



The Bear Over There

The Animosity Between The U.S. And Russia Has Old Roots And A Complex History. Don't Expect Anything To Change Soon.

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The allegations implicating the Russian government in a hacking scandal that rocked the presidential election this summer are serious, and continue to grow more concerning (and weird). The FBI, the CIA, and the National Security Agency (NSA) have all reported that Russian president Vladimir Putin ordered a campaign of disinformation and hacks into both the Republican and Democratic National Committees as early as March of 2015 — much of it, allegedly, intended to benefit Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Those hacks included a leak of DNC emails that dramatically altered the presidential campaign (and got then-DNC chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz fired). Over the past few days and weeks, more information has been revealed — including a report that intelligence officers presented Trump with evidence that the Russian government wanted to compromise him.

This is the rare news story that's just as big, or even bigger, than it seems: For the first time in American history, there is real evidence that a major foreign power tried to influence a large-scale election in the U.S. — and may have succeeded.

For decades, the Russian government has lived at the edges of American imaginations. During the Cold War, American fears about Russia were used by mainstream political figures to manipulate public opinion. But after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia fell out of America's political spotlight; we stopped thinking about Russia as soon as it stopped being perceived as a threat. "Russia went from being one of the world's great powers to being a power nobody bothered to consult on important things," Emma Ashford, a visiting foreign policy fellow at the Cato Institute, told MTV News. "Over a period of time, this has really sunk into the Russian leadership, this feeling that no one sees them as 'good enough' or 'important enough' to weigh in on world events."

But the potential of Russian incursion into American politics has changed everything. Putin's government wants to reestablish Cold War norms — not necessarily of Communism, but of Russian political power and position on the global stage. "What Russia really wants is to be treated as if they are a major power again," Ashford said. And with an administration in charge that is more likely than not to see Putin as an ideological ally, it's now possible

that the Russian relationship with the U.S. could see a complete reset, reshaping not just our foreign policy, but our political culture as well.

The roots of the unsettled and occasionally downright bizarre relationship between Russia and the U.S. are old. A century ago the Russian Revolution overthrew nearly 500 years of Tsarist monarchical rule, eventually launching the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922. From that time until 1991, the USSR was a global superpower, ruling nearly 300 million people across 15 countries, and with "satellite states" like Poland and Romania that, though nominally independent, looked to Moscow for political and economic leadership.

Following the Revolution, the U.S. broke off diplomatic relations with the newly formed Soviet Union, only recognizing the state officially in 1933. Relations broke again when Soviet leader Joseph Stalin signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany at the beginning of the Second World War — a pact on which Germany reneged in 1941, launching an invasion of the USSR. The U.S. joined the USSR's fight against Germany, Japan, and Italy after the attack on Pearl Harbor, but the feelings between the two countries were hardly friendly. During the Nazi invasion of Russia, then-Senator (and, four years later, President) Harry Truman said, "If we see that Germany is winning, we ought to help Russia, and if Russia is winning, we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible." And after the war ended in 1945, with European loyalties divided between the American-influenced West and the Soviet-influenced East, the relationship between the U.S. and Russia disintegrated completely.

Beginning in 1947, the Cold War put the U.S. and the Soviet Union on what seemed like a perpetual collision course — and a potential nuclear conflict — for more than 40 years. Both sides had stockpiles of nuclear weapons, and at times, both seemed all too willing to use them. Each country funded governments, militias, and rebel groups around the world, fighting "proxy wars" for dominance in Africa, South America, Europe, and Asia. And the underlying American fear — of war, invasion, and domination — exposed major fault lines, not just in foreign policy, but in society.

Some conservative politicians and government officials used worries about the influence of the Soviet Union — and Communism — to discredit critics of U.S. policies at home and abroad, including the growing Civil Rights Movement. They accused "Negro agitators" like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. of being secret Communists, even comparing the 1964 Civil Rights Bill to the 1928 platform of the Communist Party. These concerns (and racism) led the U.S. government to wiretap Dr. King's phones and meeting spaces (though King himself believed that Communism "was an alien philosophy contrary to us"). The Soviet Union represented not just a country, but an ideology, one that vocally rejected capitalism, religion, and the concept of private enterprise — in other words, the major building blocks of American life. So for decades, the Soviet Union held the place that ISIS and Al Qaeda represent today: the ultimate "bad guy."

Though relations between the U.S. and the USSR gradually warmed throughout the 1970s and 1980s (partly because of then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts at reform), the Cold War didn't actually end until the early 1990s — when the Soviet Union dissolved into new republics like Lithuania, Estonia, and, importantly, the Russian Federation. For

millions of people, the end of the USSR and the election of Boris Yeltsin in 1991 — the first democratically elected president in Russian history — offered new opportunities, but also uncertainty, and often chaos. The Russian government tried to reform the economy, privatizing formerly state-owned businesses and beginning the long and painful process of shifting to a market economy. The result was a 50 percent drop in gross domestic product (GDP) — a major economic marker — and a dramatic increase in crime (including a murder rate that doubled from 1991 to 1994) as the social safety net that had assured Russian citizens of jobs, health care, and subsidies for food disappeared.

To Vladimir Putin, a former foreign intelligence officer with the KGB, the Soviet equivalent of the CIA, the end of the USSR wasn't a triumph — it was a tragedy. Gregory Feifer, a journalist and author of *Russians: The People Behind the Power*, told MTV News, "Putin has stated that the Soviet collapse was the 20th century's greatest catastrophe and that the 1990s were a period of chaos and corruption that threatened to erupt in civil war and Russia's disintegration." Putin became acting president of the Russian Federation in 1999, and spent much of his first years in office attempting to dismantle the changes brought by the end of the USSR and return the country to its former glory days. Putin didn't want to just make Russia great again, so to speak: He wanted to make it important internationally again, too.

In this effort, Feifer noted, Putin has conveniently ignored the positive, pro-democracy shifts that took place in the 1990s in his country. For example, the new constitution, finalized in 1993, guaranteed press freedom, freedom of speech, and the right to privacy. In Feifer's opinion, Putin's rejection of 1990s-era reforms was more symbolic of his own desire for power than of a genuine belief that the end of the USSR was wrong for Russia. "Putin's main aim in reinforcing such views has been to build a myth of himself as the country's savior to justify his growing authoritarianism," Feifer said, adding, "I don't think Putin and his cadres have any illusions about the system they built."

Putin's system, one that encouraged tax cuts and deregulation (alongside widespread corruption), led to an economic recovery from 1999 to 2008, and, following the global economic crisis, another period of economic growth that led to the country being listed for the first time as a high-income economy by the World Trade Organization in 2013. But that system has also featured the murder of journalists and dissidents — even with a constitution that alleges to protect them — and the disenfranchisement of political opponents as Putin's political party, United Russia, gained control of the country's legislative body, the Duma. And with sanctions placed on the country by the U.S. and other Western powers after Russia's attempts to gain territory in the Crimea and support pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, economic progress in Russia has stopped, too. Now, the country is in a full-blown recession.

But ironically, the more problems Russia faces internally, the more interest the country has in attempting to expand its reach and power externally, particularly in opposition to the U.S. "[Putin's] main goal is to disrupt U.S. policy and undermine American institutions in order to show himself to be a powerful leader," Feifer said. "That distracts his own population from the international isolation and economic recession he has single-handedly brought about, tapping into a traditional Russian envy of the West in a way that enables Russia — a weak country plagued by poverty, disease, and lack of infrastructure — to appear powerful."

And as Putin refocuses on manipulating U.S. strategy toward Russia, the political winds have shifted in the U.S. too: Liberals, not conservatives, are now most concerned about Russia's potential involvement in American political life. With the election of Donald Trump, who has consistently supported Putin since entering the presidential race in June of 2015, the same Democrats who decried Mitt Romney for calling Russia America's "number one geopolitical foe" in 2012 have changed their tune dramatically. And it's conservatives who now see Russia, and Putin, as a potential ally: Thirty-seven percent of Republicans think positively of the Russian president, up from just 10 percent in 2014. Though Putin's background is in Soviet security forces, some conservatives believe that he can be an able defender of "traditional" family values and social conservatism, with his support for anti-LGBTQ laws (including limits on "public displays" of homosexuality, like Pride parades) and the Russian Orthodox Church. After nearly 25 years of being a relative afterthought, and at its weakest point domestically in a decade, Russia is now front and center in the American political and cultural discussion — right where Vladimir Putin wants it.

And once again, the U.S.-Russia relationship can tell us about not just our foreign policy, but our own internal anxieties. In the 1950s, concerns about the Soviet Union papered over fears of a growing and changing America, in which millions of people were beginning to demand the rights they were owed by the Constitution. In 2017, worries about Russia highlight a growing divide between progressives and a conservative bloc wanting to return to a heralded traditional past that never really existed. And in the middle of all of it is a Russian government that, in Feifer's words, is "seeking to exploit indifference and attempts to engage in order to subvert American policy and undermine U.S. institutions, part of an attempt to force international relations ... back to a 19th-century competition between great powers."

That competition raises real questions — not just for our military and our foreign policy leaders, but for us as citizens, too. What do we do when our democracy is being threatened by a foreign power, even by an entity some social and political conservatives agree with? Are our democratic institutions strong enough to stand up to not just wrongdoing, but manufactured chaos? The relationship between the U.S. and Russia has been asking questions of us and our most closely held civic beliefs for a century. And no one, least of all our president-elect, seems to have the answers.