

## Making sense of Russiagate: what do Russians think?

Written by Filip Slaveski, Research Fellow, Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Deakin University

---

If you're struggling to make sense of ["Russiagate"](#) and the [Trump-Putin connection](#) as [the James Comey affair](#) quickly unravels in Washington, you're not the only one. Many Russians are also scratching their heads, but perhaps for different reasons.

Usually, revelations of Western intervention in Russian domestic politics is what launches many Russians into fearsome, anti-Western tirades. News of the [supposed influence](#) the Russian government had on the 2016 US election has left many asking if Americans know something about Russian espionage they don't.

Conspiracy theories, fake news and the like are not uncommon themes in Russian media and society. However, they are usually directed against Russian interests from abroad, not the other way around. And the media is silent on Russian espionage directed against domestic opponents by the Putin regime.

Adding to the confusion among Russians is their leading state-run TV stations' [schizophrenic coverage of "Russiagate"](#). It hints toward the Russian regime's prowess in influencing the US election, while simultaneously treating the accusation as baseless Western propaganda.

These stations particularly delight in quoting the most inflammatory Western commentators to make this point. However, they missed [possibly the most suitable comment](#) for their ends, coming from the UK think-tank, [RUSI](#).

The director of International Security Studies at RUSI, Jonathan Eyal, said the Russians "have won on almost every account". He claimed that in influencing the US election, the Russians had made a "mockery of the US political process". Eyal said this showed:

## Making sense of Russiagate: what do Russians think?

Written by Filip Slaveski, Research Fellow, Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Deakin University

---

American democracy is no different from anything else, that people get bought and sold, that politicians make cynical deals.

This comment not only fits the Russian media's methodology, but inadvertently hints at a deeper issue at play in Russiagate that has little to do with election meddling. Russia's supposed influence on Trump's election victory did not reveal anything about American democracy that Russians did not already suspect – that US politics is as corrupt and morally compromised as their own.

This over-reaching moral relativism in Russian political thinking is not new, but has been fostered by the Putin regime's propaganda and practice for many years. The underlying message of this regime is that while Putin may not be "good", the alternatives and their Western sponsors are just as bad – if not worse.

For example, Russia's [destabilisation of the current Ukrainian regime](#) has much to do with demonstrating to the Russian population the futility of Western-backed democratic regimes in the post-Soviet space.

This may be a deeper reason why Western media reporting on Russia's meddling in the election has had less impact in Russia.

Many Russians do not share [the doomsday narrative of this reporting](#) on the Trump presidency's perceived destruction of the values of Western civilisation. This is because they don't believe the US political and media establishment represented [these values](#) in the first place.

In this sense, Russians have much more in common with Donald Trump's more hard-edged supporters, [who probably voted for him](#) at least in part to bring down this establishment.

The similarity of political views across borders and nationalities gives rise to numerous questions, perhaps far more important than that of Russian influence in US elections. Theorists

## Making sense of Russiagate: what do Russians think?

Written by Filip Slaveski, Research Fellow, Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Deakin University

---

[have long argued](#)

that middle classes identify more with one another across borders than with their own lower classes, especially in the era of globalisation.

What we might be seeing here is a similar identification, but in the opposite direction.

Will those who feel cheated by the US political establishment's foreign policy misadventures find common cause with Americans cheated by this establishment at home? Probably not, but I cannot be the only one surprised by the apparent lack of interest in Russian meddling in the elections by those who had least to lose from its destruction. American patriotism is more complex than the flag-waving pro-Trump rallies may suggest.

It seems less and less likely, however, that [Trump's anti-establishment campaign rhetoric appointments](#) and [proposed legislation](#) will bear fruit. If anything, his [political](#) seem to be entrenching economic power in Wall Street, the military, and other long-standing centres of power.

This stability and continuity might give encouragement to Russian leaders hoping Trump can stave off impeachment to at least drop the anti-Russian policies of the previous administration. US-sponsored sanctions for Russia's intervention in Ukraine, while US and EU intervention is celebrated, remains the gripe of the Putin regime.

But Trump's stability and continuity may need to flow over into foreign policy as well. If it does, there will likely be no winners in Russiagate – only losers on both sides of the Atlantic.

*Filip Slaveski receives funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC).*

Authors: Filip Slaveski, Research Fellow, Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Deakin University

## Making sense of Russiagate: what do Russians think?

Written by Filip Slaveski, Research Fellow, Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Deakin University

---

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/making-sense-of-russiagate-what-do-russians-think-77871>