

Written testimony for the record
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For the hearing
“Undermining Democratic Institutions and Splintering NATO: Russia’s Disinformation Aims”
House Foreign Affairs Committee
March 9, 2017

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am humbled and honored to be with you, and to be part of such a distinguished panel. And as a citizen and voter, I want to thank you for holding a hearing on this important and timely topic that is central to the future security and prosperity of our great country.

I agree with the premise of the subject Mr. Royce has chosen for this hearing: that Moscow seeks to undermine democratic institutions and liberal democracy, and to splinter NATO, the EU, and other political institutions that protect our democratic values. Disinformation campaigns—a combination work by Russia’s vast spy agencies and government-controlled propaganda outlets—are one of the tools that the Kremlin uses to advance these objectives.

I would like to offer a few observations on several questions that follow from this starting point. First, why does the Kremlin pursue these aims? Second, how, practically speaking, does the Kremlin execute disinformation efforts? Third, why does this matter for the United States? And finally, what should we do about it?

1. Why Moscow seeks to undermine democracy and its institutions

I heard it said once a couple years ago that it is only a slight exaggeration to say that Russia doesn’t have a foreign policy as such; it has only domestic policy that manifests itself internationally. This is an important point—we project onto Russia a foreign policy framework that mirrors our own in form. But Russia’s foreign policy is not driven by any kind of genuine world view—it’s driven by the domestic political imperatives that drive Putin: preservation of his personal position and, necessarily, preservation of the corrupt and increasingly authoritarian system by which he and so many of his cronies have enriched themselves and maintained an iron grip on the state. This is why Russian foreign policy is so often at odds with the actual interests of ordinary Russians. It’s not about advancing the security or prosperity of Russian citizens, or even the long term interests of the Russian state. It’s about the preservation of a particular regime.

The myth of NATO as a security threat to Russia is case-in-point. NATO is a defensive alliance. But the myth of NATO’s aggressive encirclement provides a domestic justification for the regime. In fact, if you look at a map, Russia’s borders with or near NATO countries are the most secure and stable borders it has. NATO has been a stabilizing force for Europe, and it has enhanced the security of Europeans and Russians, whether or not the latter are prepared to admit it. Yet the Putin regime has cultivated the perception of NATO as a bogeyman. Here it is important to remember: It’s not, or not only, the supposed military threat that NATO poses, but

rather the blow to democracy that NATO's fragmentation would represent, that drives Moscow to attempt to undermine it. Similarly, Russia's desire to undermine the EU is not about neutralizing a threat but about destroying a political arrangement that is founded on the universal values at the heart of liberal democracy.

The most prominent example of Russia's attempts to undermine democracy in Europe in the last five years was the invasion of Ukraine and ongoing conflict that Russia continues to pursue in that country. This was not a "foreign policy" chosen because Ukraine posed a security threat to Russia—it was pursued because Putin saw the opportunity, among other things, to boost his waning domestic popularity by whipping up nationalist sentiments at home through the seizure of Crimea. And his ongoing attempts to sabotage the democratic choices of the people of Ukraine is driven by his (reasonable) fear that a successful democratic Ukraine would expose the (racist) lie that his authoritarian rule depends on: that Russians and other Slavs are incapable of living in a liberal democracy.

The rules-based order which has been a chief accomplishment of U.S. foreign policy through Democratic and Republican administrations over the last seven decades, pursued in cooperation with Canada, our allies in Europe, and democratic governments in other parts of the world, is anathema to the kleptocratic authoritarianism Russia's ex-KGB president has built.

I do not discount the macho egotism that many see as one of Putin's chief motives—that an effort to restore the perceived stolen greatness of the Soviet Union is one of his personal ambitions. But we must also recognize that not only does he long for a lost past, he fears the present. He fears justice, accountability, the rule of law—all of the things that the European Union, NATO, and the United States of America represent and reinforce.

This in short, is why Putin pursues—with obsessive compulsion—a range of efforts to dominate the post-Soviet space and to weaken Europe, the US, trans-Atlantic relationships, and domestic and international institutions that reinforce the values of liberal democracy.

2. How Moscow uses disinformation to accomplish these aims.

We know Putin's goals, now let's turn to one of his tactics. Russian disinformation campaigns today are part of a broader arsenal used in Putin's assault on democracy. They are both old—in that they continue core elements of Soviet "active measures" efforts—and new—in that they have harnessed new technologies and used them effectively.

Using open source information and analyzing the data on social media, it is possible to track Russian disinformation's path from GRU or FSB agents working with the Kremlin, through Russia's propaganda arms like Sputnik and RT, to a set of intermediaries disguised as independent sources or commentators who act either voluntarily or as part of a paid apparatus to propagate stories. These sources often describe themselves in their profiles in ways intended to legitimize them and make them attractive to target audiences—for example, those targeting Trump supporters may have "Make America Great Again" or "Christian Patriot USA" in

their profile—never mind that they might in fact be sitting in a troll factory in St. Petersburg or in a town in Eastern Europe. They promote and share the stories, which are then amplified through technical means—“bots”—that send out, for example, many thousands of tweets with the same false stories and headlines accompanied by a set of hashtags. This burst of activity puts the hashtags on twitter’s “trending” list and then the story is picked up by more and more genuine supporters of a candidate or cause, and finds its way into their own twitter feeds and facebook posts. Little does the person in Hamilton, NJ or Brea, CA know that what they just shared with their friends and family is junk that was written by a Russian agent. (And indeed, Members of Congress watching their own twitter feeds may be unaware that the responses they are seeing to their posts may be coming from the same bots or network of Russian collaborators that spread propaganda, rather than from constituents.)

Propaganda masked and spread through a combination of digital and human means is one piece of this operation. State sponsored hacking is another. These are not separate lines of effort; they are part of the same whole—a campaign to manipulate public opinion in ways that serve the interests of the Kremlin. Wikileaks has become the most well-known platform for Russian intelligence to distribute their stolen caches. Hacked material is dumped, some of it unadulterated, some of it perhaps modified—mixing authentic or legitimate material in with falsehoods is a tactic for building trust with an audience. The hacked material then gets distributed alongside propaganda and used as a kernel around which fully-formed propaganda stories are distributed. The coordination of the two tactics was apparently exposed several times during the U.S. presidential campaign when RT or Sputnik ran a story based on hacked material several hours before it was posted on Wikileaks. Even Russian spies make mistakes.

It’s important to note that while disinformation is used to attempt to change views on certain issues, or to bolster support for candidates and political or social issues that Moscow perceives as advancing its agenda, the broader attack here is not about one candidate or political decision-point. It’s about fomenting conflict rather than debate within our democracies, it’s about undermining public trust in government and democratic institutions, it’s about calling into question truth itself. This last part is important because it is one of the asymmetries that plays to the Kremlin’s advantage: if you’re trying to undermine people’s confidence in truth or facts, you need only to call it into question, you need not persuade them to change their mind. “You say the sky is blue, I say it’s green, we both have our opinions,” they say. This notion that nothing is true, and every argument or opinion is equally valid is what some have called “weaponized relativism,” and it is a common Russian tactic. The RT motto “Question more” isn’t about critical thinking, it’s about undermining the basis for civilized, fact-based argument and debate in democratic societies. I worry that this tactic is too often bleeding into our own political discourse, and when it does, it accomplishes a Russian objective and constitutes an abandonment a cornerstone of our democracy.

Russia has deployed these tactics during the 2016 U.S. election and during the Brexit referendum in the UK earlier last year. While Russia targeted particular groups of voters for its influence operations, in both cases, all voters—and indeed all citizens and residents of the

United States and UK—were victims, for Russia was attacking a fundamental institution of our democracy itself: free and fair elections.

3. Why Russia's attempts to undermine democracy in Europe matter for the United States

Analysts tracking the network through which the Kremlin executes its campaigns noted that some of the same intermediaries and bots that were active during the 2016 U.S. campaign pivoted almost immediately to upcoming elections in Europe, including the upcoming Dutch and French elections and, especially, the German election in which Chancellor Merkel is seeking a fourth term later this year.

Russia has recognized that the success of the xenophobic and anti-EU Geert Wilders in the Netherlands or of his French far right populist counterpart Marine Le Pen, whose Front Nationale party has received Russian financing in the past, would be a blow to Europe and European values and would advance Russia's aims. Putin also seeks to embolden the extreme right and extreme left in Germany, believing that Merkel's political end would spell the end of European solidarity in standing against Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere, and would bring down a pillar in support of liberal democracy in Europe and the world—a pillar that many consider to be of singular importance.

Though they have ramped up in the wake of successful operations in the U.K. and U.S. last year, Russian disinformation campaigns in Europe aren't new or exclusively focused on elections. Russia also uses these tactics to attempt to undermine popular support for NATO and to thwart expansion of the alliance, most recently in the ongoing attempts to sabotage Montenegro's accession. Russia allies with domestic groups to stir up anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment. It works to support groups and corporate interests that attack plans that would enhance Europe's energy independence, seeking to maintain Europe's dependence on Russia so that it can better exploit Europe economically and coerce it politically.

These attempts to undermine the institutions of democracy in Europe, and to fragment Europe politically, aren't just a threat against European security and prosperity, they are a threat to American security as well. Our allies in Europe remain our partners of first resort in taking on the challenges of the 21st century. When they are weakened, the United States is less able to accomplish our objectives whether those are related to countering global terrorism, supporting a stable global economy, preserving an open and level playing field for American business, or countering climate change and global epidemics. The post-World War II project has been a European and North American project, and it has been enormously successful. It was crucial to bringing an end to the Cold War and expanding freedom's reach to tens of millions of people. NATO is the most successful military alliance in the history of the world, it is anchored in shared democratic values—values worth defending—and it is far from obsolete. The United States will continue to have an abiding interest in a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace in the decades to come. We must be ready to help our European friends withstand Russia's attempts to undermine their institutions and their security.

4. What should we do about it?

To do this, we must pursue three general lines of effort at the same time:

First we should work with governments and civil society in Europe to help repulse Russian efforts to undermine European democratic institutions. Our intelligence community—which is the best in the world—should sustain and enhance information sharing with European partners about Russian malign activity within and across their borders. Working through NATO, the EU, and bilaterally, we should work with European partners, and with Canada, to identify concrete steps to enhance the resilience of their societies to Russian malign influence.

Second the U.S. government should sustain existing punitive measures aimed at delivering consequences to Russia for its intervention in our election, and should be prepared to forcefully implement additional measures, whether unilaterally or in partnership with Canadian and European allies.

Third, we must continue to gather facts about the Russian malign influence on our own elections and the Brexit referendum. We need a comprehensive, independent review of what happened, why it worked, why certain parts didn't work, and how we can resist it. We need a coherent approach for determining appropriate and effective countermeasures and punitive action.

A lot of the discussion about an investigation has—predictably but regrettably—become politicized in the United States, and support for a full investigation has divided mostly, but not perfectly, along partisan lines. This saddens me. This should not be a Republican issue or a Democratic issue. This is a national security issue that should concern any patriot. I understand that because both open source evidence and the findings of our intel agencies support a conclusion that Russian influence was deployed on behalf of the Republican candidate in our presidential election, an investigation feels politically uncomfortable for Republicans. But I urge members of this committee, and of the broader House of Representatives, as well as your Senate colleagues, to recognize that while the focus of an investigation must necessarily be our last election, the reason for an investigation is to defend our future elections—and that is an interest we all share.

And so I want to emphasize a specific reason for a full, independent investigation into Russia's engagement in U.S. elections: education. A well-executed investigation will provide facts that can help American citizens educate themselves. Russia took advantage of a number of asymmetries in its campaign to undermine our elections—our protections of freedom of speech and freedom of the press are one such asymmetry. The very fact that we have free and fair elections—where the authorities don't perpetrate fraud as Putin does in his elections at home—is a strength that the Russians use against us. Another asymmetry historically has been relatively high levels of public trust—in the media and in government. These are strengths of our society, but we have learned that they can present vulnerabilities. Knowing this, it is up to

us to take action. We should not forsake our democratic values, but we should prepare ourselves to repel attacks on our democratic system. If we are to withstand future efforts to manipulate us through disinformation, we must have the facts about how this effort worked and how effective it was. This is part of equipping our citizens to defend ourselves, to defend the unmolested exercise of our right to vote, to defend our democracy. For this reason, a robust independent investigation of the Russian role in our elections is needed, separate from and in addition to any appointment of a special prosecutor to look into criminal collaboration with such efforts.

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Before concluding I want to make two points about Russia—one substantive, one semantic. First, on substance, while it is true that Russia is a nuclear power and a menace that has demonstrated its ability to cause significant damage and exact enormous human costs through its actions abroad, we should avoid exaggerating Russia’s strengths. The Kremlin is acting out of weakness, not strength. In recent years it has been difficult to talk to a Russian diplomat for any amount of time without having them talk about a “multi-polar world”, their code for an end to American global leadership and the rise of Russian influence. But even if one were to accept the premise that the 21st century brings the advent of a multi-polar world, it’s far from obvious that Russia would be one of the poles. There is nothing attractive to most people about Putinism—to be a pole in the world you have to have something that draws people to you without coercion. Putin’s Eurasian Economic Union is a failure—a political project dressed up as an economic one, and one that he has had to twist arms to get several neighbors to sign up to. Russia has the birth rates of Western Europe and the life expectancy of a developing country. It has an economy that has not diversified because its leaders have been too busy siphoning off natural resource wealth and have not invested for the 21st century. It lacks rule of law and reliable courts that are necessary for entrepreneurs to flourish. Its economy is under enormous strain and is the size of Italy’s. And Putin is so insecure that he feels compelled to silence political opponents despite his grip on the mechanics of state power and control of the media. Vladimir Kara-Murza a Russian democrat—small d—and one such critic has recently suffered, for a second time, a mysterious poisoning. Any regime that has to physically attack those who advocate for different policies is not a regime that is confident in its appeal.

The second point is semantic. We often talk—as I have today—about “Russia” and “Russian interests” or “Russian objectives.” We need to be clear that most of the time in international politics when we discuss Russian behavior and motives, we’re principally talking about the decision-making of President Putin. This is not to say that Putin is unconstrained—he is far weaker than most believe. But Putin’s interests are, in many cases, radically divergent from the the interests of ordinary Russian citizens, and it is Putin’s perceptions of his own interests that drive his behavior. Like most nationalists, Putin is no patriot. He manipulates public institutions and public sentiments for personal gain. This distinction between Russia as a whole and the Kremlin is important for at least two reasons. One, so that we focus our attention where it belongs as we work to understand and counter the threats emanating from the Kremlin. And two, because we should be clear that we seek friendship with the Russian

people—they are mothers and fathers, grandparents and grandchildren, with dreams and hardships just like us. They deserve a government better than the one they have, and the government they have is a threat to their futures just as it is a threat to so many beyond Russia's borders. We should never leave a doubt that the international system we seek is one in which a free and democratic Russia that truly represents the interests of its citizens plays a constructive role.

Again, I thank you for the invitation and am happy to do my best to answer your questions.