

To Russia, With Hate

The War Party targets the Kremlin

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The hate campaign against Vladimir Putin's Russia is really quite extraordinary, not only on account of its relentless ferocity but also because of its brazen reliance on rumor, exaggeration, and – all too often – utter falsehood. Take [this piece](#) by Cathy Young, recently [downsized out](#) of her longtime perch at the *Boston Globe* and relegated to the relatively obscure pages of *Reason* magazine, wherein she retails the latest anti-Russian hysterics:

"In March, Putin signed a decree merging two existing federal agencies – one for media oversight and the protection of culture, the other for telecommunications monitoring – into a single body, the Federal Service for the Oversight of Mass Communications and Protection of Cultural Heritage. It is perhaps no accident that the Russian word for 'oversight' used in the agency's name, nadzor, has a somewhat sinister ring for a Russian speaker: It commonly refers to the supervision of a prisoner. The new agency, which will start its work in about three months, will oversee and license broadcasters, the print media, and websites."

So, have any Russian Web sites been closed down? Well, um, *no*: it's just that some "Russian journalists have expressed strong concerns about this move, which they see as consolidating government control over the media." Yes, but what has actually occurred, aside from a bureaucratic "consolidation" of government agencies? Answer: *nothing*. Oh, to be sure, there is a lot of speculation that this could be preparation for the Russian government exerting control over the Internet:

"Roman Bodanin, editor of the political website gazeta.ru – which got an official warning for 'extremism' last year after writing about the Muhammad cartoons controversy – and Raf Shakirov, former editor of the daily Izvestia, who was sacked..."

Ah yes, sacked – another disgruntled journalist, discarded by his employer. He couldn't possibly have an agenda that has affected his objectivity, now could he? As for that warning about "extremism" – Russia is hardly alone in having laws against "extremist" rhetoric and other forms of "hate speech," but for some reason I don't think we'll see Young speak out against any of these legislative infringements on free speech any time soon.

Okay, so what about the new legislative moves by the Russians to "regulate" the Internet? Well, here's what Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has to say about it:

"The merger has been interpreted largely as an attempt to control the Internet, the only sphere of media and communications that is currently free of regulation. This lack of regulation has turned the web into an island of freedom of speech and the number of users continues to grow. But despite intense speculation that the authorities want to establish control over the Internet, the Ministry of Information Technology and Communications has

maintained a hands-off policy to date.

“Most observers have leapt to the conclusion that the Internet is the main target of the merger, as legislators have repeatedly called for more stringent control. However, Boyarskov’s words seem to corroborate the opinion of a smaller number of experts, who consider that the primary issue Russian officials are currently concerned with is the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting, which has huge political and economic implications. Those experts consider the anticipated consequences of the merger for the Internet, and for Internet service providers (ISP) specifically, as essentially a side effect.”

The reality is that the Russian Internet is alive and flourishing, with an increasing number of sites reflecting an incredible ideological and social diversity. The technological reality is such that the Russian government *couldn’t* control the Internet, even if it sought to do so: given a minimal technical competence on the part of the user, the wide-open nature of cyberspace is enough to defeat any would-be central planner or censor.

The complaints about the “consolidation” of the Russian media emanating from Young and the anti-Russia chorus are all about changes in ownership: the “oligarchs,” who looted the Russian state in the wake of the implosion of Communism, lost control of Russian television and radio facilities, and these were bought up by a new group of owners, some of whom are pro-Putin – but so what? The Murdoch media empire is generally supportive of the Bush administration, and this made a big difference during the run-up to war with Iraq: remember how uncritical the American media was of government claims about Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” and Saddam’s alleged links to al-Qaeda – but does that mean the U.S. government has taken over television, radio, and newspapers in this country? Of course not.

Conspiracy theories are an integral part of the new Russophobia, from the accusations that Putin ordered the nuking of Alexander Litvinenko to blaming the FSB (Russian security service) every time a Russian journalist stubs his or her toe, and Young relates a real doozy:

“A lengthy [investigative report](#) published in 2006 on the Russian Democratic Union website alleges that in the Putin years, political forums on the Russian Internet have been the target of deliberate, organized intimidation by pro-government forces. The article, by former St. Petersburg television and BBC Russian Service correspondent Anna Polyanskaya (now Paris-based) and two colleagues, cites disturbing evidence that these digital goon squads are not simply loud, obnoxious, and well-coordinated but quite possibly connected to the government. Their members often seem to have mysterious access to personal data about anti-Putin posters; on some occasions, they have posted disinformation intended to discredit the opposition a few days before these exact same canards are officially circulated by the government. The article also mentions instances of posts critical of the state being purged from site archives. Under the new oversight agency, it seems very likely that freedom on the Russian Internet will become an even more endangered commodity.”

Again, this new “oversight agency” is no more intrusive than, say, the Federal Communications Commission, or the Federal Elections Commission, which has tried to regulate the political commentary of American bloggers during election season. But what about these mysterious Internet goon squads that have supposedly been unleashed by the neo-KGB from their headquarters in the basement of the Kremlin? Young gives us little or no reason to believe that these are government-sponsored activities: however, she does provide a link to the “investigative report” of the Russian Democratic Union. Too bad it’s in

Russian.

As for those “digital goon squads” – the goons over at Little Green Footballs are notorious in the American blogosphere for their knee-jerk support of U.S. government policies and goon-squad-ish behavior, but no one, to my knowledge, has ever accused them of being paid agents of the U.S. government. If every Internet phenomenon that seems “loud, obnoxious, and well-coordinated” is attributed to the action of some government, then I’m waiting for the Russian Democratic Union to examine the online antics of Charles Johnson and his infamous winged cyber-monkeys.

Young’s is hardly the only “libertarian” voice that riffs on Dick Cheney’s denunciation of Russia as “slipping” into “authoritarianism.” At a time when the NATO alliance is pressing hard against the Russians, erecting a missile shield in Eastern Europe and scolding Putin for withdrawing state subsidies from oil exports to former Soviet republics such as Ukraine, the Cato Institute’s Andrei Illarionov is literally calling for war on the Kremlin. At the end of a long peroration devoted to reiterating the all-too-familiar canards against Putin’s Russia, he cites the neocons’ favorite statesman – Winston Churchill, you ninny! – as follows:

“Let me conclude these remarks with words spoken by Winston Churchill about another great war for freedom:

I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this government: ‘I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.’ We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.

“That war for freedom was won. We may yet win, indeed we must win, this current war. But to win, we must work together.”

Them’s fightin’ words, as they say, but is the Cato Institute really calling for a shooting war against the Russkies? Illarionov is no doubt indulging in a bit of hyperbole, but there seems little doubt that the “libertarians” over at the house that Ed Crane built are not all that averse to the deployment of a little “soft power” in the service of “regime-change” in Russia.

Illarionov defends the infamous “oligarchs,” who were handed control of the formerly state-owned industries by Boris Yeltsin and his gang, as champions of “free enterprise” – but his favorite oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, is an “entrepreneur” more in the style of Al Capone than Hank Rearden. Khodorkovsky built up his Menatep Bank as a result of his connections to the old Communist Party and seized control of Yukos, the government-controlled oil company, by using his political influence to elbow out a lower bid on a technicality. Khodorkovsky spirited billions out of the country and stashed it away in foreign banks – much to the dismay of the International Monetary Fund, which discovered that a good deal of its “aid” to Russia had somehow found its way into those same foreign accounts. There has been at least one murder investigation linked to the Khodorkovsky empire, and strong-

arm tactics come as naturally to this gang as they did to the old KGB.

Illarionov charges that the Russian state is employing “storm troopers” to beat and crush its opponents: the youth group [Nashi](#) is cited as one of the chief culprits. However, Nashi is not a government entity, but a private organization, which supports the politics of Putin’s political party, just as the Young Republicans support President Bush – although there the parallels end, because we’re talking about some very different politics. [Here’s](#) Nashi demonstrating outside the U.S. embassy, denouncing the war in Iraq, calling on the American people to stop Bush from invading Iran, and warning that interference in Russia’s internal affairs could lead to some unpleasantness:

“Nashi leader Vasily Yakemenko said the United States was causing bloodshed from Iraq to Afghanistan and warned Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice against stirring tensions in Russia. ‘If Condoleezza Rice escalates tension here, it’s possible there will be a situation where people here could die too. The U.S. needs to think less about what is happening here and more about what is going on in Iraq,’ he said.”

A sign carried in the Nashi demonstration [read](#): “American mothers, stop the fanatics from the State Department” – a remonstrance that many Americans, and not just mothers, can sympathize with.

The irony is that the charges of hooliganism aimed at Nashi are more properly directed at Putin’s *opponents*, who, out of frustration at their complete inability to make a dent in the Russian president’s popularity, have taken to showy – and often violent – displays of “dissent,” such as the one that attracted a few thousand participants in St. Petersburg on Sunday. Headlines proclaimed the arrest of Gary Kasparov, the former chess champion, who heads up his own small political movement, but by far the biggest and certainly the most visible presence in this menagerie of malcontents was the National Bolshevik Party (NBP), an ultra-nationalist and racist organization whose Fuehrer, Eduard Limonov, is a megalomaniac and a loon.

It’s no accident that the name of the “dissident” coalition that organized the St. Petersburg march – and a prior conference – is called “the Other Russia,” also the title of Limonov’s political manifesto. NBP ideology is an eclectic mix of extreme nationalism, outright neo-Nazism, Stalinist nostalgia, trendy punkish nihilism, and an almost stylized authoritarianism, spiced up with a pan-Slavic “Eurasianism,” which, if it ever came to power, would turn Russia into a giant North Korea. The NBP symbol – a black hammer-and-sickle in a white circle against a red background – is particularly loathsome, conjuring as it does two of the most murderous regimes in human history. Video and still photos of the April 15 demonstration show this disgusting symbol dominating the display of “dissent.” As the main activist organization inside the anti-Putin Popular Front, the NBP is a truly sinister outfit.

When neo-Nazi demonstrators are dispersed in the streets of Germany, the U.S. government wouldn’t dream of issuing an official protest: yet our State Department didn’t hesitate to declare themselves “deeply disturbed” by police actions taken against violence-prone NBP demonstrators.

Anne Applebaum – chronicler of the Gulag and energetic opponent of authoritarianism – joins the “libertarian” defense of Limonov and his fellow neo-fascists, decrying their arrest (while mentioning only Kasparov, the useful idiot, by name). She compares the demonstration in St. Petersburg with one in Ukraine, where the pro-Russian Party of the

Regions is camped out in the main square of Kiev to protest President Viktor Yushchenko's threat to dissolve the parliament and rule by decree until new elections can be held. That's the pro-Western "democrat," you'll remember, responding to attempts by the Ukrainian parliament to limit his power. His big problem at the moment is that members of his own party and its coalition partners have defected to the opposition. Imagine if Putin dissolved the Russian Duma on similar grounds – Applebaum and the new Russia-haters would have fits of self-righteous indignation.

Putin is no libertarian; he is also no monster. Russia is no utopia, nor is it a dictatorship. Contra Illarionov, it represents no threat to its neighbors, as long as those neighbors refrain from engaging in a provocative arms buildup while shielding themselves behind NATO's nuclear umbrella. It seems to me that needless provocations directed at the Kremlin, which is in no position to threaten American interests – and which is fighting on the same side as us when it comes to battling Islamic terrorism – are not at all useful, and, as Gary Hart has recently pointed out, are downright dangerous. "The mystery," says Hart, "is this: what forces are at work to demonize Russia, to isolate and alienate it from the West, and to continue to treat it as an enemy?"

The campaign to demonize Russia, and target Putin in particular, is motivated by the Russian president's angular stance against American hegemony, expressed forcefully in a speech to the Munich conference of European nations in February. Russia has opposed U.S. attempts to further destabilize the Middle East, selling defensive weapons to Syria and trying to mediate between the Iranians and the UN Security Council over the nuclear issue. Putin, in short, has failed to know – or keep – his place: this alone puts him in the cross hair of the War Party.

As the U.S. seeks to encircle Russia with a string of "color revolutions" from Ukraine to Georgia to the wilds of Central Asia, a geopolitical game is being played out, one that involves an increasing risk of violent conflict. The volatile mix of ethnic, religious, and political feuds that make life dangerous in the former Soviet republics is a veritable sandbox for the American regime-changers to play in, and the amount of trouble they can cause is considerable. The War Party's relentless campaign to further humiliate an empire already humbled and shattered is playing with fire – nuclear fire, to be exact. The Cold War was a [bad idea](#) to begin with; its revival is an even worse one.

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