

WHY HAS PUTIN CHANGED HIS MIND ABOUT WHETHER RUSSIANS WHO HACKED THE US ARE PATRIOTS OR OTHERS?

Now, with even more performed disdain! As you've no doubt heard, Megyn Kelly came out from wherever NBC has been hiding her to do another interview with Vladimir Putin. Over and over, Putin effectively said he doesn't give a fuck if some Russians interfered in the US election, but that this was not a state effort.

His most noted denial suggested that even if Russians did tamper in the US election, they might not be *real* Russians: they might be Ukrainians, Tatars, or Jews.

"So what if they're Russians?" Putin said of the people named in last month's indictment. "There are 146 million Russians. So what? ... I don't care. I couldn't care less. ... They do not represent the interests of the Russian state."

Putin even suggested that Jews or other ethnic groups had been involved in the meddling.

"Maybe they're not even Russians," he said. "Maybe they're Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews, just with Russian citizenship. Even that needs to be checked. Maybe they have dual citizenship. Or maybe a green card. Maybe it was the Americans who paid them for this work. How do you know? I don't know."

Most of the coverage of this exchange is shocked *that* Putin made such an anti-semitic

(and otherwise bigoted) comment.

But I'm more interested why he did so.

When I last commented on what I saw as a shift from outright denial to admission that Russian hackers might have been involved, Putin was describing the offending Russians as *patriots*.

Putin raised the possibility of attacks on foreign votes by what he portrayed as free-spirited Russian patriots. Hackers, he said, "are like artists" who choose their targets depending how they feel "when they wake up in the morning." Any such attacks, he added, could not alter the result of elections in Europe, America or elsewhere.

Artists, he said, paint if they wake up feeling in good spirits while hackers respond if "they wake up and read that something is going on in interstate relations" that prompts them to take action. "If they are patriotically minded, they start making their contributions – which are right, from their point of view – to the fight against those who say bad things about Russia," Mr. Putin added, apparently referring to Hillary Clinton.

Here, he's suggesting any freelancing Russian offenders are the opposite, the kind of internal others that Putin has increasingly demonized as part of his formula to stay in power (curiously, however, he didn't suggest they might be gay). He's responding to the first accusations of Russian tampering, the Internet Research Agency indictment, by suggesting that any Russian that took part must be other than Russian. He does this even while he mocks the possibility Russia might extradite any of the accused, based on Russia's standard refusal to extradite "Russians."

So any Russians accused of tampering in the US election are labeled, post hoc and preemptively

(assuming Robert Mueller is on his way to indicting Russians for the hack, as well), Russians for legal purposes, but not-Russian for cultural ones, for the political expediency of having natural scapegoats.

Why is he doing this, and who is his audience?

That he suspects he will need to scapegoat any Russian accused in the operation suggests something about it will be unpleasant, will need deniability in a way it might not have last June.

But is he playing to American prejudices in blaming Jews (and Ukrainians and Tatars, which wouldn't trigger even the most bigoted Americans)? That might make sense given that this (unlike the June comments, which were for St. Petersburg journalists.

Or is he playing to Russian prejudices (which makes more sense, given the targets)? It would mean Putin's open disdain for Kelly is a performance for his domestic audience, as well.

Most interestingly, if he is prepping scapegoats for his domestic audience, does he think Russian response to any upcoming exposure at the hands of Mueller will be negative in a way he once believed it'd be positive? That would surprise me ... but it is the most logical explanation given how he is pre-emptively demonizing what he once claimed would be patriotic.