

The Breach Episode 102 – In the Shadow of Putin with Sarah Kendzior

Lindsay: Welcome to The Breach, your deep dive into authoritarianism and corruption in the time of Trump. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein, and my guest today is journalist, Sarah Kendzior.

We asked you, our listeners, which expert you'd most like to hear on Russia and Trump, and you overwhelmingly picked Sarah. She's here today to talk about Vladimir Putin and his intricate strategy to influence the United States and other Western countries through propaganda, fake news and cyber-warfare.

Sarah earned her PhD studying authoritarian states in central Asia, so she's seen these Putinesque autocracies up close. She studies how the internet affects political mobilization, self-expression and trust, and she speaks Russian and Uzbek.

Last week, President Trump bombed the Shayrat airbase in Syria where Russia has troops on the ground supporting Syrian forces. So we've got two nuclear powers staring each other down in the Middle East as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson prepares to leave for his first official trip to Russia this week.

There's no better time to deepen our understanding of Russia and its hardline authoritarian leader, Vladimir Putin. Sarah. Welcome to the program.

Sarah: Oh, thank you for having me.

Lindsay: Why is Vladimir Putin so preoccupied with influencing US public opinion and US elections?

Sarah: He always has been ever since he came into power. I think that there's been shifts in both politics and in technology that have allowed him to be more effective in recent years. But we've seen this kind of election interference in other countries besides the US as well. This year, I think, he was presented with two candidates, one of whom was his direct antagonist in terms of Hillary Clinton, who would, of course, continue the sanctions and I think have a harsher stance towards him, and one who was very malleable and also possibly tied to Russia and influenced by Russia through financial deals and other arrangements that have been made in the past. Obviously, he would be a preferable person for Putin to have in power.

Lindsay: Some intelligence analysts have said that Putin's initial goal was just to be a chaotic influence on the election but that he eventually gravitated towards a preference for Trump. Does that make sense?

Sarah: I think both things are possible. In a sense, it's a win/win. To start off, I think that our institutions were already fragile before Russia intervened in any way. I think because they were fragile, Russia was able to pull off what they seem to have done in the manner that they did it. So I think in one sense they're exacerbating problems that already existed and making them worse through propaganda and political maneuvering and other means. I think he also preferred Trump to win in part because Clinton was a

fiercer opponent in terms of Russia's geopolitical aims, but also because of this long history that Russia seems to have with Trump ranging from Manafort to Trump's connection to oligarchs to various people who Trump employed in the cabinet, including Flynn who's now gone, but also, Jeff Sessions, Rex Tillerson who received the order of friendship. Trump designed the cabinet that's extremely pro Putin that has many individuals that have personal ties and corporate ties, and obviously that works to their advantage.

Lindsay: Can you talk a bit about Russia's track record interfering in the elections of other countries besides the United States prior to 2016?

Sarah: They've really intervened in Georgia, in Baltic countries. They are allegedly involved in the Brexit referendum, they're currently making a push in France. They've had varying degrees of success in these measures. At the same time, there's been a growing shift toward right wing politics that you see all over Eastern Europe in particular and Poland and in Hungary and Russian propaganda have exploited that much in the way that they exploited the vulnerability of the U.S., and exploited the vulnerabilities of these other states. So I think it's a combination setting out to do a deliberate maneuver to either weaken their own former territory of the Soviet Union. I don't think Putin ever got over the collapse of the USSR as a super power. And also weakening western adversaries both to boost their power but again as a form of revenge, to put people in their place, to lift up Russia's status and to divert attention away from Russia's own domestic problems. One great way to do that, the classic what-about-ism of Russia is to highlight the difficulties that other countries are experiencing.

Lindsay: Why is Putin so interested in promoting Brexit or the collapse or the weakening of the European union?

Sarah: Well the European union is a great foe towards Russia in terms of certain things that Russia wants to do. For example, invading Ukraine and taking over Crimea and so a weakened disorganized EU is advantageous, an EU that has people in positions of power who just outright favor Putin are people like Farage or Le Pen is advantageous to them. We also have the issue of NATO, which several right wing western leaders either want to do away with or weaken. We see Trump's own stance on it, where he says it's unnecessary or seems to treat it as Mafioso protection racket where they're supposed to pay up their settlement in order to maintain the protection that they're supposed to get under international law. You know, it's a very unsophisticated view of how NATO works and I'm honestly not sure if Trump understands how NATO works, but all of that works to their advantage because if they want to continue this imperialistic expansion that they began with Ukraine in which I think that they are considering in terms of ventures into the Baltics or into other countries that have somewhat substantial Russian minority population that's the kind of rhetoric they use to justify it a strong EU and a strong NATO would be detrimental to that aim so of course they want to weaken it.

Lindsay: Michael West had an interesting quote about Russia's style of propaganda and he says, "Russia combines Soviet Euro what-about-ism and active measures with a wised up post modern smirk that says everything is a sham." Does that sound right to you?

- Sarah: Yeah. I think that that's accurate. That kind of rhetoric's been going on for a while. It basically transpose tactics that they've been using for a very long time. Tactics initially develop under the KGB in the Soviet Union into a digital sear and it's a lot easier for them to do these psychological or propaganda maneuvers in the internet where you can be anonymous, where you can create armies of bots, were you hire out people in order to do your bidding in other languages. They have a very sophisticated propaganda apparatus. They're attempting to do multiple things. They're attempting to have people lose faith in institutions that honestly since the recessions and the wars, people who are already losing faith in, and they want to put into question the nature of truth itself. Does truth matter? Do facts matter? They'll present you with an alternate version of reality that maybe true to your emotional needs. They're good at that, they're very studied at that.
- Lindsay: Why is Russia interested in undermining the idea of truth? The traditional propaganda thing the Soviet Union did was to say, "Well, we have the truth. Other people are lying to us. You should believe us and we've actually objectively achieved this workers' paradise." What is the new strategy there in saying, getting people to give up on the idea of truth as such?
- Sarah: With the collapses the Soviet Union and with the pseudo-democracy that came into play in Russia, there's not a gray, guiding ideology that filled that void. It was basically filled by nationalism and by revival of Russian orthodoxy, but most of all what you saw was the emergence of a plutocracy, of a hyper-capitalist, oligarchs-dominated society, which when spelled out to the average person, these are the people who run your world, these are the people who are have power, you're very unlikely to be in that position, it's unattractive to the Russian population and you saw that in the protest that were held recently that were not specifically anti-Putin in nature, but they're anti-corruption. With corruption is something that's not a marketing point, they can't really lead people in a positive direction and so they instead go into denigrating all of your rivals in order to make Russia seem superior to them. Sometimes this goes into ethnic or white supremacists kind of premises, you know, that's another thing that has been rising in Russia and that has led to multi-national white supremacist alliance that you see in Europe and the United States as well. But when you have something like that, when you're making these kind of bigoted claims, when you're trying to cover up to corruption, you don't want clarity and truth. It's more advantageous to have things be as muddled and as emotionally compelling as possible.
- Lindsay: So what Russia is really trying to do is put forward the message of, "Well, everybody sucks including people you might rise up as heroes. So we may be kleptocrats, but who cares? Everybody is. You should just stay home and watch TV."
- Sarah: Yeah. It's funny cause I see the rhetoric reiterated in American punditry. My take on it is, "Yes. The U.S. is deeply flawed. Yes. We have our own version of plutocrats and those billionaires that will way too much political influence, but ideally the goal should be to change that, to stand up against that, both in Russia and the U.S. There should be some kind of consistency in condemning those types of practices regardless who's the one

who is practicing them. Whereas with Russia, the way they phrase it is, "Well, we get a pass, because you did it too." And that's how Trump sees it. When he talks about how Russia gets away with this and that, it's not out of condemnation, it's out of envy. Because he's had to work in the confines of U.S. law, although he's been very skillful using loopholes to exploit those confines and get away with a lot of corrupt action on his own, he's never been able to do it to the degree that Putin has, to the degree that prominent Russia oligarchs have. The position that Putin is in is something that he desires and he would like to have himself.

Lindsay: David Remnick made a really interesting point about the weaponization of cynicism in Russia, but he observed that under the Soviet Union there was so much hypocrisy that people lived with because there was the high flying rhetoric of the state and then there was the corrupt base reality that everybody lived with and denied, and his theory is the new Russia propaganda strategy is what came out of that, that cynicism has now become a way of life and a political tool.

Sarah: Yeah. That's accurate. I also don't think it's unique to Russia. My specialty is in post-Soviet central Asia and that kind of cynicism is wide-spread. You find it in any country that has had corruption still ingrained in the system. Countries where you're expected to pay bribes or the idea of a meritocracy or a fairness or of justice is just a joke. We have elements of that too in the United States. I think there's a lot of things going on, but one of the problems with that is when you have that much cynicism and then when you have that much paranoia, because this lack of belief in the idea of facts itself leads you to be more accepting of conspiracy theories. The opposite of that level of suspension is unfortunately credulity. People taking all sorts of information, they don't know how to parse it, they don't know how to figure out what is accurate, what is meaningful, what is true. And that's for a number of reasons. One is because they're getting a propaganda onslaught from numerous parties but also because their leaders, the ones who are supposed to be truthful, who are supposed to be serving them them are participating in that as well.

Lindsay: What is fake news in the Russian context, and how do they use it to shape global public opinion?

Sarah: It's similar to how it operates in all sorts of different international context. Every country at this point because of the internet has some element of quote/unquote "fake news", and to break that term down, when I think of fake news, I think of something that's the deliberate intention to mislead. Something more akin to propaganda and is often just sloppy reporting or reporting with errors. It's something to that category, but I think it doesn't quite fit into the errors of intentional, but in terms of fake news and propaganda, for a longer time, I'm not sure how self-aware people are.

I honestly worry about younger people worldwide. When I give talks at universities that go on this topic, I'm often asked here in America, 'how do I tell what a fact is? How do I tell truth from fiction?' These are educated young people, these are people trying to figure it out, and they're genuinely overwhelmed with the kind of social media and digital media onslaught of political content that they get. So, I think people in Russia are

in a very similar situation. The key difference is that they do not have freedom of speech to the degree that we do. They can be punished for blog entry or for saying something that Putin finds insulting, or even putting out pictures that he finds insulting. So, there's an element of self-censorship and fear there that's in place as well. If they're going to for example post a fake news story that praises Putin or says something, some atrocity Russia committed didn't really happen, that might be for the reason of safety as well.

Lindsay: How do the bots play into this? What are they and how does Russia use them?

Sarah: That's something that, it needs more research and debate. There have been some people that are researching them and you heard this mentioned during the Senate hearings as well, there are bots that are used- basically troll farms, not the computerized ones, but people whose job it is to jump into conversations, supply lies essentially, try to misdirect people who are engaged in some sort of political debate in whatever direction the Russian government, or whatever government, wants them to go. Then, from what I've read, there are other bots that are basically programmed by algorithms to look for certain key words or phrases and to, again, amplify certain points. This has the effect of duping actually real people who are engaged in these topics into believing that there's a mass movement around the point, like when something is retweeted a lot of times, when it's liked a lot of times, it takes on this veneer of credibility that it might not really merit. That's often the point of it, and also targeted harassment is something that a lot of people experience online as a result of this campaign. That's meant to suppress debate instead to lead people to a certain conclusion.

Lindsay: Adrian Chen has done some fascinating research on the bots and the weaponized trolls. Are the bots basically the automated counterparts of the trolls where Russia first hired people, or still does hire people to be doing these things, and then they've taken it to the next level of technology?

Sarah: From what I understand, yes. As a result of their investigation into Russian interference, people are really trying to get to the bottom of what exactly they did, who were they targeting, who fell for it, where do they live, how are they funded? A lot of these questions are still up in the air. Adrian Chen did one of the most in depth reports on this and he did it well before we realized that this was going to be a seminal factor in the election, but I would guess that more hard information on the subject is still to come.

Lindsay: How does hacking work into this overall weaponized information matrix?

Sarah: It's important. When you see the role of WikiLeaks in the election, this goes back to what I was saying about people losing faith in institutions in the U.S. The release of past materials through WikiLeaks exploited this idea that the government wasn't trustworthy, that political parties weren't trustworthy and that WikiLeaks because it had access to secret material was somehow the arbiter of truth. This played on WikiLeaks's old reputation. They've gone in a very bad direction since when they originally started out when they were allegedly supposed to reveal the most corrupt and deplorable acts of oppressive governments and reveal them to the population in the hopes that that would

cause reform.

That doesn't seem to be their goal anymore. They basically seem to be operating as a Putin lackey. So, it's not just the hacks that are important, but who distributes them and how the organization or individual is perceived. And the flip side of this is that this can be as blackmail and threats. From what I've read, the RNC was hacked as well and it was used in this manner. I wish that there's more reporting on this because I think that it explains a lot of actions of Republicans in the House and Senate and why they're backing Trump, why are they sometimes seem to investigate something and then abruptly stop. This is a very typical process that authoritarian states use all over the world and I don't know why we would be any more immune to it.

Lindsay: It's fascinating--as we speak, Trump has just bombed an air field in Syria which was the exact opposite of what he said he was going to do and certainly the opposite of what somebody who wanted to get closer to Vladimir Putin would do. Do you think this is some kind of feint, because it seems to be happening just as the heat is really turning up on the Russia investigation? Do you think Trump is hell-bent on proving that he's not Putin's puppet?

Sarah: I think ideally he'd like to prove he's not Putin's puppet because he'll like to have this entire investigation end because it's affected his staff and him in very concrete ways. We've had multiple recusals, we've had Flynn having to resign, we've had all this inquiry into Trump's background and finances and relationships, but something like an air strike in Syria isn't unilaterally made by Trump. I don't think that Trump has a particular geopolitical expertise in Syria, or anywhere to be honest. I have a feeling that this strike may have been designed by people like Mattis who have their own goals and objective but also realize that, yes, this can turn attention away from what Trump is doing. One thing that's interesting is that they didn't bother to notify Congress before they carried out this military initiative, but they did notify Russia.

Lindsay: From the "deconfliction" line. The "deconfliction" line is fascinating. I would love to have one of those.

Sarah: Yeah. Yeah, they did that just to say, heads up, you're here. We're about to do this strike, and that makes sense, but I feel a lot of this heated rhetoric we're seeing today between different Russian officials, different U.S. officials, I'm a little bit skeptical that we're really at odds with Russia in the way it's presented. You have to remember that Russia is also dealing with a domestic crisis. They just had these mass protests against Putin's administration. Trump's dealing with domestic crisis because his poll numbers are terrible, and as we know, Trump is the master of projection and he in previous tweets years ago talked about how the natural thing for Obama to do if his poll numbers are low is to bomb Syria or bomb another country, and, well, here we go. So, I think that that actually is his mentality, but Syria is very complicated. I think it's as simple as they carried out in military strike purely as a diversion. I think that one, there was a chemical gas attack, but there's been many before that we did absolutely nothing about, but that is at least somewhat of a legitimate reason to do this. I'd feel better about this strike if it wasn't being carried out by the Trump administration, which has been both

incompetent and sadistic, but there is some sort of more rational explanation for why they did too.

Lindsay: It seems to me that the left is having trouble coming to terms with the gravity of Russia and its interference and it often seems like people feel guilty about having backed WikiLeaks given the role that it may have ultimately had in electing Trump.

Sarah: Yeah. It certainly seemed to have trouble coming to terms with what happened. I found it very interesting that people who identify as being on the left you would assume would be anti-imperialistic, anti-plutocracy, anti-corruption, are backing Putin, or making excuses for him, or saying any kind of critique of what Putin does is somehow Russo-phobia or McCarthy-ism or red-baiting. These are the exact terms that are being put out in Russian propaganda and they get echoed in American pundits that have this bizarre sympathy. They seem to think that the Soviet Union hasn't ended. I don't know where red-baiting would come from because this is not a communist country. It hasn't been for over 25 years.

I don't know whether they realize that their own rhetoric, their own complicity in this is questionable. I do think that many, many people believed that Hilary had a lock on this. Maybe they felt a little more free to make these baseless claims that Trump's a non-interventionist, Trump is dove-ish. There's nothing to back up those claims because Trump has said throughout the campaign that he intended to quote 'bomb the shit out of people', that he intended to bring back torture, that he had an anti-Muslim agenda. None of this is new. And the strike last night shouldn't've been surprising, but they seem to just not have very much interest in the fairness of our elections and our sovereignty and the kind of authoritarian practices that both Russia and Trump are putting out and I would just think that if you have any kind of interest in justice and humanitarian quality of life, if you have any interest in the suffering that people are experiencing under either of these regimes, that you would want this investigation pursued, but they don't seem to want that.

Lindsay: Do you think that there's any risk that we could be indulging in authoritarian tendencies within our own society and culture if we get too worked up about ferreting out ties to Russia?

Sarah: I think we've always had authoritarian tendencies in American culture, since America was founded and even before. We're a country that was founded on stolen land from Native Americans, we've had slavery, we've had internment camps, we've had Jim Crow. We've always been a deeply flawed democracy that has managed to engage in brutal and unconstitutional practices quite well on our own. So I don't think that Russia would necessarily be the cause of this. The think that's unnerving is that as decades have passed, we've moved away from this. We've changed our laws. We've tried to make laws that are more fair and more just and now we're moving in the direction that's backwards. And when Trump looks to Russia, he doesn't see a human rights disaster. He doesn't see an authoritarian state that obviously the United States wouldn't want to emulate. He repeatedly says how strong Putin is, how great Putin is. He seems to admire him. So, I think that he would like to govern in a manner similar to Putin. I think that,

especially in terms of kleptocratic impulses the kind of money that Putin and his lackeys have been able to accumulate through abusing the executive powers, extremely appealing to him. And so, yeah, we will go backwards both in terms of emulating Russia but also just in terms of putting someone like Jeff Sessions in the Attorney General's position. That's an extension of anti-civil rights policies that obviously well pre-date the Russian interference scandal.

Lindsay: Is there any reason to be afraid of the implications of what we might find? If we take this investigation all the way to the end, and it turns out that Russia clearly stole the election?

Sarah: Yeah. I'm more afraid that we will not find out what happened because there's value in truth. You need to know to whom is your government loyal. Is your government engaged in corrupt activity? Those are basic questions that we should be able to ask and get the answers to.

The fact that Trump and his administration seems to desperately want to stop this investigation is very unnerving because if they were innocent in this, I don't think that they would be trying so hard. I think it would be very hard for society as a whole to deal with the ramifications of a president who may well have committed treason, who may well have people in his campaign or in his staff that committed treason. Even if it's not full-fledged treason, having gauged in activities that are essentially anti-constitutional, anti-American, that obviously don't put the needs of the American public [first].

I don't think we've ever had a case quite like this. We've had a lot of scandal, we've had a lot of corruption within our government. Water-gate is an obvious example, WMDs, the fake pretext of the Iraq war is another example, but we've never had to ask ourselves who is our, what country is our president most loyal to? Is it the United States? That's a mind-blowing thing for people to process and if that's proven, there's going to be both chaos in terms of well if he's impeached or if he has to leave office, who will be next? Is that person implicated as well?

But also, how vulnerable are we? How vulnerable are our institutions? How do we move pass this? And in terms of people who voted for Trump in good faith, not knowing at all that he was involved in this. Their feelings have to be considered as well because I think that they may see this as some sort of contrived political maneuver just to get him out because people don't like him or they disagree with him or it's actually a matter of national security and sovereignty. That's why I think it's very important that this investigation be bipartisan, that it be independent and that it be as open and transparent as possible. People need to see the process of getting to the bottom of this. They need to see how people are proving their point and if Trump is guilty, how that is proven because I don't think that anyone is going to just take someone's word for it at this point.

Lindsay: Do you think there's any danger if we really nail this down that it could push us closer to war with Russia?

- Sarah: In terms of military conflict, I don't think so. But the last few years, if you had asked me three or four years ago would Donald Trump be the President of the United States, I think I would have answered no. There are a lot of things that are hard to predict. I think that we're definitely going to see an escalation in this cyber-attacks and cyber-espionage. That's already going on. I wouldn't be surprised if for example Russia tries to hack things that are worse than even hacking our election system, like our power grids, or trying to get access to our weaponry things like that. That's its own kind of danger. I think that we're in a new kind of conception of warfare, one that's much more technologically motivated, one that can be done from a distance without having some sort of boots on the ground presence. I'd be very, very surprised if we got into a situation where we had troops in Russia or Russia had troops in the United States. I would be very surprised if it came to that.
- Lindsay: It's really fascinating the way in which cyber-warfare has become this equalizer where Russia, which is no longer a superpower, can in big ways affect the history of the United States without hardly spending any money or putting any of its people at physical risk.
- Sarah: Well, they spend a lot of money. They spend a lot of money into paying all these people who are doing the cyber warfare who are creating the propaganda. The budget for their propaganda outlets is immense, and so they are able to do that. They are one of the world's major nuclear weapon powers, sp-
- Lindsay: That's true but the cost of even one warhead or one fighter jet you can hire a lot of bots and trolls for that. It's relatively cheap.
- Sarah: Yeah, yeah. No and I think that they also have, like most countries since 2008, a struggling economy. Theirs is in a lot worse shape than ours, and I think that this is possibly an attractive job prospect for people who can't find other work. So, it's kind of a growth industry over there. But, I don't know whether to say, they're not a superpower, but I'm kind of wondering who is a superpower nowadays? Because every country seems to be struggling. Every kind of union, something like the EU, seems much more fragile than it used to be. But it is true that they can redefine the terms of warfare, they can redefine ways of attacking people. They can basically do it from within by manipulating people within their own countries to carry out the kind of outcomes that they want. That's smart. That's cost effective. It's often very hard to prove. It's hard to detect and it relies on that person to be somewhat complicit, whether consciously or not, in the betrayal of their own country, which of course leads to the uncomfortable questions that you just brought up.
- Lindsay: What can we all do to steal ourselves against the influence of propaganda? Not just Russian propaganda, but propaganda in general. Our government, corporations, anybody.
- Sarah: Yeah, it's a good question. That's something people are really wrestling with. The way to steal yourself against it is through critical thinking, but this is very difficult because you and I work in news, we read a lot of news all the time. We're parsing information. We're trying to figure out if it's true, because it's our job and we have a lot of time on our

hands to go about doing that. For the average person who's just checking Facebook a couple times a day, turning on Fox News or something at night, they're not going to go necessarily dig through everything for detail, not even out of lack of interest just because they've got other stuff going on.

So it's very easy to become susceptible to it. At the same time I feel like the solution to it is to dig deeper. If you see a story that looks suspicious or a website that looks unfamiliar that's making some sort of bold claim, fact check that claim, see if it appears elsewhere. See if you can get primary sources, audio or video. Of course, those can be doctored as well, but it's a bit less likely. I think this looks for continuity. Find reporters in outlets that you trust, one's that have proven it for the long haul, but tend to see the events coming in advance that don't just follow the herd. If you can find people that you trust, that's often an antidote for this propaganda explosion.

Lindsay: Sarah, that's all the time that we have for today. Thank you so much for coming on the program.

Sarah: Oh, thank you for having me.

Lindsay: Now it's time for a feature we call Recommended Reading. Each week, I bring you some stories that shaped my thinking in my ongoing quest to come to grips with the current political crisis. The first is a piece by Elizabeth Drew in the New York Review of Books called No One to Blame But Trump. It's a masterful synopsis by a veteran Washington correspondent of the Trump administration three months on. It's Game of Thrones level intrigue, it's rocky relationship with Congress, all the Republican Senators who quietly swear they're done with Trump and more. Moving from the sublime to the ridiculous, we've got a little gem from last week's San Jose Mercury news called Trump's Border Wall Design Bids Due Today, and you can expect some doozies. Indeed the designs have been creative to say the least including a nuclear waste moat within a border wall, a monorail wall and a things engraved wall where people would be able to pay to get their family trees etched on it. So the great big testament to whiteness would be paid for by a bunch of little testaments to whiteness. How meta. You can find these links at rewire.news/breach or in the show notes. That's it for Recommended Reading.

The Breach is produced by Rewire. Our executive producer is Marc Faletti. Our theme music is Dark Alliance performed by Darcy James Argue's Secret Society. And I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. Tweet your suggestions, comments and questions to @beyerstein. B-E-Y-E-R-S-T-E-I-N on Twitter. See you next week.