

Russian Interference in Domestic Politics

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Good morning, and thank you Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to speak with you about Russian interference in democratic politics. The Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election is deeply troubling, yet unsurprising. It is up to us as Americans to acknowledge the threats that Russian disinformation provides, and develop the effective strategies needed to combat them.

This weaponization of information by Russia is not new; in fact, it dates back to the Soviet Union. In 1983, a pro-Soviet newspaper in India published an article accusing the Department of Defense of creating AIDS in an attempt to develop new biological weapons. In 1964, the KGB used similar tactics in an effort to convince the Indonesian President that there was a CIA plot to assassinate him. The primary differences between these disinformation campaigns and those today, is twofold: firstly, the internet and social media make it much easier to spread disinformation, and secondly, these campaigns are increasingly targeting first world Western nations.

Russia took full advantage of this new media landscape by promoting disinformation to sow discontent among Americans. Russia exploited divides in the American populace to promote what many have referred to as a “culture war”. Surveys have shown that the US is more polarized than it has ever been on issues such as gun control, immigration, religion, and race. Russian operatives, seeing an opportunity, purchased social media advertisements and created social media profiles, in order to promote partisan stances on these issues to further widen the rift. Russian advertisements and profiles did not have a consistent political position; the only consistent aspect is that they all promoted partisan positions on immensely divisive issues.

The details of Russia’s interference in the election are maddening. However, the reality is that we should not be surprised by this interference. The Russians have interfered with numerous elections in Western nations recently, including those in the Netherlands, Germany, and France. There is increasing evidence that Russia worked to influence the referendum in which the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union, as recently shown in a report prepared by some on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It has promoted anti-immigration sentiment in Europe, by creating and spreading the story of “poor Lisa,” a thirteen-year-old girl who, as the fallacious story goes, was abducted and raped by migrants.

Furthermore, we have “meddled” in elections in our own way. In 1953, Allen Dulles offered \$5 million to an agent to sway the Filipino elections. 1958’s Operation Booster Shot encouraged rural Laotian farmers to vote against Communist politicians in Laos. This meddling did not end with the Cold War; in the 2006 Palestinian elections in Gaza, the United States provided economic assistance in an attempt to bolster Fatah’s chances. The reality is that both the United States and Russia have meddled, and we should not be surprised by this trend continuing.

What is astounding about Russian meddling is how brazen Russia was in executing it, as well as the fact that Russia seems to believe that it can escape this with its reputation unsullied. Russia appears to be surprised by the outrage that has been seen throughout the US. The US has been a leader and pillar of Western democracy, and the fact that Russia believed that it could interfere with American elections with no response is truly shocking.

However, Russia's interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election is merely a symptom of a larger hybrid war against the West, in which economic, cyber, and disinformation tactics are used in conjunction with conventional forces in order to exert force or pressure on an adversary. In February 2013, General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, gave a speech entailing this strategy, claiming:

The very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.

This led to the coining of the term “the Gerasimov Doctrine.” This describes Russia's view that warfare is not simply a conventional affair, but one that uses the aforementioned cyber, economic, and information tactics.

This is notable because it shows that Russia acknowledges that its election meddling is a form of warfare. While Russia may deny that it interferes with elections, or claim that it is innocuous, the words of General Gerasimov ring loud and clear: disinformation efforts are efforts of warfare.

The reality is that Russia is using hybrid tactics to target Western values, democratic governments, and transatlantic institutions. President Vladimir Putin claimed in a state of the nation address that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century. Russia sees the West, and in particular, a unified West, as an adversary. Waging a conventional war against the West would be unfavorable to Russia. As such, it has used hybrid warfare to break up Western unity.

Exploiting divisions in US society and promoting a “culture war” is one key element of Moscow's efforts to weaken the West. Through disinformation, it has pried differences in Europe to promote Euroscepticism and to grow the notion among the peoples of Europe that the EU is not beneficial to them. It has waged cyber-attacks, such as the NotPetya attack in Ukraine in 2017, the Fancy Bear attack on German Members of Parliament earlier this month, or the numerous distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks on the Estonian government. It has used economic subversion to exploit the relatively smaller economies of its neighbors to subvert political power.

It uses its vast energy resources to promote the dependence of its smaller neighbors, working to keep them in the Russian sphere of influence and preventing them from turning to the West. In short, while the 2016 Presidential Election is the most notable case of Russian hybrid warfare, especially for Americans, it is not the only case of Russian hybrid warfare.

The Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election has received an unprecedented amount of media coverage. However, we should not be so myopic as to see this interference in a vacuum. In order to effectively combat said interference, we need to understand the scope of Russian hybrid warfare. We need to view this as a comprehensive problem that connects the dots of recent Kremlin activity. We cannot simply

take a stance against a specific case of election interference, we must take a stance against Russian hybrid warfare in its entirety. In all the cases of Russian disinformation and election interference, the West has been slow to see it, and even slower to react. We need to move past simply trying to formulate a reaction to interference in the Presidential Election, we need to move to a place where we are ready to combat hybrid warfare and not need to react at all.

Hybrid warfare is a form of warfare that the United States has yet to fully understand, never mind prepare for. The revelation of Russian disinformation in the election is the wake-up call that hybrid warfare is occurring, even if we are unwitting participants in it. Simply condemning the election meddling is not going to solve this problem, and it is not going to prevent future Russian hybrid operations. We must treat this with the gravity that it deserves. We need to take a position, establish policy, and execute it. The Russian hybrid threat is larger than the 2016 Election, and larger than the United States. It is a threat to liberal order that the West has become accustomed to, and it will continue to be until we develop an effective strategy and implement the necessary policies to combat it. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.