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Jan 04, 2017 by [Markos Kounalakis](#)

[Putin's Powerful Playbook](#) ^[1]

Putin hacks. [Putin cyberattacks](#). On the one hand, the Republican nominee refused to acknowledge the cybercrime; on the other, he invited it against his opponent.

Russia's technological capacity to damage America extends beyond the recent digital probing, snatching, culling and embarrassingly selective release of data about Democrats. The cybersecurity breaches are serious, of course, but ultimately survivable.

Russia and other countries, however, are capable of potentially much greater damage like [controlling power grids](#), [taking down financial markets](#) or [grounding aircraft](#). Since such actions would be considered [acts of war](#), Russia instead uses deniable cyber-hooliganism to actively prank the American political system. And it's taking a toll.

Given Putin's powerful disruptive potential, he knows it is a lot cheaper to create fear, paranoia, uncertainty and political cynicism than to go big and provoke a coordinated diplomatic and military allied response. Instead, his play is to sow the seeds of suspicion and undermine trust in the individuals and institutions that make American (and European) elections work and keep democratic societies functioning healthily.

This is the Putin Playbook. Steal, cheat, attack, disrupt, mislead, confuse. If caught, lie and deny.

Putin used this method to muddy the waters of blame for the downing of [Malaysia Airlines MH17](#). It is how he reframed the Russian military's [swallowing of Crimea](#). In a worldwide context, Putin actively uses these tools against open democratic institutions to shut down citizens' trust.

Putin's assault on liberal democratic societies is amplified by a growing chorus of Western leaders from [Ankara](#) to [Budapest](#). The prevalence and influence of social and institutional media that focus on scandal and skip substance crank the intolerable noise to 11.

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Putinocracy has taken away civic responsibility from its own people via a tight authoritarian regime and state paternalism. Russia's [low-grade state of emergency](#) and Putin's never-ending jingoistic rhetoric, strongman strong-arming and symbolic nationalism have combined to take power away from individuals and civil society. What's left for the Russian people are obligation and sacrifice – and plenty of bills to pay – but no ability to effect meaningful societal or political change.

Russian elections are so corrupt that there is often only one choice. Credible opposition is either [marginalized or murdered](#). The result is broad societal cynicism that reflects a resignation to popular powerlessness.

It is this attitude that Putin hopes to export as he successfully did by [reinforcing the “Leave” narrative](#) in Britain in the run-up to the Brexit vote. Putin knows how vulnerable people in open societies – people everywhere – are to arguments of moral equivalence.

At the very least, Americans need to recognize, accept and defend that their imperfect union is better than a bankrupt authoritarian state. American society has made great strides in LGBTQ rights, women's rights and minority rights, and has a relatively strong and resilient globally innovative economy. Americans need to ask if it is just a fluke or if there is something inherent in their democratic experiment that allows for measurable societal improvement and overall economic betterment? There are plenty of flaws, cycles and stumbles along the way, but not a wholesale corruption of the system.

Putinocracy relies on spreading the lie that all systems are corrupt. Unfortunately, the Republican presidential nominee reinforces this narrative, referring to a [“rigged”](#) system and an indictable opponent. His outbursts follow years of domestic political discord, where comity is history, crazy seems the new normal, and a sitting president can be heckled with [“You lie!”](#)

Be skeptical, but don't fall for the cynicism that can sow the seeds of democratic downfall. Step one? Vote.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: This piece originally appeared in the [Sacramento Bee](#).

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