

RUSSIA'S REVENGE:

Russian Information Operations and Proposed Countermeasures

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Despite extensive media coverage since 2016 of Russian information operations against the United States, there has been no focus on Russia's "objectives beyond the result of the 2016 presidential election" to undermine the US by lowering the credibility of American democracy. Little is known about the US structural factors that enable propaganda, disinformation, and manipulation, and the absence of governmental policies to deter hostile influence operations. This brief aims to lay out the case for a long-term American strategy in response to the Russian information operations, rooted in the past and adapted to the present.

In his 2005 annual address to the nation, Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted that "the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." Russian elites have held the US responsible for the Soviet Union's demise. His case rests on Alexander Dugin's ideas. A philosopher/strategist close to the Russia's ruling elites he argues, using the retro-revolutionary language of mid-20th Century geopolitics, in the volume *Foundations of Geopolitics*. (1997) that "[t]he Heartland [Russia] is required to pay back the Sea Power [US] in the same coin." Since Russia's liberalization policies of the 1990s were not yielding results fast enough, the more conservative elements of the ruling elites switched strategies. From seeking to surpass the U.S. (in socio-economic terms) they aimed lower but more insidiously to "drag [the U.S.] down to their level and then beat [it] with experience", according to Timothy Snyder in *The Road to Unfreedom*.

To Dugin, Putin and other Russian strategists and policymakers, a greater Russia can only come about by confronting the U.S. on its home turf. Dugin's roadmap includes "introduce[ing] geopolitical disorder into internal American activity, encouraging all kinds of separatism and ethnic, social and racial conflicts, actively supporting all dissident movements - extremist, racist, and sectarian groups, thus destabilizing internal political processes in the U.S. It would also make sense simultaneously to support isolationist tendencies in American politics" (Dughin, 1997, p. 367.)

NEW TOOLS FOR THE NEW CENTURY

It is not unusual for a country to seek influence over another country to promote better economic ties, a military alliance, or closer political cooperation. Between 2016 and 2020, foreign governments (e.g., Japan, Saudi Arabia, Ireland) spent about \$2 billion in lobbying efforts in the US. Russia, however, prefers under

rather than over the counter dealings since it is not seeking to develop closer political, military or economic links with the US. Russia's goal is to compete and at least locally, to control the international relations game through the backdoor of influence operations.

Russia's influence operations abroad have a long and contorted past, starting with the 1920s and continued to the 1960s interference in the U.S. elections notably by supporting through proxies the 1968 Herbert Humphrey candidacy. In the 1980s, Soviet intelligence agencies promoted conspiracies, such as that CIA killed John F. Kennedy and that the US military unleashed the HIV/AIDS virus.

In the age of instant connectivity and social media, Russia's tactics at influence have become more surgical. As revealed by the Global Engagement Center of the State Department, in the US, Russia's influence "ecosystem consists of five main pillars: official government communications, state-funded messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation." It relies on such diverse tactics because it has learned, as Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, has noted that "the widespread use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures implemented with the use of the protest potential of the population" is significantly more effective than the use of kinetic force. Such hybrid or grey zone measures allow Russia to accomplish objectives similar to what can be done through traditional warfare without provoking a military response in the absence of an American strategy to deter hybrid warfare.

THE AMERICAN FERTILE GROUND FOR RUSSIAN INFLUENCE SEEDS

There are several key factors that enhance Russian influence in the US. First, an inviting political landscape. During the 1992 presidential election, GOP operatives approached President George H. W. Bush with the idea to reach out to the Kremlin for damaging information on Bill Clinton. They were completely shut down by James Baker III (President's chief of staff). However, on July 27, 2016, Donald Trump asked the Russians to find Hillary Clinton's emails (official emails from her days as the Secretary of State), in defiance of US laws. In a prudent defensive and derisive reaction, the Republican establishment dismissed Trump's request as a "joke." The Democrats seized on the Steele Compromat (Russian term for politically compromising materials) dossier, which claimed that Russia blackmailed Trump. In fact, the Steele dossier might have been a Russian plant.

When, in advance of the 2016 election, President Obama presented evidence of Russian meddling to key Republicans, Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell did not reject a bipartisan condemnation of Russian meddling, while the Obama administration worried that a strong response would be seen as aiding Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. As a President, Donald Trump sided with Russia and negated the findings by 17 U.S. intelligence agencies showing Russian interference. Moreover, despite the overwhelming evidence of Russian interference and the fact that contacts between the Trump campaign and the Russians in 2016 existed, even if no evidence of collusion was uncovered, as the Mueller report attested (hamstrung by a very limited definition of its duties), not much was done to counter-attack the Russian activities in kind or diplomatically since 2015. Even today, Russia remains unchecked, as the Biden administration has yet to formulate a Russia policy.

Second, the American society and the media landscape are a fertile ground for disinformation. The political polarization is at its highest in a century and the level of distrust is increasing. A 2019 Pew Research poll found that Americans worry about the declining levels of trust in fellow citizens, with 79% believing that "Americans have 'far too little' or 'too little' confidence in each other," and 64% believing that "Americans' level of trust in each other has been shrinking." A 2020 poll conducted by the same organization showed that while Democrats trust more than distrust news sources, Republicans display a greater level of distrust of news sources other than their own (e.g., Fox News). These levels of distrust manifest themselves in Americans' propensity to believe conspiracy theories with 1 in 10 Americans believing in the "Deep State" conspiracy or that the Postal Office has intentionally removed mailboxes before the election in an attempt of vote suppression.

Lastly, information and communication technologies enable personal reach on a massive scale. The Internet, once used as a tool for liberation, freedom, and liberalism, "has become a conduit for surveillance and electoral manipulation," often used to promote authoritarianism. The private sector, while providing opportunities for citizens by reducing the cost of internet access, expanding its reach, and offering new platforms for communication, has also been an agent of authoritarians who seek to use the internet to control and manipulate. The widespread adoption of social media in the US (with 73% of Americans on YouTube, 69% on Facebook, and 37% on Instagram) and the low digital literacy and paucity of critical thinking in the U.S. enables Russia not only to reach out to large swaths of the American population, but also to communicate with any individual and

custom tailor their messages.

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, The New York Times showed that Russians reached 126 million Americans via Facebook alone, and that 131,000 Twitter messages (traced to Internet Research Agency) and 1,000 videos on YouTube targeted Americans. One Army of Jesus political ad on Facebook depicted an arm-wrestling competition between Satan and Jesus with the message "Satan: If I win Clinton Wins! Jesus: Not if I can help it!" The tweets included various tweets Photoshopped pictures including comedian Aziz Ansari urging voters to "Save time. Avoid the line. Vote from home." One of the main Russian disinformation efforts on YouTube involved the most popular news organization on that platform, RT (the state backed Russian news channel) spreading false stories about the Clinton Foundation, Hillary's poor health, and her ties to Islamic extremism. However, it is just as important to note that the Russian and external campaigns work not by sheer numbers, but by perception of importance. The quantity of Russian social media propaganda, which cannot be more than hundreds of thousands of posts a day, pales in comparison to the tens of millions of posts circulated on Facebook daily.

COUNTERING RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

American national problems transcend party affiliation, ideological orientation, geographic scope, or personal identity. Successfully combating Russian meddling requires national efforts.

1. Both major US political parties need to recognize that foreign interference in the U.S. democracy is malignant and must be combated systemically in a bipartisan way home and in cooperation with allies abroad. Domestically, the government must create an interagency group to monitor and counter hostile influence, similar to the Active Measures Working Group which combated Soviet influence from 1981 to 1992. In cooperation with allies, the US must frame Russia's abuse of social media as a violation of international law, and deny the culprits access to various platforms on the internet to prevent hostile influence operations.
2. Just as fear of Mutually Assured Destruction contributed to prevent nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union, the US and its allies must develop an unambiguous deterrence policy in the realm of influence operations. One solution developed by RAND, suggests "jamming, corrupting, degrading,

destroying, usurping, or otherwise interfering with the ability of the propagandists to broadcast and disseminate their messages.” Another option could be updating Article 5 of the NATO Treaty to include cyber-attacks/influence operations as trigger for collective defense. Russian operations against the US and other opponents/enemies show that they now operate under a different conceptualization of war. The sooner the US and NATO are able to realize that the outdated concept of war is no longer binding on its adversaries, the quicker will they be to adopting effective policies to deter such threats.

3. Policymakers in Washington D.C. and the state capitols must recognize that the weaponization of social media and the digital realm by Russia and other competitors/adversaries requires thoughtful legislation that protects the First Amendment while also defending American democracy. Social media executives have made some positive steps in closing Russian accounts and sought to be more transparent with political ads. But this is not enough. Government regulation and legislation must provide clear boundaries and expectations for industry operations standards, particularly with international entities. Furthermore, the “must carry” nature of communication networks needs to be reaffirmed, and competition in social media needs to be encouraged. Policies can encourage and support the creation of decentralized social media networks, such as those inspired by the Mastodon models. These two software and social media platforms focus on decentralized control and ownership of the software platforms, while ensuring trust mechanisms and privacy tools to prevent abuse.
4. For democracies to successfully combat disinformation and propaganda requires a “collective defense” approach, similar to Finland’s collective defense strategy. In Finland, students at every level must be offered a curriculum that raises information literacy and strengthens critical thinking skills. Moreover, the government, the civil society, and media must cooperate to increase the level of transparency in the media to reduce the ability of foreign actors to manipulate the media and to foster a healthier public environment that does not breed disinformation.

Countering Russian and other foreign influences is a long and arduous process fraught with difficulties. Plans need to be put in place with the rigor and long-range implications of the strategic assurance and deterrence policies. While social media has aimed to influence minds, the next phase in this area of cyberconflict could easily escalate, involving hacking and attacks against the infrastructure

of the financial institutions, public utilities, and healthcare centers. Counter information operations should thus be considered at the same level of risk and importance as any other major strategic operations.