



Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns

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Summary: Deception and active measures in all their incarnations have long been and will remain a staple of Russia's dealings with the outside world for the foreseeable future.

Chairman Burr, Vice Chairman Warner, distinguished members of Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,

It is a great honor to appear here today. The issue before this panel is Russian active measures and influence campaigns. It rose to the top of our national agenda in 2016, when we became aware of Russian interference in our presidential campaign. It remains one of the most contentious issues in our national conversation, for the very idea that another nation could put at risk the integrity of our country's most essential institution—the process of electing our president—is hard for us to comprehend.

I would like to state at the outset that based on media reporting, on statements of senior U.S. and other countries' law enforcement and intelligence officials, and my professional experience as a student of Russian foreign policy, I am convinced that Russian intelligence services, their proxies, and other related actors directly intervened in our election in 2016.

You might ask why I am so confident of this. I have not seen the classified evidence that supports the findings presented in the Intelligence Community Assessment "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections" published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on January 6, 2017. Some observers have been critical of that Assessment for not presenting detailed evidence of Russian cyber intrusions or covert activities. They miss the mark—it is the totality of the Russian effort to interfere, mislead, misinform, outright falsify, influence, etc. that is just as, if not more convincing than the cyber evidence of the Russian break in into the Democratic National Committee (DNC) server and other intrusions. That Russian effort is before us in plain sight—in state-sponsored propaganda broadcasts on RT (Russia Today), in countless internet trolls, fake or distorted news spread by fake news services, in the recent Kremlin get together of Russian president Vladimir Putin with the French far right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen. The list can go on. That effort is also an integral part of Russian foreign policy and domestic politics.

It's More than the Economy

To understand why the Russian government is engaged in this large-scale and diversified influence operation, which blends overt and covert activities, one needs to step back and put it in the context of events of the quarter century since the end of the Cold War.

Every country's foreign policy is a product of its history, its geography, and its politics. Russia is no exception to this rule, and to understand the pattern of Russian behavior at home and abroad, we need to look at Russian history, Russian geography, and Russian domestic politics.

War in Europe is integral to the formative experience of every Russian. The country's national narrative is impossible without the record of two wars—the Patriotic War of 1812, which Russians view as a war of liberation from Napoleon's invasion of Russia, and the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. Both wars were fought to liberate Patria, the Fatherland, from foreign occupiers. In 1812, Napoleon entered Moscow and the city was burned. In 1941, Hitler's armies were stopped just outside the city limits of Moscow. Americans, too, had their war of 1812, and Washington too was burned, but few Russians know or remember it, just as they think little of the fighting in the Pacific theater against Japan in the second world war. Stalin's armies didn't enter it until nearly the very end, three months after the war in Europe ended. The end of the Great Patriotic War is celebrated in Russia every year as a great national holiday on May 9. The greatest Russian novel of all times is Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, all Russians read it in high school. They are also taught in history classes that their country's greatest accomplishment of the 20th century was the defeat of fascism in the Great Patriotic War.

The war of 1812 ended for Russia when the armies of Tsar Alexander I entered Paris in 1814. The Great Patriotic War ended in 1945 when Stalin's armies entered Berlin. From 1945 to 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, Russia was at its most secure, or so successive generations of Russian leaders have been taught to believe. The history and the strategy taught in Russian military academies for decades after it ended were the history and the strategy of the Great Patriotic War. The map for tabletop exercises at the Military Academy of the General Staff in 2001 was a giant map of the European theater. U.S. strategists were by that time "done" with Europe and shifting their focus from the Balkan edge of the continent to South Asia and the Middle East. Russia was not "done" with Europe.

Little appreciated in the West at the time was the trauma suffered by the Russian national security establishment when it lost its outer and inner security buffers—the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet empire. The sense of physical security afforded by this dual buffer between NATO's armies and the Russian heartland was gone. Russian declaratory policy may have been to sign on to the 1990 Charter of Paris as the Cold War ended, but the historical legacy and the geography of Russian national security could not be altered with the stroke of a pen. Even as the Communist system was dismantled and the Soviet Union disbanded, Russia's national security establishment, which had been brought up for generations to think in terms of hard power, could not and did not embrace the new vision of European security based on shared values.

In 1991, with their society in turmoil, their economy in tatters, their military in retreat from the outer and inner empires, and their country literally falling apart, Russian leaders had no choice but to go along with that vision. They also accepted as given that history is written by the victors, and that the victors would also make the rules for the new era. Russia would have to go along with it for as long as it remained weak.

The 1990s were a terrible decade for Russia. Its domestic politics remained in turmoil, its economy limped from one crisis to the next, and its international standing—only recently that of a superpower—collapsed. Western students of Russia were entertaining the prospect of a world without Russia. It was not lost on Russian political elites that the 1990s were also a time of great prosperity and global influence for the West. For them, brought up on the idea of importance of hard power, the dominance of the West was inextricably tied to its victory in the Cold War, the defeat of Russia, its retreat from the world stage, and the expansion of the West in its wake.

Russia Is Back

But Russia would not remain weak indefinitely. Its economic recovery after the turn of the century, buoyed by soaring global prices for commodities and hydrocarbons, and its domestic political consolidation around Vladimir Putin and his brand of increasingly authoritarian leadership, so different from the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, have laid the groundwork for a return to Russia's more assertive posture on the world stage.

That increasingly assertive posture has manifested itself on multiple occasions and in different forms over the past decade and a half—in Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007; in the war with Georgia in 2008 and the statement in its aftermath by then-president Dmitry Medvedev about Russia's claim to a sphere of "privileged interests" around its periphery; and finally in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine to keep Ukraine from slipping from Russia's orbit.

For the West, Russia's return to the world stage has been nothing more than pure revanchism. It violates the basic, core principles of the post-Cold War European security architecture—which Russia pledged to observe over a quarter-century ago.

For Russia, it is restoring a balance—not the old balance, but some semblance of it. Currently, NATO troops are deployed to deter Russian aggression against Estonia. (Curiously, former U.S. speaker of the House Newt Gingrich has described it as the “suburbs of St. Petersburg.”) Russia’s security establishment views this commitment by NATO countries to its vulnerable ally as a threat to the heartland.

The narrative of restoring the balance, correcting the injustice and the distortions of the 1990s, when the West took advantage of Russia’s weakness, has been the essential element of Russian state-sponsored propaganda since the beginning of the Putin era. Whether or not we choose to accept this narrative, these beliefs undergird Russia’s comeback on the world stage and political consolidation at home. In public and private, top Russian officials proclaim that the wars in Georgia and Ukraine were fought to prevent Western encroachment on territories vital to Russian security. The military deployment in Syria merely restores Russia’s traditional foothold in the Middle East, from which Russia withdrew when it was weak, and where it was replaced by the West with consequences that have been tragic for the entire region.

In domestic politics, Putin’s authoritarian restoration is treated by the majority of average and elite members of Russian society as the return to the country’s traditional political health, free from foreign interference in its political and economic life. The more pluralistic system and dramatic decline of the 1990s are linked in this narrative to the influence of the United States and other foreign interests in Russia’s economy and politics, to their desire to introduce alien values in Russia’s political culture and take Russia’s oil. U.S. support for Russian civil society is an effort to undermine the Russian state, to bring Russia back to its knees, and take advantage of it, both at home and abroad. Western economic sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of its annexation of Crimea and the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine are a form of warfare designed to weaken Russia and gain unfair advantage over it. Western support for democracy in countries around Russia’s periphery is an effort to encircle it and weaken it too.

This narrative has dominated the airwaves inside Russia, where the Kremlin controls the television, which is the principal medium that delivers news to most Russians. With independent media in retreat and alternative sources of information marginalized, this narrative has struck a responsive chord with many Russians. The narrative has been effective because it contains an element of truth—Russia did implode in the 1990s, and the West prospered; Russia did recover from its troubles and regained a measure of its global standing on Putin’s watch; the West did promote democracy in Russia, which coincided with its time of troubles; and the West has been critical of the Russian government’s retreat from democracy as Russia regained strength.

Moreover, foreign policy traditionally was and is the preserve of the country’s political elite and its small national security establishment. Whereas there are some voices inside Russia who, like the leading anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny, have challenged the many domestic failings and authoritarian leanings of the Putin government, there are hardly any who have challenged its foreign policy record. Worse yet, the Kremlin propaganda has been apparently so effective, and the legal constraints imposed by it so severe, that few Russian opposition voices dare to challenge the government’s foreign policy course for fear of being branded as foreign agents, enemies of the people, and fifth columnists.

Warfare by Other Means

For all the talk about Russian recovery and resurgence on the world stage, its capabilities should not be overestimated. Its GDP is about \$1.3 trillion vs. U.S. GDP of over \$18 trillion. The Russian economy is not “in shambles,” but in the words of a leading Russian government economist it is doomed to “eternal stagnation” unless the government undertakes major new reforms.

Russian defense expenditures are estimated at about \$65 billion, or little more than President Trump’s proposed increase in U.S. defense spending for FY 2018. The Russian military is estimated at just over 750,000—well short of its authorized strength of one million—vs. U.S. 1.4 million active duty military personnel.

By all accounts, the Russian military has made huge strides in the past decade, benefiting from far-reaching reforms and generous defense spending. It is undeniably far superior militarily to its smaller, weaker neighbors and enjoys considerable geographic advantages in theaters around its periphery.

Yet, the overall military balance does not favor Russia when it is compared to the United States and its NATO allies. They have bigger economies, spend more on defense, have bigger, better equipped militaries, and are more technologically sophisticated. A NATO-Russia war would be an act of mutual suicide, and the Kremlin is not ready for it. Its campaign against the West has to be prosecuted by other means.

That is the backdrop for the subject of today's hearings. Since Russia cannot compete toe-to-toe with the West, its leaders have embraced a wide range of tools—information warfare in all its forms, including subversion, deception, dis- and mis-information, intimidation, espionage, economic tools, including sanctions, bribery, selective favorable trading regimes, influence campaigns, etc. This toolkit has deep historical roots in the Soviet era and performs the function of the equalizer that in the eyes of the Kremlin is intended to make up for Russia's weakness vis a vis the West.

In employing this toolkit, the Kremlin has a number of important advantages. There is no domestic audience before which it has to account for its actions abroad. The Kremlin has few, if any external restraints in employing it, and its decisionmaking mechanism is streamlined. There is no legislature to report to, for the Duma is a rubber stamp body eager to sign off on any Kremlin foreign policy initiative.

The circle of deciders is far smaller than the Soviet-era Politburo, and it is limited to a handful of Putin associates with similar worldviews and backgrounds. They are determined to carry on an adversarial relationship with the West. They can make decisions quickly and have considerable resources at their disposal, especially given the relatively inexpensive nature of most of the tools they rely on. A handful of cyber criminals cost a lot less than an armored brigade and can cause a great deal more damage with much smaller risks.

Shame and reputational risks do not appear to be a factor in Russian decision-making. In early-2016, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov did not shy away from repeating a patently false fake media story about the rape of a Russian-German girl by a Syrian asylum-seeker in Germany.

Moreover, a version of selective naming and shaming—or targeting of political adversaries with false allegations of misconduct—has been used by Russian propaganda to discredit political adversaries in the West. Russian propaganda, and Putin personally, have sought to deflect the attention from the fact of the intrusion into the DNC server and the top leadership of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign to the information released as a result of it that has presented various political operatives in an unfavorable light.

This not only deflects the attention from Russia's role in this episode, it helps the Kremlin convey an important message to its domestic audience about the corrupt nature of U.S. politics. Russia therefore is no worse than the United States, which has no right to complain about corruption and democracy deficit in Russia.

Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is likely to be seen by the Kremlin as a major success regardless of whether its initial goal was to help advance the Trump candidacy. The payoff includes, but is not limited to a major political disruption in the United States, which has been distracted from many strategic pursuits; the standing of the United States and its leadership in the world have been damaged; it has become a common theme in the narrative of many leading commentators that from the pillar of stability of the international liberal order the United States has been transformed into its biggest source of instability; U.S. commitments to key allies in Europe and Asia have been questioned on both sides of the Atlantic and the Pacific. And last, but not least, the Kremlin has demonstrated what it can do to the world's sole remaining global superpower.

It Is Not a Crisis, It Is the New Normal

Events of the past three years, since the annexation of Crimea by Russia, have been referred to as a crisis in relations between Russia and the West. However, this is no longer a crisis. The differences between Russia and the West are profound and are highly unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future without one or the other side capitulating. The U.S.-Russian relationship is fundamentally broken, and this situation should be treated as the new normal rather than an exceptional period in our relations. For the foreseeable future our relationship is likely to remain competitive and, at times, adversarial.

The full extent of Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election is not yet publicly known. But the melding of various tools (e.g. the use of cyber operations to collect certain information covertly) and the provision of this information to outlets such as Wikileaks and the news media was certainly a first. Unfortunately, it is not a first for U.S. allies and partners in Europe and Eurasia. It is not the last either. Just a few days ago, Vladimir Putin received France's right-wing presidential candidate Marine Le Pen in the Kremlin. Previously, her National Front had received a loan from a Moscow-based bank, and Russian media outlets have tried to injure the reputation of her chief opponent Emmanuel Macron by spreading rumors about his sexuality and ties to financial institutions. The chiefs of British and German intelligence services have warned publicly about the threat from Russia to their countries' democratic processes. The Netherlands

recently chose to forego reliance on certain computer vote tabulation systems due to elevated fears of Russian interference and hacking.

The experience of Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. election should be judged an unqualified success for the Kremlin. It has cost it little and paid off in more ways than can be easily counted. To be sure, U.S. officials should expect it to be repeated again and again in the future. 2016 was a crisis, but it was not an aberration and should be treated as the new normal. Cyber is merely a new domain. Deception and active measures in all their incarnations have long been and will remain a staple of Russia's dealings with the outside world for the foreseeable future.

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