

IDEAS

The Great Russian Disinformation Campaign

In a new book, Timothy Snyder explains how Russia revolutionized information warfare—and presages its consequences for democracies in Europe and the United States.

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Journalists listen to Russian President Vladimir Putin during his annual end-of-year news conference in Moscow, Russia, on December 23, 2016. (SERGEI KARPUKHIN / REUTERS)

When Westerners first began to hear of Vladimir Putin’s troll army—now some five years ago—the project sounded absurd. President Obama in March 2014 had dismissed Russia as merely a weak “regional power.” And Putin’s plan to strike back was to hire himself a bunch of internet commenters? Seriously?

In a recent talk in Washington, the historian Timothy Snyder observed that Russia’s annual budget for cyberwarfare is less than the price of a single American F-35 jet. Snyder challenged his audience to consider: Which weapon has done more to shape world events?

Snyder is an unusual historian-activist, both a great scholar of the terrible cost of 20th-century totalitarianism and also a passionate champion of endangered democracy in Ukraine and Eastern Europe—and now, the United States. Increasingly, he sees his concerns fusing into one great narrative, as methods of

Privacy settings

manipulation and deception pioneered inside Russia are deployed against Russia's chosen targets.

Clausewitz defined war as the use of violence by one state to impose its will upon another. But suppose new technology enabled a state to “engage the enemy's will directly, without the medium of violence,” Snyder writes—this would be a revolution in the history of conflict. This revolution, Snyder argues, is what Russia has imposed upon the United States and the European Union. How, why, and with what consequences is the theme of Snyder's newest book, *The Road to Unfreedom*.

“Democracy never took hold in Russia, in the sense that power never changed hands after freely contested elections,” he writes. “Yeltsin was president of the Russian Federation because of an election that took place when Russia was still a Soviet republic, in June 1991. Those taking part in that election were not choosing a president of an independent Russia, since no such thing yet existed. Yeltsin simply remained president after independence. ... In other post-communist states, free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections quickly followed. The Russian Federation managed no election that might have legitimated Yeltsin or prepared the way for a successor.”

Amid the collapse of the Soviet state, canny survivors of the old regime seized valuable assets. Yeltsin secured their new wealth; they secured Yeltsin's power. As Yeltsin succumbed to age and alcohol, his entourage looked about for a replacement. They found their candidate in an obscure former spy who had got rich quick as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg: Vladimir Putin. Yeltsin elevated Putin as his deputy, then resigned in his favor. Putin faced the electorate in 2000 supported by all the power and money commanded by a Russian incumbent. Public opinion was consolidated by a conveniently timed series of murderous terrorist bombings. Number Snyder among those Western experts who strongly suspect that the bombings were organized by the Russian authorities themselves to legitimate Putin's accession.

At first, Putin turned a sunny face to the West. He cooperated with the United States after the 9/11 attacks. In 2004, he endorsed EU membership for Ukraine and did not object to NATO enlargement. He attended a NATO summit in 2008 and spoke warmly of European economic integration. But as he centralized the state and consolidated his own power—rewriting the constitution to enable him to rule for life—he turned ever more harshly repressive at home and violently aggressive abroad.

He promoted ideologies that Snyder inventively describes as *schizo-fascism*: “actual fascists calling their opponents ‘fascists,’ blaming the Holocaust on the Jews, treating the Second World War as an argument for more violence.” Putin’s favored ideologist, Alexander Dugin, “could celebrate the victory of fascist in fascist language while condemning as ‘fascist’ his opponents.”

In this new schizo-fascism, homosexuals played the part assigned to Jews by the fascists of earlier eras. Democratic societies were branded by Russian TV as “homodictatorships.” When Ukrainians protested against faked elections and the murder of protesters, Russian TV told viewers, “The fact that the first and most zealous integrators [with the European Union] in Ukraine are sexual perverts has long been known.” Putin himself struck more macho poses and wore outfits more butch than all the stars of the Village People combined. In Snyder’s pithy phrase, “Putin was offering masculinity as an argument against democracy.”

Restrictive new laws silenced democratic debate, including remembrance of the victims of Soviet-era crimes. Memorial associations were condemned as alien invaders. “Russia’s own past became a foreign threat”—but it all started with the August 2012 law outlawing advocacy of gay rights.

Yet the most crucial turn to a new kind of politics—one now agonizingly familiar to Americans—arrived with the Russian invasion of Crimea in February 2014. Even as Russian troops in Russian uniforms seized the peninsula, Putin denied anything was happening at all. Anyone could buy a uniform in a military surplus store. Russia was the victim, not the aggressor. “The war was not taking place; but were it taking place, America was to be blamed.”

Snyder identifies a new style of rhetoric: implausible deniability. “According to Russian propaganda, Ukrainian society was full of nationalists but not a nation; the Ukrainian state was repressive but did not exist; Russians were forced to speak Ukrainian though there was no such language.”

Russian TV told wild lies. It invented a fake atrocity story of a child crucified by Ukrainian neo-Nazis—while blaming upon Ukrainians the actual atrocity of the shooting down of a Malaysian civilian airliner by a Russian ground-to-air missile.

But Russia’s most important weapon in its war on factuality was less old-fashioned official mendacity than the creation of an alternative reality (or more exactly, many contradictory alternatives, all of them Putin-serving). “Russia generated tropes targeted at what cyberwar professionals called ‘susceptibilities’: what people seem likely to believe given their utterances and behavior. It was possible to claim that

Ukraine was a Jewish construction (for one audience) and also that Ukraine was a fascist construction (for another audience),” Snyder writes.

In 2014, Facebook was not yet a decade old; Twitter younger even than that. As a state weak in conventional means of power, Russia early identified the potential to weaponize these new tools against stronger foes. “The Russian economy did not have to produce anything of material value, and did not. Russian politicians had to use technologies created by others to alter mental states, and did.”

Perhaps this campaign might have been defeated by strong responses by Western governments and truthful reporting by Western media. Indeed, Snyder dedicates his book to reporters, “the heroes of our time.” But alongside those heroes were others working for other ends. Snyder quotes his own warning from the Ukraine war: “Here is going to be there.” Americans and Europeans were left unready to face the new Russian techniques “because writers they trusted were not analysts of, but rather participants in, the Russian campaign to undermine factuality.” Snyder cites repeated examples of journalists in prominent platforms, trusted by left-of-center readerships, whose reporting seemed to support Russian claims that Ukraine had become a romper room for neo-Nazis—or alternatively to “the green flag of jihad.” Many of these reports cited second- and third-hand sources, some of whom disappeared untraceably after depositing their testimonies on Facebook. Hard-left and alt-right social-media trolls then tidied up after the reporters, belittling claims that the original sources were disinformation. Of one such troll, Snyder quips—in an apothegm that applies sadly widely—“he did not see the Russian intervention because he was the Russian intervention.”

Even greater success still awaited the Russian disinformation project: the Trump campaign of 2016. In Snyder’s telling, Trump is himself the ultimate expression of Putin’s anti-factuality. Trump in Snyder’s telling was not the successful businessman he performed in his TV non-reality series, *The Apprentice*, but an American loser who became a Russian tool. “Russian money had saved him from the fate that would normally await anyone with his record of failure.”

As late as July 2016, Trump insisted that Russia had not entered Ukraine. His first big foreign-policy speech of the election campaign—viewed from a reserved front-row seat by the Russian ambassador to the United States—was reportedly ghostwritten in considerable part by Richard Burt, a former American diplomat then under contract to a Russian gas company. (Burt has denied this attribution).

Snyder sees Trump as very much a junior partner in a larger Russian project, less a cause, more an effect. He worries, too, that slowly before Trump—and rapidly after Trump—America is becoming like Russia: a country on a path to economic oligarchy and distorted information. Trump's attitude to truth again and again reminds Snyder of the Russian ruling elite: The Russian television network RT “wished to convey that all media lied, but that only RT was honest by not pretending to be truthful.”

The Road to Unfreedom is a rich and complex book, punctuated by epigrams that cast heroic clarity upon the disturbing distance the United States has already traveled to the sinister destination in Snyder's title. If some of Snyder's assessment seems overstated or premature, he can powerfully reply: He has perceived more accurately than his critics what has already happened. He has earned the right to be heard on what may lie ahead.

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