

Whither Russiagate?

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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Two years have passed since [the 2016 presidential election](#). Allegations that foreign interference had influenced the result, perhaps decisively, began to surface even as the last ballots were being counted. Against all odds underdog Donald J. Trump had been elected president and the Establishment, which denigrated him throughout the campaign, had to find a scapegoat to explain their failure to elect the preferred candidate. The scapegoat turned out to be Russia.

The Robert Mueller led inquiry into the election has been running since May 2017. It has been tasked with determining whether the Trump campaign colluded corruptly with the Russian government to influence the outcome of the election. It has worked hard to delegitimize the president without that being its stated objective and has had a certain measure of success in doing just that.

But apart from a couple of low-level convictions for perjury, Mueller has come up with nothing that convincingly demonstrates that Moscow had some kind of plan to disrupt the elections and thereby damage American democracy. There was, to be sure, some Russian government sponsored probing and what might be described as attempted influencing, but that is what intelligence agencies do to justify their existence. The worst culprit when it comes to election interference worldwide is undoubtedly America's own Central Intelligence Agency, which has been doing just that since 1947. But apart from some low-level activity, there has been nothing to suggest some kind of grand design orchestrated by Russian President Vladimir Putin to overthrow or cast into confusion the American government.

No one should ever let a good story line go to waste, so the U.S. mainstream media has bought into the proposition that Russia did both interfere in and influence the result of the election based on the assumption that where there is smoke there must be fire with little in the way of evidence being provided. Some media outlets have maintained that the margin of victory for Trump was actually "made in Russia," meaning that he is ipso facto Moscow's puppet. It should be noted that this is the same media that embraced Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and transatlantic gliders back in 2002 and the Syrian use of chemical weapons more recently, suggesting that the relationship between demonstrated facts and what comes out in the reporting is very tenuous.

To keep the story fresh, both government and the media [have now been suggesting](#) that there has already been an attempt by Russia to interfere in [the 2018 midterm election](#) which will take place on Tuesday. The New York Times describes an "elaborate campaign of 'information warfare' to interfere." On October 19th, federal prosecutors charged Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova of St. Petersburg Russia, a woman whom they labeled the project's "chief accountant." She allegedly managed a budget to "sow division and discord"

in the lead-up to the voting. The Times goes on to describe how “She bought internet domain names and Facebook and Instagram ads and spent money on building out Twitter accounts and paying to promote divisive posts on social media.”

And the list of culprits has also been expanded to include China and Iran, if one goes by PBS’s [coverage of the story](#). One would not be surprised to see North Korea added to the list, as it is convenient to keep all of one’s enemies in one place, all on the march to destroy American democracy and its political institutions before the GOP and Democrats finally get around to doing it.

One might easily regard the never ending Russiagate saga as a bit of an amusement, but there are actually real-life consequences to corrupting the popular sentiment in a large and powerful nuclear armed nation like the United States by constantly discovering new enemies to stimulate the selling of newspapers and television ad time. At a minimum, phony threat accusations create paranoia and also mistrust in the institutions that are supposed to be protecting the country.

And there are also other less tangible consequences, namely that the constant crying wolf over the Russians and Chinese corrupting America’s political system actually does tell the voters that their vote does not matter as outside forces beyond their control will determine the result anyway.

Stephen Cohen, professor of Russian studies at Princeton University, has been arguing for some time that the pursuit of Russiagate and the various delusions that have become attached to it is doing grave damage not only to the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Washington but also to perceptions of the state of the U.S. political system. His latest article in The Nation entitled [Who is really undermining American democracy?](#) has as a sub-heading “Allegations that Russia is still ‘attacking’ US elections, now again in November, could delegitimize our democratic institutions.”

Cohen argues plausibly how the “undermine American democracy” meme may itself erode confidence in U.S. political institutions because if the trick of claiming outside interference can to be used successfully once it will be used again even after Trump is gone. If there are claims by losing candidates that Russia or some other foreign power interfered in the midterm this week it will inevitably jumpstart a witch hunt to find those congressmen who were “helped.” The legitimacy of congress itself will be in question.

Cohen also argues that “Russiagate has revealed the low esteem that many U.S. political-media elites have for American voters—for their ability to make discerning, rational electoral decisions, which is the bedrock assumption of representative democracy... Presumably this is a factor behind the current proliferation of programs—official, corporate, and private—to introduce elements of censorship in the nation’s ‘media space’ in order to filter out ‘Kremlin propaganda.’ Here, it also seems, elites will decide what constitutes such ‘propaganda.’”

It is the ultimate irony that the most powerful and least threatened country in the world – the United States of America—runs on fear. The obsession with possible foreign interference in U.S. elections reflects the fundamental insecurity of the elites that actually manipulate the system to benefit themselves and their constituencies. If the midterm results do not satisfy the Establishment and the “foreign menace” again is surfaced as causative it will, in

truth, be the beginning of the end for American democracy as mistrust of the integrity of the government institutions will continued to be eroded. The alternative? Tell Robert Mueller to put his cards on the table and prove what is being generally accepted as true regarding Russia or fold up his tent and go home because he is no longer need.

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