

Putin and 'normalised' lies

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by Guest Blogger, Daphne Skillen

Bernie Sanders has called Trump a 'pathological liar'. Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov repeatedly called Putin a 'pathological liar', the last time on the day before he was assassinated. When Chinese journalists in Shanghai asked Putin to explain why he was so popular, he said: 'I always stick to certain rules. First, not to lie ... our people deserve to be told the truth'.

Lies are hard to disentangle, that's why Putin's tactics have proved so successful in suppressing opposition at home and disrupting democracies abroad. The storm of lies, fake news and public abuse unleashed by Kremlin-controlled media and trolls during the Ukraine crisis in 2014 alerted the world's attention to Russia's new soft-power goals. Nato called it 'hybrid warfare'; others called it 'weaponised information', but to call a spade a spade, it was all about lies, a familiar phenomenon of Russian/Soviet history.



At first it was easy to expose Putin's denials during the Crimean invasion that the 'little green men' were Russian soldiers or his assertion that pogroms had been committed against Russians in Ukraine. But the huge volume of lies produced by Russia's army of complicit journalists and trolls working round the clock, with lies emerging in different sectors – cyber warfare, state-sponsored Olympics sports doping, unprecedented meddling in elections of foreign countries – a return to cold war resources became inevitable.

The EU East StratCom Task Force set up a Disinformation Review that exposes lies from Russia on a weekly basis; while US-funded Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, which had disbanded with the break-up of the Soviet

Union , has now reinvented itself as a Russian-language 24-hour TV news channel beaming from Prague.

The mass of lies showed that Russia's aim was not to produce the perfect lie that would stand up to scrutiny, but willy-nilly to wreak havoc, sow discord, shatter trust and, as Russians say 'powder the brains' so that nothing is clear anymore.

What baffled the West was why anyone would lie so openly – what honours did it confer? After all lying is supposed to be morally reprehensible. The Putin regime's rather negligent attitude to making lies believable shows its cynicism, that it neither cares nor blushes at exposure. It turns to its convenient post-modernist arsenal, repeated endlessly by Russia's international broadcaster, RT, that there is no truth anyway, only self-interest.

Back in Russia's history lies and disinformation, however absurd and far-fetched, were meant to serve an ideology, either monarchist or communist. Lies were a survival mechanism to deal with autocratic and totalitarian systems, an adjustment to centuries of arbitrary and repressive rule. Putin's regime looks back to this authoritarian history to resuscitate a virulent form of nationalism and belief in traditional values, which it uses to protect its corrupt mafia state. If you have immunity, you can lie through your teeth. As Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said when journalists guffawed at a PR stunt that saw a macho Putin discovering an ancient amphora after a dip in the Black Sea – so what, nothing to gloat about!

Normalised lying happens when free speech is muzzled. In the Yeltsin era when pluralism reigned lies had to compete with exposure and outrage. Putin began to take control of the media a few months after coming to office in 2000 and all mainstream media has long been under Kremlin control.

When we look at other strongmen on the world stage today – Trump, Erdogan, Orban and their ilk – the first assault is always the media because they hold them accountable. Trump attacked the media on his first day in office, the 'most dishonest human beings on earth' he called journalists of America's famous broadsheets, showing favouritism to the nationalist emotive short-of-facts websites that helped him win the elections.

Control the media – that's the tried and tested path for 'normalised' lying.

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