

Opinion | Putin's 'sock puppets': How Russia 'uses' anti-GMO activists to undermine crop biotech and science

Russia, and the Soviet Union before it, are experienced at employing surrogates and agents of various stripes and abilities to further their agendas. An extreme example is the Russian spy agency's "illegals" program, which places deep-cover agents in Western countries to carry out missions of espionage, sabotage and disinformation. In 2010, ten of these deep-cover agents were [rounded up and deported](#).

TV "news channel" station RT (formerly *Russia Today*), the Kremlin's English-language propaganda arm, is the mouthpiece for Russia President Vladimir Putin's agenda. Fake news is its stock in trade, as illustrated by its blatant [disinformation attacks](#) on the reporting of news by respected media outlets like the BBC. Alex Berezow of the American Council on Science and Health has described how RT subtly undermines the United States' technology and economy. One example:

The report released by the Director of National Intelligence on Russia's interference in the U.S. election concluded that [RT is spouting anti-fracking propaganda](#) as a way to undermine the natural gas industry in the United States. Why? Because fracking lowers the prices of fossil fuels, which severely harms Russia's economy.

In a report from the Office of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, RT was implicated in Russian hacking during last year's presidential election. The [report](#) found the network uses the internet and social media to conduct "strategic messaging for the Russian government" and that its programming is "aimed at undermining viewers' trust of US democratic procedures."

In addition, there is what a *New York Times* news article called "a particularly murky aspect of Russia's influence strategy: freelance activists who promote its agenda abroad, but get their backing from Russian tycoons and others close to the Kremlin, not the Russian state itself."

Genetic engineering in agriculture is a sector that holds intense interest for the Russians. Harkening back to the [Lysenkoism catastrophe](#) for Soviet agriculture in the Soviet Union, their expertise and R&D in that area are virtually nil, and there is a ban on genetically engineered organisms from abroad entering the country, so they've adopted a strategy of trying to stymie its development elsewhere.

As Berezow pointed out:

RT has never been fond of GMOs [genetically modified organisms], which are largely the result of American innovation. In a 2015 [article](#), RT reported on Russia's decision to ban GMO food production in Russia. Tellingly, one of the protesters shown in the report is holding a sign that reads, "Goodbye America!" The anti-GMO stance is not based on science or health concerns; instead, it's based entirely on hurting U.S. agricultural companies.

And that brings us to the U.S. home-grown anti-genetic engineering movement, which is well-coordinated

and well-financed. It's unclear how or if it is directly supported by Russia; it may simply be that, as one of my colleagues, a prominent Russia expert, speculated, "Whatever stirs up trouble in the U.S., Russia is ready to help make it worse."

This syllogism explains the strategy of all the bad actors, here and abroad:

- The United States is by far the world's leader in both the development and cultivation of genetically engineered plants
- Genetic engineering applied to agriculture is the most rapidly adopted agricultural technology in history
- Organic agriculture strictly bans GE plants, but only those produced with the most precise and predictable molecular techniques
- Recent advances in GE plants—higher yields, pest- and disease resistance, drought- and flood-tolerance, improvements in sustainability, traits with appeal to consumers, etc.—are making conventional (i.e., non-organic) agriculture ever-more efficient and superior to organic's pathetic performance
- There is virtually no development or cultivation of genetically engineered plants in Russia, therefore, genetic engineering must be prevented from expanding and succeeding elsewhere.

"That's why," according to Berezow, USRTK, the most aggressive of the anti-genetic engineering NGOs, "[receives more than \\$400,000 from the Organic Consumers Association](#), a group that spreads lies about [genetic engineering]. [Ronnie Cummins](#), the International Director of OCA, is known to [propagandize for RT](#)." (Cummins is another one of the trolls who promote organic agriculture and [attack](#) those in the scientific community who defend advances in science and technology, including genetic engineering.) Another six-figure supporter of USRTK is [Dr. Bronner's Family Foundation](#); Dr. Bronner's is a large purveyor of various "natural" and organic products, including the "iconic soap of the countercultural 60's."

Berezow further dissects the linkages:

USRTK and RT both share a common agenda: To undermine American science and technology for financial gain. Gary [Ruskin, the co-founder and co-director of USRTK] gets more money from organic activists, and Russia worries less about competing against America's multinational agriculture companies. Everybody wins... except, well, Americans.

There's more direct evidence of a Russian connection to trolling in the U.S. about genetic engineering. [This story](#), which claims that Melania Trump has banned genetically engineered foods from the White House and favors organic products, ran on May 30 on *Your News Wire*, which is widely considered to be a [fake news source](#) linked to Russian interference with the 2016 presidential elections. The author of the article, "Baxter Dmitry," has penned articles that allege that, among other things, "Sweden Bans Mandatory Vaccinations Over 'Serious Health Concerns'," (untrue) and the arrest for "treason" of a "former Hillary Clinton employee" (untrue).

Moreover, much of the article, including some of the quotes attributed to the First Lady, are cribbed

verbatim from a 2010 article in *Yes! Magazine* that had nothing whatever to do with her.

Overall, the organic industry's propaganda campaign has achieved impressive gains, albeit at the expense of truth (as well as the wallets of consumers who purchase overpriced organic products). Academics Review, a science-oriented nonprofit organization of academic experts, performed a [review](#) of hundreds of published academic, industry, and government research reports concerned with consumers' views of organic products. It also looked at more than 1,500 news reports, marketing materials, advocacy propaganda, speeches, etc., generated between 1988 and 2014 about organic foods. Their analysis found that "consumers have spent hundreds of billion dollars purchasing premium-priced organic food products based on false or misleading perceptions about comparative product food safety, nutrition and health attributes," and that this is due to "a widespread organic and natural products industry pattern of research-informed and intentionally deceptive marketing and paid advocacy."

Pursuing the Russian agenda, the activists regularly trot out a litany of false accusations about academics, and USRTK has filed harassing Freedom of Information requests for emails and documents of at least a hundred public university faculty and staff members, hoping to find embarrassing snippets that might imply conflicts of interest. Their efforts to undermine scientists and public policy scholars whose work threatens the Russians' agenda follow a familiar pattern. In the words of University of Florida plant biologist [Kevin Folta](#), who has been excoriated repeatedly for supposedly being a Monsanto "sock-puppet," the activists "develop a narrative that suggests industry collusion or undue influence, especially with any attempt to connect the faculty member to Monsanto, a company that is the bogeyman favorite of activists."

Every page of every email must be examined by attorneys to ascertain whether they are releasable. Folta estimates that the USRTK fishing expedition may have cost his university as much as a million dollars of taxpayers' money.

Folta has [characterized](#) the activists' goal as leaving "these trusted professors, dietitians and physicians 'Google Dead', a state where their online reputation will always drag the anchor of activist derision."

The most recent prominent victim was Peter Phillips, Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan, whose supposed sin was (*surprise!*) too close a relationship with Monsanto and allowing the company to influence what he said and wrote.

Folta [describes](#) how these campaigns work:

In the case of Phillips, US-RTK acquired emails and used Jason Warick from [CBC News](#) as a complicit pipeline to media. This way it is not simply Gary Ruskin and his band of industry-financed lackeys slandering scientists on activist websites. Instead, it takes the patina of legitimate research, hard-core gumshoe reporting. It really is a reporter doing the bidding of US-RTK, who is doing the bidding of a handful of organizations, companies, and undisclosed donors paying for the hit.

These sorts of campaigns are pernicious because they further erode the ability of disinterested observers

– the public — to judge what is true and what is not with respect to complex public policy issues. And it is distressing for those of us being attacked, to say nothing of our friends and families. As the fellow said in the Mark Twain story, after being tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail, “If it weren’t for the honor, I’d just as soon have walked.”

However, history is on the side of the scientists and science communicators. In the words of philosophy professor Crispin Sartwell in a recent *Wall Street Journal* [op-ed](#), “The power of the Russian intelligence services. . . is considerable, but it does not include the ability to bend the fabric of reality.” On the other hand, even if we’re not found floating face-down in the Volga, it’s no fun being among the “Google Dead.”

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