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‘Corruption’ as a Propaganda Weapon

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Sadly, some important duties of journalism, such as applying evenhanded standards on human rights abuses and financial corruption, have been so corrupted by the demands of government propaganda – and the careerism of too many writers – that I now become suspicious whenever the mainstream media trumpets some sensational story aimed at some “designated villain.”

Far too often, this sort of “journalism” is just a forerunner to the next “regime change” scheme, dirtying up or delegitimizing a foreign leader before the inevitable advent of a “color revolution” organized by “democracy-promoting” NGOs often with money from the U.S. government’s National Endowment for Democracy or some neoliberal financier like George Soros.

We are now seeing what looks like a new preparatory phase for the next round of “regime changes” with corruption allegations aimed at former Brazilian President Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The new anti-Putin allegations – ballyhooed by the UK Guardian and other outlets – are particularly noteworthy because the so-called “Panama Papers” that supposedly implicate him in offshore financial dealings never mention his name.

Or as the Guardian writes:

> “Though the president’s name does not appear in any of the records, the data reveals a pattern – his friends have earned millions from deals that seemingly could not have been secured without his patronage. The documents suggest Putin’s family has benefited from this money – his friends’ fortunes appear his to spend.”



Image: Russian President Vladimir Putin delivering a speech on the Ukraine crisis in Moscow on March 18, 2014. (Russian government photo)

Note, if you will, the lack of specificity and the reliance on speculation: “a pattern”; “seemingly”; “suggest”; “appear.” Indeed, if Putin were not already a demonized figure in the Western media, such phrasing would never pass an editor’s computer screen. Indeed, the only point made in declarative phrasing is that “the president’s name does not appear in any of the records.”

A British media-watch publication, the Off-Guardian, which criticizes much of the work done at The Guardian, headlined its article on the Putin piece as “the Panama Papers cause Guardian to collapse into self-parody.”

But whatever the truth about Putin’s “corruption” or Lula’s, the journalistic point is that the notion of objectivity has long since been cast aside in favor of what’s useful as propaganda for Western interests.

Some of those Western interests now are worried about the growth of the BRICS economic system – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – as a competitor to the West’s G-7 and the International Monetary Fund. After all, control of the global financial system has been central to American power in the post-World War II world – and rivals to the West’s monopoly are not welcome.

What the built-in bias against these and other “unfriendly” governments means, in practical terms, is that one standard applies to a Russia or a Brazil, while a more forgiving measure is applied to the corruption of a U.S. or European leader.

Take, for instance, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s millions of dollars in payments in speaking fees from wealthy special interests that knew she was a good bet to become the next U.S. president. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Clinton Stalls on Goldman-Sachs Speeches.”]



Image: Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Or, similarly, the millions upon millions of dollars invested in super-PACS for Clinton, Sen.

Ted Cruz and other presidential hopefuls. That might look like corruption from an objective standard but is treated as just a distasteful aspect of the U.S. political process.

But imagine for a minute if Putin had been paid millions of dollars for brief speeches before powerful corporations, banks and interest groups doing business with the Kremlin. That would be held up as de facto proof of his illicit greed and corruption.

Losing Perspective

Also, when it's a demonized foreign leader, any "corruption" will do, however minor. For example, in the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan's denounced Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega for his choice of eyewear: "The dictator in designer glasses," declared Reagan, even as Nancy Reagan was accepting free designer gowns and free renovations of the White House funded by oil and gas interests.

Or, the "corruption" for a demonized leader can be a modest luxury, such as Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych's "sauna" in his personal residence, a topic that got front-page treatment in The New York Times and other Western publications seeking to justify the violent coup that drove Yanukovych from office in February 2014.

Incidentally, both Ortega and Yanukovych had been popularly elected but were still targeted by the U.S. government and its operatives with violent destabilization campaigns. In the 1980s, the CIA-organized Nicaraguan Contra war killed some 30,000 people, while the U.S.-orchestrated "regime change" in Ukraine sparked a civil war that has left some 10,000 people dead. Of course, in both cases, Official Washington blamed Moscow for all the trouble.

In both cases, too, the politicians and operatives who gained power as a result of the conflicts were arguably more corrupt than the Nicaraguan Sandinistas or Yanukovych's government. The Nicaraguan Contras, whose violence helped pave the way for the 1990 election of U.S.-backed candidate Violeta Chamorro, were deeply implicated in cocaine trafficking. [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga."]

Today, the U.S.-supported Ukrainian government is wallowing in corruption so deep that it has provoked a new political crisis.[See Consortiumnews'com's "Reality Peeks Through in Ukraine."]

Ironically, one of the politicians actually named in the Panama Papers for having established a shadowy offshore account is the U.S.-backed Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, although he got decidedly second-billing to the unnamed Putin. (Poroshenko denied there was anything improper in his offshore financial arrangements.)

Double Standards

Mainstream Western journalism no longer even tries to apply common standards to questions about corruption. If you're a favored government, there might be lamentations about the need for more "reform" – which often means slashing pensions for the elderly and cutting social programs for the poor – but if you're a demonized leader, then the only permissible answer is criminal indictment and/or "regime change."

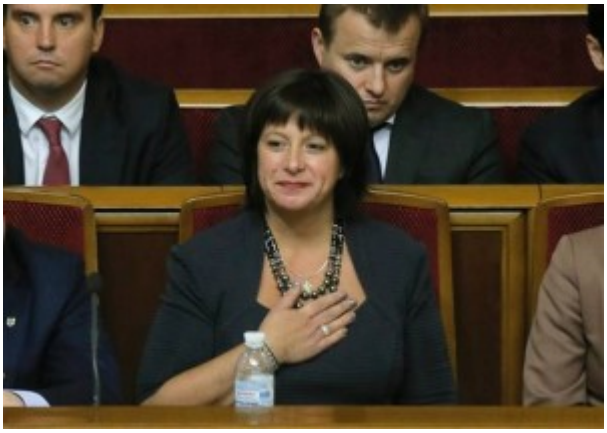


Image: Ukrainian Finance Minister Natalie Jaresko.

One stark example of these double standards is the see-no-evil attitude toward the corruption of Ukraine's Finance Minister Natalie Jaresko, who is touted endlessly in the Western media as the paragon of Ukrainian good governance and reform. The documented reality, however, is that Jaresko enriched herself through her control of a U.S.-taxpayer-financed investment fund that was supposed to help the people of Ukraine build their economy.

According to the terms of the $150 million investment fund created by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Jaresko's compensation was supposed to be capped at $150,000 a year, a pay package that many Americans would envy. But it was not enough for Jaresko, who first simply exceeded the limit by hundreds of thousands of dollars and then moved her compensation off-books as she amassed total annual pay of $2 million or more.

The documentation of this scheming is clear. I have published multiple stories citing the evidence of both her excessive compensation and her legal strategies for covering up evidence of alleged wrongdoing. [See Consortiumnews.com's "How Ukraine's Finance Minister Got Rich" and "Carpetbagging Crony Capitalism in Ukraine."]

Despite the evidence, not a single mainstream Western news outlet has followed up on this information even as Jaresko is hailed as a "reform" candidate for Ukrainian prime minister.

This disinterest is similar to the blinders that The New York Times and other major Western newspapers put on when they were assessing whether Ukrainian President Yanukovych was ousted in a coup in February 2014 or just wandered off and forgot to return.

In a major "investigative" piece, the Times concluded there was no coup in Ukraine while ignoring the evidence of a coup, such as the intercepted phone call between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt discussing who they would put into power. "Yats is the guy," said Nuland – and surprise, surprise, Arseniy Yatsenyuk ended up as prime minister.

The Times also ignored the observation of George Friedman, president of the global intelligence firm Stratfor, who noted that the Ukraine coup was "the most blatant coup in history." [See Consortiumnews.com's "NYT Still Pretends No Coup in Ukraine."]

The Propaganda Weapon

The other advantage of "corruption" as a propaganda weapon to discredit certain leaders is

that we all assume that there is plenty of corruption in governments as well as in the private sector all around the world. Alleging corruption is like shooting large fish crowded into a small barrel. Granted, some barrels might be more crowded than others but the real decision is whose barrel you choose.

That's part of the reason why the U.S. government has spread around hundreds of millions of dollars to finance "journalism" organizations, train political activists and support "non-governmental organizations" that promote U.S. policy goals inside targeted countries. For instance, before the Feb. 22, 2014 coup in Ukraine, there were scores of such operations in the country financed by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), whose budget from Congress exceeds $100 million a year.



Image: Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy.

But NED, which has been run by neocon Carl Gershman since its founding in 1983, is only part of the picture. You have other propaganda fronts operating under the umbrella of the State Department and USAID. Last year, USAID issued a fact sheetsummarizing its work financing friendly journalists around the globe, including "journalism education, media business development, capacity building for supportive institutions, and strengthening legal-regulatory environments for free media."

USAID estimated its budget for "media strengthening programs in over 30 countries" at $40 million annually, including aiding "independent media organizations and bloggers in over a dozen countries," In Ukraine before the coup, USAID offered training in "mobile phone and website security," which sounds a bit like an operation to thwart the local government's intelligence gathering, an ironic position for the U.S. with its surveillance obsession, including prosecuting whistleblowers based on evidence that they talked to journalists.

USAID, working with billionaire George Soros's Open Society, also funds the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, which engages in "investigative journalism" that usually goes after governments that have fallen into disfavor with the United States and then are singled out for accusations of corruption. The USAID-funded OCCRP also collaborates with Bellingcat, an online investigative website founded by blogger Eliot Higgins.

Higgins has spread misinformation on the Internet, including discredited claims implicating the Syrian government in the sarin attack in 2013 and directing an Australian TV news crew to what looked to be the wrong location for a video of a BUK anti-aircraft battery as it supposedly made its getaway to Russia after the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014.

Despite his dubious record of accuracy, Higgins has gained mainstream acclaim, in part, because his "findings" always match up with the propaganda theme that the U.S. government and its Western allies are peddling. Though most genuinely independent bloggers are ignored by the mainstream media, Higgins has found his work touted by both The New York Times and The Washington Post.

In other words, the U.S. government has a robust strategy for deploying direct and indirect agents of influence. Indeed, during the first Cold War, the CIA and the old U.S. Information Agency refined the art of "information warfare," including pioneering some of its current features like having ostensibly "independent" entities and cut-outs present U.S. propaganda to a cynical public that would reject much of what it hears from government but may trust "citizen journalists" and "bloggers."

But the larger danger from this perversion of journalism is that it sets the stage for "regime changes" that destabilize whole countries, thwart real democracy (i.e., the will of the people), and engender civil warfare. Today's neoconservative dream of mounting a "regime change" in Moscow is particularly dangerous to the future of both Russia and the world.

Regardless of what you think about President Putin, he is a rational political leader whose legendary sangfroid makes him someone who is not prone to emotional decisions. His leadership style also appeals to the Russian people who overwhelmingly favor him, according to public opinion polls.

While the American neocons may fantasize that they can generate enough economic pain and political dissension inside Russia to achieve Putin's removal, their expectation that he will be followed by a pliable leader like the late President Boris Yeltsin, who will let U.S. operatives back in to resume plundering Russia's riches, is almost certainly a fantasy.

The far more likely possibility is that – if a "regime change" could somehow be arranged – Putin would be replaced by a hard-line nationalist who might think seriously about unleashing Russia's nuclear arsenal if the West again tries to defile Mother Russia. For me, it's not Putin who's the worry; it's the guy after Putin.

So, while legitimate questions about Putin's "corruption" – or that of any other political leader – should be pursued, the standards of evidence should not be lowered just because he or anyone else is a demonized figure in the West. There should be single not double standards.

Western media outrage about "corruption" should be expressed as loudly against political and business leaders in the U.S. or other G-7 countries as it is toward those in the BRICS.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).

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