

Russia-Bashing Just Hit New Low — and It's Really, Really Ugly

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Global Research, June 26, 2016

[RT](#) 25 June 2016

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

It's doubtful that the media sport of Russia-bashing will ever go out of fashion. As they say, no journalist or analyst ever hurt their career by focusing their ire on Moscow.

Hysterical op-eds about the Evil Empire and its malevolent leader are ten a penny these days — and most of them, while very often scant in the facts department and ample in the conspiracy department, can be skimmed over and forgotten about. More of the same. No point getting too hyped up about it.

But every so often, a piece comes along that is so bad, on so many fronts, that it deserves a response. A recent piece in the Boston Globe meets the requirements. “*Putin’s Russia is a poor, drunk soccer hooligan*,” [proclaimed](#) the headline. If there was an award for excellency in Russia-bashing, this piece would surely be the winner.



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I know it's hard to imagine, but it gets worse than the headline. Russia, the author wrote a few paragraphs in, is like an “oiled, aged, but still buff, body builder” who hides his “geriatric walker” off-stage — and “Boozy Yeltsin” was a “fitting representative” for the country. Funny, huh?

Horrendous piece on Russia by [@Scott_Gilmore](#), probably the worst I've ever read. <https://t.co/HHEDdKXp1N> pic.twitter.com/LfFcEdZ3zn

— Danielle Ryan (@DanielleRyanJ) [23 June 2016](#)

Fact-checking. Who needs that?

Let's be perfectly clear: It would be a mistake to believe this piece was an attempt to inform the reader of the realities of modern Russia. Because the purpose of this piece was not to inform. Its single, glaringly obvious intent was to paint the worst possible picture of a country — for no other reason, it would appear, than sheer malice. To do this, facts were cherry-picked, statistics were delivered out of context without regard for overall long-term trends — and yes, some parts were just entirely untrue. Like the dubious claim that Russia's life expectancy rate has been "*declining*", when in fact, it has been rising. But why let pesky facts get in the way of a good narrative? As one Twitter user wrote to me: "*punditry is the most fact-checking-free segment of media today and also the most popular means of disseminating info (sic)*". In other words, if readers took this piece at face value, they have been misled. Sold as a "*closer look*" at Russia, this article provides anything but. In fact, it's simplistic and downright deceitful.

Regarding the life-expectancy assertion, this is pretty easy to fact check. Russian life expectancy reached a historic high in 2013 (71.2 years) and increased again in 2014-2015 (71.4 years). In 2016, life expectancy has reportedly continued to increase at a more rapid rate, although detailed data are not yet available. Where am I getting all of this? From an actual [expert](#) in Russian demographics who reads data and favors facts over fakery. And he's [no fan](#) of Vladimir Putin, either. I know to some this combination of not being a Putin fan and at the same time having the decency and integrity to focus on facts (even when they paint Russia in a somewhat positive light) might be shocking, but such people do really exist.

[@27khv](#) [@DanielleRyanJ](#) [@Scott_Gilmore](#) Random check: just Google "Russia life expectancy" and see how it's "declining" to its highest ever.

— Slava Borisov (@bavals) [23 June 2016](#)

Context helps

Lest it be forgotten, when we talk and write about Russia, we're talking and writing about a country that is in many ways still recovering from a devastating and calamitous blow to its system less than 25 years ago. A country that had to be pulled back from the edge of very real ruin, not the kind of constantly impending imaginary ruin that columnists drool over today.

Therefore, reeling off a list of negative-sounding statistics as the author of the Globe piece has done, provides no historical context with which the reader can evaluate the successes or failures of the country that Russia is today. And as much as it pains some to admit, there have been some successes. Focusing with tunnel-vision on the negatives does not do anyone any good if the overarching goal is to understand.

Telling the reader that infant mortality is "*two to three times higher than the rest of the world*" is another example. It ignores completely, for example, that infant mortality in Russia decreased by 12 percent in 2015 and that even since Russia's recent economic crisis took hold, mortality indicators have improved significantly. The crude effort to mask positive improvements to suit the 'Russia is collapsing' narrative is increasingly transparent and

authors who employ the tactic do not appear to be at all concerned with painting a fair picture for their readers.

“Putin’s Russia is a poor, drunk soccer hooligan” my latest piece for the [@BostonGlobe](https://t.co/hKoDYEKrgX) <https://t.co/hKoDYEKrgX>

— Scott Gilmore (@Scott_Gilmore) [22 June 2016](#)

Pride in prejudice

Unfortunately, if the author’s Twitter feed is anything to go by, he actually seems to have taken some pride in angering “*Russian Twitter trolls*” and the “*pro-Putin crowd*”. Russian Twitter trolls, by the way, are Twitter users who dare to risk a positive or even neutral utterance about Russia in any capacity. The juvenile crusaders against these terrible trolls know that if someone disagrees with them, that person is a troll, end of discussion. Because that’s the level of discourse we’re dealing with today: If you disagree with me, you’re a troll and I’m going to block you because in today’s messed up world, cognitive dissonance is another mental stressor that I just don’t need. I have often been critical of American foreign policy in this column. But you can be sure my next headline won’t be: ‘*Obama’s America is a dumb, obese criminal delinquent*’. Because, well, that would be a bit over the top and insulting, wouldn’t it? People would gasp and tell me how unfair it was. Americans aren’t all stupid and obese, they would declare. And they’d be right. But somehow it’s not a problem to imply, directly or indirectly, that all Russians are poor and drunk. Nah, that’s totally fine.

Well blow me down, I was right—“Russian government hackers” didn’t hack DNC oppo research on Trump <https://t.co/ivb1k3Zxi5>

— Mark Ames (@MarkAmesExiled) [16 June 2016](#)

Russia the mouse and Russia the menace

The thing about over-the-top Russia-bashing is that it is incredibly irrational and paranoid. Columnist Bryan MacDonald last year [coined](#) the term ‘Russophobia’ — a condition whereby the sufferer believes simultaneously that Russia is both about to collapse and take over the world. Many sufferers are employed in the media world and regard Russia both as a distant speck of irrelevance in world history and at the same time see Putin and the KGB floating nefariously in their cornflakes every morning. One day, Russia is a washed-up has been, a pathetic, insignificant nothing.

The next day, some other columnist will write that Russia is a menacing bear threatening world domination; there’s a madman at the helm and there’s nothing he is not capable of orchestrating from his Kremlin lair. And the cycle will continue. The put down pieces will be used to convince readers not to worry, America is still number one and everyone else is just a big loser — and the Russian menace pieces will be used to ensure no one ever decides to form a neutral, or God forbid, positive opinion of the country. Don’t forget, the columnists will remind us, Russia may be a loser, but it’s still a bad, evil one with nuclear weapons. The fact that the media oscillates so frequently between these two narratives indicates that they

have whipped themselves up into such a confused frenzy that they don't know which line they should be selling most vigorously — and that right there is how you know the narrative is based not on objective fact-finding, but on ideology: Russia is bad, in all ways, at all times, and it always will be. And if you disagree, you're a troll.

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