

Robert Mueller Will Never Get to the Bottom of Russia's Meddling



Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin on Monday. CreditPool photo by Kirill Kudryavtsev

The first indictments in Robert Mueller's investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 American presidential elections have made it very clear that "Russia-gate" will be a critical factor in American domestic politics in the months to come. But no matter how deep Mr. Mueller digs and what he finds, it seems unlikely that he is going to get to the bottom of a series of bigger questions about the Kremlin's decision to interfere in America's politics in the first place.

Was this a desperate attempt to install a Russia-friendly president in the White House? Or was the main objective to discredit the American political system at a moment when the Kremlin has lost any hope for normalizing relations with Washington? Was it a major strategic move or just a "fun operation" meant more to hurt than to influence?

And there are important questions not just about what happened but also about the future: How have Moscow's recent experiences in America and Europe

influenced Russia's willingness to interfere in Western democracies' politics? Does the Kremlin consider its meddling in American elections and the chaos that followed a success? If so, was its inability to sway France's presidential election this spring a failure?

Mr. Mueller's indictments will not answer these questions. The Kremlin's official position — that Russia never messed with the American politics — means that hardly anyone on the Russian side is willing to discuss the issue, either. And those who actually do know what Russia did and why are extraordinarily few in number — and none are particularly talkative.

So if we want to figure out why the Russians did what they did, we need to leave the terrain of spy games and move to the realm of foreign policy.

Here, we can start with a simple observation: While Russia's meddling was a shock in the West, in Russia it was neither surprising nor scandalous. In my recent discussions with Russian foreign policy experts, they have made clear that if Moscow wants to be a world power, on an equal footing with Washington, it should be able and willing to match the United States. Russian leaders believe that Washington interferes in their domestic politics and that the United States intends to orchestrate a regime change in Moscow. So if they take that as given, the Kremlin should be able to similarly meddle and to show the world that it has the capabilities and will to do so. Reciprocal action is, after all, how you gain the respect of your enemies and the loyalty of your allies.

The common sense in Moscow foreign policy circles today is that Russia can regain its great power status only by confronting the United States, not by cooperating with it. Speaking two week ago at the Valdai International Discussion Club, President Vladimir Putin declared that post-Communist Russia's gravest mistake was "putting its trust in the West." In the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin's Russia wanted to imitate the West, its values and institutions; today Moscow is focused on mirroring Western policies with respect to Russia, doing to West what Russians believe the West is doing to them.

And contrary to conventional wisdom, Russia's craving for global power status is not simply about nostalgia or psychological trauma. It is a geopolitical imperative. Only by proving its capacity to be a 21st century great power can Russia hope to be a real, equal partner with countries like China, which it needs to take it

seriously. Believe it or not, from the Russian perspective, interfering in the American presidential election was a performance organized mostly for the benefit of non-American publics.

Although Russia knows that it is vastly weaker than the United States militarily, economically, technologically and in just about every possible other way, the Kremlin still believes that power and weakness are complex concepts today, and that the stronger party doesn't always win. The Russians see great power rivalries as game of rock-paper-scissors. What is critical is what kind of power you aspire to or are ready to use: Rock beats the scissors, but it is defeated by paper; paper, of course, has no chance against the scissors.

What makes the current situation so dangerous is that Russia will mirror not what the West is doing — but what Russia believes the West is doing. Russian perceptions are shaped by the country's traumatic loss of power after the end of the Cold War. Russian actions are shaped by the conviction that it has the capacity to take risks rather than economic or even technological potential that determines who will prevail.

Ivan Krastev is a contributing opinion writer, the chairman of the Center for Liberal Strategies and the author, most recently, of "After Europe."

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