

Jill Stein Isn't Sorry

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Had a few thousand votes in key Midwestern states gone to Hillary Clinton instead of Jill Stein, many on the left believe, America might be having a very different conversation today.

Instead, Democrats are still fuming about the role the Green Party nominee may have played in electing Donald Trump—who as president has celebrated the coal industry, promised to pull the United States out of the world's most important climate agreement and refused to even say whether he believes global warming is real. All of that should be anathema to a party whose founding principles include a commitment to “ecological wisdom.”

So does Stein, with the benefit of hindsight, have any regrets? “I don't think so,” she tells me by phone from her home in Lexington, Massachusetts. Decrying “fake news,” citing the “sabotage of Bernie Sanders” and talking up the “tremendous” campaign she could have run with more money, Stein is projecting a Trump-worthy level of defiance. “I consider it a great honor that the party and our prior campaign for president is suddenly being attacked outside of an election season,” she says.

Those attacks aren't merely sour grapes from a party still reeling from its stunning defeat in November. Some Democrats would like to see Stein hauled in front of Congress to explain mysteries like what, exactly, she was doing at a 2015 Moscow gala thrown by a Russian state-owned broadcaster—the same RT event that got Trump's former national security adviser, Michael Flynn, in such trouble.

“We're certainly interested in any efforts the Russians made to influence our election,” says California Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff, the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, which is investigating Russia's alleged meddling in the election. “There have been public reports, I think, that Jill Stein was also in Russia attending the RT function, so we're going to need to look at any efforts the Russians made through whatever means to influence our elections.”

Stein didn't just attend the gala—dressed in a shimmering silver shawl, she sat at the same table as Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has barely disguised his glee at the political chaos that what he calls “patriotic” Russian hackers have unleashed in the United States. And she recorded a video from Moscow's famous Red Square, in which she talked about “the need

to rein in American exceptionalism” and replace “a U.S. policy based on domination”—words that sounded like they were ripped from Putin’s talking points.

Stein isn’t sorry about any of it. She says she’d welcome the opportunity to testify before Congress and dismisses the idea that she was a spoiler or that her campaign was co-opted as a tool of Russian influence as Democrats’ “pathetic excuses” for losing the election.

Unlike Flynn—whose initially undisclosed \$45,000 RT payout landed him in hot water with congressional investigators—Stein has said she was not offered any speaking fee and that she declined the Russian network’s offer to cover her travel. She tells POLITICO that she was accompanied by a single aide and that her presidential campaign paid for the travel, which included a stop in Paris. The campaign’s Federal Election Commission reports from that period show modest disbursements to multiple airlines, including Air France, and a travel agency.

Stein says that to her knowledge, neither she, her campaign nor the Green Party have taken money from Russian entities: “I am certainly not aware of any ties whatsoever, financial or otherwise, to the Russian government.”

Stein has also hit back at “fake news” claiming she has praised Putin. For the record, Stein says, “Putin is an authoritarian and has a very troubled, disturbing record.” But, she adds, “It’s important to look at where Putin comes from. ... It was Larry Summers and the guys from Harvard who basically privatized the public domain [in post-Soviet Russia] and created the oligarchs” (the culpability of American economic advice for the collapse of the Russian economy in the 1990s remains hotly debated).

That’s cold comfort for Democrats who still blame Stein for helping install Trump in the White House. In Michigan, Stein garnered more than 51,000 votes, while Clinton lost by fewer than 11,000. In Wisconsin, Trump’s margin was 23,000 votes while Stein attracted 31,000. And in Pennsylvania she attracted 50,000 votes, while Trump won by 44,000.

The case that Stein played spoiler isn’t nearly as strong as it was for Ralph Nader in 2000, when Bush won Florida by 500 votes while Nader racked up close to 100,000 votes there. And Stein points to national exit polling that shows the majority of her voters would have stayed home rather than vote for Clinton, while others would have sooner voted for Trump.

Beyond the question of whether staying off swing-state ballots or endorsing Clinton could have prevented Trump’s victory, there is the question of the extent to which Russia attempted to use Stein’s candidacy as a vehicle for influencing American politics and the extent to which it succeeded. Democrats have long accused the Green Party of being like a watermelon—green on the outside, red on the inside—and Stein’s closeness to a Kremlin-backed entity like RT has only fueled those suspicions.

Shared opposition to the bipartisan U.S. foreign policy consensus has led to significant intermingling between the Green Party and the network. Stein’s vice presidential shortlist included RT host Chris Hedges, a former New York Times journalist who has become popular

on the left for his jeremiads against war. Her eventual running mate, Ajamu Baraka, who has slammed the “gangster states of NATO,” has long regularly appeared on the network.

Stein is acutely aware of the value of exposure, rattling off figures for the billions of dollars in free media showered on Trump, Clinton and Democratic runner-up Bernie Sanders while lamenting that she got little attention. The only network to consistently cover her candidacy and invite her on air was RT.

The network also hosted a primary debate for the Green Party, noting in its accompanying coverage, “Many Americans feel disenfranchised by the 2016 election’s options from both party” [sic].

And three months before she traveled to Moscow in December 2015, photos Stein posted on Facebook and her campaign website show her meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at another RT gala in New York. Stein says the encounter lasted only a minute or two, and that she used it plug the Green Party’s nuclear disarmament plan. “He was, like, very skeptical that that could happen,” she says. “That’s about as far it went.”

At the Green Party’s National Convention in Houston in August, Julian Assange addressed the assembled delegates via videoconference about hacked documents published by WikiLeaks showing Democratic officials working to tip the party’s primary towards Clinton and against Sanders. Stein says she’s unsure how Assange’s convention address came about.

According to U.S. intelligence agencies, the documents were obtained by Russian state hackers and delivered to WikiLeaks as part of the Kremlin’s efforts to subvert the American political system. Russian propaganda outlets made the Democratic Party’s treatment of Sanders a central theme of their election-related content in an apparent effort to drive a wedge between Clinton and the left.

The Russian government has long sought to co-opt Western environmental movements to further its own aims, and in recent years it has actively supported Western anti-fracking activists, not out of a desire to promote a transition to sustainable energy, but instead to preserve market share for Russian gas.

All of it leaves Clinton’s staunchest supporters with a bad taste in their mouths—even if it seems doubtful that exposure on a little-watched Russian propaganda network could have given Stein’s shoestring campaign a meaningful boost.

“There was a large and in some states decisive vote for Jill Stein that would have helped stop Donald Trump from being president,” says former Clinton campaign communications aide Jesse Ferguson. “What is debatable is the extent to which the Russian intervention in the election included propping up her campaign. There was a not-insignificant amount of exposure given to her campaign by the Russian government, Russian government outlets like RT, but there’s no way to conclusively know whether Donald Trump would’ve lost Michigan if Russian operatives weren’t promoting Jill Stein. It’s an unknowable question.”

Ferguson says he believes Stein's attitude about her role in the election depends on whether she is more concerned with self-promotion or the Green Party agenda. "If she cares more about the agenda, then the results of this election have to trouble her."

Clinton intimate Neera Tanden, president of the Center for American Progress, voices the continuing frustrations of many liberals through her ongoing Twitter jabs at Stein, including the observation last month that, "I know I need to let this go but I hope Jill Stein does not so much as whisper a rebuke of Trump pulling out of Paris. #shebuiltthis." On Monday, in response to news of Russia's threat to shoot down U.S. warplanes in Syria, Tanden tweeted, "thanks Jill Stein" (the tweet has since been deleted).

Stein is not losing any sleep over what might have been—in her telling, Clinton wouldn't have been much better. "There are differences between Clinton and Trump, no doubt, but they're not different enough to save your life, to save your job, to save the planet," she says. "We deserve more than two lethal choices."

I thought I might be able to find some daylight between Stein and other Green Party leaders, who I expected might be troubled at any role they might have played in helping elect a man who once claimed climate change was a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese.

I was wrong.

"In some ways, Trump is one of the best things to happen to this country because look at how many people are getting off their posteriors," says Sherry Wells, the Green Party's Michigan chairwoman. "So part of me is giggling."

Americans, she reasons, would be hypocritical for crying foul over foreign meddling in their political system. "I am so comforted to hear that the United States never interfered in the election of other countries," cracks Wells, who volunteers that she is fluent in Esperanto.

Indeed, while ties to Russia or the prospect of a spoiler role appear to have caused no real consternation among the Greens, Stein's decision to demand recounts in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania has been far more contentious. Because of this, says Stein — whose efforts to call attention to vulnerabilities in American voting systems continue — "I am often accused of being anti-Russian."

Indicative of the controversy is a December takedown article by Brandy Baker, a Green National Committee delegate from Maryland, titled, "Jill Stein sees Russia from her house."

"Is there is any explanation for Jill Stein to latch onto the jingoistic, Cold War rhetoric of Russian hacking conspiracies that come straight from the Clinton campaign, the DNC, and the White House?" asks the piece, published in the far-left outlet Counterpunch—perhaps unfairly, because while Stein believes there has been hacking, she hasn't actually blamed it on Russia.

“Most people are saying, ‘Oh it’s the Russians,’ but there is not a lot of evidence for that,” Stein says. She also rejects the contention from some on the left that her recount efforts made her a vehicle for Democratic Party interests, calling it “fake news.”

Stein is adamant that the Green Party not allow itself to become the vehicle for anyone else’s agenda—not Vladimir Putin’s, nor Hillary Clinton’s, nor Donald Trump’s.

A POLITICO review of the party’s finances turned up \$40,000 in contributions pledged in late 2015 to the Pennsylvania Green Party’s federal account from Philadelphia-based libertarian donor Howard Rich and three of his family members. Rich, who sits on the boards of the Cato Institute and the Club for Growth and did not respond to requests for comment, is an opponent of green energy subsidies.

Green Party Pennsylvania chairwoman Kristin Combs says the donation was pledged to get a Green Party candidate for Senate on the ballot in 2016. After party members concluded the contribution was motivated by a desire to help Republican Pat Toomey win reelection, they decided to reject the gift, according to Combs, who pointed to an amended FEC filing reflecting the decision.

Stein says the episode reflects the Green Party’s commitment to its high ideals.

“We didn’t want to be in a position where we were tools of conservative money,” she says. “That’s not what we’re about.”