

Understanding Russian propaganda and the U.S. election

It may seem strange, but the Kremlin's propaganda machine is not backing Donald Trump. It has a bigger goal: Discrediting democracy in the United States.

The Kremlin's main propaganda outlets in America are the TV station RT (formerly Russia Today) and the radio and online outlet Sputnik. Both are headed by Kremlin loyalists and closely mirror Russia's foreign policy. While their effect on the presidential race is likely to be minimal, their reporting is useful for the insight it provides into the Kremlin's intentions.

That reporting focuses on attacking Hillary Clinton in specific, and the nature of U.S. democracy in general. As such, it appears that the Kremlin is less interested in promoting Trump than promoting discontent.

Coverage of Trump by RT and Sputnik is, in fact, uncharacteristically balanced. Some recent reports have presented the Republican candidate favorably, such as when he [endorsed](#) a number of critics for re-election 'in an attempt to ease party tensions', or [accused](#) Clinton of founding the Daesh terrorist group.

Others, however, were unfavorable. One [quoted](#) a neo-Nazi leader as backing his candidacy; another [accused](#) him of hypocrisy. One [report](#) even asked, 'Is Trump an embarrassment to the GOP because he's an incompetent, uninformed, pathological menace, or because he's just saying out loud what most Republicans now believe?'

No such balance is apparent in the two outlets' coverage of the other candidates.

Clinton is the most obvious target. In August alone, RT reports covered accusations of [corruption](#), [lying](#) and [ill health](#) against her; [accused](#) her of launching a McCarthy-style 'witch hunt' against Trump; and [linked](#) her to the use of nuclear weapons in 1945. Sputnik's reporting called her and her team '[war hawks](#)', [accused](#) her of wanting to 'make more families suffer' the deaths of soldiers, and [named](#) her the 'Queen of War'.

If the Kremlin's machine has nothing good to say about Clinton, it has nothing *but* good to say about the Green party's candidate for president, Jill Stein, currently [polling](#) at 3.8%, according to website [realclearpolitics.com](#). RT and Sputnik have given the Greens so much coverage they appear to be serving as a PR agency.

Between 28 December 2015 and 31 July 2016, they together interviewed Stein nine times, with soft questions such as '[Why](#) does it make sense to step outside the system and support the Green Party?' RT even [hosted](#) a presidential debate among the Green candidates, and ran a [report](#) on the highlights of the Green Party convention.

Earlier in the electoral cycle, Bernie Sanders enjoyed similar lavish coverage, with headlines such as '[Why](#) only Sanders can prevent "President Trump"'. In March, RT even ran an [interview](#) claiming that Clinton and Google were collaborating to rig the results against Sanders, with the interviewer asking, 'Sanders scored a 35% swing, maybe, in Michigan, I mean, it hasn't worked so well for Clinton, has it?'

Thus, the Kremlin's propaganda is not so much pro-Trump as it is anti-Clinton and anti-establishment. This fits into a broader pattern of behavior.

As RT whistleblower Liz Wahl - who [resigned](#) on air in 2014 in protest at the station's violation of journalistic standards - [wrote](#) in March, 'RT's main goal is not to seek truth and report it. Rather, the aim is to create confusion and sow distrust in Western governments and institutions by reporting anything which seems to discredit the West.'

This is the optic through which the Kremlin's coverage - and the related hacking of the Democratic National Convention - can be understood: It is not about making a candidate look good, but making American democracy look bad.

For example, one recent RT [headline](#) read, 'Leaked emails, rigged elections, media blackout: Welcome to democracy, American-style.' An [editorial](#) described U.S. politics as an establishment conspiracy; another was [headlined](#), 'Did you think U.S. presidential debates were open and fair? Think again.' Sputnik, meanwhile, ran a slew of stories talking up the chances of third parties, despite poll numbers to the contrary, before [repeating](#) the accusation of a Google conspiracy.

In this campaign, the media are a prominent target. Some comments are aimed at the media as a whole, such as this RT [editorial](#): 'The surging fundraising and poll numbers for Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein since the end of the Bernie Sanders campaign must be hitting a nerve, because Democratic insiders and the mainstream media are resorting to smear tactics.' Some are aimed at specific targets, such as Google, [BuzzFeed](#) and [Vice](#).

Not all of these comments can be attributed directly to Kremlin writers. However, on both RT and Sputnik, the choice of third-party quotes is so systematically anti-Clinton and anti-establishment that it can only be the result of a deliberate policy.

There are two possible reasons for this anti-establishment drive. The first is that it is part of the Kremlin's effort to deflect accusations that it has abandoned the path of democracy by painting its critics as equally undemocratic. In this sense, Putin's 17 June [comment](#) to CNN's Fareed Zakaria is instructive:

'Well, they lecture everyone on how to live and on democracy. Now, do you really think presidential elections there are democratic?'

The second is more troubling. Russia's military [doctrine](#), updated in December 2014, identifies the 'wide use of the protest potential of the population' as one of the key elements of modern conflict. The Kremlin tried to harness that potential in its annexation of Crimea and its invasion of the Donbas; it appears to have attempted to stir up protest in Scotland in September 2014, after the Scottish referendum on independence, when a Russian election observer [claimed](#) the vote did not mean international standards.

Given that Russia sees rabble-rousing as an integral part of modern conflict, and positions itself rhetorically as in a state of geopolitical conflict with the U.S., it would be entirely logical for the Kremlin to attempt to seed discontent in America. That is what its election coverage appears designed to do.

