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"Russian Disinformation Attacks on Elections: Lessons from Europe"

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today on the subject of the Kremlin's Disinformation Attacks on Elections: Lessons from Europe.

My most important notion today is, that Kremlin's disinformation operations continue uninterrupted between the elections and are targeted to many other institutions. Obviously, special operations are targeted to influence the outcome of individual elections, too, other politically important developments around Europe are targeted too. Some of those long-term information operations bear fruit in elections, too.

Moreover, I want to point out, that Kremlin's used of disinformation, fake news, trolls and influence agents don't **only** threaten our democracies, or citizens' freedom of speech or the rule of law in general, but pose a **critical threat** to national security in the targeted countries. And the issue is urgent, because the Kremlin targets many countries simultaneously. Often times we even learn about different operations only after they've already hit their target.

Instead, we should be able to pre-empt the impact of the Kremlin's disinformation attacks before they take place in our information space and reach our citizens. Basically, Western governments need unified efforts and a strategy to update their legislations and the implementation of their existing laws and international legal instruments to be able to expose and counter the Kremlin's global-scale hoaxes and crimes in the information space. This needs to be done timely and effectively.

The damage by social media trolls and viral fakes take effect quickly. After launching a fake news article in the St. Petersburg troll factory, it may take only a few seconds to cross international borders in the cyber space and land at the reader's, the targeted person's consciousness.

At the moment to my knowledge there is no international organized body investigating systematically all ongoing Kremlin's disinformation operations and sending warnings about them.

There should be, and quickly. Nowadays, too often the operations are discovered when fixing the consequences of the operations is already impossible. For example, canceling the end result of a presidential election heavily influenced by Russian trolls, hacks, intel operations and propaganda combined.

I'm a journalist specialized in Russia, extremism and information warfare. I have lived in Russia, studied in the most precious state university in Moscow and worked as a journalist in Russia. I have reported about Russia and former Soviet Union region to Finnish media outlets since 2005.

I started to investigate the impact and techniques of the Russian social media trolls in 2014. Next September I will publish a non-fiction investigative book about Kremlin's international and often criminal attacks against those Western individuals, who the Kremlin has labeled as their enemies or at least counterproductive to their own political goals.

This testimony is largely based on my own journalistic research, findings included in my upcoming book, but it also refers to research by other journalists, authors and scholars.

KREMLIN'S INTERNATIONAL DISINFORMATION NETWORK

Russian president Vladimir Putin's regime conducts information-psychological warfare against Russian citizens, and against citizens of foreign countries.

Kremlin's operations on social media have succeeded in influencing part of the population and have the ability to misguide that population's decisionmaking. With digital disinformation Kremlin wants to dictate, which electoral candidates the targeted populations vote and which policies they support. The Kremlin often fuels discussions over divisive topics such as immigration, the economic sanctions against Russia as well as individual countries' memberships in the NATO and the European Union. Kremlin's propaganda often attacks individual European countries and depicts the European Union as weak failed.

Kremlin's security structures have manufactured multi-faceted digital disinformation networks in the cyber space. These networks consist of Russian multilingual troll and propaganda factories and Russian state-controlled media outlets & news agencies, such as Kremlin's international "weapon of information warfare RT, former Russia Today" and Sputnik "news agency". The global network also employs Russian intelligence officers and local proxies, such as paid foreign citizens working - sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly - as professional propaganda spreaders and community builders in both physical surroundings and online, extending Putin's regimes interestest far beyond Russia's state borders.

The network also includes an unknown amount of proxy fake news sites, which pretend as homegrown and local, but receive either workforce, ideological, political or hidden financial support, for example through crypto currencies, from Kremlin-connected and Kremlin-minded actors.

Many operators on the highest ladders of the Kremlin's disinformation network have several different tasks: they run fake citizen organizations abroad, produce articles with fake names to pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets and/or operate as "election observers" in Kremlin-influenced elections, helping to rig the real votes. Some of these operators run "informal pro-Kremlin troll farms" on social media, and get to do it with impunity, as they are not directly connected to any Russian state structures and claim to only "use their freedom of speech".

Yet another layer of the Kremlin's global disinformation network consists of local "useful idiots". Usually these individuals might not even know, that they're serving Kremlin's interestest. They might for example provide hosting services to pro-Kremlin fake news online sites or write filth articles to those same sites completely unaware, that the site is lead by Kremlin's disinfo architects.

Sometimes Kremlin's security services succumb people as their propagandists by promising them support in upcoming elections or "interesting speaking opportunities" in Russian universities. Some of the local, recruited propaganda spreaders might be blackmailed, some bribed.

Yet another layer of Kremlin's disinformation spreaders consists of individuals, who have previous criminal background and take personal pride in participating in anti-social and anti-government fake news operations. Some of the spreaders represent political extremes, and in one way or another benefit from Kremlin's direct or indirect support to their ideology, such as neo-nazism, ultra-nationalism or right-wing populism. Some active spreaders or pro-Kremlin conspiracy theories are eccentrics, who feel drawn to all sorts of conspiracy theories, as long as they offer quick answers to complex global issues.

Kremlin has a variety of different themes and angles which it pushes aggressively and lavishly to its global disinformation network. To name a few themes, it wants to blur for example different audiences' perception concerning Russia's war in Ukraine (according to the Kremlin such war doesn't exist), as well as the well-investigated and proven downing of the flight MH17 by Russian-backed militants in the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine in 2014 (Kremlin denies any involvement).

In addition, Kremlin's disinformation attacks aim at heavily eroding the target populations' trust towards named traditional journalists, individual Western-minded politicians, human rights activists, think-tankers, scholars, diplomats and government officials. Sometimes the Kremlin's plots against named individuals last years, in some cases over a decade.

SOCIAL MEDIA PAID PROPAGANDISTS MANIPULATE REAL PEOPLE

In 2014 I started to investigate the techniques of the then-newly exposed tool of Kremlin's international information warfare, the troll factory St. Petersburg, exposed already in 2013 by courageous independent Russian journalists.

The "trolls" are paid online propagandists who pretend as genuine Russian, American, British, Finnish and other countries' citizens on different social media platforms. Their task is to build social media profiles and use them to infiltrate local communities, and act practically as digital influence agents. The trolls abuse the target population's trust towards strangers in cyber sphere. As personal communication is known as the most influential form of communication, targeted

populations are more prone to believe messages originating from a "Facebook friend" than the message from, for example, an anonymous article published by Russian fake news agency.

On the course of my initial investigations, I specifically wanted to find out, how the aggressive pro-Kremlin social media fake and anonymous troll profiles **influence internationally** in real peoples' ideas, attitudes or possibly behavior. I conducted my investigation through crowdsourcing, with open questions.

With the help of the Finnish internet users, many interviewed online forum moderators and experts, I found out, that already back in 2014-2015 the Russian social media trolls, ultimately fake profiles, used multiple techniques and channels targeted specifically at manipulating international audiences.

Already in 2014 the pro-Kremlin trolls were already systematically spreading propaganda in several different languages, on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, the comment sections of traditional medias in the US, UK and Finland. The social media propagandists conveyed their messages through social media comments, posts, groups, memes and videos, as well as bot armies on Twitter which spit out the same fakes simultaneously.

They also spread the Russian regime-controlled media's fake news stories and falsifications to wider and more international audiences. Me and my colleagues found out in February 2015, that the St. Petersburg troll factory produced political fake news in English, around the clock. In addition, the troll factory security guard slipped important information to us: the factory was indeed a state security structure - an "administrative building", as the guard put it himself.

In addition I learned and reported, that the aggressive, fake and anonymous social media profiles had already impacted and manipulated real people internationally: both regular internet users' ideas, and actions to certain extent. Some of my interviewees told, that they couldn't separate the facts and fiction for example concerning the war in Ukraine, because the internet was full of fake troll stories about the causes and the situation of the Ukrainian war. The digital disinformers had distanced Kremlin's part from the war in Ukraine, accused the European union, US and Nato of waging the war in Ukraine, smeared the European leaders as nazis and fascists - all false claims

similar to the ones spread by Russia's regime throughout international news network. As some of my interviewees had lost the idea over what really happening in Ukraine, the paid online pro-Kremlin propaganda operators had succeeded in manipulating real people.

During my investigation some of my interviewees told me, that they had stopped Russia-related commenting online completely, because the trolls had threatened and name-called them. Thus, the digital disinformation spreaders has managed to silence Finnish citizens and thus removed moderate and critical views from the public sphere.

Thus, by confusing genuine citizens' minds, the trolls had succeeded spinning the public debates as well as suffocated Finnish people's freedom of speech in a manner, that ultimately benefitted the Kremlin. Naturally, part of the interviewees told, that they had not been influenced by social media propaganda. But my investigations and later research by other journalists, researchers and intelligence services have proved, that the Russian trolls have attacked many other populations and continue to do so. Thus, those populations need protection.

CONSEQUENCES OF MY INVESTIGATION

Kremlin's information warfare, the use of trolls, influence agents, bot networks or fake news don't only threaten people's right to receive information and form well-informed decisions based on facts. Kremlin uses social media propaganda is systematically used to agitate real people into hateful actions, by manipulating their feelings of fear and hatred. In Russia disinformation against Ukraine is being used to motivate and mobilize the Russian young men to enlist the armed forces to fight the propagated "Ukrainian fascists". Thus digital disinformation threatens directly the targeted countries' national security, not just individual elections.

The information warfare also poses severe security threats to individual people, such as myself. As soon as I started my troll impact investigations September 2014, I became a still ongoing criminal defamation campaign originating from Russia and later continuing aggressively at the Finnish language pro-Kremlin fake news sites. Recently, I have been smeared by one Russian news agency, a variety of Russian social media operators and by the Russian troll factory's fake news site. In addition, documents allegedly including my name have been hacked from a British think-tank and

spread around in Russian state media and later in Finnish disinformation media, further smearing me. A couple of months ago someone conducted an identity theft and used my name to send sexually harassing post cards, including hints of assassinations to a company based in UK.

According to the Finnish police's threat assessment, I face the threat of impulsive violence, if I'm in the wrong place the wrong time. The physical security threat against myself originates from the hate campaign, through which I'm even today smeared as a Nato and CIA employee, worker of a Western propaganda factory, conducting information warfare against Finland, being a drug dealer, braindamaged, criminal, liar, threat to Finnish national security etc. Unknown people believe these writings and are agitated into hatred against me. Some of them send me death threats. A year ago in my first trial against the main perpetrators, I had to be escorted by the police to the court.

The criminal proceedings are ongoing, and my attempts to seek justice have been revenged in a mafia-like manner, and during the trial I was made target of more threats. The court convictions haven't stopped the character assassination: countless of more suspected illegal social media blogs and comments have been used to smear me after the convictions last October. Some of the harassers follow me on public and post information about my whereabouts to social media. I have been forced to moved away from my home country Finland to escape the "crowdsourced stalking", which the judges depicted as "out-of-control".

According to my book investigations, Kremlin's social media trolls and influence agents carry out similar aggressive attacks in an organized manner against journalists, opposition politicians, diplomats, scholars and anyone, who sheds light to Kremlin's activities - even outside Russia's borders. Often the systematic nature and severity of the campaigns resemble cross-border organized crime.

The attacks against Western journalists and human rights promoters are similar as the ones that have been targeted and conducted inside Russia against Russian individual journalists for almost two decades.

LESSONS LEARNED IN EUROPE

After my initial investigation 2014-2015, many US, independent Russian journalists as well as other international journalists and researchers have uncovered Russian troll and fake news operation around the US and Europe.

According to many different journalists and researchers, Russian trolls have promoted UK's exit from the European union, Catalonia's independence from Spain, fueled violent conflicts in Catalonia by spreading fake images on social media, fueled clashes in France during the Yellow vest protests, spread massive amounts of Russian state media's propaganda of many different European countries, tried attacking France's presidential election 2016 with the help of email hacks, attacked against a UK-based think tank investigating Russian influence and many more.

In Europe pro-Kremlin operators often promote xenophobia and all-out racism, spread conspiracy-theories and hate speech, agitate people into thinking "all asylum seekers are criminals", dehumanize muslims, jews, members of the lgbti communities, promote misogynia, and smear people, who promote liberal, pro-democratic values. In addition, they try to rewrite not just the present world events, also the history on many different comment section online.

One of the most important lessons learned is, that the Kremlin doesn't only attack specific elections, such as the US presidential elections 2016. It attacks all the time, between, before, after and during elections in many countries and language areas. If the Kremlin's information warfare architects cannot get the result they desires the most, at least it will try and destroy people's trust in the traditional journalistic media, decent politicians, the integrity of the elections and government officials. Kremlin conducts a variety of ongoing operations and projects internationally, some of them more successfully than the others.

HOW TO COUNTER THIS?

Kremlin will continue its operations as long as it is let to continue. That's why combined international effort is required to counter the inethical and partly illegal meddling.

US-based global companies Facebook, Twitter and YouTube enable Russia's state-sponsored propaganda spreading. After the Russian trolls attacked the US presidential elections, the

platforms were demanded to take action and they introduced new policies in removing hateful and fake content. But they're still not doing nearly enough.

Still today, many citizens don't know, that the "information" on their Facebook or Twitter feed can be implanted by Russia's security structures. Facebook and Twitter are still nowhere near transparent enough concerning the Russian activities, which they should be.

More importantly, the users of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are not safe and secured, even though as the customers and users of the platforms they are entitled to protection. Many of the users of these platforms are children browsing the platforms' content without any parental advisory. Thus, the lawmakers need to quickly impose stricter guidelines and sanctions. The European Commission has already forced the social media companies to remove the hate speech in 24 hours after their posting, but in some language areas they're still not removed - even though it's illegal.

The social media companies' argumentation defending their inactivity in removing hateful troll content is in line with the Kremlin's as well as many far-right activists': "taking down hate speech would breach citizen's freedom of speech". The pro-Kremlin hate agitators used the argumentation in Helsinki district court a year ago, but the judges took a clear standing: hateful writings simply aren't protected by freedom of speech. In addition, anonymous fake profiles don't have freedom of speech or any other human rights.

Both Europe and the US are still lacking the robust government actions such as investigations and counter-intelligence into Russian information warfare activities. The Mueller investigations here in the US are still the most comprehensible and in-depth investigation into the combined intelligence and troll factory operations. Similar investigations should be done internationally, in co-operation with international and national law enforcement bodies.

From my point of view as a journalist, more awareness raising and public information about the threats of Kremlin's disinformation and their impact in real people is needed. In practice that means supporting investigative journalists, researchers and other organizations bringing the operations to daylight.

FINALLY

Russian security services have planned and planted international fake information and fake news campaigns for decades. For the Russian security structures fake information campaigns are a cheap, but efficient method to wage war against the West. The modern social media sphere magnifies those campaigns' effect and impact.

One former Putin's regime's insider and Putin's former economical advisor once told me, that the Kremlin has political reasons to conduct its information warfare, for example seeking acceptance to its warfare in Ukraine. But there's another reason, Andrei Illarionov told: Russia wants to show might, just like a village bandit.

It cannot be stressed enough, that the first victims of Vladimir Putin's regime have been the ordinary Russians. Their minds are taken hostage by the government, who has succumbed the independent journalistic medias as the regime's megaphone. The apathy and disillusionment in Russia are further fed by politicized justice system, systematic corruption and the impunity of the killings of critical journalists, human right activists and opposition figures.

Us lucky foreigners still have many of the freedoms that have already been robbed from the Russian people. But Putin's regime's global machine of information warfare extends abroad and will suffocate those freedoms, if it's not strictly confronted by the same Western democratic governments - the same ones, which Kremlin so eagerly would like to see fail.

While finding ways to protect ourselves, we should find the ways to protect the Russian citizens, too.