

What does Russia think about all this? ‘Washington has gone crazy.’



By **David Ignatius** Opinion writer June 1

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When Russian officials and analysts here talk about the U.S. investigation of their alleged hacking of the 2016 campaign, two themes predominate: They’re flattered that their country is seen as such a powerful threat, and they’re amazed that the United States is so preoccupied with the scandal.

This is the official line, to be sure, but it was also expressed by several critics of the regime I interviewed this week. People can’t quite believe the sudden reversal of fortunes: Russia is back as a global force, after decades of humiliation. And the United States, so long the dominant superpower, is now divided, disoriented and, to Russian eyes, in retreat.

For the Kremlin version, here’s how [Sergey Karaganov](#), the head of Russia’s Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, describes his reaction to the investigation: “It’s a mixture of disgust and sympathy. Disgust because 99 percent of that is lies or a concoction, maybe 100 percent. As for sympathy, it’s a desperate picture when a great democracy is killing itself, committing collective suicide.”

There’s an undisguised tone of *schadenfreude* here, even as officials talk about U.S. overreaction. “I would have been proud and happy if the authorities of my country would have used some hackers to penetrate [your system], and showed that you’re living in a crystal palace and should not interfere in the affairs of others,” said Karaganov, who’s an informal Kremlin adviser in addition to running the think tank.

Russian President Vladimir Putin wins either way, argues [Andrei Kolesnikov](#), an independent analyst who’s a senior associate with the Carnegie Moscow Center. “If we did meddle in your elections, we show our might. If we didn’t, we’re pure.”

A similar assessment of the win-win dynamic for Putin comes from [Andrei Soldatov](#), one of Moscow’s best investigative reporters and the author of many exposés about Russian intelligence. “What did Russia get [from the hacking] in terms of

foreign policy? Almost nothing, except that Russia looks powerful,” he told me. “That’s why Putin is so popular. He gives people an identity: Once again, we’re a superpower.”

What surprises Russians is how quickly the U.S.-led order has been coming apart since the election of Donald Trump. Russian officials loathed Hillary Clinton and favored Trump. But it’s unlikely that, even in the darkest corridors of the Kremlin, Putin’s advisers imagined that President Trump would be so disruptive, or the reaction to him so volatile. Russians have grown up being intimidated by the United States; they didn’t imagine it was so fragile.

“We think Washington has gone crazy,” said Andranik Migranyan, a former Russian government official who has taught politics in the United States. “The American story was always one of self-sufficiency. Now, we see a sense of vulnerability.” He sees Trump’s election as a “paradigm shift” for an America that was much more polarized and overstretched than the elites realized. Now, in his view, it’s payback time.

You might expect that Russians would feel embarrassed by the charge that they tried to subvert U.S. and European campaigns, but it’s the opposite. Migranyan explained: “You are assuring us that Putin is all-powerful, that he can do anything he wants — fix elections, change Europe, do anything.”

The official media here are sardonic about each day’s revelations in the U.S. media and Congress. When [Sen. John McCain](#) (R-Ariz.) said this week that Russia was more dangerous than the Islamic State, a Russian news site responded: “Somebody give this gentleman a sedative.” When a story broke about White House adviser [Jared Kushner’s problems](#), the same site headlined: “Once again, those Russians!” Basically, they think it’s funny.

Trump is a familiar sort of political figure to Russians — big, affable, boorish, a bit like Boris Yeltsin. “I wouldn’t love him to run in Russia,” Karaganov said of Trump, “but if your system couldn’t provide better, why not?” He described Trump as “unbelievably brave” in challenging U.S. political orthodoxy, including his calls for better relations with Russia.

Trump’s chief virtue for the Kremlin is that he turned back Clinton, who embodied the aggressive, pro-democracy, interventionist policies that Russia viewed as a mortal threat. “We saw them as absolutely 100 percent dangerous,” Karaganov said. “My advice to the government if she wins was: Put your nuclear forces on alert, so they would know.”

Putin is hosting a celebration of Russia’s new power this week, at the [St. Petersburg International Economic Forum](#), a Davos-like gathering. It’s not a victory parade, but it might as well be. For Putin and his allies, America’s vaunted “liberal international order” is dissolving.

“That order we did not like, and we are doing away with it,” Karaganov said.

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