



**Statement before the
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia,
Energy, and the Environment**

***“Undermining Democracy: Kremlin Tools of
Malign Political Influence”***

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May 21, 2019

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Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to speak on an issue of significant importance to the American people. We must better understand Russia's sweeping and systematic malign influence operations, which support anti-democratic and anti-Western forces in Europe and the United States. Using a variety of tools, from corruption to influence operations, the Kremlin undermines and weakens democracies, rendering them unable to respond promptly to Russian military actions or making them beholden to the Kremlin to such a point that a democratic country will support Russia's interests over its own. And this is why we study Russia's malign tactics in Europe: to prevent them from working effectively in the United States, and vice versa.

Russia is undoubtedly the adversarial power which is the most advanced and adept at using malign influence as a tool of statecraft. The Kremlin uses a comprehensive array of influence tools that have been honed for well over a century, including from its experience with Soviet-era active measures. These tactics are now enshrined in Russian military doctrine known as New Generation Warfare (NGW). But today there is greater urgency to the Kremlin's use of malign influence as it must alter the policy stances and democratic orientation of the United States and Europe before the West—or Russian internal dynamics—directly challenge Mr. Putin's political survival.

A note of caution is in order: we are prone to giving too much weight to the “brilliance” of Russian malign influence operations. Oftentimes they can be quite clumsy and amateurish, but because these tools are used persistently and they penetrate all available means of influence that are not well understood by the target, they appear overwhelming in nature both to the U.S. government and the American people. This is because we face two key challenges in this fight. First, the U.S. government is structurally designed to fight terrorism and not domestic malign influence campaigns. Second, as the American people lose faith and confidence in their democratic leaders and institutions and become more politically divided, the Kremlin's clumsy efforts can achieve a level of success even they could not have imagined.

Therefore, the true challenge lies in understanding the persistent and penetrating nature of the Kremlin's efforts to render a democracy so helpless that it cannot defend its own sovereignty or national interests. Like the U.S. government, we in the think-tank community struggle to grasp the totality of the challenge. International research in this space tends to home in on one or two elements of NGW, typically its most pressing and visible manifestations: disinformation, illicit finance, corruption, and election interference. Our research at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for the past four years, in collaboration with our European partners at the Center for the Study of Democracy—the two *Kremlin Playbook* volumes—has focused on the tactics of Russia's malign economic influence in Europe, with special attention to the use of corruption and illicit finance to alter a country's political orientation. My fellow witnesses have done great work in the disinformation space. We can put the pieces together after the fact, but struggle to preemptively understand the challenge. And this is in part why the Kremlin has been so effective.

The American People Must Understand We are at War

The average American does not know that we are in a daily battle to preserve and protect the integrity of our democracy. We take many things for granted, particularly the health of our democratic system and the national security requirement for bipartisanship on significant international issues. If the American people understood that we are facing a new kind of war, a greater sense of patriotism and duty about what is at stake would be awakened. Similarly, when the United States entered the Second World War, millions of citizen soldiers had to be made aware of what was at stake and who the enemy was. To help these citizen soldiers, the U.S. government produced information pamphlets and slogans with detailed instructions to all those who served. Perhaps the slogan with the most popular resonance was “loose lips sink ships,” which summarized the following written instructions:

“THINK! Where does the enemy get his information—information that can put you, and has put your comrades, adrift on an open sea; information that has lost battles and can lose more, unless you personally, vigilantly, perform your duty in SAFEGUARDING MILITARY INFORMATION?”

I recommend we modernize the old “loose lips sink ships” to fit 21st century threats: “If the facts are not complete, delete!” Or: “Truth and trust make America strong; lies and fear are just plain wrong!”

Can you imagine if every social media platform today were required to have the following disclaimer on every one of its posts as an update to the World War II instruction: “THINK!: What is the origin of the information you have just received? Is it true? Don’t share it if you can’t prove it!”

Although this sounds ridiculous, a regain in patriotism and awareness is urgently needed to combat Russian malign influence alongside an increase in trust, transparency, and accountability from the government.

The Battle for the Integrity of the American Mind

In February of this year, an advisor to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Vladimir Surkov, succinctly summarized the nature of the challenge before us. It bears repeating:

“Foreign politicians talk about Russia’s interference in elections and referendums around the world. In fact, the matter is even more serious: Russia interferes in your brains, we change your conscience, and there is nothing you can do about it.”¹

¹ Cristina Maza, “Vladimir Putin’s Adviser Tells Americans: ‘Russia Interferes in Your Brains, We Change Your Conscience’,” *Newsweek*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-president-vladimir-putin-election-americans-1327793>.

Russian malign influence is designed to alter how we think about ourselves and our democracy and to deepen our distrust. It seeks to touch and shape every aspect of our lives—what we read, our personal preferences—and to make us doubt what we believe in. It is also designed to make us very angry at one another. Ultimately, this interference in our brains will result in the American people losing faith in the country’s founding ideals and in our unique 243-year experiment in democracy. If this attack is successful, we will simply resign ourselves to the idea that we are no different from Russia; in other words, that we are morally equivalent, which makes it much easier to find accommodation with the Kremlin (which in reality means the United States will harm its own national security interests to accommodate the Kremlin’s interests).

It bears repeating that Russia is not the original cause of American doubts, fears, and uncertainties about ourselves and our democracy. But it expertly identifies these feelings, amplifies fear and division, and fully exploits distrust. If Americans are unified and confident, the Kremlin’s strategy lands on fallow ground. However, if we are divided and fearful, if we distrust our institutions and leaders, Russian malign influence can grow like an invasive species. And in our current frame of mind, we have been aiding and abetting the spread of this species.

In other words, we can talk about Russian tools and tactics all day long, but we simply lose valuable time that could be spent strengthening our institutions and restoring confidence in our democracy.

The United States’ Weaknesses are Russia’s Strengths

There is such great irony to the “success” of Russian malign influence in the United States and Europe today. U.S. military and economic strengths are unmatched globally and Europe has great economic power, while Russia’s economic and demographic picture is grim and will significantly worsen without substantial political and economic reform. Yet, America’s and Europe’s societal weaknesses and divisions are profound today.

The Kremlin’s ultimate success in the 2016 U.S. presidential election can be attributed to these weaknesses, which Russia was able to exploit:

- 1) We did not sufficiently protect our election infrastructure because we did not anticipate Russia would take these steps; our national security apparatus is configured to fight terrorism, not malign influence; partisan divisions prevented a unified message to the American people; and the level of distrust between the state and federal level did not allow us to anticipate and proactively address the problem;
- 2) Presidential campaigns did not take proactive measures to enhance the cyber-protection of their networks;
- 3) Tragically, one presidential campaign’s staff did not believe it was wrong to accept illegally-obtained material from a foreign adversary (here is where a warning “THINK!

“Where did the enemy get their information?” would have been useful had there been sufficient patriotism on hand).

Important and hard lessons have been learned from 2016 and incorporated in the defense of the 2018 midterm elections; unfortunately, Russian malign tactics have evolved as they persistently probe weaknesses and exploit tactical opportunities. We are fighting the last battle and not fully anticipating or preparing for the coming one, offering excuses rather than addressing national vulnerabilities.

Preparing for the Coming Battle

As the Kremlin amplifies our doubts and fears about our democracy and our world, it will increasingly seek out U.S. voices and organizations to disseminate Russian malign disinformation with messages targeting U.S. communities that are vulnerable to division (which may look very similar to domestic election campaign messages). These will likely be accompanied by hard-to-refute ‘deep fake’ audio, video, and image files. The Director of National Intelligence and the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation have already warned this Congress about the use of deep fake material that will be used to sow seeds of doubt through American outlets and social media.²

To better prepare for the challenge, I would like to highlight two specific areas in which I am particularly concerned U.S. citizens and organizations, wittingly or unwittingly, will come under increasing threat of Russian malign influence: (1) faith-based and ultra conservative organizations; and (2) opaque financial support for key U.S. influencers.

Vladimir Putin, True Defender of Tradition and Conservative Ideas. Since the collapse of its Communist identity, the Kremlin has adroitly crafted a compelling ideological narrative to mask its kleptocratic authoritarianism and to ensure that no one mistakes the country for “just another regional power” with nuclear weapons. Mixing pre-Soviet, Soviet, and Orthodox ideologies that weave together nationalism, patriotism, and faith, Vladimir Putin has restored the concept of Russia as a unique neo-Eurasian civilization—one which is neither part of the West or the East, but its own unique civilization. This narrative is intensely anti-Western, anti-individualistic, and a perversion of capitalism. It has been shaped by Russian ultra-nationalist Aleksandr Dugin, who took this faith-based ideology one step further by suggesting that today’s Russia, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, is the Biblical incarnation of the Third Rome or the restoration of the Third Temple in Jerusalem.³ The Kremlin has replaced a “godless” Communist ideology—as it was typically referred to during the Cold War—with a powerful messianic and mystical vision of its domestic and foreign policy.

² Daniel R. Coats, “Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 29, 2019, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/os-dcoats-012919.pdf>.

³ Ulrich Schmid, “The New Third Rome: Readings of a Russian Nationalist Myth,” *Scando-Slavica* 63, no. 2 (2017), 235-238.

In 2014, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church drew a direct line from Saint Prince Vladimir, the leader who brought the Orthodox faith to Russia and Ukraine, to Vladimir Putin. Patriarch Kirill has modernized the tsarist-era slogan “For the Faith, the Tsar and the Fatherland” by fusing into one the Russian Orthodox Church, Vladimir Putin, and the survival of the Russian state. Together, President Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church constitute the true defenders of the Slavic world, of traditionalists who oppose globalization and modernity, and of the faithful of Christendom who are the true conservatives against the liberal, democratic, and individualistic decadence of the United States and Europe. As Patriarch Kirill argued in 2014:

“If they wrap a person with soft power, lure him with the sweet life, contrasting his poorness to wealth, which they possess only because they are different—then someone, especially among the young, may tremble. [...] If such thoughts obsess our people, we will lose Russia. [...] May God save the historical Rus, our brother Slavic nations.”⁴

These dynamics may seem like concerns that are internal to Russia. But it is crucial for us to understand that this idea of defending traditional and conservative values has enormous resonance with many in the United States who may agree that these values, as well as their faith and identity, are “under attack” by modernity and the speed of societal and demographic change. Many Americans may not realize when they are the targets and recipients of Kremlin-produced messages via affinity chat rooms and social media because they share similar views regarding the perceived “decadence” of modern society. Freedom of religion and the separation of church and state dictated by our Constitution are sacrosanct, but we must understand and warn the American people that Russian malign influence will seek to exploit and amplify all societal divisions, including those that relate to faith.

The most egregious example of this interplay is the U.S.-based World Congress of Families and its overt interactions with Aleksandr Dugin and with ultra-nationalist Konstantin Malofeev. Malofeev, a Russian oligarch with close ties to the Kremlin, reportedly sponsors much of the World Congress of Families’ European activities and its interactions with European far-right parties.⁵ The organization’s ties spread across Europe; it supported a petition to organize a referendum in Romania for a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as between a man and a woman, which is a controversial issue in Romania.⁶ One of the organizations that played a central role in the Romanian referendum in 2018, Coalition for Family, is part of a

⁴ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy. Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 228.

⁵ Madalin Necsutu, “Moldova to Host Global Christian Right-Wing Congress,” *Balkan Insight*, January 23, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/23/moldova-to-host-world-congress-of-families-before-elections-01-23-2018/>.

⁶ “Petition in Support of Romania’s Defense of Marriage,” World Congress of Families, May 17, 2008, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080517125923/http://www.worldcongress.org/WCF/wcf.leadership.romania.0804.htm>.

broad network of ultra-conservative activists in the United States and in Russia (including Kremlin-affiliated oligarchs) who have pushed similar referendums across Europe.⁷

The comingling of financial and religious interests is particularly visible between Messrs. Dugin and Malofeev. Dugin is the editorial director of Malofeev's far-right Tsargrad (the Orthodox reference to Constantinople, which evokes Third Rome imagery) TV channel. Malofeev founded Marshall Capital Partners, one of the leading Russian investment groups, and St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, the largest Russian Orthodox charity that provides humanitarian assistance to religious organizations and affinity causes. Malofeev exemplifies the ties between economic influence and religious or societal influence, as Marshall Capital supports the Foundation financially.⁸ Dugin and Malofeev are both under U.S. sanctions for their involvement in the Russian invasion of Crimea and aggression in Eastern Ukraine (Malofeev is also under EU sanctions).⁹

Konstantin Malofeev and the Russian Orthodox Church are frequently cited in our research to explain the role of Russian economic and political influence in Europe. We have observed the use of the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches as effective tools of influence in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro.¹⁰ Prior to Montenegro's accession to NATO, Patriarch Kirill voiced his concerns publicly about NATO membership.¹¹ The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, referred to by some Montenegrin politicians as Montenegro's largest opposition force, also opposed membership and released a statement noting that “[i]t is [its] duty *in the name of the Church* [italics added] that gave birth to Montenegro . . . to say that it is necessary that such a historic decision, like the decision on independence, is made by all citizens in a free referendum, and not simply by pressure from the ruling clique.”¹² Such statements seek to worsen internal divisions, erode confidence in leaders and democratic institutions, and demonstrate that “decadent” Western democracy and EU and NATO membership are incompatible with Slavic identity and the Orthodox faith. The comingling of identity and religion resonates powerfully in all societies.

Does Democracy Have a Price? The spread of Russian malign influence is also made possible by corruption, illicit financing, and the weakness of Western financial institutions and the industries that service Russian illicit funds. Greed, corruption, tax evasion, and non-transparent

⁷ Claudia Ciobanu, “‘New World Order’: The ‘Natural Family’ Franchise Goes Global,” *Balkan Insight*, November 21, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/new-world-order-the-natural-family-franchise-goes-global-11-05-2018>.

⁸ Maksym Bugriy, “Hot Issue – Konstantin Malofeev: Fringe Christian Orthodox Financier of the Donbas Separatists,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, August 8, 2014, <https://jamestown.org/program/hot-issue-konstantin-malofeev-fringe-christian-orthodox-financier-of-the-donbas-separatists/>.

⁹ “Russia Sanctions Tracker,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://russiasanctionstracker.csis.org/>.

¹⁰ Heather A. Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Heather A. Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Heather A. Conley and Matthew Melino, “Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and Economics,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 14, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro>.

¹¹ Dusica Tomovic, “Serbian Church Urges Montenegro NATO Referendum,” *Balkan Insight*, January 5, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/05-serbian-church-urges-montenegro-to-hold-referendum-on-nato-01-04-2016/>.

¹² Ibid.

behavior—from foreign agent registration to “golden visas”—are *de rigueur* for the West, which is why Russian state-owned companies as well as security, intelligence, and organized crime networks find it so attractive and easy to exploit: they recognize a familiar environment. In some cases, it is difficult to see where Western financial practices end and Russian kleptocracy begins, which provides another powerful argument for the Kremlin that Western democracies are really no different from Russia. From his experience as a KGB officer, Vladimir Putin firmly believes that every person has a price, particularly influential people, and he is likely surprised by how cheap that price can be.

Western banks such as Danske Bank, Swedbank, and Deutsche Bank have welcomed Russian and post-Soviet funds into their coffers, later to be “laundered” through the international financial system. These banks facilitate capital flight out of Russia, which ultimately further impoverishes the Russian people. Yet these institutions retain their profitability and reputation—for a time, at least. As we have documented in our report *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers*,¹³ corporate service providers, attorneys, accountants, and wealth managers are eager to create shell corporations or subsidiaries to avoid or evade taxes and to encourage more funds to come to their financial centers. Real estate is purchased without transparency into beneficial ownership. These funds and assets are being used to harm our country, yet we act as if this is of no concern. European enforcement in particular seems lax and political patrons (some of whom receive illicit funds themselves) can shield these deals from investigations. These illicit flows jeopardize the integrity of open market economies, creating threats to national security.¹⁴ Furthermore, by abusing our opaque system, corrupt officials and individuals can hide or launder the profits of illegally-obtained funds (sometimes stealing from their own people) and put them beyond the reach of law enforcement and tax authorities; this depletes state revenue and insulates the perpetrators from justice, questioning the effectiveness of the whole system.¹⁵ It is therefore no wonder that confidence in democracy is low; this must stop.

We must place the love of our country ahead of our avarice. We must pass new laws that require greater transparency of ultimate beneficial ownership, such as the one that is being considered before the House Financial Services Committee. We need new financial tools, more enforcement resources, and greater focus by the Justice and Treasury Departments to prosecute complex, multi-jurisdictional money-laundering schemes before they are discovered ten years and 200 billion euros too late. Of course, not all Russian transactions or business dealings are illicit, but as Russian foreign direct investment into our economies grows, so does the Kremlin’s political influence. Greater transparency of financial transactions with law firms, think tanks, public relations firms, and lobbyists must be prioritized. Special attention must be given to the financial support of all organizations that can feed division in our public sphere (even unwittingly; the

¹³ Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook 2*.

¹⁴ Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing – A Global Threat*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2005).

¹⁵ See charting of this nexus between illicit finance and national security in Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook 2*, 17.

most innocuous ones can sometimes be the most harmful) and political campaigns, particularly figures close to presidential candidates.

A War We Must Win

We have a better understanding today than we did in 2016 of the Kremlin's tools and how it uses them to exploit our weaknesses. We need to anticipate and mend those weaknesses in 2020. I have argued that the faith-based community and the lack of transparency in funding influential organizations and voices may be new targets of or loopholes for Russian malign behavior in the United States, as they have been in Europe. We need strong, bipartisan messages on how Russian tactics may target U.S. citizens in the run-up to the 2020 election. We need strong laws that enhance our financial transparency and severely punish those who prioritize their love of money over their love of country. We need to promote unity rather than fuel the divisions that only help the Kremlin fulfill its malign aims. We must stop facilitating their malign activities.

My message to this subcommittee today is: "THINK! Have you personally, vigilantly, performed your duty in SAFEGUARDING THE UNITED STATES FROM RUSSIAN MALIGN INFLUENCE?"