power Grab?

Reading from Chekhov's "A Night in the Cemetery" on national television Tuesday, Dmitry Medvedev foreshadowed the upheaval to come with his government's resignation on Wednesday.

Originally published by *The Daily Beast* on January 16, 2020

At a celebration of the Russian Orthodox New Year on Tuesday, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev chose a grim message, the sarcasm of which left his audience on edge. But then, Medvedev probably knew what Wednesday would bring—the resignation of his entire government—and the audience did not.

On national television, the prime minister read at length from Anton Chekhov's story "A Night in the Cemetery," which suggests with ironic wit that celebrating the coming of the New Year is a foolish pursuit, unworthy of a properly functioning mind, since "every coming year is as bad as the previous one," and the newest year is bound to be even worse. Instead of celebrating the New Year, Chekhov wrote—and Medvedev read—one should suffer, cry and attempt suicide. Every new year brings you closer to death, makes you poorer, your bald spots larger and your wife older, he said.

Medvedev's sour greetings brought on some awkward laughs and sparse applause from confused Russian bureaucrats in the studio audience, most of whom remained stone-faced. The prime minister seemed nervous and almost dropped his papers at the end of the speech.

Then Wednesday dawned, and Russian President Vladimir Putin in his annual state of the nation address proposed a constitutional overhaul. It supposedly is designed to boost the powers of parliament and the cabinet, but more likely is intended to give

Putin, 67, a firm grip on the country for many more years, even decades, to come.

A few hours later, Medvedev submitted his resignation, and his entire cabinet submitted theirs as well. And while some of them may stay on, Medvedev, who once served a term as Putin's placeholder president, will move to a previously nonexistent post.

Putin offered the prime minister slot to Mikhail Mishustin, the head of the Russian Tax Service, who has been described as “the taxman of the future,” digitally acquiring receipts of every transaction in Russia within 90 seconds.

It's unclear whether Mishustin will be a placeholder technocrat or assume other responsibilities currently known only to Putin. But in his annual address, Putin articulated the need to identify any persons with current or former double citizenships and foreign holdings, eliminating them from government service.

Mishustin might become instrumental in such a reshuffling of Russia's power elites, who are perceived to be unpatriotic by maintaining residences or bank accounts abroad. The added pressure will also give Putin further leverage over them.

In the past, Putin and Medvedev have choreographed moves that allowed Putin to remain in charge under different titles, swapping places to circumvent term limits.

This time around, Medvedev will assume a newly created position as the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council and all current ministers will remain in an acting capacity until a new government is appointed.

Meanwhile, the leader of Chechnya in Russia's volatile North Caucasus region, Ramzan Kadyrov has declared himself to be “temporarily incapacitated,” relegating his duties to the current prime minister of Chechnya, Muslim Khuchiyev.

Putin's sweeping changes are widely interpreted as designed to weaken his successor, reshaping Russia's power structure in order to create additional opportunities for Putin's continued control over the government, even after the conclusion of his fourth presidential term in 2024.

Putin proposed amending the Russian constitution to expand the powers of the legislative branch and investing additional

powers in the State Council, leading to speculation Putin is contemplating his future return at the helm of a newly empowered Parliament, after the expiration of his current presidential term.

Commentary on the Russian president's likely intention to carve out a new position for himself has been skillfully avoided by the Russian state media. Instead, Kremlin-controlled news outlets chose to focus on promised subsidies for families with young children, designed to address Russia's demographic crisis by boosting the birth rate, and the general claim that Putin has, as it were, made Russia great again.

On the Russian state television show, *The Evening With Vladimir Solovyov*, the host proclaimed, "The greatness of the country is indisputably tied to the name of Putin." Solovyov argued that the Russian president "restored respect" towards their country globally.

His take was echoed by the State Duma Deputy Chair Irina Yarovaya, who pontificated that Putin, having achieved his foreign policy and national security objectives, could now move on to his domestic agenda.

Yarovaya said, "We remember statements by [U.S. President Barack Obama] in 2014—very recently—that Russia is a regional power of minor importance. We remember all of that. We remember how the sanctions started. We remember how we weren't invited to the G8. And today there is a line of world leaders waiting just to talk to our president over the phone..."

The sanctions started and Russia was disinvented after it seized and annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in 2014, then incited and abetted a separatist war in Ukraine's east. They were intensified after Russia's flagrant interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

Russian state media also highlight Putin's promises of socioeconomic largesse and his prediction that "Russia's economy will grow faster than the global average in 2021." During the last decade, the Russian leader has promised in vain that Russia will become the world's fifth largest economy by 2024. It is currently ranked as the 11th largest economy in the world, with a smaller GDP than that of California.

President Putin's current growth prediction is much more modest. It's still not realistic, but such promises had to be made as Russia's declining standards of living have led to political unrest and mass protests.

Without providing any direct answers as to his own plans, the Russian leader – who has now been in power for 20 years – created new venues for his continued reign in yet-to-be-revealed future capacities.

Amid all the uncertainties, maybe it shouldn't surprise us that Medvedev was reading Chekhov's story about a blind drunk civil servant who stumbles out of a New Year's celebration only to get lost in a graveyard – and then discovers in the morning he was somewhere else entirely.

## This Is the Real Goal of Putin's Propaganda Machine

The Kremlin's minions may seem to push Bernie Sanders, Tulsi Gabbard—and Trump. But the bigger goal is to destroy faith in the whole electoral system.

Originally published by *The Daily Beast* on March 10, 2020

In Russia and abroad, the Kremlin's state media are waging info-warfare designed to undermine former Vice President Joe Biden while boosting Senator Bernie Sanders—and Rep. Tulsi Gabbard.

But Donald Trump is the intended beneficiary of the Kremlin campaign, and the ultimate goal is not to elect Sanders, much less Gabbard, despite militant messaging on their behalf. It's to discredit the democratic process as a whole. And that's where the English-language Russian state media take the lead.

For example, RT (formerly Russia Today) praised Gabbard (D-HI) for staying in the race—while demeaning Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) for sticking around in spite of low ratings—and described the whole electoral process as “a rigged game.”

One of RT's offshoots, *In The Now*, claimed: “This nomination is getting stolen from Sanders, we are witnessing a robbery... Everything has already been done to make sure Sanders doesn't have enough delegates.”

Describing all of the presidential candidates—except for Sanders—as “puppets,” and the electoral process as the “smoke and mirrors show,” *In The Now* host Anissa Naouai mocked Biden, razed Mike Bloomberg, blamed Warren for staying in the race too long to “keep delegates from Sanders... in a coordinated attempt to keep Sanders out.” Naouai also proceeded to admit that she voted for Bernie Sanders, even though she doesn't think that he can win, essentially encouraging other American voters to do the same.



Russian state media specialize in rage-inducing coverage of the U.S. elections, aiming to prompt Americans to vote for the unlikely contender out of sheer spite at “the establishment,” or to discourage people from voting at all.

While the methods utilized by the Kremlin’s operatives have been somewhat modified since the 2016 elections, the aspirations remain the same. The main objectives include undermining public faith in the U.S. democratic process, stoking divisions, promoting unrest, and lobbying for the re-election of Donald J. Trump, whose presidency continues to be considered highly beneficial for the Kremlin.

A bipartisan report released by the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee in 2019 found that in 2016 a Russian troll farm known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA) urged voters not to vote for Hillary Clinton, not to vote at all, or to instead vote for the Green Party’s Jill Stein.

Jill Stein’s 2016 campaign was heavily promoted by RT. One year earlier, she attended the dinner celebrating RT’s 10th anniversary and was seated at the table with President Vladimir Putin.

In 2020, pro-Kremlin actors urge voters not to vote for Biden, not to vote at all, or to vote for Sanders. Curiously—but perhaps unsurprisingly—Jill Stein is rallying against Biden’s nomination.

Pro-Kremlin media are not as dedicated as they were in 2016 to creating their own agitprop. Instead, they more frequently amplify select talking points by publicizing handpicked social media content and useful statements made by various analysts, writers and politicians, including President Trump.

Russian state media have been merciless when it comes to almost all of the U.S. presidential candidates, except for Trump, Sanders and Gabbard.

Tapping into Sanders’ appeal with Hispanic voters, RT’s Spanish-language outlets are targeting one of this key demographic with reports designed to boost his popularity, peppered with allegations of “rigged” U.S. elections standing in the way of his candidacy. The following is a small sampling of Russian state media talking points and conspiracy theories amid the ongoing flood of

propaganda that is likely to intensify in the run-up to the U.S. presidential election in November:

### **Stay home, voting is pointless:**

- RT: "Bernie or Biden—doesn't matter. Trump's election wasn't a glitch and the trends say he'll beat the Dems again... I didn't bother staying up late for Super Tuesday... The results really were a matter of indifference. Rather than being a glitch, Trump is actually a 'normal' president (if we ignore his orange colour)—so the usual rules and trends apply... Trump isn't unbeatable; only that, for him to be beaten, something out of the ordinary must happen."
- RT: "Do the Democrats really think they can beat Trump with this rogues' gallery of political hacks? If they aren't too young and inexperienced, like the ex mayor of South Bend, then they are too old and feeble-minded, like the lead candidate who just declared he was running for the US Senate. If they aren't a bald-faced liar, like a certain fake native American, they are a brutally honest socialist who freely admits he will confiscate your hard-earned earnings once elected."
- RT: "The DNC knows this presidential race is lost."

### **No one to vote for on the Democratic side:**

- Sputnik: "Old Commie, Dementia Patient Walk Into Convention."

### **Elections are rigged:**

- RT: "American politics is a Ponzi scheme..."
- Sputnik: "Trump Accuses Democrat Elites of 'Rigging' Primary Race Against Sanders."
- RT: "Fake JoeMentum: US media & Democrats are forcing a new pro-Biden narrative."
- RT: "Warren & Bloomberg lost big on Democrats' Super Tuesday—or did they? Supporters of Bernie Sanders have accused Warren of staying in the race as a 'spoiler,' to split

the progressive vote and harm Sanders in the race against the establishment favorite Joe Biden... If so, it would appear Warren succeeded, rather than failed, in her appointed task on Super Tuesday.

- RT: "Last woman standing. Tulsi Gabbard plays a rigged game."

### **Establishment conspires to control the outcome:**

- RT: "Obama's 'hidden hand' in Biden's surge tells us all we need to know about what kind of president he'll be... Sanders might actually defeat Trump, claim the presidency and enact some of the policies that might seriously gut the US billion-dollar war machine... rejecting Sanders for a racist war-hawk like Biden makes little sense."
- RT: "Establishment Joe-mentum: Biden racks up Super Tuesday wins as party lines up behind him."
- Sputnik: "The Biden Bet: How Could Hillary Clinton Claw Her Way to the Presidency?"
- Sputnik: "Having served two presidential terms, Obama is not allowed to run again, but he could send in his wife Michelle... perhaps the DNC and Obama's real objective is for Michelle Obama to enter the 2020 race so Obama may once again gain control."
- RT: "Obama's national security and spying apparatus is only the latest section of the Democratic party establishment to line up behind Biden."
- RT in Spanish: "Sanders: Establishment strikes back... Javier Rodríguez Carrasco wonders if these results are decisive and if there is an orchestrated campaign within the Democratic Party to remove Sanders from the electoral race."
- RT: "What really matters [for the Democratic party] is not beating Trump, it's ensuring that the rich stay rich and the rest of us suffer."
- RT: "Trump serves the class interests of the Democratic establishment way more than Bernie Sanders ever could... They're fine with another Trump presidency... They don't

actually do anything. They are more threatened by Bernie Sanders than they are by Donald Trump. They're happy, they're perfectly fine with another Trump presidency."

- RT: "There is collusion between the DNC and the media."
- RT: "Pete Buttigieg was a manufactured candidate... dropping out in coordination with the Democratic party to help Joe Biden, same with Amy Klobuchar, and you also have Elizabeth Warren staying in the race in order to try to obstruct Sanders as a spoiler."

### **Biden's mental fitness is in question:**

- RT: "The cantankerous and erratic candidate...mistakes, poor judgment...The septuagenarian has issued a string of insults and exhibited episodic aggression, erupting at the slightest challenges."
- Sputnik: "Joe Biden's once-moribund presidential bid came back from the dead in the past week, but there has also been an increasingly growing flow of questions regarding his mental health...cognitive decline... He appears to be suffering from brain damage... anticipate his complete mental collapse."
- RT: "The political lifer seems to be cognitively unraveling before the American public's eyes."
- RT: "Joe Biden, 77, a man who appears to be exhibiting all the trademark signs of senility."
- Sputnik: "Watch: A Proud 'Obiden Bama Democrat' Joe Biden Says 'We Can Only Re-Elect Trump': Joe Biden's never-ending flow of verbal gaffes is taking increasingly blatant forms and drawing more and more attention to his cognitive abilities."
- RT: "Trump really looks super presidential against Joe Biden... Donald Trump is the greatest president of my lifetime, and if anybody thinks that any of these democratic clowns — any of them — could have done 10 percent of what he's done for this country and the world, it's a delusion. The Democratic Party is dead. Moribund. Through. Pipe dream. Forget it. It's over. You have nothing."

## **Trump's corruption is a "hoax," Biden must be investigated:**

- RT: "Will the pretense for the impeachment of President Trump, the elephant in the House hearings and Senate trial, ever get an actual hearing? Will the dealings of Biden's son Hunter with the Ukrainian energy giant Burisma, and the former VP's possible role in the arrangement, ever get addressed in the establishment media?"

## **Unrest, retaliation:**

- Sputnik: "Bernie's Supporters Will Unleash Hell on DNC if It Deprives Him of Nomination Again: it's unlikely that Bernie's supporters "will tolerate this and go quietly" like they did in 2016... We could see a shakeup in the Democratic Party in the event they use the same machinations to deny Sanders the nomination, even a potential split of the party or a third party run by Sanders."
- Sputnik: "The vocal and energetic Sanders supporters... would either sit out or vote for Trump in protest of another Bernie loss."

One lesson from all this: In 2020, Americans should be well aware that by spreading divisive rhetoric, exacerbating internal divisions, and disseminating conspiracy theories they are helping Russia and not their chosen candidate.

Russia is highly proficient at harnessing the power of social media and audiovisual communications. RT seemed less than pleased with Twitter's decision to add a "manipulated" tag to a video retweeted by President Donald Trump and shared by his social media director Dan Scavino. The video was deceptively cropped, creating a false appearance that Biden had endorsed President Trump. It was also featured by RT's sister outlet, Sputnik.

RT's senior writer opined that "the entire argument that fake news or 'manipulated' social media posts swayed US elections has always been an insult to Americans' intelligence."

On the other hand, Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of Rossiya Segodnya, RT and Sputnik shared her true opinion of Americans in 2017, when she said: "Their level of knowledge is lower than the baseboard... Americans have such low education and understanding of the world, so off the charts, it's way below the baseboard."

RT's main concern is clearly not with defending Americans from "insulting" labels on fake or manipulated media, but with the way such designations undermine the Kremlin's deceptive influence campaigns.

On their own turf, Russian state media pundits, experts and politicians openly admit that information warfare between the United States, the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia, has been going on for decades.

Appearing on the Russian language state TV show *The Evening With Vladimir Solovyov*, Konstantin Zatulin, a leading figure in Putin's United Russia party, said: "We waged this fight for many years, except it wasn't as technologically advanced. We had no Internet, or fast-acting Wikipedia, or the rest of it."

Another guest on the same show, Boris Yakemenko, asserted that World War III between the United States and Russia is already in progress and is playing out in the social media.

Analyst Dmitry Drobnitsky added that Russia should be proactive in fighting info-wars in the West: "If we say this is war, then using the analogies of WWII... we need to work behind enemy lines, where they least expect us." The host, Vladimir Solovyov agreed and said: "RT and Sputnik are working brilliantly."

The Kremlin enjoys the spoils of its info-wars, but fears reciprocity. Appearing on a state-run television station TVC, RT's Simonyan said that modern information warfare is no less important than nuclear weapons. She complained that the most watched TV channel in Russia is YouTube, which is controlled by the Americans. Anticipating the boomerang effect of Russia's info-wars abroad, Simonyan exclaimed: "They'll blow us up from within." After all, that's what the Kremlin has in mind for America.



# Can Trump's Art of the Arms Deal Get More Stupid?

## The Russians Are Loving It

Now that Trump reportedly is toying with a resumption of nuclear testing, the Kremlin intends to take full advantage.

Originally published by *The Daily Beast* on May 23, 2020

President Donald J. Trump has announced the U.S. intends to exit the "Open Skies" treaty. The 34-nation agreement allows the United States, Russia and other countries to conduct observation flights over each other's territories in the interests of transparency and international security.

Speaking to reporters, Trump said: "We're going to pull out, and they're going to come back and want to make a deal. We've had a very good relationship lately with Russia."

While the Trump administration is citing Russia's various violations of the agreement as the main reason for the U.S. withdrawal, Russian experts and government officials believe that the abrupt decision is rooted in Trump's desire to throw all international treaties out the window in pursuit of a bigger, better deal which he can claim to pursue during his election campaign even if it comes to nothing.

Such flippant methods may work for reality television, but tend to backfire in real life. Case in point, Trump's gambit with Iran, where U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal led to the expansion of Tehran's nuclear stockpile.

Now that Trump reportedly is toying with the idea of resuming nuclear testing as well, the Kremlin intends to take full advantage of that harebrained idea.

Washington's approach reportedly is rooted in the flawed assumption that renewed nuclear testing would prompt the Kremlin



to pressure the Chinese into joining a trilateral agreement with the United States and Russia.

This concept was dismissed out of hand by Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov. During an online forum conducted by the Gorchakov Fund, a Russian think tank, Ryabkov asserted that the Kremlin didn't intend to apply any pressure to China to please Washington.

Instead of playing along with Trump's dangerous brinkmanship, Russia may pull out of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty altogether. Alexei Fenenko, an associate professor of global politics at Moscow State University, told the state media outlet RIA Novosti that such a withdrawal would be "beneficial for Russia, since the collapse of this treaty would cause colossal damage to the United States of America." State media outlet Vesti surmised that such a move would obliterate all of Washington's efforts and decades-long investments in the nuclear ban treaty.

As for the planned U.S. withdrawal from the Open Skies treaty, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo clarified that it is set to take place six months from now, on November 22, 2020, after the next presidential election in the United States.

In Russia, Trump's commentary and the timing of the intended withdrawal from Open Skies were interpreted as a sign that the move is merely political, with no tangible repercussions for the Kremlin. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov mentioned that the Kremlin's exchanges with Washington were taking place via the traditional and non-traditional channels, but described the Trump administration's demands and ultimatums as "senseless" and "categorically unacceptable."

Russian state-owned radio station Vesti FM described Trump's dangerous flailing on the international arena as his desire "to play with toy soldiers."

The Kremlin's state media have grown used to laughing at Trump's irrational bluster. Appearing on the state TV show *60 Minutes* earlier this week, Elena Malinnikova, an infectious disease specialist for the Russian Health Ministry, said that Trump must really be taking the regimen of hydroxychloroquine, since it's known to cause psychotic side effects.

Trump recently sought to improve relations with Russia with a donation of U.S. taxpayer-funded ventilators, despite Moscow's claim that it already has more ventilators per capita than the United States.

In fact, Russian state media reported that the country is so flush with ventilators, it plans to start exporting them to other countries by July. Instead of eliciting gratitude, Trump's gift to the Kremlin only prompted more mockery.

The Kremlin is waiting for the November election, hoping it's guy Trump will win, and looking at the administration's announced policies through that lens.

Appearing on the state TV show *60 Minutes* on Friday, Oleg Nilov, member of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, said: "After the [U.S.] elections, the new political chapter will emerge in the United States of America. A lot of things will surface." He dubbed the Open Skies announcement a "pre-electoral move," and, referring to the U.S. president's remarks about good relations, joked that Trump thinks, "Everything is fine in relations with Russia, we [the U.S.] trust them completely and therefore, they don't need to be monitored."

Nilov's commentary prompted the experts and the host of *60 Minutes*, Olga Skabeeva, to chuckle. The possibility of genuine trust between the United States and Russia sounded too far-fetched to be taken with any degree of seriousness.

Skabeeva asked military expert Ivan Konovalov whether the U.S. withdrawal from the Open Skies treaty would hamper Russia's ability "to uncover important information about the Americans." Konovalov assured her that regardless of the treaty, Russia can continue to obtain the same data by utilizing its space operations.

Last year, the Defense Intelligence Agency noted that both China and Russia "have developed robust and capable space services, including space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance."

The signatories of the Open Skies treaty include most of America's NATO allies—and Ukraine. Konovalov explained that the termination of the treaty wouldn't impact Russia, while at the same time it would harm NATO, Europe, and especially those countries

on Russia's borders: the Baltic States and Ukraine. "They are losing much more," he said. "Ukraine participated in these flights since 2014. In spite of all of our disagreements and confrontations, Ukrainian officers and inspectors were allowed to enter our airspace along with Americans." America's allies "are losing because of this, the Europeans are losing."

Political scientist Vladimir Kornilov pointed out: "Trump is convinced this is a bilateral agreement, he isn't even thinking about other countries involved. It's funny."

Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, noted that the U.S. announcement about its intended withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty came as a surprise to America's allies. He accused the Trump administration of lying about its reasoning for withdrawing from the treaty and added: "The United States is sowing discord and uncertainty among its allies... They are ignoring the opinion of NATO and other nations that are party to this agreement."

France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and Sweden jointly said they "regret" Trump's decision to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty, calling on Russia to return to compliance with the agreement.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, trying to smooth things over within the alliance, cited Russia's violations of the treaty, including "flight limitations over Kaliningrad, and restricting flights in Russia near its border with Georgia" and expressed hope that the agreement could be preserved if the Kremlin returns to compliance.

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said, "Withdrawing from a treaty is not the solution," adding that the EU "will be examining the implications this decision may have for its own security." The European Union on Friday urged the United States to reconsider its plan to pull out of the Open Skies Treaty.

As the Trump administration casts aside the concerns of the Europeans, the Kremlin intends to amplify "the lack of solidarity" exhibited by the United States towards its allies.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko told the state media outlet TASS: "This move will not only worsen the situation with strategic stability and military security in Europe, but apparently it will also harm the interests of U.S. allies that are parties to this European agreement."

Trump's ability to sow that kind of discord among NATO allies is unquestionably appetizing to the Kremlin. Earlier this week, experts on the Russian state TV show *The Evening With Vladimir Solovyov* discussed Russia's preference for Trump's re-election, as opposed to the candidacy of former Vice President Joe Biden.

Andrey Bezrukov, retired intelligence service colonel who serves as an advisor to the president of Rosneft (the Russian state-owned oil company), and a member of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, explained: "I am often asked: 'Why is Trump better than, for example, Biden or Clinton?' The answer is simple. Because Biden or Clinton would act in support of [international] coalitions. It's the gathering of all forces against us into one group, one team. When Trump came, he destroyed that team."

So, from the Kremlin's point of view—in spite of Trump's mind-numbing arrogance and incompetence—his actions ultimately boost Russia's interests. In light of Trump's successes undermining transatlantic unity, the Kremlin has to be unquestionably rattled by the possibility he might lose the election in 2020.

Anatoly Torkunov, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Collegium of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, offered fairly cogent analysis: "Even though the world system is less and less dependent on the United States and the results of their elections, we continue to carefully analyze the situation. At the beginning of the year there was more certainty. According to our experts, Andrey Bezrukov and Ivan Safranchuk, the outcome of the elections depended on two variables: the economic situation in the United States and the ability of the Democratic Party to mobilize its political base. Given that the economic situation was favorable and the Democrats could not recover from internal conflicts, the chances of the incumbent president to maintain his post were pretty high."

"The pandemic caused things to change," said Torkunov. "On the one hand, the United States is facing serious economic difficulties. On the other hand, the Democrats, at least the establishment of the party, rallied around their candidate, Joseph Biden. This reduces Trump's chances."

The Kremlin's apparent concern that its preferred candidate might lose in November explains the avalanche of anti-Biden coverage on Russia's English-language outlets, RT and Sputnik.

Kremlin-funded media are latching on to every distraction spawned by Trump's re-election campaign: Obamagate, Huntergate, Flynngate and whatever else may follow. The goal of undermining the American democracy continues to guide the Kremlin's actions and Trump's presidency still suits Putin's agenda to a "T."

## **‘America’s Dying’**

### **Russian Media Is Giddy at Chaos in the USA**

From the U.S. troop drawdown in Germany to Trump’s refusal to slam Russia over soldier bounties, Russian state media is jubilant over America acting in the Kremlin’s interests.

Originally published by *The Daily Beast* on July 30, 2020

This week, U.S. President Donald Trump reiterated his intent to move forward with reducing the U.S. military presence in Germany, without any consultations with Berlin. And even as members of the U.S. Congress and America’s allies abroad expressed concerns about the drawdown, the Trump administration’s decision brought joy to the Kremlin and Russian media.

Back in June, 22 Republican members of the House Armed Services Committee urged Trump not to go ahead with the move, stating in a letter: “We believe that such steps would significantly damage U.S. national security as well as strengthen the position of Russia to our detriment ... In Europe, the threats posed by Russia have not lessened, and we believe that signs of a weakened U.S. commitment to NATO will encourage further Russian aggression and opportunism.”

German officials have called the move politically motivated. While Trump claimed that the drawdown was based on Germany not meeting the NATO target of spending 2 percent of its GDP on defense, Belgium and Italy—the two countries that will be receiving some of the U.S. troops from Germany—spend an even a smaller percentage on defense. The move will cost billions of dollars to the American taxpayers and undermine NATO alliances.

Meanwhile, when the intent to reduce the U.S. contingent in Germany was first announced, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that the Kremlin “would welcome