



Countering Putin begins with knowing what his regime is saying

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Recent media accounts have argued that the U.S. government suffers from an absence of high-quality expertise on Russia. These accounts correctly note that funding for careers to ensure career opportunities for a continuing flow of people interested in Russia has dried up as well as the quantitative as well as qualitative lack of capable analysts. Undoubtedly we suffer from a shortage of funding and of professional interest in Russia, which is widely regarded as a busted flush of little account despite Ukraine and Syria. This shortage tallies with the president and his administration's view that Russia is a declining regional power. Yet, as we have seen reality continues to belie such shortsighted thinking, particularly when it comes to the information battlefield and America's struggle to contest Russian dominance in the weaponization of information used by the Kremlin against the United States and NATO.

Moreover, the shortage of informed expertise transcends our borders. The House of Lords' scathing 2014 report attacked the UK's demolition of its Russian expertise and that Britain has sleepwalked through the crisis leading to the invasion of Ukraine. French analysts tell a similar story in France. In addition one NATO spokesman observed after Turkey shot down a Russian Fighter in November 2015, that NATO had believed its own propaganda about Russia and now had to wake up from this self-imposed dream. Likewise, General Phillip Breedlove (SACEUR and USAF) has often publicly decried NATO's lack of intelligence capabilities in the field and in general regarding Russia. Meanwhile U.S. commanders in Europe encounter the same problems and are thus regularly surprised by Russian exercises and operations.

In the longer term only legislation authorizing funding for education and careers in government for Russia experts and stimulating academia to take Russia more seriously and create careers there as well will eliminate the problem. But in the meantime the problems posed by Russia will not go away and will likely increase as its economic crisis and external aggression continue. So we need to act now. Fortunately there are measures that are immediately available and should be implemented that could dramatically increase our stock of knowledge about Russia and encourage the training and education of a new generation of specialists to replace those aging Cold War veterans who are leaving the scene.

One such solution that does not require legislation is directing the intelligence community to resume the daily electronic Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) now supervised by the Open Source Center. This service was a daily electronic feed of worldwide media, press, radio, television, and social media networks known as the World News Connection (WNC) that once was available to thousands of researchers and which provided immense amounts of information that were vital to shaping our understanding, not only of Russia, but of China, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, etc. This service was shut down in December 2013 by the Director of National Intelligence James Clapper for a reason known to nobody outside the intelligence community. Since then it has been restricted to government employees who have no reason or face serious impediments to discussing their findings in the public forum. Indeed, the attitude of the bureaucracy is that non-government experts don't need this data to do their work. This attitude is a classic sign of the proprietorial attitude to information that helped make 9/11 possible and which contributes today to the shortage of qualified experts and lack of understanding of Russia, and probably of other societies as well.

Making FBIS available again to experts probably does not cost a lot of money and could be done, if necessary by charging for its use. Moreover, it needs no Congressional authorization and it would help prevent the intelligence failures that the Administration has admitted to: failure to anticipate the invasion of Crimea, the rise of China's military, the rise of ISIS, and Russian intervention in Syria. It would not just be relatively easy for the intelligence community to make this material available again to experts even if on a paid basis, it would also be a significant step in advancing our understanding of Russia and other international actors and a material contribution to the national interest and security of the United States. Once widely available to thousands of American universities, FBIS played an major role in educating an entire generation of US-trained specialists on Russia and the region in their efforts to learn more about the closed society of the Soviet Union, which significantly enhanced our ability to understand the USSR and the former captive nations of Eastern Europe.

But beyond these issues making this material available to experts could also go some way toward alleviating the same problem in Great Britain and France. Undoubtedly their governments must act on behalf of their own national interest. But the community of scholars and experts on Russia and other countries is today a global one and its members are in constant international communication. Foreign experts are routinely invited to Washington for conferences and other meetings to enlighten the U.S. government, so making this information available to them too certainly benefits us as well as them. Access to these materials could rapidly be arranged and it is a sound investment not only for the immediate future but also for the longer-term. Just as businesses know that investing in human capital by making workers smarter pays immense dividends the U.S. government and intelligence community should make its workers and its experts smarter and well informed in order that this and future Administration might also be smarter and more informed.

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