

Written Testimony of Peter B. Doran
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**Hearing on “Undermining Democratic Institutions and Splintering NATO:
Russian Disinformation Aims”**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee. I am Peter B. Doran, Executive Vice President at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). I want to thank you for inviting me here today. It is an honor and a privilege to give this testimony. I would like to submit my written testimony for the record and offer a brief summary of my thoughts on Russia’s global efforts to undermine democratic states.

Mr. Chairman, my organization is a U.S.-based non-profit policy institute dedicated to the study of Central Europe. At CEPA, we have developed an on-going program to analyze and expose Russian disinformation and propaganda in Europe. Our primary area of focus covers frontline American allies like Poland and the Baltic countries: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Based on our research and reporting at CEPA, my main message to the committee is this: the Russian government is sharpening its use of state-sponsored propaganda against Western democracies. While some of these propaganda techniques are not new, their sophistication and intensity are increasing. This puts democratic states and NATO at risk.

This committee should have no doubt: Russia is a rival to the United States. The strategic aims of the Russian government are fundamentally at odds with American interests in Europe. Russia’s leaders view the American-led security order as outdated and unfair. Russian leaders want to change this. In its place, they seek to establish a sphere of privileged influence in Europe. To do so, they must weaken America’s links to allies, divide NATO, and if necessary use force.

Russia’s problem is this: it is no match against a united Atlantic alliance. Against individual states in Europe, however, Russia is comparatively strong. Russian leaders know this. It is why they must fracture allied solidarity, stoke public distrust for democratic institutions, and discredit the alliance structures that defend Europe. If we are divided and distracted, Russia can challenge the U.S. led security order in Europe. This is Russia’s ultimate aim. Propaganda is a means.

Unlike the Cold War, today’s Russia propaganda does not crudely promote the Kremlin’s foreign policy agenda. Instead, it is designed to confuse and dismay. By polluting the information space with disinformation, Russia seeks to increase polarization in the West, undermine democratic debate, and create doubt among allies. The intended result is to erode Euro-Atlantic values and degrade public support for security organizations like NATO.

Perhaps most troubling is how Russian propaganda exploits the natural openness of democratic systems. Crucial elements in an open society such as a free press, broadcast and social media, civic groups, political parties or even economic actors can be utilized to spread disinformation. They may not even know they are doing it. Whether Russian propagandists are re-packaging

false narratives to disguise their original source—a concept we call “narrative laundering”—or branding credible news as fake, or employing rumors, myths and conspiracy to confound audiences, the methods are many. Trust is the intended casualty—trust in America’s promises, NATO’s staying power, and democratic efficacy.

Propagandists want the news to be confusing. When facts and falsehoods become interchangeable, Russia can befuddle and dismay Western audiences. This allows propaganda to play upon an audience’s fears, doubts, and real-life worries. By calibrating its narratives and messaging to specific countries and audiences, Russian propaganda can aggravate dormant historical or ethnic tensions, widen political cleavages, and heighten feelings of isolation or estrangement from the United States. What’s worse, the spreading of these ideas is as easy as a “Like” a “Tweet” and a “Share.”

All of this has immediate ramifications for upcoming elections in France and Germany. Right now, Russia’s propaganda outlets are active in trying to shape public perceptions ahead of both contests. The Russian government has a clear stake in the outcomes, since it desires to keep Europe distracted, divided and incapable of defending the existing security order that has maintained peace since the Cold War. If Russia succeeds, it will create great harm to U.S. interests.

The question for us becomes: how do we protect ourselves against this danger; and what does victory on this new frontier of conflict look like?

For starters, we should begin to view Russian propaganda like a virus. To stop this virus, we should treat it like one. This means:

Detecting the virus—knowing what it is, and how it works;

Debunking it—curing those who may have been exposed;

Defending people—educating citizens to protect themselves and others;

Disarming it—finding a vaccine.

Ultimate success occurs when audiences, editors, journalists, experts and leaders easily spot Russian propaganda and ignore it.

For the recommendations that follow, CEPA has developed a package of ideas to address the different dimensions of disinformation.

Recommendations

Detect (and analyze)

Today, no dedicated agency or *systematic* effort exists to detect and analyze Russian disinformation in real or near-real time. Especially needed is greater analysis on how Russia targets different audiences across multiple countries—and its impact. To address this gap we recommend greater support for increased monitoring and analysis (inside and outside of government) on the methods, reach and especially impact of Russian propaganda.

Debunk

While Russia's propaganda messages are relatively simple and emotional, Western counter-messaging is often too complex or lacks broad public appeal. Regional audiences tend to consume Kremlin propaganda because it is glossier and more entertaining than fact-based alternatives. To address this gap we recommend a full spectrum approach to counter Russian propaganda featuring: broadcast, social, and online media. Both government and non-governmental actors should play a role. This includes greater support for public fact-checking and myth-busting efforts, especially in countries and populations, which are common targets for Russian disinformation.

Defend

Media education matters, as audiences require a wider variety of sources to understand and explain Russia's false narratives and disinformation techniques. To address this gap we recommend robust assistance for public awareness campaigns, which educate audiences in how to spot disinformation, protecting themselves and others against it. This can include high-quality media content where disinformation techniques and false narratives are explained for general, non-specialist audiences.

Disarm

Defending U.S. allies and protecting exposed democracies will require not just a whole of government approach at the policy level, but a whole of society approach to "make facts cool again." In the 21st century media space, a lie can be disproved but audiences have to care. To address this gap we recommend increased backing for the development of Russian-language media featuring satire, humor, news and even entertainment content. Ideally, this content would be calibrated for specific counter-messaging on Russian propaganda, inoculating audiences against the digital virus of disinformation. Additionally, the creation of a voluntary charter for broadcast and online content producers would demonstrate that participating media adhere to the highest ethical standards in journalism and fact-based reporting.

Trust can be restored.

The information space can be protected.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to answering your questions.