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2000-09

# Tragedy Keeps Paranoia Afloat

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## PERSPECTIVE

Volume 11, No 1 (September-October 2000)

# Tragedy Keeps Paranoia Afloat

By PAVEL FELGENHAUER(1)

The attitude of the Russian authorities to the tragic sinking of the nuclear submarine Kursk (Oscar-2 class) was very Soviet in nature: They withheld information, distorted details, stretched the truth, denied the obvious and presented xenophobic fantasies as solid facts. Russian military officers may actually believe that the Kursk was deliberately sunk by a NATO US or British submarine although there is no solid evidence whatsoever of any such underwater collision. The present propaganda whitewash campaign is also very Soviet in nature: The government-subsidized media are rewriting the Kursk affair into a heroic saga of sailors who died defending the Motherland.

The Russian press alleges that US President Bill Clinton, during a telephone conversation with Russia's President Vladimir Putin, in fact acknowledged that a US submarine made a hit-and-run attack which sank the Kursk. It also was claimed that Clinton's recent decision not to go ahead with the development of a national missile defense system (NMD), deferring any decision to his successor, was made because of the sinking of the Kursk to compensate Russia for the damage done by the US Navy that "deliberately or by accident killed 118 Russian sailors." Russian sources linked to the military also imply that the culprit the US or British submarine that allegedly hit the Kursk limped back to some NATO base to lick its wounds and that US (or British) sailors could have died during the collision, but the US and British governments have suppressed all information (including details on the loss of servicemen's lives)(2)

Of course, Washington and London have denied that any of their craft were involved in the Kursk tragedy. Still, Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev publicly demanded that Russian officials be allowed to inspect NATO nuclear attack submarines: The USS

Memphis, the USS Toledo and HMS Splendid. The refusal of Western powers to provide for such an inspection was interpreted in Russia as ample proof that the Kursk was surely sunk by NATO.

The head of the governmental commission of inquiry into the Kursk disaster Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov added fuel to the growing anti-Western frenzy in Russia by stating in the Duma on 15 September: "Sailors on the nuclear cruiser Peter the Great observed foreign emergency buoys in the sea at the scene of the sinking of the Kursk, but the buoys were half submerged from the beginning and fully disappeared later. Apparently, these foreign buoys had an inbuilt self-destruction mechanism."

The appearance of "foreign" green/white buoys in the disaster area was first reported by Arkady Mamontov, a journalist from the Russian government TV channel RTR the only reporter the authorities allowed on the scene of the Kursk sinking. He subsequently explained to me that "I investigated and discovered it was a floating sack of potatoes that fell overboard while provisions for sailors were loaded on the Peter the Great out at sea." The Russian navy also soon discovered, with some embarrassment, the true nature of the "foreign buoys"; however, after some hesitation, the authorities apparently decided to use the mysterious "foreign buoys" as anti-Western propaganda fodder.

In short, from a Western point of view, the reaction of the Russian military and civilian bureaucracy to the Kursk tragedy is paranoid. Instead of using the genuine wave of sympathy that the disaster raised in the West to build closer relations with the West on the government-to-government and military-to-military levels, the Russian authorities are throwing wild Cold War-style accusations, pretending not to know that in the US (or Britain) it is virtually impossible to hide from the public a major collision involving navy ships, especially if loss of life were involved.

It is hardly surprising that Russian military chiefs and Klebanov, who is in charge of Russia's defense industry, are doing their best to pass the blame for the Kursk disaster by pointing an accusing finger at NATO. The sinking of the Kursk and the continuous

false statements issued by the authorities have caused a public outcry in Russia. Putin's approval ratings have gone down somewhat, from over 70 percent in late July 2000 to just over 60 in September. The reputation of Russia's military chiefs has suffered even more.

The public is still asking questions about the real cause of the Kursk disaster, and accusing the West is the easiest way in Russia to pass the blame. If the culprit was not a killer NATO submarine, Russia's defense industry and military chiefs could be in the dock for designing and building an unsafe vessel that exploded and went down, killing all of its crew, in peacetime in light seas near friendly shores, or for gross mismanagement by the Russian navy of one of its newest ships, or maybe on both counts. Moreover, increased tension with the West provides a good pretext for the Russian military and defense industry to clamor for more defense spending and procurement.

But why is Putin silent most of the time while his ministers are making anti-Western statements? Is Putin truly the "reformer" many in the West seem to believe he is?

During an 8 September interview on CNN, when asked what happened to the Kursk, Putin replied: "It sunk." And smirked. But on 22 August, speaking to relatives of sailors who perished on board the Kursk, Putin expressed himself more forcefully: "Television? They're lying. Lying. Lying. There are people in television who bawl more than anyone today and who, over the past 10 years, have destroyed that same army and navy where people are dying today. And here they are today leading the support for the army. Also with the aim of discrediting and collapsing the army once and for all! They have been stealing money to their hearts' content for the last few years and now they are buying everyone and everything!"

Of course, Putin did not mean to say that TV reporters are "destroying" the Russian army, navy and state. "People in television" who are "stealing money" and "buying

everyone and everything" is code for "Rich Jews," yet another attempt to discredit the media moguls Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky and maybe others.

The sinking of the Kursk and the fire that gutted Moscow's Ostankino TV tower revealed what experts have been saying for years: Russia's basic civilian and military infrastructure which makes a modern state function including communications, power production, nuclear power, water supply, medical services and so on is crumbling.

Government ministers and Putin himself have acknowledged that Russia is in dire straits. Putin has publicly singled out the Kursk tragedy and the Ostankino fire as signs of Russian disrepair. The Russian government has in fact approved a radical economic reform plan to tackle the mounting infrastructure crisis. The Russian minister in charge of trade and economic development, German Gref, announced that the main idea of the new government's economic program is to create conditions favorable to private investment into the country's infrastructure. The government is planning a surplus budget: A flat 13 percent income tax has been introduced, social state subsidies are being cut, and plans to deregulate the economy have been announced.

But will private entities, Russian and foreign, make long-term investments into the infrastructure? Will capital stop fleeing Russia while Putin is accusing "rich Jews" of destroying the country, while military chiefs and Russian officials accuse NATO of sinking the Kursk? A flat tax is not enough to make Russia a true member of the free market world economic community.

The conspiracy theories that connect Clinton and NMD deployment postponement with the Kursk tragedy have appeared in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* and *Moskovsky komsomolets* papers that have close ties with Russia's security services and have often circulated stories that were deliberately leaked by the authorities. It is possible that these bizarre narratives, especially the alleged contents of the recent Putin-Clinton telephone conversation, may have been planted deliberately, possibly with the knowledge of the Kremlin. It is possible that these bizarre narratives, especially the alleged contents of

the recent Putin-Clinton telephone conversation (that Clinton secretly acknowledged that a US submarine sunk the Kursk and offered to postpone NMD deployment as "compensation"), may have been planted deliberately, possibly with the knowledge of the Kremlin.

As Putin consolidates more and more personal power in Russia, it is increasingly obvious that he is attempting to install in Russia the so-called "Chilean model" of severe authoritarian militarized rule, supported by nationalistic fervor, in combination with market economic reform and free enterprise. This model is sometimes also called "South Korean" in Russia.

But Russia is not Chile or Korea. Those countries are not militaristic empires, they do not have armed forces or defense industries comparable to those of the United States and never sought world domination. Neither Chile nor South Korea ever challenged the West or had any intention or capability to do so. Foreign investment and transfers of Western technologies supported economic growth in Chile and Korea in spite of the revulsion of Western public opinion provoked by local authoritarian practices, but Russia is a totally different case. A revisionist, authoritarian, aggressively nationalistic Russia will be seen by many in the West as a true menace. Today one part of the Russian government is charming Western investors, while the other is using the Kursk affair to promote an anti-Western nationalistic mood within the population. Different factions inside the government are rowing in different directions and this feat will most likely sink Russia instead of steering it to national recovery.

The ruling elite in Russia today is split between those who want to recreate the good old Soviet Union per se and "reformers" who want a new, remodeled Soviet Union (or Imperial Russia) with a thriving market economy and a revitalized professional military imposing itself on neighboring countries and worldwide. As Putin told the nation after the sinking of the Kursk: "We will overcome it all and restore it all: the military and the navy and the state."

All factions of the Russian elite "reformist" and "conservative" still dwell on delusions of past imperial glory. Russian diplomats and generals continue to implement old Soviet policies of trying to balance US influence worldwide, of supporting anti-Western regimes in Iraq, Libya, Yugoslavia and elsewhere, of attempting to balance the West militarily, of attempting to wedge cracks in NATO by exploiting differences between the US and its European allies on ABM and so on. The Russian elite, of which Putin is a true representative, remains totally unreconciled to the ugly fact that today's Russia is not the Soviet Union, that Russia's true national interests are not at all the same, and that today Moscow commands only a small fraction of the capabilities and resources of the old Soviet bloc.

Centuries ago the Byzantine elite executed foreign and internal policies as if it were still in charge of a "Roman empire," when in fact the old leaders were ruling a failed state, making things worse and worse as the gap grew between imperial ambitions and true capabilities. Today Russia, which traditionally is very Byzantine in nature, seems to be going down the same drain: failing as a state mainly because its ruling elite, including Putin, does not seem to understand that building new nuclear subs and fighting a bloody unwinnable war in Chechnya will not "restore" Russia at all.

Notes:

1. Pavel Felgenhauer is an independent defense analyst based in Moscow.
2. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 13 September 2000.

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Unless otherwise indicated, all articles appearing in this journal have been commissioned especially for *Perspective*. This article was originally published at <http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol11/Felgenhauer.html>.