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Russia's screen of lies

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

Maybe he was a drug addict; maybe he was suicidal. Maybe his British handlers decided to get rid of him; maybe it was his mother-in-law. Ever since Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy, [was poisoned](#) in a provincial English town, Russian state media and Russian officials have worked overtime to provide explanations.

The British government identified the poison as [Novichok](#), a substance made only in Russia. A spokesman for the Russian foreign ministry parried the claim by insisting that the Czechs, the Slovaks and the Swedes had it, too. And, of course, the British themselves.

One Russian journalist opined that the assassination attempt was a rival's ploy to undermine Russian President Vladimir Putin; another blamed a Ukraine attempt "to frame Russia." The Russian foreign minister declared the whole story was an attempt to "distract from Brexit."

For his part, Putin, when asked, said Russia had destroyed all its chemical weapons anyway.

The conspiracy theories came so thick and fast that some had to be retracted. One Russian scientist admitted that the Soviet Union had created Novichok; the interview was removed from the Internet because it contradicted the foreign ministry spokesman, who claims Novichok never existed. So far, the British foreign office has tallied 21 separate explanations for the assassination attempt, with more presumably on the way.

No one was surprised by this barrage of contradictory claims: This was exactly how the Russian media and Russian authorities responded after Russian-backed troops in eastern Ukraine [shot down](#) a Malaysian passenger plane in 2014, killing everyone on board. Those explanations were just as varied and far-fetched (the Ukrainians were trying to shoot down Putin and missed; the plane took off from Amsterdam with dead bodies on board), and they had the same aim: to pollute the conversation and make the truth seem unknowable.

Inside Russia, that campaign was a huge success. A Radio Liberty journalist did [a series of man-in-the-street interviews](#) in Moscow soon after the crash. Almost everyone he asked told him that not only was it impossible to know what happened but also that nobody would ever know. Even some in the Netherlands (which had many passengers on the doomed flight) have adopted "nobody will ever know" as an explanation for the crash — even though Dutch authorities and others have shown quite convincingly that it was shot down by a Russian Buk missile launched by the Russian-backed "separatists" in eastern Ukraine.

Knowing that there is no point in rebutting each claim — that would simply amplify them further — the British foreign office decided to respond, as one official told me, “by exposing the methodology” of deceit. Its officials created a short [video](#) mocking the multiple Russian explanations, and they posted it on Twitter and Facebook with a statement accusing Russia of offering “denial, distraction and threats” instead of explanations. They also sent samples of the Skripals’ blood to a neutral international institution, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, for testing to confirm their conclusions.

But the campaign will continue in places that are much harder to see. Trust in the government is very low in large swaths of the British political spectrum. The leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, has said that he still wants a “definitive answer” about the source of the nerve agent. Russian Internet trolls are working hard on deepening this doubt. While watching the debate about Skripal, Ben Nimmo of the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab [noticed](#) an online poll, the creation of a pro-Corbyn blogger with a large social media following. It asked, “Are you satisfied that Theresa May has supplied enough evidence for us to be able to confidently point the finger of blame at Russia?” When Nimmo investigated, he found large numbers of Russian and consistently pro-Russian accounts answering the poll (with an overwhelming “no,” of course) — and then amplifying the result so that it appeared to have even more approval. A minor thing, but it was enough to convince the blogger that “the mood of the public is starting to shift.”

This is an example in miniature of the kinds of efforts that will be repeated again and again, and it’s instructive. Since 2016, we’ve become fixated on the idea that Russian disinformation is something that happens during election campaigns. But it goes on all the time, and coordinators respond to all kinds of circumstances and will evade official attempts to avoid them.

Social media, which makes it easy for anonymous trolls to have influence, makes it easy to invent disinformation. Social divisions, which diminish trust in authorities like the British foreign office, help it spread.

What is needed now is a broader version of Britain’s “expose the methodology” campaign, one ambitious enough to reach below the surface. That will take time and effort. But unless we get started, we’re doomed to live in a world where truth is defined by those who have the least respect for it.