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## Russia, Trump & Flawed Intelligence

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US Defense Under Secretary for Intelligence Marcel Lettre, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, and National Security Agency Director Michael Rogers testifying before the Senate, Washington, D.C., January 5, 2017

After months of anticipation, speculation, and hand-wringing by politicians and journalists, American intelligence agencies have finally released a declassified version of a report on the part they believe Russia played in the US presidential election. On Friday, when the report appeared, the major newspapers came out with virtually identical headlines highlighting the agencies' finding that Russian president Vladimir Putin ordered an "influence campaign" to help Donald Trump win the presidency—a finding the agencies say they hold "with high confidence."

A close reading of the report shows that it barely supports such a conclusion. Indeed, it barely supports any conclusion. There is not much to read: the declassified version is twenty-five pages, of which two are blank, four are decorative, one contains an explanation of terms, one a table of contents, and seven are a previously published unclassified report by the CIA's Open Source division. There is even less to process: the report adds hardly anything to what we already knew. The strongest allegations—including about the nature of the DNC hacking—had already been spelled out in much greater detail in earlier media reports.

But the real problems come with the findings themselves. The report leads with three "key judgments":

1. “We assess Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election”;
2. “Moscow’s influence campaign followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations—such as cyber activity—with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or ‘trolls’”;
3. “We assess Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the US presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against US allies and their election processes.”

It is the first of these judgments that made headlines, so let us look at the evidence the document provides for this assertion. This evidence takes up just over a page and contains nine points. The first four make the argument that Putin wanted Hillary Clinton to lose. I will paraphrase for the sake of brevity and clarity:

1. Putin and the Russian government aimed to help Trump by making public statements discrediting Hillary Clinton;
2. the Kremlin’s goal is to undermine “the US-led liberal democratic order”;
3. Putin claimed that the Panama Papers leak and the Olympic doping scandal were “US-directed efforts to defame Russia,” and this suggests that he would use defamatory tactics against the United States;
4. Putin personally dislikes Hillary Clinton and blames her for inspiring popular unrest in Russia in 2011-2012.

None of this is new or particularly illuminating—at least for anyone who has been following Russian media in any language; some of it seems irrelevant. (Though the report notes that the NSA has only “moderate confidence” in point number one, unlike the CIA and FBI, which have “high confidence” in it.) The next set of points aim to buttress the assertion that Putin “developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump over Secretary Clinton.” The following is an exact quote:

Beginning in June, Putin’s public comments about the US presidential race avoided directly praising President-elect Trump, probably because Kremlin officials thought that any praise from Putin personally would backfire in the United States. Nonetheless, Putin publicly indicated a preference for President-elect Trump’s stated policy to work with Russia, and pro-Kremlin figures spoke highly about what they saw as his Russia-friendly positions on Syria and Ukraine.

The wording makes it sound as though *before* June 2016 Putin had been constantly praising Trump in his public statements. In fact, though, Putin had spoken of Trump exactly once—when asked a question about him as he was leaving the hall following his annual press conference in December 2015. At that time, he said,

Well, he is a colorful person. Talented, without a doubt. But it’s none of our business, it’s up to the voters in the United States. But he is the absolute leader of the presidential race. He says he wants to shift to a different mode or relations, a deeper level of relations with Russia. How could we not welcome that? Of course we welcome it. As for the domestic politics of it, the turns of phrase he uses to increase his popularity, I’ll repeat, it’s not our business to evaluate his work.

Nothing in this statement is remarkable. At the time, Trump, who was polling well in the Republican primary race, was the only aspiring presidential candidate to have indicated a willingness to dial back US-Russian hostilities. The topic was clearly judged not important enough to be included in the main body of Putin's more-than-four-hour press conference but deserving of a boilerplate "we hear you" message sent as Putin literally headed out the door.

The Russian word for "colorful"—*yarkiy*—can be translated as "bright," as in a "bright color." That must be how Trump came to think that Putin had called him "brilliant," an assertion that the US media (and, it appears, US intelligence agencies) failed to fact-check. In June 2016, at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, American journalist Fareed Zakaria, moderating a panel, asked Putin, "The American Republican presumptive nominee, Donald Trump—you called him 'brilliant,' 'outstanding,' 'talented.' These comments were reported around the world. I was wondering what in him led you to that judgment, and do you still hold that judgment?" Of the epithets listed by Zakaria, Putin had used only the word "talented," and he had not specified what sort of talent he had seen in Trump. Putin reprimanded Zakaria for exaggerating. "Look at what I said," he said. "I made an off-hand remark about Trump being a colorful person. Are you saying he is not colorful? He is colorful. I did not characterize him in any other way. But what I did note, and what I certainly welcome, and I see nothing wrong with this—Mr. Trump has stated that he is ready for the renewal of a full-fledged relationship between Russia and the United States. What is wrong with that? We all welcome it. Don't you?" Zakaria looked mortified: he had been caught asking an ill-informed question. Putin, on the other hand, was telling the truth for once. As for the American intelligence agencies marshaling this exchange as evidence of a change of tone and more—evidence of Russian meddling in the election—that is plainly misleading.

The next two points purporting to prove that Putin had a preference for Trump are, incredibly, even weaker arguments:

6. Putin thought that he and Trump would be able to create an international anti-ISIS coalition;
7. Putin likes to work with political leaders "whose business interests made them more disposed to deal with Russia, such as former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder."

Number 6 is puzzling. Nominally, Russia and the United States have already been cooperating in the fight against ISIS. The reference is probably to Putin's offer, made in September 2015 in a speech to the UN General Assembly, to form an international anti-terrorist coalition that, Putin seemed to suggest, would stop the criticism and sanctions imposed in response to Russia's war against Ukraine. Obama snubbed the offer then. Then again, this is my conjecture: the report contains no elucidation of this ascertainment of Putin's motives. As for Number 7, not only is it conjecture on the part of the report's authors, it is also anachronistic: Schroeder was a career politician before becoming a businessman with interests in Russia, as his term in political office was drawing to a close.

The final two arguments in this section of the report focus on the fact that Russian officials and propagandists stopped criticizing the US election process after election day and Russian trolls dropped a planned #DemocracyRIP campaign, which they had planned in anticipation of Hillary Clinton's victory. (Notably, according to the intelligence agencies, whatever influence the Russians were trying to exert, they themselves seem to have assumed that Clinton would win

regardless—and this is in fact supported by outside evidence.) The logic of these arguments is as sound as saying, “You were so happy to see it rain yesterday that you must have caused the rain yourself.”

That is the entirety of the evidence the report offers to support its estimation of Putin’s motives for allegedly working to elect Trump: conjecture based on other politicians in other periods, on other continents—and also on misreported or mistranslated public statements.

The next two and a half pages of the report deal with the mechanics of Russia’s ostensible intervention in the election. It confirms, briefly, earlier reports that the intelligence agencies believe that the hacks of the Democratic National Committee were carried out by an individual connected to the General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU). It also notes, without elaboration, that “Russian intelligence accessed elements of multiple state or local electoral boards,” though, according to the Department of Homeland Security, not the type of systems that are involved in vote tallying. And then the report goes from vague to strange: it lists the elements of Russia’s “state-run propaganda machine” that ostensibly exemplify the Kremlin’s campaign for Trump and denigration of Clinton. These include RT, the Russian English-language propaganda channel (as well as Sputnik, a state-funded online news site); a Russian television personality; and a fringe Russian politician named Vladimir Zhirinovsky. According to the report:

Pro-Kremlin proxy Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, proclaimed just before the election that if President-elect Trump won, Russia would “drink champagne” in anticipation of being able to advance its positions on Syria and Ukraine.

In the Russian political sphere, Zhirinovsky is far from the mainstream. A man who has advocated mobilizing the Russian military to shoot all migratory birds in order to prevent an epidemic of bird flu, he is a far-right comic sidekick to the Kremlin’s straight man. Dictators like to keep his kind around as reminders of the chaos and extremism that could threaten the world in their absence. In Hungary, for example, the extremist Jobbik party allows Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to look moderate in comparison. The particular statement about drinking champagne was made during a televised talk show in which several Russian personalities get together to beat up rhetorically on a former insurance executive named Michael Bohm, who has fashioned a career of playing an American pundit on Russian TV. Here is the exchange that preceded Zhirinovsky’s promise to drink champagne:

They threaten to cut Russia off from international financial systems. They can do that! But then we won’t give America a single dollar back. That’s hundreds of billions of dollars! Hundreds of billions! If they cut us off, they cut off the repayment of all our debts. Hundreds of billions! They are not dumb, so they’ll never do it. Never. As for the arms race, sometimes we are ahead and sometimes they are. We’ve got parity. But there is another danger to America. They have a hundred nuclear power stations. And we can reach all of them. And the destruction of a single nuclear power station kills every living thing on a territory of five hundred thousand square kilometers. That’s fifty million square kilometers. But all of America is just ten million square kilometers. So a single explosion will destroy America five times over. Same thing with us. But our stations are on the fringes. Theirs are in densely populated areas. So blowing up their nuclear reactors will kill more people in America. Plus, we have lots of empty space. So they have weighed it: Russia’s survival rates will be higher than America’s. More of them will die in case of nuclear war.

Host: Remember you also told us about magnetic weapons that will make us stick to our beds and incapable of getting up?

Zhirinovsky: Yes, there is that, too.

[A brief exchange about the arms race between two other participants]

Zhirinovsky: I hope that Aleppo is free of guerrilla fighters before November 8!

Sergei Stankevich [a largely forgotten Yeltsin-era politician]: But then we have to think about what happens November 9, if we've already liberated Aleppo.

Zhirinovsky: We are going to be drinking champagne to celebrate a Trump victory! [to Bohm] And to the defeat of your friend Hillary Clinton!

Remarkably, the report manages not only to offer a few words thrown out during this absurd exchange as evidence of a larger Russian strategy, but also to distort those words in the process: contrary to the report's assertion, Zhironovsky made no mention of being able to advance Russia's positions in Syria and Ukraine following a Trump victory. Of course, he could have—indeed, he could have said anything, given the tenor of the conversation. Whatever he said, it's difficult to imagine how it could be connected to Russia's ostensible influence on the American election.

Other evidence in this part of the report includes the statement, "Russian media hailed President-elect Trump's victory as a vindication of Putin's advocacy of global populist movements—the theme of Putin's annual conference for Western academics in October 2016." This statement is false. The theme of Putin's annual conference, known as the Valdai Club, was "The Future Begins Today: Outlines of the World of Tomorrow." The program reads like the program of the annual World Affairs Council conference in San Francisco—which last year, coincidentally, was called "Day One: The World That Awaits." This is not to say that Putin has not supported populist movements around the world—he demonstrably has. But once again the particular evidence offered by the report on this point is both weak and false.

Finally, the bulk of the rest of the report is devoted to RT, the television network formerly known as Russia Today.

RT's coverage of Secretary Clinton throughout the US presidential campaign was consistently negative and focused on her leaked e-mails and accused her of corruption, poor physical and mental health, and ties to Islamic extremism. Some Russian officials echoed Russian lines for the influence campaign that Secretary Clinton's election could lead to a war between the United States and Russia.

In other words, RT acted much like homegrown American media outlets such as Fox News and *Breitbart*. A seven-page annex to the report details RT activities, including hosting third-party candidate debates, broadcasting a documentary about the Occupy Wall Street movement and "anti-fracking programming, highlighting environmental issues and the impacts on public health"—perfectly appropriate journalistic activities, even if they do appear on what is certainly a propaganda outlet funded by an aggressive dictatorship. An entire page is devoted to RT's social media footprint: the network appears to score more YouTube views than CNN (though far fewer Facebook likes). Even this part of the report is slightly misleading: RT's tactics for inflating its viewership numbers in order to secure continued Kremlin funding has been the

subject of some convincing scholarship. That is the entirety of the case the intelligence agencies have presented: Putin wanted Trump to win and used WikiLeaks and RT to ensure that outcome.

Despite its brevity, the report makes many repetitive statements remarkable for their misplaced modifiers, mangled assertions, and missing words. This is not just bad English: this is muddled thinking and vague or entirely absent argument. Take, for example, this phrase: “Moscow most likely chose WikiLeaks because of its self-proclaimed reputation for authenticity.” I think, though I cannot be sure, that the authors of the report are speculating that Moscow gave the products of its hacking operation to WikiLeaks because WikiLeaks is known as a reliable source. The next line, however, makes this speculation unnecessary: “Disclosures through WikiLeaks did not contain any evident forgeries.”

Or consider this: “Putin most likely wanted to discredit Secretary Clinton because he has publicly blamed her since 2011 for inciting mass protests against his regime in late 2011 and early 2012, and because he holds a grudge for comments he almost certainly saw as disparaging him.” Did Putin’s desire to discredit Clinton stem from his own public statements, or are the intelligence agencies basing their appraisal of Putin’s motives on his public statements? Logic suggests the latter, but grammar indicates the former. The fog is not coincidental: if the report’s vague assertions were clarified and its circular logic straightened out, nothing would be left.

It is conceivable that the classified version of the report, which includes additional “supporting information” and sourcing, adds up to a stronger case. But considering the arc of the argument contained in the report, and the principal findings (which are apparently “identical” to those in the classified version), this would be a charitable reading. An appropriate headline for a news story on this report might be something like, “Intel Report on Russia Reveals Few New Facts,” or, say, “Intelligence Agencies Claim Russian Propaganda TV Influenced Election.” Instead, however, the major newspapers and commentators spoke in unison, broadcasting the report’s assertion of Putin’s intent without examining the arguments.

*The New York Times* called it “a strong statement from three intelligence agencies,” and followed its uncritical coverage with a story mocking Trump supporters for asking, “What’s the big deal?”

“How is it possible, if these intelligence reports are true, to count the 2016 Presidential election as unsullied?” asked *New Yorker* editor David Remnick in a piece published Friday. But since when has “unsullied” been a criterion on which a democratic process is judged? Standard measures include transparency, fairness, openness, accessibility to all voters and to different candidates. Anything that compromises these standards, whether because of domestic or external causes, may throw a result into doubt. But Remnick’s rhetorical question seems to reach for an entirely different standard: that of a process that is demonstrably free of any outside influence. Last month Paul Krugman at *The New York Times* railed, similarly, that the election was “tainted.” Democracy is messy, as autocrats the world over will never tire of pointing out. They are the ones who usually traffic in ideas of order and purity—as well as in conspiracy theories based on sweeping arguments and scant, haphazard evidence.

The election of Donald Trump is anomalous, both because of the campaign he ran and the peculiar vote mathematics that brought him victory. His use of fake news, his serial lying, his conning his way into free air time, his instrumentalization of partisanship and naked aggression certainly violated the norms of American democracy. But the intelligence report does nothing to clarify the abnormalities of Trump’s campaign and election. Instead, it risks perpetuating the

fallacy that Trump is some sort of a foreign agent rather than a home-grown demagogue, while doing further damage to our faith in the electoral system. It also suggests that the US intelligence agencies' Russia expertise is weak and throws into question their ability to process and present information—all this, two weeks before a man with no government experience but with a short Twitter fuse takes the oath of office.