

Trump's election and Britain's looming departure from the EU, the post-Cold War order was unravelling. 'The liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the overwhelming majority of the population,' Putin told the *Financial Times* in June 2019. Liberals, he said, 'cannot dictate anything to anyone just like they have been attempting to do over the recent decades.' Even before Trump's victory, Vladimir Yakunin for one had tried to draw parallels between the rising tide of populism in the West and the demands for the dismantling of the Communists' political monopoly that heralded the Soviet collapse. In fact, the two processes could not be more different, but Yakunin tried to argue that the Western elite was almost as ageing and distant from the population as the Soviet elite had been in its last days. 'Brexit and Trump should be useful in that they should cause concern in the political elite and show them that they have gotten too fat,' he said in the summer before Trump's election. 'They have lost the ability to react to political situations, and they have separated themselves from the masses . . . It is a natural process. When the elite ages, new forces arrive to replace them.'<sup>158</sup> After Trump's election, Yakunin delighted in what he saw as the defeat of the liberal world order: 'The neocons who thought they controlled the whole world, that they had the whole world by the balls, suddenly got hit in the face so hard that everything shook for them. This system they have built is not able to exist when there is an alternative. The worst thing for them is an alternative. Putin is an alternative. The appearance of Trump is an alternative. The shaking Europe is an alternative.'<sup>159</sup>

Russia, he eventually admitted, had, like any other world power, used its secret services to take advantage of existing weaknesses in the West. 'All intelligence services carry out active measures,' he said. 'I know what I'm speaking of. Of course, whenever there are conflicts each side tries to find an advantage. The Germans do this. The French do this. The Russians do this. There was never the aim to influence anyone. There was the aim to raise Russia from its knees. This can be done through conducting an independent policy . . . For this you need to have a circle of friends.' This, he said, was a process not dissimilar to Cold War times, when the Soviets funded the peace

movement in the West. 'When there was the Soviet Union, you remember how powerful the peace movement was. The Soviet Union financed this movement. Now we have an absolutely different configuration. The problem is, our politicians have not yet understood that there will be no victors in this battle,' he reflected, slowly shaking his head.<sup>160</sup>

Such 'active measures' had led to a backlash. In the US, allegations that Russia had a hand in Trump's rise were under investigation. The unwitting disclosure by a Trump foreign policy adviser that he knew in advance that the Russians had access to Hillary Clinton's emails led the FBI to open an investigation, while Trump's firing of FBI director James Comey only exacerbated the situation. It led to the appointment of a special counsel to investigate Russia's efforts to interfere in the election, including whether Trump had obstructed justice when he fired Comey, and possible collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign. The US intelligence community concluded overwhelmingly that Russian military intelligence had hacked the Democratic National Committee's servers, and had sought to sway public opinion in Trump's favour through a social media campaign – findings that led the more hawkish members of Trump's administration to impose increasingly stringent sanctions on the Russian economy and its tycoons. For more than two years, allegations of Russia's involvement dominated the headlines. Decades of operations were being slowly unpicked.

For Yury Shvets, the Putin regime's campaign had been a disaster, a heavy-handed, flat-footed and opportunistic operation that, he sniffed disdainfully, was about as subtle as a *kolkhoz*, a giant Soviet collective farm filled with peasants. 'How could this be a success?' he exclaimed. 'They turned the whole of Russia into a global pariah!'

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But despite the new sanctions imposed by his administration, Trump was still a president who answered many of Putin's KGB men's dreams. He was driven by his own long-standing America-first sensibilities, as well as his chaotic decision-making style. But he'd also