



Individual-1: Kompromat 101

Description

I've been trying to understand how Russia and the Kremlin are reputed to exert their soft-power influences on other states. I've seen plenty of films about espionage, blackmail and corruption, but I usually miss the twist in the plot that explains the hold that one state agent has over another – perhaps because such misdemeanours are alien to my everyday experience. Here I'll try to reduce the story to something more obvious and ordinary.

How to grow a lie

You go on a business trip and take a few days extra for a holiday. You rightly claim the work-related expenses from your company, but then include a claim for the holiday travel, including hotels and meals as if business expenses. Presuming it to be an easily corrected error, the company accounts department sends you an email querying the extra expenditure: "Please explain, or amend the claim."

Instead of withdrawing those expenses that belong to your holiday you insist that all the travel was for business, and you deliver an explanatory email with some made up business-related activities to justify your claim. The easily corrected minor **infraction** (claiming a holiday cost as a business expense) has now compounded into a **lie** – and your assertions are documented in your emails.

Compromise

A **third party** enters the scene who knows as a fact that you made this false expenses claim and then lied about it, and has the evidence. You are now compromised, a **victim**, and vulnerable to blackmail. The third party claims some **payoff**, saying: if you don't do as I say, give me money, or put in a good word for me with the boss, then I'll let everyone know that you submitted a false claim and then lied about it.

If the third party was a bad actor from the start then they may have even encouraged you to put in the false expenses claim, make up false evidence, and insist that you are in the right: "everyone does it, you'll never be found out, the financial benefit is worth it, I'll corroborate your story," etc.

Later on they may even spread rumours about your mis-claim in order to force you to be more strident and public in your defence. You are in too deep now and your denials about your offence appear ever more forceful. You can't easily retract them now.

This malign third party may never have to threaten to expose you as a fraudster and a liar, but you both know the power this other person has over you. Your subservience and sense of duty to that other person is tacit.

Unpacking the analogy

The malign **third party** in this allegory is people in or connected to Putin and the Kremlin. You the **victim** in my analogy are Michael Flynn, Michael Cohen or one of several members of Trump's business, campaign, transition or advisory team, family or cabinet.

For the rogue expenses claim, the initial **infraction** in my example, substitute an event from a portfolio of activities, that range from lightweight to heavy duty misdemeanours: negotiating a deal to build a skyscraper in Moscow without telling voters, bribing the President of Russia with a free apartment in the building, negotiating a loan from a banned Russian bank, agreeing to receive stolen data about a political rival.

The **lie** in my analogy is simply a public lie or denial from the Trump organisation about these and other deals, as encouraged and supported by Kremlin operatives. Putin's agents know about those lies, and have the evidence to expose them.

I've also read that in this real-world case the lies from the various pro-Trump actors tend to match up with one another. So that's another trick: engineer a potential charge of *conspiracy to lie* amongst your victims.

The third party in my analogy gets something out of the power they hold over you, or rather over the US presidency: abolish US economic sanctions against Russia originally imposed when Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine in 2014. That's one of several **payoffs**. There are others.

There may also be mutual benefits from the removal of Russian sanctions, as that would free up constraints on Trump's ambitions to develop and make money in Moscow. Apart from the benefits that would accrue to the Trump organisation, the malign actors can watch as a motive emerges that reinforces the victim's culpability.

Kompromat is easy

According to Google Translate, *Kompromat* is a variant of the Russian word for 'compromise', *компромисс*, and is a tactic for confounding your enemies, also known as 'active measures', useful Google search terms, and also the name of a 2018 film about Putin's attack on the 2016 US election.

Kompromat will not always work, but it's cheap to implement much cheaper than war. In any case, if it doesn't work, chaos amongst your enemies is the main reward. If *kompromat* is delivered by one state against another, and the malign state is an autocracy, then any bad publicity that comes its way is cushioned by state-controlled media. That malign state can also keep its operations hidden,

as it infiltrates the global Internet and social media with propaganda and misdirection.

This explanation is my own, derived from following commentary about US politics. An illuminating article by [Pawel Surowiec](#) shows why *kompromat* is difficult to counter:

“There is a risk that countering *Kompromat* inspired propaganda head on will lead to the proliferation of the very information one is trying to counter in cyberspace” (25).

I’ve seen this reluctance in some mainstream media news reports: cautious commentators will state that they don’t want to restate the lies out loud as that increases their circulation.

***Kompromat* and the Internet**

The article by Surowiec was published in Autumn 2017, the early months of the 45th presidency, and events move quickly.

“What makes the key difference between traditional espionage and digital espionage is *kompromat*, which, thanks to the recent dossier on Donald Trump, has gained widespread media attention. This peculiarity of Russian political culture illustrates the strong public dimension of digital espionage that is absent from traditional espionage. *Kompromat* is a flexible and powerful concept. It enables denial (rarely apologia) of any wrongdoing when uncovered. Additionally, it often reveals falsehoods and lies about political or business opponents along with truthful negative information, blending accuracies and misinformation, thus allowing it to damage its targets in a highly sophisticated manner. Furthermore, President Trump’s tendency to promote theories that are not supported by evidence might explain why *kompromat*-inspired propaganda resonates well among his supporters” (24).

For those attracted to [conspiracy theories](#), it is indeed peculiar that made up stories about a US “deep-state” and the free press as “enemy of the people” have greater circulation than the more plausible, fascinating and “real” *kompromat* narratives. But deflection from its own operations is also part of the *kompromat* play – the circulation of distracting and unsettling *kompromat*-inspired palpably false accusations and conspiracy theories.

Context matters

Whether by design or happenstance, the scene is set for the *kompromat* drama: apparently enough of the US population is affected by economic disadvantage, shifts in the employment landscape, social inequality, anxiety about unregulated immigration, substance addiction, uneven educational participation and blatant racism, bolstered by a right wing populist media channel and a demagog leader, for *kompromat* to have its effects – though not for much longer.

See yesterday’s [court filings](#) from the Southern District of New York on Michael Cohen and Russia.



References

- Prokop, Andrew. 2018. Read: Mueller and prosecutors's sentencing filings for Michael Cohen. Vox, 7 December. Available online: <https://www.vox.com/2018/12/7/18130805/michael-cohen-sentencing-memo-mueller> (accessed 8 December 2018).
- Surowiec, PaweÅ?. 2017. Post-truth soft power: Changing facets of propaganda, *kompromat*, and democracy. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, (18) 3, 21-27.

Notes

- The image above is a sign in the Estonian countryside at the border with Russia.
- Also see posts [Encrypted city](#), [Cracks and flaws](#), [Dark web anonymity](#), [Rogue fan fiction: the peculiar case of QAnon](#), [You can fool all the people some of the time](#), and [Troll farming](#).

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