

Russian Interference in the 2016 United States Presidential Election

Kate Fisher

TC 660H

Plan II Honors Program

The University of Texas at Austin

May 15, 2019

---

George Christian, Ph.D.

Department of English

Supervising Professor

---

Debra Hansen, Ph.D.

Department of Integrative Biology

Second Reader

## ABSTRACT

Author: Kate Fisher

Title: Russian Interference in the 2016 United States Presidential Election

Supervising Professor: George Christian, Ph.D.

The purpose of this thesis is to address how and why Russia interfered in the United States 2016 presidential election, and to identify a larger pattern of behavior that helps explain this action. Though Russia's cyberattack defies precedent with regard to Russia-US geopolitical relations, it comes as the latest iteration of Russian cyberwarfare and intelligence warfare on its adversaries. In particular, Russia's interference in US politics grew out of the tactics and networks developed in "Cyber War I," waged by Russia on Estonia in 2007, and from Russia's interference in Ukrainian political systems since 2014. To accomplish its ends, Russia perpetrated cyberattacks on state election systems and national industry infrastructure, disseminated foreign and domestic propaganda campaigns, hacked the computer systems of political networks, and attempted to recruit American citizens as assets, particularly key members of the Trump campaign team.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am sincerely grateful to Dr. George Christian and Dr. Debra Hansen for their guidance and support.

Also, I would like to convey my appreciation and love for Victoria Szukalski and Reghan Conrey.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CYBER WAR I- ESTONIA, 2007</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>CYBER WAR LABORATORY- UKRAINE, 2014-2019</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>CYBER WAR ON AN ELECTION SYSTEM- UNITED STATES, 2016</b>	<b>20</b>
RUSSIAN INFILTRATION OF THE STATE ELECTION SYSTEMS	20
THE HACKING OF CRITICAL INDUSTRY INFRASTRUCTURE	23
THE SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN	26
<i>The Propaganda Machine</i>	26
<i>The Timeline</i>	34
THE RUSSIAN MEDIA NETWORK	35
GRAPPLING WITH NEW MEDIA	37
<i>Facebook and Cambridge Analytica</i>	39
<i>On the Larger Role of Social Media</i>	42
HACKING AND TIMED RELEASES OF DAMNING INFORMATION	45
<i>Using What Did Exist- Emails</i>	45
<i>Using What Did Not Exist- The Loretta Lynch Scandal</i>	46
RECRUITING THE TRUMP CAMPAIGN	55
<b>ASSESSING MOTIVES</b>	<b>60</b>
THE US INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT OF THE INFLUENCE CAMPAIGN	60
DRIVING FORCES	60
FOUNDATIONS OF GEOPOLITICS: ONE STRATEGY FOR GLOBAL DOMINATION	62
THE TRACE EVIDENCE OF PUTIN’S WORLDVIEW	67
<i>Putin’s Vendetta for Clinton</i>	72
<i>Putin’s Scheme for After the Election</i>	74
<i>Putin’s Preference for Trump</i>	76
	4

<i>Putin's Plan for Democracy</i>	78
PROMOTING FAR-RIGHT CANDIDATES	79
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>80</b>

“How do you respond to the greatest geostrategic catastrophe of the 20th century, which was the collapse of the Soviet Union? You try to preempt the collapse of the western system in the 21st century. And if you can’t destroy these structures militarily, you will destroy them from within.”

-Heather Conley, author of *Kremlin Playbook*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In 1960, a Civic Culture study by Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba examined the social distance between Republican/Conservative parties and Democratic/Labor parties in five nations, including the United States. Almond and Verba specifically analyzed inter-party marriage, asking respondents if they would feel pleased, displeased, or no difference if their son or daughter married a supporter of the opposite political party. At the time in the US, just 4 percent of Democrats and 5 percent of Republicans responded that they would feel displeased at their child marrying a member of the other major political party.<sup>2</sup> Fifty years later, polling firm YouGov repeated the study, asking respondents if they would feel not at all upset, somewhat upset, or very upset at the prospect of their child marrying a supporter from the opposite political party. In 2010, 49 percent of Republicans responded that they would feel upset to very upset, as well as 33 percent of Democrats.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Conley, Heather. *Active Measures*. Directed by Jack Bryan, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Almond, Gabriel A., and Sydney Verba. 1960. *Civic Culture Study, 1959-1960* [Computer file]. ICPSR07201-v2. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2009-02-12.

<sup>3</sup> Abramowitz, Alan. 2010. *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

The ever-increasing hyper-partisan animosity that currently embroils the United States did not come about by accident. We find ourselves living in the first moments of a technological era, where every facet of the human experience -society, politics, and economics- function under a completely new set of conditions. In this era, public attention and sentiment trade like a commodity. Accordingly, social media and the news industry act as one, a hybrid social-news media, operating on behalf of honest interpretations of fact and paid interests alike. Advances in media and technology elevate advertisement to operate, basically, with high efficiency and effectiveness. This comes with the cost of prefabricating the infrastructure for malignant, irresponsible, or calamitous influences to successfully accomplish rapid grand-scale change in any direction. The expedient online highways and bridges that connect advertisers to prospective customers are also open for malignant influences to use to corrupt vulnerable people.

The sociopolitical environment in the US that has so palpably changed, with marked increases in disillusionment towards institutions like the FBI and the White House, mistrust amongst communities, anger to the point of hostility towards political adversaries, and a newfound sense of chaos and impending doom, did not transform overnight, or by accident. There are industries that seek to profit off the attention garnered by social outrage. And there are foreign institutions intent upon conducting war not by traditional boots-on-the-ground combat, seeking to take down the United States by hurting its formidable military, rather via an insidious campaign of intelligence warfare, through which adversaries seek to achieve the destruction of the United States by breaking its spirit, rendering it soulless and impotent.

There is a reason why some feel that the challenges facing the present have been felt so dire and that the country has never been so divided. Every time an American citizen feels less proud of his or her country, less united with his or her countrymen, and thus less willing to take a

stand for them, Russian President Vladimir Putin has won a little more, and accomplished his agenda. Americans do face problems of our own making, like an ineffective Congress and fraught international relations; however, these obstacles are nothing new, and are relatively less imposing threats than those looming in the buildup to World War II, or throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is not so much a concern about the external viability of the United States, but a pervasive doubt about the intrinsic value of the United States as a people, set of institutions, and promise of a better future.

FBI Special Agent Clint Watts outlined the five objectives of Russian “Active Measures,” or the Soviet-era tactics for political warfare, modernized under Putin as part of a Russian effort “to win the second Cold War.”<sup>4</sup> According to Watts,

“Russian Active Measures hope to topple democracies through the pursuit of five complementary objectives: undermine citizen confidence in democratic governance, foment and exacerbate divisive political fractures, erode trust between citizens and elected officials and democratic institutions, popularize Russian policy agendas within foreign populations, and create general distrust or confusion over information sources by blurring the lines between fact and fiction.”<sup>5</sup>

What is certainly different about this moment in history is that our adversary, Russia, devised for the United States to fall ill with despondency and faithlessness. The United States suffers from the confusing, insidious acts of information warfare waged by Russia on our national integrity, designed to destroy us from within, weakening us by turning citizen against citizen to the point of our own undoing. Russian interference in the United States election system

---

<sup>4</sup> Watts, Clint. “Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns” (Congressional Testimony to US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, May 30, 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Watts, Clint. “Disinformation”



and infiltration of its social-news media requires an immediate effort to reform the nation's information-technology infrastructure and fortify the existing protections against cyberattacks.

In 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin activated the final steps of a years-long campaign aimed at the US election process. According to the FBI, CIA, and NSA, Russia sought to tarnish public faith in the US democratic system, aid the campaign of Donald Trump, present him as a more favorable candidate than his opponent Hillary Clinton, malign Clinton, diminish her presidential campaign, and later to set the stage for damaging her transition into the presidency when she became the clear frontrunner in the presidential race.<sup>6</sup>

The tools Russia used to accomplish these ends include an amalgam of covert intelligence operations, like online cyberattacks, as well as overt influence operations conducted by arms of the Russian Government, state-funded media programs like "RT" or Russian Television, third-party firms and agencies, and "troll farms" comprised of paid online influencers.<sup>7</sup> This operation followed in the tradition of Russia's predecessor, the USSR, which also conducted covert intelligence operations and overt influence operations to affect US elections. However, Russia's modern influence campaign stands out for its direct and unabashed maneuvers, the success it achieved (which even surpassed the expectations of its leading authority, Putin), and the unpreparedness of American officials and organizations to combat this threat.

In the 2016 United States Presidential Election, the Russian government conducted a grand-scale attack through cyber-warfare resulting what journalist Craig Unger described as "the biggest intelligence breach in the history of the world."<sup>8</sup> Though the Russian interference

---

<sup>6</sup> Intelligence Community Assessment: *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*, 6 January 2017. P.7. (NOTE: all page numbers referenced are from the Unclassified ICA)

<sup>7</sup> Intelligence Community Assessment: *Assessing*. P. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Unger, Craig. "Active Measures." Directed by Jack Bryan, 2018

campaign used to attack the US political system in 2016 represented an unprecedented act of aggression by Russia towards the US, it also served as just the latest iteration of Russia calling on its intricate IT network and “cybermilitia” to conduct intelligence warfare and cyberwarfare on enemies of the state. Russia’s cyber-network carried out attacks on foreign election systems and IT networks beginning in Estonia in 2007, Lithuania and Georgia in 2008, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in 2009, Ukraine in 2014, France, Germany, and the Netherlands in 2015, Finland and the United Kingdom (UK) in 2016, and others.<sup>9</sup>

Putin ordered the campaign for Russia to interfere in the 2016 US Presidential Election.<sup>10</sup> Russia’s interference had a multi-faceted strategy, including a news-and-social media campaign involving “troll armies” that disseminated propaganda, disinformation, and sought to increase divisiveness. The interference involved attempts to recruit American citizens as assets to further accomplish Russia’s agenda in the US. The interference also included a hacking operation to break into the computer systems of Democrat and Republican organizations and to release the stolen information in order to damage the campaign of Hillary Clinton and support the campaign of Donald Trump. It incorporated aggressive attempts to infiltrate 39 states’ computerized election systems, with Russian-affiliated hackers successfully stealing certain state voter information.<sup>11</sup> In addition to its attempts to recruit Americans as assets, Russia also persistently attempted to recruit members of the Trump campaign to help accomplish Russia’s agenda.

Lastly, Russia infiltrated the computer networks of highly critical US industry infrastructure, attempting to plant malware on areas of the US power grid, certain US nuclear generators, and in parts of other sectors key to daily life in the US. This played into the larger

---

<sup>9</sup> Swalwell, Eric. “Russia: Not Our Friend” *Issues – Committee on Intelligence*

<sup>10</sup> Intelligence Community Assessment: *Assessing*. P. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Riley, Michael and Jordan Robertson. “Russian Hacks on U.S. Voting System Wider Than Previously Known” *Bloomberg Cybersecurity*. June 13, 2017

strategy of Russia manufacturing events to substantiate the theories it fostered in Americans' minds about the ineptitude of the government, the dividedness of the populace, and the chaos in the world. Russia manipulated the election process with the certainty of having orchestrated some of the key events that unfolded in the final days of the election cycle, and the possibility of having swayed the final election results.

### **CYBER WAR I- ESTONIA, 2007**

The first documented instance of cyber-warfare technologies being applied on another country actually occurred between Russian Intelligence and the United States in the 1990's. In an effort mostly to redirect the negative coverage surrounding the War in Chechnya, ex-senior Russian Intelligence officer Sergei Tretyakov described, after defecting to the United States, having ordered officers to utilize the anonymity of computers operating in a New York Public Library to post or send out Russian propaganda.<sup>12</sup> Russia demonstrated its interest in cyberattacks in the 1990's, and subsequently expanded its online network of both government-affiliated and freelance hackers and trolls into a cyberarmy through the early 2000's. Beginning in Estonia in 2007, Russia set the cyberarmy loose, and began a systematic string of attacks using many of the same hacking strategies and computer networks. Essentially, Russia began deploying its cyberarmy on its rivals in 2007, and for the following decade Russia honed this cyberarmy into a powerful, cohesive unit.

Over the spring of 2007, tensions worsened between Russia and its tech-savvy neighbor, Estonia. Though small, at the time Estonia possessed a state-of-the-art Information Technology

---

<sup>12</sup> Pete Earley, "Comrade J: The Untold Secrets of Russia's Master Spy in America After the End of the Cold War", Penguin Books, 2007, ISBN 978-0-399-15439-3, pages 194-195

(IT) network, a system integrated in many aspects of daily life, earning it the moniker of “Estonia.” Estonians could access free Wi-Fi in most areas of the country.<sup>13</sup> Even in 2007, Estonia’s banking, business, education, government, entertainment, and other industries deeply integrated their functioning with Estonia’s IT network, relying heavily on it for day-to-day tasks. By 2007, Estonia used online banking to conduct 97% of all its banking transactions.<sup>14</sup> Estonia was the first country to ever hold an online election, beginning a pilot program of holding municipal elections in 2005, the success of which led to Estonia’s electronic-vote parliamentary election on March 4, 2007.<sup>15</sup>

Many Estonians harbored resentment over the half century of Soviet occupation spanning from the end of World War II to 1991. As Estonia’s relationship with Russia deteriorated, Estonian officials considered moving “The Unknown Soldier” bronze memorial, a downtown monument and grave-site for fallen Soviet soldiers erected in 1947 by Soviets to pay tribute to the Soviet Union’s “liberation” of Estonia. Anti-Estonian, mostly ethnically Russian protesters used the monument to rally around, and on the morning of April 26, 2007, these protesters left the monument to riot in the Estonian capital of Tallinn.<sup>16</sup> That night, hackers began a cyberattack on Estonia’s IT network. The Estonian government moved the memorial and graves the following morning, which only spurred on unprecedented rioting and street violence in the notoriously pacifistic country for two more days. In Moscow, Russian activist groups took over the Estonian embassy. Meanwhile, chaos descended over Estonia’s IT network.

---

<sup>13</sup> Davis, Joshua. “Hackers Take Down The Most Wired Country in Europe” *Wired Business*. August 21, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Kash, Wyatt. “Lessons from the Cyberattacks on Estonia” *Government and computer news Journal, Volume 27, Issue 14*. June 16, 2008. P. 26.

<sup>15</sup> Sheeter, Laura. “Estonia forges ahead with e-vote” *BBC News, Tallinn*. October 14, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, Joshua. “Hackers”

According to Lauri Almann, Estonia's permanent Undersecretary of Defense, the hackers launched a cyberattack on Estonia as part of the escalation of tensions surrounding the monument.<sup>17</sup> Almann described the cyberattack as having two parts, the first of which involved "hacktivists," or private citizens who use online movements to achieve some end. Hacktivists on Russian-language websites trolled Estonia and incited other "patriots" to rally against "F--cking Estonian Fascists."<sup>18</sup> The first phase focused most on an intelligence campaign to disseminate propaganda to turn the hearts and minds within Estonia. Astonishingly, hackers breached the website of Estonia's political party in power and posted a counterfeit letter of apology for moving the monument. The letter was addressed from the Prime Minister of Estonia, Andrus Ansip, to the Government of the Russian Federation and the Russians. Almann described this phase as "relatively primitive and simple," where hacktivists were instructed by the pro-Russian coordinators to attack Estonian websites, primarily Estonian government sites.<sup>19</sup> Almann noted a lack of manpower and energy behind this phase of the attack. That being said, national polls conducted at the time showed that Russians found Estonia, a country with a population of 1.3 million inhabitants at the time, to be Russia's main threat to its security, providing some insight about how Russian media likely portrayed the conflict from its side.<sup>20</sup>

The second phase, however, vaulted the cyberattacks on Estonia to become "the first war in cyberspace."<sup>21</sup> This attack came from "botnets," or software that hijacks "zombie" computers unbeknownst to their owners, linking the computers to each other and using their combined

---

<sup>17</sup>Terlikowski, Marcin. "Cyberattacks on Estonia. Implications for International and Polish Security" *The Polish quarterly journal of international affairs*. v.16, i.3, 2007, P. 68-87.

<sup>18</sup>Ruus, Kertu. "Cyber War I: Estonia Attacked from Russia" *The European Institute*. European Affairs. v.9, i.1-2, Winter/Spring 2008

<sup>19</sup>Kash, Wyatt. "Lessons"

<sup>20</sup>Ruus, Kertu. "Cyber War I"

<sup>21</sup> Mite, Valentinas. "Estonia: Attacks Seen as First Case of 'Cyberwar' *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*. Russia. May 30, 2007

power to barrage a target system, overwhelming it to the point of incapacitation. According to Almann, “the notion of a personal computer is really counterintuitive. There is no such thing as a personal computer. Everyone's computer can be used to attack another country.”<sup>22</sup> This expensive and intricate attack originated from more than 75 jurisdictions and more than 1 million computers internationally. It arrived in waves, disrupting Estonians’ access to news sites and media outlets, government communications, and commercial banks. To supplement other sources of funding, cyber attackers created a PayPal account to help fundraise to hire additional botnets. Computers from Egypt and Peru overwhelmed Estonian websites, leaving no way to discern and disarm the bots and zombies. This phase required sophistication, financial support and intellectual resources. Estonian government officials could not even put out press releases on the attack, as the attack compromised their government sites.

In response to the cyberattack in 2007, Almann outlined several strategies Estonia undertook to bolster its defenses for subsequent cyberthreats. These included: learn to conceal real throughput capacity, fortify the cyber emergency rapid-response team, plan ahead with the EU and NATO so they could properly assist Estonia in the event of a cyberattack, create cooperative agreements within appropriate industries (like banking or telecommunication) to come into play in the event of a cyber-emergency, create cooperative agreements between Estonia’s private sector and the EU and NATO to also come into play in the event of a cyber-emergency, craft a national cyber-defense strategy to identify the most essential and most vulnerable aspects of that infrastructure, strengthen the underlying Internet in Estonia, increase connections between Estonia’s web and the global web, enhance the government e-services facility called X-Road, and invest in the infrastructure designed to identify and alert officials to

---

<sup>22</sup>Kash, Wyatt. “Lessons”

cyberattacks underway. Estonia's thorough restructuring of its computer systems in response to its cyberattacks provides an example of the overhaul required in many other countries with integrated IT systems.

To date, experts cannot definitively identify the coordinators of the attack. Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet issued a statement during the cyberattack that assaults "have been made from IP addresses of concrete computers and individuals from Russian government organs including the administration of the President of the Russian Federation."<sup>23</sup> However, the Kremlin pointed out that those computers could have been "zombie" computers, hijacked by activists without their knowledge. Though such a grand-scale assault likely required the direction of a top Kremlin official or the head of a large corporation, Russia has plausible deniability and thus has not been charged with the attack. That being said, by 2007, a pro-Russian cybermilitia possessed the skills, computer power, unitability, numbers, and willingness to barrage a perceived enemy to Russia with advanced cyberwarfare for three weeks.

The Estonian government quickly and effectively neutralized the second phase threat. Behind closed doors, Estonia's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) worked furiously for weeks, but it restored functioning to most portals within a matter of hours or days. Former police officer and director of CERT, Hillar Aareleid, stated that in less than a week after the cyberattacks began, "most ordinary people noticed nothing."<sup>24</sup> Many governments fortified their online protections in the wake of this incident, including the Bush administration.<sup>25</sup> NATO and the EU adapted their laws and protocols for future cyberattacks, increasing the likelihood of

---

<sup>23</sup> Ruus, Kertu. "Cyber War I" *The European Institute*. Winter/Spring 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> "Cyber Attacks: An Unprecedented Threat to U.S. National Security" Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats. 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, March 21, 2013, Serial No. 113-8.

sanctions and diplomatic blowback if perpetrators slip up and leave a trace of the origin of the cyberattack.

Whether or not the Russian government ordered these attacks outright or indirectly, Russia witnessed the success of this cyberarmy's operation, the difficulty NATO and the EU had with finding a ringleader and knowing how to respond diplomatically to cyberwarfare, and the vulnerability of other countries' cyberdefenses. This pro-Russian cybermilitia became more skilled and forceful over the years, and repeatedly came to the aid of the Russian government to subdue Russia's greatest enemies. These efforts include subduing domestic threats within Russia, like rebel forces within Chechnya.<sup>26</sup> They also include information warfare committed by the pro-Russian cybermilitia on Georgia during the Russo-Georgian War in 2008,<sup>27</sup> on Kyrgyzstan in 2009, on Ukraine during the Russian invasion of Ukrainian Crimea in 2014,<sup>28</sup> on France during the run-up to the French election in 2015, on Britain in an effort to sway the 2015 Brexit referendum, and on the US in an effort to sway the 2016 US Presidential Election.<sup>29</sup> The latter represents a continuation of a series of mounting aggressions from which the perpetrators have not been deterred.

## **CYBER WAR LABORATORY- UKRAINE, 2014-2019**

---

<sup>26</sup> Ruus, Kertu. "Cyber War I"

<sup>27</sup> Cornell, Svante. "Georgia feels Russia's heavy hand" *The Guardian. Opinion*. June 17, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Geers (Ed.), *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, NATO CCD COE Publications, Tallinn 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Brattberg, Erik & Tim Maurer. (2018). "Russian Election Interference – Europe's Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.; Burgess, Matt. (2017, November 10).



Tensions between Ukraine and Russia increased in the early 2000's. The 2004 presidential election in Ukraine went to Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Kremlin candidate, in an election later ruled unconstitutional and rigged by the Ukrainian Supreme Court.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, according to Greenberg, "Ukrainian crowds in orange scarves flooded the streets to protest Moscow's rigging of the country's elections; that year, Russian agents allegedly went so far as to poison the surging pro-Western presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko."<sup>31</sup> The so-called Orange Revolution peacefully transferred power from the pro-Russian Yanukovich to pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko for two years. The 2008 financial crisis that spread through much of the world drastically impacted Ukraine, and by 2010 Yanukovich became president once again.<sup>32</sup> Notorious lobbyist Paul Manafort helped Yanukovich makeover his image for this 2010 election against the incumbent Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, and Manafort worked for Yanukovich when he led the campaign to "lock her up," imprisoning his predecessor and nemesis Yulia Tymoshenko for reasons later considered "politically motivated."<sup>33</sup> Then-candidate Donald Trump famously repeated this political rallying cry about his rival, Hillary Clinton, in the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election.

Yanukovich made a campaign promise important to his subsequent 2014 victory to continue the process of integrating Ukraine with the EU.<sup>34</sup> Many Ukrainians hoped to reduce Russia's controls on Ukraine, and saw admission into the EU and NATO as a way to improve

---

<sup>30</sup> "The Supreme Court findings" (in Ukrainian). Supreme Court of Ukraine. 3 December 2004. Retrieved 7 July 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Greenberg, Andy. "How An Entire Nation Became Russia's Test Lab for Cyberwar" *Wired. Security*. June 20, 2017

<sup>32</sup> "Ukraine crisis: Timeline". BBC News. 13 November 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Higgins, Andrew and Andrew E. Kramer. "Archival Is Freed as Ukrainian Leader Flees" *The New York Times*. February 22, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Higgins; Andrew E. Kramer; Steven Erlanger (23 February 2014). "As His Fortunes Fell in Ukraine, a President Clung to Illusions". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 12 March 2015.

standards in Ukraine and align Ukraine with the West. However, in a surprise move, Yanukovich instead chose to sign a treaty with Russia, deepening the ties between the two countries economically and politically. Yanukovich deployed riot police that night to disperse the crowds of students who had gathered in Ukraine's Maidan Square, having planned to celebrate the night Ukraine would finally become part of Europe.<sup>35</sup>

The riot police's brutality towards peaceful protesters and students galvanized the Euromaidan protests, which roiled in Ukraine through late 2013 and early 2014, gradually escalating into the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution. The Ukrainian protesters eventually accomplished their goal of ousting Yanukovich, who fled Ukraine with the help of Russian soldiers in the middle of the night for refuge, arriving in Russia during the early morning hours of Saturday, February 22, 2014.<sup>36</sup> However, Putin took advantage of Ukraine's moment of vulnerability and national fatigue. Putin later described in a documentary for Russian television how he issued the order at 7 a.m. on February 23, 2014 for Russian commanders to seize Ukrainian territory of Crimea.<sup>37</sup> After Russians annexed Crimea, Russian-backed dissidents in east Ukraine took control of the territories Donetsk and Luhansk, together called Donbass. Though Russia repeatedly denied having invaded the territory, Russian paramilitaries were estimated to comprise between 15-80% of the fighters in Donbass.<sup>38</sup> The War in Donbass is currently ongoing.

---

<sup>35</sup> "Ukrainian police have been provided with combat weapons – interior minister". *Kyiv Post*. Archived from the original on 21 February 2014. Retrieved 21 February 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Higgins, Andrew and Andrew E. Kramer. "Ukraine Leader Was Defeated Even Before He Was Ousted" *The New York Times*. Jan. 3, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> "Putin reveals secrets of Russia's Crimea takeover plot" *BBC Europe*. 9 March 2015.

<sup>38</sup> "Pushing locals aside, Russians take top rebel posts in east Ukraine". Reuters. 27 July 2014. Archived from the original on 28 July 2014. Retrieved 27 July 2014.

According to Wired reporter Greenberg, in its “hybrid war” of traditional physical war and cyberwar on Ukraine, Russia aims “to humiliate the Ukrainian government, to destabilize society, to give a general impression that things are going badly in Ukraine, to prevent foreign investment in Ukraine.”<sup>39</sup> All this, says Greenberg, works in concert to sow a general sense of chaos. Greenberg relays that “[Ukrainians] believe Russia is trying to create a perception of a failed state. And the dysfunction that they’re able to inflict certainly contributes to that perception.”<sup>40</sup> Greenberg hypothesizes that Ukraine might be a type of testing ground for Russian cyberwarfare, as Russia can act towards a wartime adversary in otherwise unthinkable ways.<sup>41</sup> Russia’s cyberattacks on Ukraine included two attacks on Ukraine’s power grid, in 2015 and 2016, which shut off power for hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians through malware, or malicious software, embedded in the Ukrainian power grid.

The 2015 power outage was called a “phantom mouse” attack, potentially designed to seem especially frightening, where Ukrainian IT specialists watched themselves lose control of their computer mice, which then proceeded of their own accord to shut down one grid company at a time. The second power outage in 2016 involved more sophisticated malware that automatically and simultaneously shut down dozens of utilities. Other electronic intrusions worked to subvert Ukraine’s transportation and financial industries, media networks, energy sector, political arena, and military. Cyberattacks erased data, destroyed computers, and sent viruses into computers that then disassembled Ukrainian technological infrastructure, in addition to the corruption of Ukraine’s power grid.

---

<sup>39</sup> Gross, Terry and Andy Greenberg. “Experts Suspect Russia Is Using Ukraine As A Cyberwar Testing Ground” *Fresh Air*. NPR. June 22, 2017

<sup>40</sup> Gross, Terry and Andy Greenberg. “Experts Suspect”

<sup>41</sup> Greenberg, Andy. “How An Entire Nation Became Russia’s Test Lab for Cyberwar” *Wired*. *Security*. June 20, 2017

Greenberg pointed out that these hacking operations could also target US industries, like it targeted the Democratic National Committee and voting systems in the US in 2016.<sup>42</sup> If the pattern shown in Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine persists during Russia's interference in US, the influence campaign and information warfare is just the first wave of cyberwarfare, which is soon followed by a cyberattack on national IT networks in the industrial and commercial sectors. This strategy begins with severing citizens from the lifeline connecting them, through trust and identification, with their national institutions. Then, when citizens are untethered and isolated, the attackers flip on and off the lights. This wreaks havoc and further diminishes trust in the ability for a nation and its institutions to provide protection.

If Putin's goals for the US included aspiring to kneecap Hillary Clinton's campaign, promote Trump's campaign, and mar the image of the democratic process, he has accomplished these ends. When phase one is complete, citizens feel a nagging mistrust and pessimism about their country from the ideas Russia methodically cultivated within them. Then, the strategy shifts towards creating real-life events to solidify and substantiate the theories citizens now hold against their home countries. For example, after campaigning on a message of restoring the rule of law and order from the hands of corrupt career politicians, pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich imprisoned his allegedly corrupted predecessor, Yulia Tymoshenko, shortly after his election. After spreading the idea online that Ukraine cannot effectively rule itself without Russia, Russian malware deliberately knocked out the Ukrainian power grid.<sup>43</sup> This trend shows the progression from creating a wave of ideas and beliefs to reinforcing the ideas and beliefs with events.

---

<sup>42</sup> Gross, Terry and Andy Greenberg. "Experts Suspect"

<sup>43</sup> Greenberg, Andy. "How An Entire Nation Became Russia's Test Lab for Cyberwar" *Wired. Security*. June 20, 2017

## **CYBER WAR ON AN ELECTION SYSTEM- UNITED STATES, 2016**

### Russian Infiltration of the State Election Systems

Primarily, the Kremlin's interference campaign sought to influence the 2016 US presidential election in order to subvert the "US-led liberal democratic order,"<sup>44</sup> to undermine Hillary Clinton's expected presidency with national contempt and political gridlock from day one, to promote Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders' campaigns, and to undermine faith in the voting process and the validity of its results.<sup>45</sup> Russia committed a cyberattack on the US voting system by rigorously testing state voting registration databases or Secretary of State websites for possible vulnerabilities in the code, both successfully and unsuccessfully gaining access to voter registration databases.<sup>46</sup> Bloomberg News cited "three people with direct knowledge of the U.S. investigation into [Russian election hacking]" who stated that the Russian hackers targeted at least 39 state election systems.<sup>47</sup>

The Russian-affiliated cyber actors knew how to cover up the evidence of their intrusions. According to the Intelligence Community (IC) reports compiled by the DHS and FBI and summarized by the Senate Intelligence Committee, the investigating agencies of the DHS and FBI obtained their evidence from information each state self-reported. This meaningfully increased the likelihood of an underestimation of the damages. Only some states, like Illinois,

---

<sup>44</sup> Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) review of Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA). July 3, 2018

<sup>45</sup> "Russian Targeting of Election Infrastructure During the 2016 Election: Summary of Initial Findings and Recommendations" US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. May 8, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> "Russian Targeting of Election Infrastructure"

<sup>47</sup> Riley, Michael and Jordan Robertson, "Russian Hacks"

provided almost full-access to investigators. In the case of Illinois, Russian-affiliated cyber actors gained entry to the state voter registration database, which included the voter names, birthdates, genders, driver's license information, and Social Security information of 15 million voters.<sup>48</sup> Other states, like North Carolina, concealed their state information, impeding the investigative process. Consequently, the IC noted that the "DHS has been clear in its representations to the Committee that the Department did not have perfect insight into these cyber activities."<sup>49</sup> Simply, there is a high degree of uncertainty that the evidence summarized by the Committee indicated of the true scale of the attack.

The Senate Intelligence Committee noted the possibility that more states came under attack but didn't know it, or came under attack and overlooked the indicators.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the Committee found the DHS's responses to these threats to election security in 2016 to be "inadequate."<sup>51</sup> The IC found it unlikely that the Russian-affiliated cyber actors altered the national final vote tally, but did not rule out the possibility that Russian-affiliated cyber actors altered the voter rolls and potentially the vote tallies of key districts in swing states. Though the cyber actors likely did not have the technology to change votes on a large scale, "the Committee notes that a small number of districts in key states can have a significant impact in a national election."<sup>52</sup> In fact, Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta claimed the 2016 election came down to 70,000 votes in a few key districts in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Burr, Richard, Mark Warner, Susan Collins, Martin Heinrich, and James Lankford. "Senate Intel Committee Releases Unclassified 1<sup>st</sup> Installment in Russia Report, Updated Recommendations on Election Security" May 8, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Burr, Richard, Mark Warner, et al.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) review of Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA). July 3, 2018

<sup>53</sup> Podesta, John. *Active Measures*. Directed by Jack Bryan, 2018

Crucially, according to the IC report, “in a small number of states,” Russian-affiliated cyber actors successfully penetrated “restricted elements of election infrastructure.”<sup>54</sup> Once these cyber actors gained access, they could, according to the report, “at a minimum, alter or delete voter registration data; however, they did not appear to be in a position to manipulate individual votes or aggregate vote totals.”<sup>55</sup> Essentially, the Intelligence Committee (IC) did not find evidence of Russian-affiliated cyber actors changing the results of votes, but they did find evidence that in some states, Russian-affiliated cyber actors had the ability to alter the voter rolls to edit who could vote in the first place.

Though Floridian officials avowed that they were certain no Russian-affiliated cyber actors had compromised election computers, the Mueller report refuted this. The report stated that the FBI believed the Russian GRU penetrated the network of at least one county’s election computers of Floridian county government.<sup>56</sup> Subsequently, Florida Senator Marco Rubio stated that in addition to accessing the voting system, the hackers also gained the ability to delete or alter Florida voter roll data.<sup>57</sup> Later, Florida state officials, including the Governor and Secretary of State, stated that this information came as news to them, and that they still did not know which county had been corrupted.<sup>58</sup> This demonstrates the lack of coordination and communication between key government institutions, the overstatement of state officials’ confidence in the integrity of their voting networks, and the understatement of the impact of Russian cyber-

---

<sup>54</sup> Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III. “Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election” *U.S. Department of Justice*. March 2019

<sup>57</sup> Robles, Frances. “Russian Hackers Were ‘In a Position’ to Alter Florida Voter Rolls, Rubio Confirms” *The New York Times*. April 26, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Fineout, Gary. “Florida election officials dispute Mueller report of Russian hack” *Politico*. April 18, 2019.

operations. This also enhances the likelihood that Russia successfully targeted and gained access to key districts in swing states, with unknown consequences.

### The Hacking of Critical Industry Infrastructure

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released an alert on March 15, 2018 describing Russian government cyber activity since at least 2016 that planted hard-to-find computer malware on the computer networks of “US Government entities as well as organizations in the energy, nuclear, commercial facilities, water, aviation, and critical manufacturing sectors.”<sup>59</sup> State-sponsored Russian hackers infiltrated sections of the US electric utility grid, accessing the controls of some US power plants, and potentially gained the capacity to override the existing controls and instead control components of the US power grid from Russia.

The cyber actors targeted peripheral organizations like the websites of suppliers or quality-control specialists as “malware repositories,” which would then transfer that malware through their trusted connections onto the final targets, critical US infrastructure sectors, when they trafficked those websites.<sup>60</sup> The cyber actors used a variety of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TPPs) to infiltrate victim networks. TPPs included the use of “spear-phishing emails,” or a somewhat routine and unsophisticated hacking operation involving sending the target emails from duplicitous users, like Microsoft Office in the US.<sup>61</sup> In Ukraine, Russian hackers spear-phished Ukrainians by masking themselves as a list of military draft specifications

---

<sup>59</sup> “Russian Government Cyber Activity Targeting Energy and Other Critical Infrastructure Sectors” Alert (TA18-074A). *US Department of Homeland Security*. CISA Cyber Infrastructure. March 15, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> “Russian Government Cyber Activity”

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*



sent from the Ukrainian parliament, which journalist Greenberg asserts, “is something nobody can afford not to open in the middle of a war.”<sup>62</sup> These cyber actors corrupt a network by the user downloading seemingly benign or official attachments.

Another tactic included the use of “watering hole domains,” or trusted third party sites that the final target users habitually accessed. These sites included trade publications, sites with information for quality control, and others. The cyber actors often altered previously legitimate sites, incorporating malicious content among the otherwise reputable and safe content. Other, less common TTP methods included the building of credentials, network reconnaissance, exploitation of hosts, and targeting industrial control system (ICS) infrastructure. The report describes the hackers’ activity as mainly intelligence gathering, but did not rule out there being additional motives and consequences of the hacking.<sup>63</sup>

Once the Russian cyber actors gained access into the secure networks of ICSs through TTP methods, they studied the networks through reconnaissance, moved between networks, and amassed information on the networks. Though the DHS and FBI report did acknowledge “hundreds of victims” resulting from this breach, they did not find evidence of the cyber actors attempting to take control of the US power grid.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, according to the New York Times, “in interviews, American intelligence officials said that the department [through its report] had understated the scope of the threat.”<sup>65</sup> Soon after the report became public, Energy Secretary Rick Perry raised the alarm, saying that cyberattacks are “literally happening hundreds of thousands of times a day.”<sup>66</sup> These breaches are alarming and somewhat embarrassing for

---

<sup>62</sup> Gross, Terry and Andy Greenberg “Experts Suspect”

<sup>63</sup> “Russian Government Cyber Activity”

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Sanger, David E. “Russian Hackers Appear to Shift Focus to U.S. Power Grid” *The New York Times*. July 27, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Atherton, Kelsey “It’s not just elections: Russia hacked the US electric grid” *Vox*. March 28, 2018

critical and sensitive industry infrastructure organizations, like the factories for nuclear generators and power plants. Russian cyber actors gained meaningful intel on industry infrastructure, altered important website code, and potentially laid the groundwork for future attacks to sabotage the US power grid, through the use of less-sophisticated but well researched and well targeted hacking methods.

The Russians targeted similar sectors in 2015 and 2016 to hack into the Ukrainian power grid, causing massive blackouts. Malware implanted on US and Ukrainian power grids and ICSes might lay the groundwork for future disruptions or cyberattacks on the now-corrupted networks. They might also serve as a deterrent, preventing the US's extremely talented IT specialists from disrupting Russian IT networks. Journalist Andy Greenberg hypothesized that perhaps this Russian activity came as a response to Stuxnet, an advanced piece of computer malware allegedly created in a collaboration between Israeli and US computer scientists to destroy hundreds of nuclear enrichment centrifuges in Iran in 2014.<sup>67</sup> Greenberg theorized that Russia might seek to "signal" that it is not to be trifled with, and that its cyber-weapons are also to be taken seriously.

On March 15, 2018, the same day the report became public, the US Treasury Department imposed yet another round of sanctions on Russian entities, in part as a response to this newly discovered kind of Russian cyberattacks. However, as a Vox report pointed out, over one third of the subjects who the US Treasury Department sanctioned on March 15 had already been under sanctions by the US Treasury Department.<sup>68</sup> Though Putin repeatedly references his desire to end or diminish US sanctions on Russian entities, the Kremlin's cybernetwork appears to continue

---

<sup>67</sup> Gross, Terry and Andy Greenberg. "Experts Suspect"

<sup>68</sup> Atherton, Kelsey. "It's not just elections"

undeterred by sanctions imposed by the US in response to Russian election interference.

Monitors of the upcoming European Parliament elections in late May 2019 note an ongoing Russian influence operation promoting far-right candidates and general disinformation, bearing many of the same characteristics as Russian election interference in the US in 2016.<sup>69</sup>

## The Social Media Campaign

### *The Propaganda Machine*

More people saw Russian propaganda on Facebook than would vote in the 2016 US presidential election. Around 138 million Americans voted in the 2016 US presidential election, and Russian-created posts reached at least 146 million people on Facebook's platforms alone.<sup>70</sup> In the 10 weeks before the US presidential election, Twitter users saw more than 288 million tweets that were Russian-affiliated election propaganda. US intelligence determined that the process for the social media propaganda campaign began under Putin, who directed the operation through the Russian media network. Putin also directed propaganda through state-run or state-adjacent organizations, like the Internet Research Agency.

The Internet Research Agency (IRA), headquartered in St. Petersburg, employed hundreds of Russians as professional trolls to spout millions of posts of pro-Kremlin propaganda under fake or stolen social media accounts. Though the IRA suppressed information about itself through employee non-disclosure agreements, several Russian media outlets claim that the

---

<sup>69</sup>Apuzzo, Matt and Adam Satariano. "Russia Is Targeting Europe's Elections. So Are Far-Right Copycats." *The New York Times*. May 12, 2019.

<sup>70</sup>Wells, Georgia and Deepa Seetharaman. "New Facebook Data Shows Russians Targeted Users by Race, Religion, Politics" *The Wall Street Journal, Tech*. November 1, 2017

financier and chief executive of the organization is Evgeny Prigozhin, a close ally to Putin and a noted member of the oligarchy. Historically, Putin awarded Prigozhin several lucrative government contracts. In return, Prigozhin backed a documentary that aired on the Russian media network, asserting that the anti-Putin protests in 2011 were coordinated by the US government, who paid protesters with bribes and cookies.<sup>71</sup> The IRA aimed to disguise Russian propaganda as majority opinion, or the opinion of a social media user's social sphere. This secretive organization, often called one of Russia's largest "troll farms," posted on social media day in and day out. The IRA orchestrated the illusion that certain subgroups of American political parties adamantly held opinions that in reality were just Russian propaganda. Though information regarding the IRA is suppressed with employee non-disclosure agreements, it is believed that the IRA is financed and led by an oligarch and close ally of Putin.

The Russian interference campaign in the United States involved several platforms and strategies. Russians manufactured disinformation or "fake news" by writing hundreds of fictitious articles on conspiracies like "pizza-gate," which claimed that Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager John Podesta operated a child sex trafficking ring through a pizza restaurant. According to a survey by YouGov and *The Economist*, 17% of Clinton voters and 46% of Trump voters believed in 2016 that some part of the "pizza-gate" conspiracy was true.<sup>72</sup> A "troll army" of paid social media avatars authored their own "fake news" articles, promoted their peers' articles by commenting on them and sharing them to their fake Facebook groups, targeting vulnerable and interested cross-sections of Facebook.

---

<sup>71</sup> Chen, Adrian. "The Agency" *The New York Times Magazine*. June 2, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Frankovic, Kathy. "Belief in conspiracy theories depends largely on which side of the spectrum you fall on" *YouGov*. November 27, 2016

The IRA, which had hundreds of employees, was only one of the many “troll farms” in Russia. In the New York Times Magazine’s piece on the IRA, called “The Agency,” journalist Adrian Chen spoke with a Russian man named Platon Mamatov who operated a troll farm of 20-40 employees in the Ural Mountains. Between 2008 and 2013, Mamatov directed his troll farm of “mostly students and young mothers to carry out online tasks for Kremlin contacts and local and regional authorities from Putin’s United Russia party.”<sup>73</sup> Mamatov described a complex maze of shell companies and other financial trickery that separated the trolls from their financiers, the Russian government authorities. This protected the Russian government, making it difficult to trace transactions to the source to build a case against the government. It also obfuscated the scale of the hacking and trolling operation. Insiders like Mamatov, however, put the number at “thousands - I’m not sure about how many, but yes, really, thousands.”<sup>74</sup>

Russia’s covert cyberattacks included stealing or stealthily obtaining the private information of US citizens and releasing this data publicly. This represents a modern update of the Russian tradition of “kompromat,” or compromising material dispersed for the purposes of blackmail, extortion, or generating negative publicity about a person.<sup>75</sup> Though this technique usually only concerns public figures, advances in social-news media allow for a much more expansive scope. In 2016, Russia obtained and spread the private information of US citizens for the purposes of gaining power through amassing data, blackmail, humiliation, and creating insecurity in Americans about their country’s protections. Russians obtained information through hacking voter rolls, setting up confessional hotlines promoted on Facebook, and hacking efforts

---

<sup>73</sup> Chen, Adrian. “The Agency”

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Watts, Clint. “So What Did We Learn? Looking Back on Four Years of Russia’s Cyber-Enabled “Active Measures”” *Alliance for Securing Democracy*. January 18, 2018.

via the avatar of “Guccifer 2.0” and the website DCLeaks.com. Russian operatives then disseminated this information in exclusives to media outlets or to the website Wikileaks.<sup>76</sup>

Russia recruited American citizens as assets, encouraging them through blackmail, bribes, or friendship to execute parts of the Russian agenda on domestic soil. One way Russia used social media to recruit American assets was through confessional hotlines advertised on Facebook and Instagram. Cybersecurity research firm New Knowledge compiled exhaustive research for a report on the IRA to go to the Senate Intelligence Committee. According to the New Knowledge report, the IRA placed significant emphasis on developing American assets, attempting to recruit mostly members of the Black community to complete IRA tasks, but also targeting members of the Political Left and Right.<sup>77</sup>

The report outlined 16 kinds of tasks that the IRA sought Americans to perform, which included the Russian IRA members disguised as fellow Americans asking real Americans to help arrange meetings with preachers from Black churches, solicit speakers for protests, or recruit volunteers to work pro-bono on immigration cases. Other tasks roped in Americans by offering free services like self-defense classes or counseling for sex addicts. The IRA used Facebook to ask for volunteers to distribute or design fliers, or to teach the self-defense classes. The IRA sometimes went for lewd or attention-grabbing requests, like asking female followers of an IRA account to send in photos of themselves for a calendar or asking for uploads as part of a YouTube contest dubbed “Pee on Hillary.”<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> New Knowledge. “The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency.” *Analysis by New Knowledge, Columbia University, Canfield Research, LLC.*

<sup>78</sup> New Knowledge. “The Tactics & Tropes”

In one Russian recruitment case, the IRA promoted its confessional hotlines on the fake pro-LGBT Facebook page “LGBT United,” and the fake Christian page “Army of Jesus.”<sup>79</sup> As shown in Exhibit 2, the IRA included three of the memes used in this strategy. The IRA posted one meme three times on its fake “Army of Jesus” Facebook page, and three times on its Instagram, with the words, “‘STRUGGLING WITH THE ADDICTION TO MASTURBATION? REACH OUT TO ME AND WE WILL BEAT IT TOGETHER.’ - JESUS” as well as “YOU CAN’T HOLD HANDS WITH GOD WHEN YOU ARE MASTURBATING. USE OUR HOTLINE IF YOU NEED HELP.” This meme received 5,436 likes, and 284 comments. Similarly, the IRA posted to “LGBT United” a meme with the inscription, “If any gay/lesbian/transgender teenagers need anyone to talk to I’m here and I’ll listen. I’m not looking for a hook up or anything. I won’t even give out my gender or name. Times are hard and no one deserves to feel alone.” As pointed out in the IRA report, the practice of taking advantage of a person’s deepest secrets and most closely guarded vulnerabilities, particularly ones that could result in shame or disruption in one’s personal or financial situation if discovered, has been a time-honored strategy in Russia and the former USSR.

Also, the idea of “infiltrating” protests and social movements has roots in Russia from the Soviet era. The IRA accomplished these ends in part through their confessional hotlines. The purpose of this tactic was to endear people to a social group that they deeply identified with, like people with similar beliefs about God, or young adults also coming to grip with their sexualities. In this space where Americans felt safe to interact with people who shared their core values, Russians encouraged them to attend political rallies, or to document protests to share their efforts

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

with the world. Often, the real Americans and fake Americans built a rapport over online or phone conversations.

As was the case with the masturbation addiction hotline, however, sometimes the IRA members used blackmail and coercion rather than encouragement and friendship. After Americans called onto the hotlines to confess their shame about their addiction to masturbation or their internal struggle with their sexuality, the IRA members sometimes used this information to force Americans to complete IRA tasks for political mobilization, with the threat that if they did not complete the tasks, their “kompromat” would become public. Even without a direct threat from the “Army of Jesus” or “LGBT United” hotline workers that they might release this information if the callers did not do what was asked of them, once the callers divulged their secrets to the hotline workers, there was an implicit imbalance of power weighted towards the Facebook group. As Russians know through their historical use of kompromat, once a group gains intelligence of compromising material on an individual, the individual will automatically strive to keep themselves in the group’s good graces, to decrease the chances that the kompromat is used against them.

In another instance, the IRA contacted Trump supporter Harry Miller through the fake Facebook page “Being Patriotic.” The Russians posting pro-Trump propaganda on “Being Patriotic” offered Miller \$500- \$1,000 to construct a cage on the bed of his pickup truck, which would then drive around a pro-Trump flash mob, showing imprisoned Hillary and Bill Clinton impersonators.<sup>80</sup> Later, the Russians offered to send Miller and the Hillary impersonator on a paid trip to New York with the cage, which the Hillary impersonator accepted. Though the IRA employees spoke with Russian accents on the phone with Miller, he did not know he had been

---

<sup>80</sup>O’Sullivan, Donie. Drew Griffin and Scott Bronstein. “The unwitting: The Trump supporters used by Russia.” *CNNMoney*. February 20, 2018



compromised and turned into a Russian asset until the FBI visited him at his home several months later.

Countless other American citizens furthered Russia's agenda, participating in Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter rallies next to each other on the same day, which Russian trolls organized and promoted to maximize political upheaval.<sup>81</sup> Critically, even compromised Americans struggled to fathom that Russians played a role in their political actions. However, the Russian strategy was "not faking rallies or supporters, but trying to prompt real Americans who already backed a cause to turn out in support of it."<sup>82</sup> The purpose of Russian operations was to manufacture the semblance of furious, fractious Americans. Russians utilized the online and real identities of American people in an act of ventriloquism: the American's image speaking the Kremlin's voice.

The IRA and other troll farms constituted just one facet of the Russian cyberoperations, with a vast network of IT-savvy individuals working on Russia's behalf outside of government-funded troll farms. The Russian interference operation was aggressive, brash, and successful; however, some contend that it is easy to overstate the sophistication of the attacks and its masterminds. In Russia's hacks of the DNC, industry infrastructure, and state election servers, the hackers used basic tactics like spear-phishing. Many of the social media posts contained grammatical errors and demonstrated other signals that their authors were not American-born.

Similarly, though Russia demonstrated the might of its arsenal of a network of hackers and trolls, Russia does not appear to have a military branch filled with genius hackers devoted to the Kremlin, or even a thriving technology industry from which the government could draw

---

<sup>81</sup> New Knowledge. "The Tactics & Tropes"

<sup>82</sup>O'Sullivan, Donie. Drew Griffin and Scott Bronstein. "The unwitting"

talent. It appears many of the Kremlin's cyber operations involved a smattering of hackers across Russia and former Soviet-bloc states. This explains why the FBI's report on industry infrastructure hacking used the term "Russia-affiliated cyber actors"<sup>83</sup> instead of Russian hackers- because many of the "cyber actors" were lone-wolves separate from the Russian military. Many of these actors committed the cyberattacks from Ukraine or other countries with high ethnically-Russian populations. Some were professional hackers, paid by members of the Russian intelligence services or military to do the hacking for them.

According to the Atlantic's article *What Putin Really Wants*, "in some cases [the hackers are] mercenary freelancers willing to work for the highest bidder- or cybercriminals who have been caught and blackmailed into working for the government."<sup>84</sup> Some cyber-actors were part of online communities that may or may not have had pro-Kremlin ideologies, but were either galvanized to troll for the sake of trolling, or because of the frenzy from other trolls, or because they actually identified with pro-Kremlin ideology and sought to perpetuate those opinions online. Some hacks, like that into the DNC, were carried out by government actors.

The hacker groups famous for breaking into the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to steal and release information to damage the Democratic party worked under the aliases Fancy Bear, representing the Russian military intelligence online operations, and Cozy Bear, representing the Russian intelligence agency known as the FSB. However, according to Dmitri Alperovitch, co-founder of CrowdStrike, a cybersecurity firm hired to investigate this breach, one arm of this hacking operation did not know what the other was doing.<sup>85</sup> Alperovitch stated that in his team's investigation, they watched Fancy Bear and Cozy Bear simultaneously break in

---

<sup>83</sup> "Russian Government Cyber Activity"

<sup>84</sup> Ioffe, Julia. "What Putin Really Wants" *The Atlantic*. January/February 2018 Issue.

<sup>85</sup> Ioffe, Julia. "What Putin Really Wants."

to the same online system and then simultaneously steal the same information from that system. This not only showed an inefficient use of resources, but also a blunder that increased risk of the operation as a whole, as the simultaneous operations threatened to compromise each other as they unfolded. This belied a lack of communication and coordination between government agencies and showed the somewhat haphazard and spontaneous nature in some of Russia's cyberoperations.

Russia incorporated into the influence campaign an overt communications strategy, involving Russia's state-run media agencies like Russia Today (RT), intermediaries between Russian interests and other media, and the use of "troll farms" to spread messages in Russia's interests on social media. The DNI report notes Russia's legacy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) propaganda machine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>86</sup> Following the unexpected success for Russia of its involvement in the 2016 US election, the DNI anticipates Russian involvement in even more international election processes, disseminating information to sway the electorate or help elect a candidate more attractive to Moscow.

### *The Timeline*

In a 2017 testimony for a hearing by the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, FBI Special Agent Clint Watts characterized Russia as having "used social media driven information campaigns to discredit the U.S. for years. Facebook and Twitter remain littered with pro-Russian, Western looking accounts and supporting automated bots designed to undermine

---

<sup>86</sup> "Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution" *Intelligence Community Assessment*. January 6, 2017.

the credibility of the U.S. government.”<sup>87</sup> The IRA entered onto social media sites like Twitter to communicate domestically in 2009, but did not appear to broaden its influence to American social media users on Twitter until 2013.<sup>88</sup> Watts began to notice influence operations in January of 2014, with pro-Russian accounts and bots trolling forums associated with Syria, its president Bashar Assad, terrorist group al Qaeda, and the Islamic State. By mid-2014, Watts characterized the Russian hacking and trolling campaign as “deliberate, well organized, well resourced, well-funded, wide ranging.”<sup>89</sup>

Watts later asserted that the Russian effort to interfere in the US originated in 2013, on the heels of Putin’s perceived humiliation at the hands of Hillary Clinton. Its nascent computer network demonstrated growing potential for power and influence, and the IRA trolls researched online personas and observed American social media users. In 2014, the Russian interference operation underwent capability development. In 2015, the operation focused on Russian users and accounts gaining the interest and loyalty of American users, seeking to ultimately win their audience. In 2016, the operation switched focus onto the US presidential election, seeking to use the operation’s fully honed capacity for hacking, disseminating propaganda posed as Americans, and swaying the political conversation.

### The Russian Media Network

---

<sup>87</sup> Clint Watts (26 October 2015) Russia returns as al Qaeda and the Islamic State’s ‘Far Enemy’. Foreign Policy Research Institute. Available at: <http://www.fpri.org/2015/10/russia-returns-as-al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-states-far-enemy/>

<sup>88</sup> “The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018” *University of Oxford*. Computational Propaganda Research Project.

<sup>89</sup> Watts, Clint. “Disinformation: A Primer In Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns” *Statement Prepared for the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing*. March 30, 2017.

The Kremlin reached its domestic audience and an international audience with its propaganda for US politics through its extensive state-run platforms for propaganda. This allowed the Russian narrative of US politics to gain a large, global audience, and increased the likelihood of this narrative turning into actualized events in reality. Russia disseminated its message for its domestic audience through its Kremlin-controlled media outlets. Russia spread its message internationally in part through media outlets like RT (previously named Russia Today) and Sputnik. Troll armies reinforced the Russian narrative in Russia, the US, and to the larger global audience.

RT consistently broadcast English-language coverage critical of Clinton. According to the DNI report, the coverage criticized Clinton by focusing on the email scandal, corruption allegations, reports of her failing mental and physical health, and conspiracy theories. The report claims that in August of 2017, political analysts with connections to Putin’s political orbit brought up the idea of “avenging negative Western reports on Putin by airing segments devoted to Secretary Clinton’s alleged health problems.”<sup>90</sup>

RT’s video on Clinton with the most views, titled “How 100% of the Clintons’ ‘Charity’ Went To...Themselves,” received almost 10 million views across different social media sites. The Kremlin aimed to boost the viewership and conversation surrounding the RT’s videos, keep their subject matter in public discourse longer, and disseminate their ideas across the comment sections of main-stream news sites. The DNI report also alleges that US intelligence services could easily identify some of the social media accounts that shared these videos, as their accounts were previously devoted to propaganda promoting Russian involvements Ukraine.<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> “Background to ‘Assessing Russian Activities’ “

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

This denotes the perceived success of troll farms and Russian communications strategies in previous election interferences.

### Grappling with New Media

Today's advertising industry has the ability to disseminate geographically pervasive and emotionally affecting campaigns for goods or information. Where a handful of people in the past could spread their voice to a large number of people as news broadcasters or public people, with today's social media technology, nearly every person on earth has the opportunity to use their voice in a way that reaches an unlimited audience. The technologies of the 21st century have granted access to opportunities to vast swaths of people, seeming to enact the virtues of freedom of speech and freedom of organization to an unprecedented extent. In the words of Heather Conley, author of 'Kremlin Playbook' from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "while we were focusing on the positive of social media and information technology, Russia was looking at how to use that as an instrument, and they have been incredibly effective."<sup>92</sup> Social media and information technology would pose a threat to the stability of a nation's institutions in and of themselves.

Their business model derives revenue growth from producing fear or outrage-inducing coverage in return for the sponsorship of whichever company bids the highest. Increasingly, social-news media blurs the line to the point where the compelling interest behind a media output is indiscernible. Products and information pushed forth on behalf of sincerity and truth receive the same treatment as speech made on behalf of paid-content. In the social-news media, this

---

<sup>92</sup> Conley, Heather. *Active Measures*. Directed by Jack Bryan, 2018

grants advertisers who want to promote their product and benefactors who want to promote their ideology unprecedented access to consumers. Producers now have the ability to market their goods and information to audiences that require their products and invest in social-news to change the perceived realities of the audiences that don't yet require their products.

Traditional advertising hinges on producers creating a need in consumers based on changing the way the customer perceives the output (like creating a need in a child for a Coca-Cola because the child believes a Coke is an enjoyable product). This approach utilizes pull-side factors to attract customers. The new wave of social-news media hinges on producers creating a need in consumers based on changing the way the consumer perceives their entire reality, thus pushing the consumer towards the producers' goods or information. For example, utilizing a push-side factor, a gun-manufacturing company might pay a news media outlet to underline coverage of home intrusions or develop a twitter account that amasses attention towards heroic acts performed by people with guns, to foster an overall environment conducive to their company's potential for sales.

This infrastructure connected a complex web of social media, news media, consumers, companies, independent interest groups, and governments. Russia quickly understood the opportunity to weaponize this technology. Speaking in a televised address to over a million Russian schoolchildren in 2017, Russian president Vladimir Putin stated, "Artificial Intelligence is the future, not only of Russia, but of all mankind. There are huge opportunities, but also threats that are difficult to foresee today. Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world."<sup>93</sup> In the social-news media industry, profit comes from ads in accordance with the amount of attention a media service receives. The more galling the media's output, the

---

<sup>93</sup> Gigova, Radina. "Who Vladimir Putins thinks will rule the world" *CNN*. September 2, 2017.

more attention it receives, leading to an increase in the extremity of media output. Social-news media's profit motive alone leads to fear-based coverage and increased polarization.

Increasingly, for a social-news media service to survive financially, it must generate news 24 hours a day and 7 days a week democratization and now one of the primary functions of the nascent social-news media hybrid is to push centrists further towards the extremes, and to make the extremes more extreme. There are entire industries whose revenue stream revolves solely around using all available data to learn about people, categorize them by their interests and personalities, and then push the group to receive select information and ultimately affiliate with whoever is paying.

### *Facebook and Cambridge Analytica*

In a presentation by CEO Alexander Nix of the infamous data harvesting company, Cambridge Analytica, Nix describes Cambridge Analytica's process through the 2016 election, harvesting the data of "hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Americans to form a model to predict the personality of every single adult in the United States,"<sup>94</sup> and then creating a nuanced message to target their personality. This process of behavioral microtargeting for election processes blends the techniques of audience targeting, data modeling, and psychographic profiling.

In practice, Cambridge Analytica might seek to reference the Second Amendment before a US primary election on the feed of a user whose online history leads Cambridge Analytica to categorize as highly neurotic and conscientious. With such a person, Nix advised,

---

<sup>94</sup> Nix, Alexander. "The Power of Big Data and Psychographics" *2016 Concordia Annual Summit in New York*.



“you’re gonna need a message that is rational, and fear based...in this case, the threat of a burglary, and the insurance policy of a gun is very persuasive. Conversely, for a closed and agreeable audience, these are gonna be people who care about tradition, and habits, and family, and community, this could be the grandfather who taught his son to shoot, who will in turn teach his son, obviously talking about these values is gonna be much more important.”<sup>95</sup>

Nix extolled the breadth of “big data,” which encompasses information on a person’s ethnicity down to their favorite brand of breakfast cereal.

Nix demonstrated how Cambridge Analytica utilized big data for the Ted Cruz 2016 presidential campaign in the Iowa Caucus. Cambridge Analytica created a cross section of partisanship by mobilization. It identified so-called ‘persuasion’ groups, in which the audience was extremely likely to vote, but was not very partisan, and in the words of Cambridge Analytica, “needed persuading.”<sup>96</sup> In the instance of their work on behalf of the Ted Cruz campaign, Cambridge Analytica targeted a specific subgroup of low-partisanship, high-mobility, Iowan voters with low neuroticism and openness, and slight conscientiousness. To appeal to this group, Cambridge Analytica encouraged Cruz to targeting an issue particularly compelling to this group- gun rights. In the end, the Cruz campaign focused on persuading a select subgroup of 45,000 people with a crafted gun rights message with a persuasion nuance catered to the personality profile of this subgroup, potentially focusing on certain Iowa counties, or even neighborhoods, or even as specifically as individual people.

---

<sup>95</sup> Nix, Alexander. “The Power”

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

50 years ago, a politician like Ted Cruz campaigning in a state like Iowa might only know the voting record of that state, a few recent poll results, and the information disseminated by their campaign staff. He would have to create a broad message that catered to the millions of people in Iowa, because he would have no way of knowing which voters would actually show up to the polls, and which issues he could focus on to rouse ambivalent voters in his direction. Now, instead of speaking to a broad base about a broad array of topics using a wide variety of rhetoric and techniques, a political campaign could target a few thousand key voters in each state on a few specific messages using a few targeted approaches (like using fear-based strategies or tradition-based rhetoric).

Nix asserted that blanket advertising “is dead,” and that never again will the hundreds of millions of people in a target audience see the same billboard or receive the same pamphlet. He asserted that that the following generations will never understand “mass communication,” or blanket advertising. Instead, the new concept of targeted advertising would have a higher likelihood of achieving results at a higher return on investment at a lower overall expense. Nix credits Cambridge Analytica’s specialized algorithm for determining voter preferences as increasing Ted Cruz from polling at 5% to polling at 35% support, making him the second most formidable opponent in the race. Nix ends his presentation saying that of the two candidates left in the election (at that point, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump) only one was utilizing this technology. He concluded, “and it’s gonna be very interesting to see how they impact the next seven weeks.”<sup>97</sup>

Cambridge Analytica provides an example of the tools the internet provides to allow unprecedented influence over its users. Its technology poses a threat to a nation’s unity in and of

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

itself, regardless of which interests utilize it. Behavioral microtargeting for election processes favors pandering and manipulating over producing the truth. It toys with the sanity of an entire nation, shepherding otherwise centrist voters to fall down an extremist rabbit hole, suggesting social-news media that best capitalizes on their unique weaknesses and biases. It also toys with the cohesiveness of a nation, in which neighbor can agree with neighbor on the most basic facts about the world around them. Cambridge Analytica and similar companies' technology facilitate polarization. Russia quickly understood the dark side of the proliferation of this technology to foment divisiveness.

This risk continues even without foreign interference intent upon defiling public trust and national power. However, in the case of the 2016 Presidential Election, foreign adversaries did interfere, sowing dissent and disillusionment, using the data to national detriment. Cambridge Analytica's parent company, SCL, showed in promotional documents its election division having a station to work with Russian clients.<sup>98</sup> SCL cofounder Christopher Wylie described Lukoil's dogged interest in using data for political targeting in America, but its perturbing lack of interest in any commercial application of that data.<sup>99</sup> According to journalist and *Vanity Fair* contributing editor Craig Unger, "SCL is in turn owned by shell companies that you can trace back to [Ukrainian oligarch] Dmitry Firtash who is again tied to Mogilevich. That would complete the entire string and show crime boss and Mogilevich involved starting out pure and simple money laundering in 1984 with Trump properties going forward more than 32 years to the election in which this data mining firm Cambridge Analytica is playing a very, very big role

---

<sup>98</sup> Hakim, Danny and Matthew Rosenberg. "Data Firm Tied to Trump Campaign Talked Business With Russians" *The New York Times*. March 17, 2018.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

in the Trump campaign and helping him win.”<sup>100</sup> Cutting-edge social-news media technology connected the Trump campaign with the Kremlin, as well as with a crucial sector of US voters.

### *On the Larger Role of Social Media*

The internet and social media created profound gaps in national barriers, posing as key entry points for Russian influence in national processes like elections. Putin understood the advent of AI as the next frontier in intervention, and created programs to broaden Russian students’ understanding of AI. The United States faces a reckoning with many of the products of its own invention. The United States displays confusion with regard to a national response to the digital era, and faces a reckoning with many of the products of its own invention.

Within a span of less than a decade, social media networks like Facebook and Twitter have gained market share and control of interpersonal, local, national, and global discourse. Facebook currently boasts over 2.7 billion users, or about one in three people on Earth. Facebook is an empire, even if it describes itself as a digital dorm-hallway whiteboard, facilitating friendly chats between friends and family. Facebook consistently buys out its competitors, either adding them to its business model (like Instagram, purchased in 2008) or splitting them up and selling them for parts.<sup>101</sup> It dominates the market of public opinion, allowing no similarly powerful competitors that provide a congruent service. As such, its monopolizing the market makes Facebook indispensable and indestructible, at least for the time.

---

<sup>100</sup> Unger, Craig. “Active Measures”

<sup>101</sup> Barbaro, Michael. “A Founder of Facebook Says It’s Time to Break It Up” *The Daily, New York Times*. May 10, 2019.

US national conversation often turns to social media: how should social media handle trolls, what images and ideas should be censored, how prevalent can social media be in our lives while keeping us healthy? Solutions to these problems are often difficult to solidify and divided in their support. Social media companies often shield their internal processes from public view, making direct policy amendment proposals difficult to create, communicate, and follow up with. Often, public scrutiny must rise to the level of a national outrage, like the Cambridge Analytica Scandal, for social media companies to make statements and appearances to defend their actions and propose changes.

That being said, few changes in the fundamental nature of social media occurred over the last decade. Despite the scandal of Facebook allowing nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the news on its website to be misleading or blatantly untrue, Facebook consequently provided little insight into how it will distinguish fake and real accounts, and how it will punish infractions. Few have access to the factors that drive Facebook's algorithm, which in turn determines the news feeds of over 1 billion Facebook users. During the lead-up to the election, Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg, CEO and CFO of Facebook, respectively, both released taped press statements in which they assured their users, shareholders, and nation that foreign powers had no undue influence within their platform.<sup>102</sup> This was a deliberate mistruth, which was proven in documents subpoenaed by a 2016 Congressional hearing to be a direct contradiction of preexisting information regarding Russian influence beginning as early as 2014. Thus, Facebook knowingly conducted a cover-up of damaging company information to the detriment of the

---

102 Jenkins, Nash. "Mark Zuckerberg's Congressional Testimony Will Mark a Stunning Reversal for the Facebook CEO" *Time*. April 9, 2018.

United States and the benefit of the Russian operation, thus showing their complicity in the operation as a whole. Facebook and other social media companies handled Russia's interference in US politics poorly, often facilitating or promoting its platforms.

The United States federal and state governments were created in part to sever Americans from the unwanted foreign influence of Great Britain. Some of the first laws created were anti-sedition laws, designed to fortify the country from intellectual threats as well as physical ones. Responsibilities like protecting and promoting national interests, balancing the liberty and equality of citizens, and establishing and executing a formal policy to handle foreign enemies and allies are too expansive for corporations to handle. Like the integration of the government into the aviation industry post-9/11, social media companies might require a similar level of integration of government into their process, from top to bottom.

### Hacking and Timed Releases of Damning Information

#### *Using What Did Exist- Emails*

The influence campaign bifurcates into two strategies: covert efforts and overt efforts. Covert efforts include the use of technological warfare, like hacking and leaking private government information. Russia's military intelligence units hacked into the private servers of Democrats and Republicans in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election. The DNI report assesses the identity of Guccifer 2.0 and the portal of DCLeaks.com as covert Russian military intelligence unit (known as General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate, GRU) activity.<sup>103</sup> Sometimes, the GRU would relay the private information they obtained onto WikiLeaks. This

---

<sup>103</sup> "Assessing Russian Activities"

site famously released private emails hacked from the DNC server in 2016. Additionally, the GRU infiltrated the system of several US state and local electoral boards.

The hacker group under the name Fancy Bear infiltrated the email of Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta, using a spear-fishing strategy. These hackers sent emails to the target masked as Microsoft, notifying the target that their email password expired and required changing. The email included a link that redirected the target to a fake page for them to change their password. Once the hackers gained access, they established themselves as the local administrator, enabling them to install malware on the networks. Fancy Bear used this technique to hack government officials in both parties in the build-up to the 2016 US presidential election, and Russian hackers also used this technique in hacking the staffers of US Senators vulnerable in the 2018 US midterm elections, and with hacking critical industry IT networks in 2016-2018.<sup>104</sup>

Russian intelligence operatives expanded their operation beyond political parties of both major US political parties, notably hacking into the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee (RNC). They also hacked into other influential organizations to the election process, like think tanks and lobbying groups. An intelligence committee analysis (ICA) released by the Senate Intelligence Committee stated that Russian hackers infiltrated organizations and networks based on their likelihood of shaping US policies or US electoral results.<sup>105</sup>

### *Using What Did Not Exist- The Loretta Lynch Scandal*

---

<sup>104</sup> Sanger, David E. "Russian Hackers"

<sup>105</sup> "Assessing Russian Activities"

The FBI has long maintained a precedent of remaining quiet on political matters falling under its jurisdiction in the final months of a presidential campaign cycle. So-called “October surprises,” where political scandals unravel in the months before a presidential election, are noted for their outsized effect on voters. For example, in the 2000 presidential election, polls had candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore neck-in-neck, until news broke in October that Bush was arrested in 1976 for driving while intoxicated.<sup>106</sup> Bush strategist Karl Rove later asserted that, in his opinion, this October surprise cost Bush victory in five states in the election. Though it is impossible to know just what role a political scandal assumes and what blowback results from it, political campaigns dread a revelation coming out in October, as their candidate has very little time for rebuttal or image management, and the incident stays fresh on the minds of voters when they get to the polls. Due to the documented phenomenon of October surprises assuming an unavoidable political response, FBI policy dictates that FBI officials and investigators hold off making announcements or comments until after an election, so as to avoid the appearance of the FBI influencing political outcomes.

On July 5, 2016, FBI director James Comey broke that precedent.<sup>107</sup> Without notifying his boss, Attorney General Loretta Lynch, Comey held a press conference roundly perceived as issuing a “scathing critique” of Secretary Clinton. Department of Justice practice and protocol dictated that the Bureau not comment on an investigation or its evidence if no charges were leveled, so as to not air out the dirty laundry of a subject that is, in fact, clear of wrongdoing. Protocol also dictated the Bureau not comment on political matters in an election year.

---

<sup>106</sup> Gee, Taylor. “15 October Surprises That Wreaked Havoc on Politics” *Politico Magazine*. October 4, 2016.

<sup>107</sup> “A Review of Various Actions by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice in Advance of the 2016 Election”. *Office of the Inspector General*. DOJ OIG.



Department protocol also dictates that public statements by the FBI Director occur under the authority of the FBI Director's boss, the US Attorney General. Lastly, Department protocol directed the FBI to adequately and completely convey the legal standpoint reached by the Department of Justice's prosecutors.

Comey's stunning decision to break these precedents led to a Department of Justice Inspector General investigation and 568-page report analyzing the FBI's decision-making process in the 2016 election year. Comey stated to the Department that five factors led him to believe these extraordinary steps were warranted, and that he could not involve his boss, AG Lynch, in the announcement that the FBI's "Midyear" investigation into Clinton's emails would not charge Clinton with an offense. Comey stated that he believed he could not have any involvement with Lynch because that would cause "corrosive doubt" about the validity of the entire FBI investigation.<sup>108</sup>

First, Comey believed Lynch would be seen as corrupting the FBI's investigation because a Democrat, then President Obama, had appointed Lynch. Second, Comey pointed to Lynch's alleged decision to call the Midyear investigation a "matter," as well as a spontaneous 15-30 minute meeting between Lynch and Bill Clinton on a tarmac on June 27, 2016. However, none of these factors warrant, or really explain, the unprecedented decision by an FBI director to issue a unilateral, FBI-only statement to the public about a closed investigation, and the director purposefully spending months planning this statement while keeping his superiors in the dark. In fact, the Republican Inspector General's report called Comey's choices "extraordinary and insubordinate for Comey to do so, and we found none of his reasons to be a persuasive basis for

---

<sup>108</sup> "A Review of Various Actions"

deviating from well-established Department policies in a way intentionally designed to avoid supervision by Department leadership over his actions.”<sup>109</sup>

However, Comey outlined a fifth, crucial rationale for his massively consequential decision. Comey told investigators that he chose to completely cut out the authority figures at the Department of Justice from his choice to go straight to the media, with the Department learning of Comey’s imminent press conference on July 5 from a media inquiry that morning, due to “concerns that certain classified information mentioning Lynch would leak.”<sup>110</sup> When describing his thought process leading up to the July 5 press conference, “Comey said that he also was concerned about an issue specific to Lynch...Comey told the OIG that the FBI had obtained highly classified information in March 2016 that included allegations of partisan bias or attempts to impede the Midyear investigation by Lynch.” Multiple witnesses, including Comey, told the OIG that the FBI quickly understood that the intelligence was “not credible.”<sup>111</sup>

The Washington Post claims that the classified information was a Russian intelligence document intercepted by the FBI in March of 2016.<sup>112</sup> This document spoke of an email between the Clinton Campaign and the Justice Department. The document did not include the email itself, just communication about the contents of the purported email. Allegedly, the Chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee, Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz (DWS), emailed Leonard Benardo, a staffer at George Soros’s pro-democracy charity called the Open Society Foundation. DWS allegedly told Benardo in the email that Loretta Lynch was keeping private communications with the Clinton Campaign, with Lynch stealthily reassuring Clinton staffer

---

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Demirjian, Karoun and Devlin Barrett. “How a dubious Russian document influenced the FBI’s handling of the Clinton probe” *The Washington Post*. National Security. May 24, 2017.

Amanda Renteria that Lynch would not allow the FBI's investigation into Clinton's emails to go too far.<sup>113</sup>

The allegations strained credulity, and came from a source with a history of unsubstantiated claims. According to the OIG report, after four months of investigating, the FBI still could not find any information to corroborate the claims from the intercepted document. Comey asserted he instantly knew the document was not credible, because the Russian intelligence document also suggested that Comey himself was interfering in the Midyear investigation by trying to drag out the investigation for the Republicans' political benefit, which was untrue.

According to the Post, Lynch told the FBI she did not know and had never communicated with Renteria. Renteria told the Post that FBI investigators never even contacted her about the issue, and that she did not know and had never communicated with Attorney General Lynch. DWS said she did not know of, and had never heard of, Leonard Benardo. Benardo said he had only ever read about DWS, but had never communicated with her. The FBI dismissed the information and only discussed the issue with Lynch as a "defensive briefing," or an opportunity for her to learn ahead of time of a potentially problematic piece of intelligence in the works. The FBI did not contact Lynch, Benardo, Renteria, or DWS to conduct interviews with them about the allegations in the Russian intelligence document. Upon learning about the Russian document and her alleged role from a Post reporter, Renteria said "wow, that's kind of weird and out of left field." According to the Post, the alleged conspirators felt bewildered that they had been implicated in this confusing web connecting the Attorney General Loretta Lynch to the Clinton campaign through staffer Amanda Renteria who then spoke to DNC chair, DWS, about Lynch's

---

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

reassurances; with DWS reaching out to NGO employee Leonard Benardo with ties to George Soros.<sup>114</sup>

In the US, these connections may seem haphazard. However, according to a statement in the Post's article from Russia expert and director of the Kennan Institute at the Wilson Center, Matt Rojansky, "the idea that Russians would tell a story in which the Clinton campaign, Soros and even an Obama administration official are connected- that Russians might tell such a story, that is not at all surprising. Because that is part of the Kremlin worldview."<sup>115</sup> In 2015, Russia banned the Open Society Foundation, which was founded by Hungarian-born Wall Street hedge fund manager George Soros as a charity for promoting democracy internationally. The organization Benardo worked for, the Open Society Foundation, and the head of the campaign Renteria worked for, Hillary Clinton, "are both regarded as political enemies of the Kremlin."<sup>116</sup> Summarily, the intelligence proved unconvincing and unsubstantiated. Nonetheless, it played a critical role in the Director of the FBI breaking Department protocol, going over the heads of his superiors to do damage-control for a Russian intelligence document before it ever leaked.

The importance of this document was not that the FBI necessarily believed it was true. The importance was that the FBI understood the information was not credible, but, according to the Department of Justice report, "Comey said that he became concerned that the information about Lynch would taint the public's perception of the Midyear investigation if it leaked, particularly after DCLeaks and Guccifer 2.0 began releasing hacked emails in mid-June

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

2016.”<sup>117</sup> Essentially, Russia concocted a document that disparaged one of the highest US officials, the US attorney general, in a somewhat transparent and unsophisticated way.

Comey likely thought the document had some degree of fiction to it, but was more fearful of the document being released like other emails in the waves of hacked information being dumped by Wikileaks and unknown actors like DCLeaks and Guccifer 2.0. Comey anticipated that if online hackers leaked this document, the thoroughness and impartiality of the FBI’s Midyear investigation would be called into question. Hypothetically, people could have then pointed at the FBI and said that it kept crucial intelligence about government officials and a presidential candidate from the voting public, thus influencing the vote, which the vast majority anticipated would go in Clinton’s favor anyway. People could have said that Lynch interfered in the investigation all along, and the only reason the FBI reached the conclusion it did when it did was due to Lynch’s obstruction. Comey preemptively addressed this public uproar, holding a televised press conference in which he delivered an unprecedentedly strident critique of Clinton. He showed just how little the FBI was influenced by Lynch by unilaterally closing the investigation. Similarly, he showed just how little he was willing to protect Clinton by delivering a scathing address to the public in an election year. In Comey’s mind, he was protecting the FBI in doing so.

In Comey’s maneuver to highlight how untainted he remained by his boss’s “manipulations,” he instead performed like a puppet whose strings were pulled by the Kremlin. The Kremlin fashioned together conversations describing rumors of an original email, and transmitted it through an intelligence officer who provided bad information to the US before. In response to this underwhelming operation, one of the most trusted authority figures in the US

---

<sup>117</sup> “A Review of Various Actions”

broke bureaucratic protocol and acted in response to the potential threat of these rumors carried, elevating them to the level of reality and relevance.

This document contributed to the FBI Director purposefully acting in a way he would not towards a non-political figure by being tougher-than-usual, and more public-than-usual, to showcase how little he is swayed by the political stature of the person under investigation. In an effort to not appear to the public as easy on Clinton, influenced by Lynch, and unconcerned about top-secret intel about communication between the AG's office and the Clinton campaign, Comey was as tough on Clinton as he could be without requiring a charge. In a way, the FBI Director substantiated otherwise baseless claims by speaking and acting directly in relation to them.

They were unfounded and unimportant, but out of fear of their ability to make the FBI seem biased in its decision making, Comey purposefully made a biased choice to not seem as biased when an extreme conspiracy would come out. This contributed to the chaos surrounding politics in 2016, and potentially delivered a death blow to the Clinton campaign due to events that would unfold three months later, in October.

Again, FBI policy dictates that information about an investigation gets released when a person is charged by the FBI with a crime. If the FBI does not decide to charge a person with a crime, the public likely would never have known that the person was under investigation in the first place. There is no formal announcement of "opening" or "closing" an investigation with the FBI; either a person is charged and the public hears about it, or nothing at all. This is useful when the FBI encounters additional evidence, because it does not need to go through a procedure to announce to the public they are "reopening" a case. In the case of the FBI's Midyear investigation in 2016, however, there was such an announcement.

The FBI's usual useful precedent was not in place when the husband of Hillary Clinton's top aide had his laptop subpoenaed by the FBI under child pornography charges, and previously undiscovered emails were encountered in this process. In an October surprise for the books, less than two weeks before the election, James Comey notified Congress that he was reopening the investigation into Clinton due to the discovery of "new evidence." In the following week, critics lambasted Clinton and debated whether she would become the first sitting US President charged with a crime, and whether she could effectively do her job as president with this now ongoing investigation looming over her. This firestorm prompted yet another comment on an ongoing investigation from the FBI, with Comey telling the press two days before the election that though the FBI had not been able to completely review all the new evidence in question, the FBI would stand by its decision from July to not charge Clinton with a crime. Even with this comment, Clinton herself credits the FBI's handling of the Midyear investigation in the months before the election as one of the major factors precipitating her shocking loss in the polls.

This saga illustrates the indirect yet consequential role that Russian intervention played in American political life. First, Russian election interference influenced the narrative surrounding political figures and institutions in 2016, and was partly responsible for a political environment so caustic that the FBI director chose to break Department protocol to assuage critics in the public about an FBI investigation. Comey described a need to protect the FBI, judging that this political climate could pose an existential threat to the legitimacy of the FBI and its decisions. The Kremlin's efforts helped turn agencies like the Department of Justice and the FBI against each other, thus minimizing their power and increasing the likelihood of agencies working in their self-interest, potentially at the cost of the nation's interests.

The Kremlin's influence campaign subtly and effectively manipulated this shift in the tone and tenor of American national conversation. Additionally, the Kremlin's hacking strategy succeeded by disseminating damaging information about the Kremlin's enemies and by encouraging the public to trust in the information they found online as the true story behind the lies spread by the government. The Kremlin weaponized this trust through the threat or intimidation that any intelligence could suddenly become public, so authorities felt pressure to respond to baseless foreign propaganda in a completely new way. Unfortunately, in Comey's effort not to appear beholden to the Department of Justice and the Democrats in power, he perfectly executed elements of the Kremlin's agenda.

### Recruiting the Trump Campaign

Luke Harding served as Moscow Bureau Chief for *The Guardian* until the Russian government expelled him in 2011. According to Harding, Russia certainly opened a file on Trump in 1977, but might have started watching him even sooner. That being said, Czechoslovak spy records de-classified in 2016 indicate consistent contact between Czechoslovak spies and the father of Trump's bride, Ivana, who he married in 1977. Such records from communist Eastern bloc countries transferred to the Moscow spy agency, the KGB. The next known contact, according to Harding, came as part of a deliberate, detailed effort to endear Trump to the Soviet government in the mid-1980's.<sup>118</sup>

In his novel, "The Art of the Deal," Trump described his process of beginning negotiations on a potential real estate deal to build a Trump Tower in Moscow, "The idea got off

---

<sup>118</sup> Harding, Luke. "Collusion" November 16, 2017.



the ground after I sat next to the Soviet ambassador, Yuri Dubinin, at a luncheon held by Leonard Lauder. Dubinin's daughter, it turned out, had read about Trump Tower and knew all about it. One thing led to another, and now I'm talking about building a large luxury hotel, across the street from the Kremlin, in partnership with the Soviet government. They have asked me to go to Moscow in July."<sup>119</sup>

According to Harding, despite Trump's perception of the meeting as a happy accident, this meeting was actually the product of a "concerted effort by the Soviet Government."<sup>120</sup> Soviet Ambassador Yuri Dubinin visited Trump's office in Trump Tower in an effort to entice him into projects beneficial to the Soviet Union. According to Dubinin's daughter, who also acted as a player in the scheme to endear or recruit Trump, in the meeting Trump "melted."<sup>121</sup> After a few months, as Trump again noted in "The Art of the Deal," he received a personal invitation from the USSR to visit the country, and subsequently Trump took his first trip to Soviet Moscow with his then-wife Ivana.<sup>122</sup>

In the following decades, the Kremlin undoubtedly kept its eye on Trump, and its oligarchs frequently invested in Trump properties. The effort to make ill-gotten money look legitimate, or money laundering, is a problem for the real estate industry. Illegitimate funds can be used to purchase an expensive New York apartment or a large mansion, taking the illegitimate funds from the buyer's hands and offloading them on to the seller. Real estate is subject to relatively less regulation than other financial industries, so massive transactions involving all cash deals between potentially shady players for a price meaningfully higher than market value

---

<sup>119</sup> Trump, Donald and Tony Schwartz. "The Art of the Deal" New York, November 1, 1987.

<sup>120</sup> Gross, Terry and Luke Harding. "Journalist Investigating Trump And Russia Says 'Full Picture Is One Of Collusion'" *Fresh Air*. NPR. November 21, 2017

<sup>121</sup> Gross, Terry and Luke Harding. "Journalist Investigating"

<sup>122</sup> Trump, Donald and Tony Schwartz. "The Art of the Deal"

receives less scrutiny than similar types of transactions on the US Stock Exchange, for example. Russia provided the Trump Company with ample capital over the decades, funneling in money through Trump properties to protect stolen funds from Russia's volatile economy.

A sales officer involved with the developing and marketing of Trump towers in Florida, Jose Lima, said of Russians investing their funds in Trump properties for money laundering purposes, "they were trying to save their butts, but in fact, they were saving ours."<sup>123</sup> During the peak of the US Great Recession, which was caused in part by a rupture of the US housing bubble, creating a hostile environment for real estate and home sales for years, the Trump Corporation stayed afloat. According to Lima, this was in large part due to Russian oligarchs attempting to wash their money, so much so that Lima estimated that of the 500 Trump Tower Florida units Lima sold, one-third were purchased by Russians. According to the Washington Post, locals call the area housing Trump Towers in Florida "Little Moscow." This pattern also holds true for Trump properties in Hollywood, Florida and Panama City, Panama. When asked by a reporter how the Trump Company successfully made it through the financial crisis when nearly all the other comparable golf construction companies had to stop production, Eric Trump said, "well, we don't rely on American banks. We have all the funding we need out of Russia."<sup>124</sup> Similarly, Donald Trump Jr. said in 2008, "Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets. We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia."<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> Hamburger, Tom and Rosalind S. Helderman, Dana Priest. "In Little Moscow Russians Helped Donald Trump's Brand Survive the Recession" *The Washington Post*. November 4, 2016.

<sup>124</sup> Nguyen, Tina. "Eric Trump Reportedly Bragged About Access to \$100 Million in Russian Money" *Vanity Fair*. May 8, 2017.

<sup>125</sup> Nguyen, Tina. "Eric Trump"

An outlandish example of Russian money laundering and potential opportunities in which Russia attempted to gain Trump as an asset was the sale of Trump's tear-down Palm Beach mansion. In 2004, during the housing bubble with vastly inflated housing prices about to be met with nearly no demand among housing buyers, Donald Trump bought a Palm Beach mansion from a bankruptcy auction for \$41 million.<sup>126</sup> Trump shared with the local media his plans to renovate the mansion into a diamond in the rough. However, within three years, the housing crisis hit and Trump also went through personal financial troubles. Trump desperately needed capital, and even worse, it was discovered that the mansion was a "tear-down," covered in mold and essentially worth less than the ground it sat on.

In Trump's moment of need, with stagnant housing sales across the nation and Trump's personal default splashed across the news, a Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev bought the tear-down mansion for \$95 million. At the time, this was the most expensive real estate deal in history, for a house that was condemned to demolition. Rybolovlev never stepped inside the mansion, which later was demolished and subdivided into parcels of land for sale.<sup>127</sup> This bizarre deal epitomizes the willingness of the Trump Company to engage in shady real estate deals, and the deepening relationship between the Company and Russian oligarchy. These ties between Russian oligarch customers and the Trump business enhances the sway Putin has over Trump, even indirectly, as Russian clients make up such a meaningful portion of Trump's customer base.

Though the Kremlin and the Trump campaign did coordinate in 2016 and years prior, the Mueller investigation did not find coordination rising to the level of criminality. The Mueller report defined coordination as "an agreement-tacit or express- between the Trump Campaign and

---

<sup>126</sup> Hoffheinz, Darrell. "Trump's former estate: The story behind the \$95-million mansion tear down" *Palm Beach Daily News*. May 2, 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Hoffheinz, Darrell. "Trump's Former Estate"

the Russian government on election interference,”<sup>128</sup> Trump interacted with the Russian government on election interference, for example, with the hacking of the Clinton campaign. On July 27, 2016, Trump said in a press conference, “Russia, if you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing. I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press. Let’s see if that happens. That’ll be next.”<sup>129</sup> Reports show that Russian hackers began hacking the Hillary campaign and the DNC that night. Trump crafted a tacit agreement with Russia- if you hack Hillary to resurface her emails, you will get support in the press. Trump subsequently followed through, saying later that same day, “wouldn’t it be a great thing if we could get along with Russia.” In September of 2016, Trump said of Putin, “he’s been a leader, far more than our president has been a leader.”<sup>130</sup> Trump endeared Russia in the media, as they endeavored to supply him with the stolen emails. However, according to the Mueller report, the coordination between Trump and Russia did not reach the level of criminal conspiracy.<sup>131</sup>

For many of us, the most dishonorable crime (without bloodshed) a person could commit as President is treason. The nightmare scenario is that somehow, a foreign asset works their way up through the political process, achieving the office of the Presidency while covertly working on behalf of a foreign government. An even worse scenario is if the foreign asset President works on behalf of an enemy. An even worse still, is a scenario in which that foreign asset President readily sacrifices the good of the US to further the interests of the enemy. Cataclysmic, if that foreign asset President then uses the power of the Presidency to defend himself from investigation.

---

<sup>128</sup> Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III.

<sup>129</sup> Bump, Philip. “Donald Trump’s Falsehood-Laden Press Conference” *The Washington Post*. July 27, 2016.

<sup>130</sup> Kacynski, Andrew and Chris Massie, Nathan McDermott “80 times Trump talked about Putin” *CNN*.

<sup>131</sup> “The Surprises in the Mueller Report” *Politico Magazine*. April 19, 2019.

It bodes well for the country that a nonpartisan, esteemed investigative institution conducted a thorough investigation and consequently did not recommend to charge a sitting US president with conspiracy for coordinating and colluding. On the ten-tentacled Giant Squid that is the Russian interference campaign, coordination between Trump and Russia was one arm. The Mueller campaign did not find enough additional damning information to demand a recommendation of a coordination or conspiracy charge. America must focus on the meat of the issue: Russia's cyberattacks on the United States, and how to stop them.

## **ASSESSING MOTIVES**

### The US Intelligence Assessment of the Influence Campaign

According to the DNI report, Russian involvement in the United States election process originated from “Moscow’s longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order.”<sup>132</sup> The Russian government sought to substantiate its own narrative within Russia and around the world, promulgating propaganda about “its desires and redlines, whether on Ukraine, Syria, or relations with the United States.”<sup>133</sup> The report assessed Russia’s actions in the 2016 US presidential election as, in part, a continuation of increasingly aggressive attacks lobbed against the United States and its regional adversaries. Nonetheless, the report asserted that these actions constitute a “significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations.” The purpose of this influence campaign was “to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability

---

<sup>132</sup> “Assessing Russian Activities”

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

and potential presidency. We [intelligence officers of the NSA, CIA, and FBI] further assess Putin and the Russian Government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump.”<sup>134</sup>

### Driving Forces

The Russian influence campaign acted out a wide array of motives, discussed in detail further in this paper. Briefly, Putin sought to settle scores, boost the image of Russia relative to the US, and undermine the global democratic order. Putin aimed to denigrate the campaign and character of then-candidate Hillary Clinton, and to harm the viability of her expected election victory, so that she would have less power once elected president. Putin also sought to assist the campaign for Donald Trump, so that a vehemently pro-Russia and anti-Clinton candidate would make it further in the race. Also, Russian interference promoted the campaigns of Bernie Sanders, another rival of Hillary Clinton, to build the opposition to her expected presidency.<sup>135</sup> The interference also worked to destabilize and dismantle democracy, minimizing domestic and foreign critics of Putin’s less liberal form of government. Similarly, interference confused the ideas of human rights and liberal democratic order in people’s minds, making them seem less defined and less feasible. By blurring the lines of values and ideals, interference also sought to replace America’s moral outrage with confusion and anxiety towards Russia fulfilling an Imperialist agenda of invading and annexing certain territories.

The interference campaign aimed to sow chaos and confusion, making victims of the campaign more insecure and mistrustful of the capacity of the US government and its institutions to provide protection and effectively govern. It aimed to manufacture events in reality that would

---

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> “Assessing Russian Activities”

both substantiate and exacerbate the disillusionment of US citizens towards the US government and its institutions. The interference displayed Russia's brazenness when going toe-to-toe with the United States. Putin sees the Cold War as ongoing, just with different weapons this round. Putin sought to gain respect, fear, and victory for Russia in Cold War Part II.

According to the DNI report, the interference generated publicity for events that casted Russia in a controlling, powerful light, shifting coverage away from the national embarrassments of the Sochi Olympics Doping Scandal, the Panama Papers elite tax fraud scandal, and more.<sup>136</sup> Additionally, the campaign served to generate general publicity for Russia, after often being dismissed or belittled as a global force during the Obama administration. The interference perpetuated Putin's belief that democratic or not, all elections are "rigged," all politicians can be paid off, and all talk of virtues and human rights are a facade, masking corruption and abuses that are universal to any political system. Potentially, Putin does not truly believe this, but rather wishes to spread this belief outwards for personal gain. Lastly, the interference avenges what Putin sees as NATO and the EU's violations of promises they made before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, leading to a Great Depression in Russia worse than the US's Great Depression in the 1930's.<sup>137</sup>

These motives display Putin's conspiratorial nature, portraying a leader that lashes out and casts blame elsewhere, including for the events that were more clearly the result of Putin's personal fault, or just the confluence of bad timing and bad luck. They show a leader motivated by personal, financial gain and political prestige, rather than a set of guiding principles. They show a leader who capitalizes on the traumas in Russia's collective memory, like its Great

---

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

Depression in the 1990's, but continues to covertly exacerbate the problem through money laundering and luxurious kick-backs for his personal friends in the Russian oligarchy. Putin's mounting aggressions constitute a threat to the international viability of democratic nations, and requires a serious, global response.

### Foundations of Geopolitics: One Strategy for Global Domination

Like Putin, a man named Aleksander Dugin despaired at the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the chaos that descended over his once great homeland. Dugin despised the role the US played in the USSR's collapse, and the policies the US took part in crafting which left the former USSR's economy devastated and irreparable, similar to the way the rest of Europe left Germany to flounder after World War I. According to *The Foundations of Aleksandr Dugin's Geopolitics: Montage Fascism and Eurasianism as Blowback*, Russians hold a negative perception of the United States due to its role in supporting the USSR's alcoholic president Boris Yeltsin, failing to grant Russia membership in NATO or economic help from NATO, and growing NATO until it encroached on Russia's borders, which some Russians saw as American Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush going back on their word.<sup>138</sup> Russia's state-controlled media pedaled out this message targeting the US as a scapegoat for Russia's problems, resulting in a generation of Russians like Dugin and Putin who have long held a dogma of anti-Westernism.

Dugin plays a role in Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential election through his book, *Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia*, published in 1997.

---

<sup>138</sup> Fellows, Grant Scott, "The Foundations of Aleksandr Dugin's Geopolitics: Montage Fascism and Eurasianism as Blowback" (2018).



According to a scholar of Russian fascism and its far-right movement: “There probably has not been another book published in Russia during the post-communist period that has exerted an influence on Russian military, police, and statist foreign policy elites comparable to that of Aleksandr Dugin's 1997 neo-fascist treatise, *Foundations of Geopolitics*.”<sup>139</sup> As of 2016, *Foundations of Geopolitics* continued to be required reading at military universities, including the General Staff Academy, and assigned as a textbook.<sup>140</sup>

In part, Dugin’s book attempted to create a distinct, albeit fascist and nationalist, diplomatic strategy for Russia after the vacuum of international policy left by Yeltsen’s administration. Reports vary about the extent to which Dugin’s writings informed Putin as he worked his way up the KGB. Nonetheless, Dugin’s book, “published at a crucial time in Russian history and taught to many senior military leaders in the Russian Armed Forces at the General Staff Academy Dugin’s ideas—or perhaps more accurately—the montage of ideas he’s stitched together from disparate, authoritarian intellectual materials, have been influential, or at least superficially appropriated by the Kremlin and the Russian armed forces.”<sup>141</sup>

With regard to Europe, Dugin advocated for the rise of “continental” European and Asian powers through alliances with Moscow, creating a Eurasia-Russia center of power. Dugin advocated for Moscow to rise again as the “third Rome,” gaining global dominance with Russia absorbing Finland, Romania, Macedonia, “Serbia Bosnia,” Greece, and most crucially, ending Ukraine’s independence. Dugin recommended establishing Germany as the dominant regional force through which Russia could exercise a “Moscow-Berlin axis.” France would partner with Germany to form a Franco-German bloc, thus putting power in the hands of continental Europe

---

<sup>139</sup> Dunlop, John. “Aleksandr Dugin’s *Foundations of Geopolitics*,” *Demokratizatsiya*, January 31, 2004,

<sup>140</sup> Charles Clover, “The Unlikely Origins of Russia's Manifest Destiny,” *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2016,

<sup>141</sup> Fellows, Grant S. “The Foundations”

and away from the “Atlantic” power of Britain. Estonia would transfer into Germany’s hands. Dugin advocated for dismantling the European Union and displacing the United Kingdom as a regional force by cutting its ties and isolating it from continental Europe.<sup>142</sup>

Debatably, Germany currently stands as the dominant force in Europe, with the largest economy and a critical role in the EU. France is its next closest ally in the EU, forming a kind of “Franco-German bloc.” Russia interfered in France and Germany’s election systems in 2015, fanning far-right political movements in both, which would grow to challenge the pro-Western, anti-Kremlin establishment in France and Germany. In the 2015 British referendum over Britain leaving the European Union, Russia interfered in its election system with tactics that Russia would later replicate in the 2016 US Presidential election. Russia’s influence operation in Britain, like its influence operation in the US, succeeded, and Britain voted to leave the European Union, thus limiting its power in Europe and the European Union’s power as a bloc. Lastly, Russian forces occupied and annexed Eastern Ukraine and Crimea in 2014, after successfully electing pro-Kremlin Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich in 2010, though he was ousted by the 2014 Maidan Revolution. In the last two decades since “Foundations” was published, Russia at least partially succeeded or made progress in its objectives for Ukraine, Britain, France and Germany.

With regard to the Middle East, Dugin promoted creating a “Moscow-Tehran axis,” with Iran as Russia’s main ally in the region, through which Russia could exercise influence through a “continental Russian-Islamic alliance.” Among other policy suggestions, Dugin stressed Russia end Georgia’s independence and absorb it. Dugin advocated for Russia to shake pro-Western

---

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

Turkey through “geopolitical shocks” inciting upsets between Armenians and Kurds. Dugin sought a divided Turkey and an ally in the region of Iran, goals which succeeded over time.<sup>143</sup>

Most notable in the Middle East was Dugin’s aim for the division and reabsorption of Georgia. In 2008, tensions between Georgia and Russia escalated into the Russo-Georgian War, in which Georgia fought against Russia and Russian-backed but internationally-unrecognized separatist states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This brutal conflict involved information warfare, and was the first documented conflict where cyberattacks coincided with military warfare. Eleven years before Russia’s interference campaign in the US election system, it honed its communication strategies to reclaim the narrative over the Russo-Georgian War. With regard to Eastern and Southern Asia, Dugin advocated for China to expand its influence through south-east Asian countries, like Vietnam and the Philippines, while Russia would expand east to secure a continental European-Asian empire. Russia’s interference in the US election allowed it to boost the anti-trade, anti-Trans-Pacific-Partnership platform, thus accomplishing more of Dugin’s suggested end.<sup>144</sup>

Most notably, Dugin advised Russia to “introduce geopolitical disorder into internal American activity, encouraging all kinds of separatism and ethnic, social and racial conflicts, actively supporting all dissident movements - extremist, racist, and sectarian groups, thus destabilizing internal political processes in the U.S. It would also make sense simultaneously to support isolationist tendencies in American politics.”<sup>145</sup> Dugin suggested using Russia’s expertise in covert operations to conduct a campaign on American soil to incite turmoil and

---

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Dunlop, John. "Aleksandr Dugin's Foundations of Geopolitics" (PDF). *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*. Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (George Washington University). 12(1): 41. ISSN 1074-6846. OCLC 222569720. Archived from the original (PDF) on 7 June 2016.

divisiveness in the US. Dugin specifically suggested harnessing the vitriol of racists to ostracize African Americans.

According to Oxford's *Computational Propaganda Research Project on The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018*, Russia's IRA executed a piece of Dugin's suggestions. The IRA sought to twist the knife of racial injustices experienced by African Americans, exploiting police shootings and brutality, for example, in order to get African Americans to feel too disillusioned to show up to vote.<sup>146</sup> Dugin postulated that by highlighting existing fractures in American society, covert Russian influencers could turn America in on itself, causing it to self-cannibalize until it manufactured its own demise.

In the last two decades since *Foundations* was published, Russia has made significant strides in accomplishing the plan for domination outlined by Dugin. Though Dugin's work does not necessarily speak for Putin's intentions, it does provide an accurate picture of the goals outlined to establishment and military leaders in terms of propelling Russia back onto the global arena. It provides context for the environment within which Putin crafted the Russian cyberattack campaigns that proliferated the last decade. In Russian political and military circles, figures at least have been taught a defined path to avenge Russia's humiliation at the end of the 19th century by fostering Russian alliances with key countries, breaking up pre-existing international coalitions, and destroying "Atlantic" powers of Britain and the US by severing Britain from the EU and exploiting social divisions in the US.

### The Trace Evidence of Putin's Worldview

---

<sup>146</sup> "The IRA, Social Media"

Russia suffered a string of humiliations over the last two decades. Its leader since 1996, Vladimir Putin, a man now synonymous with his country, felt the geopolitical events that damaged Russia as resounding blows to his own person. Hillary Clinton described how she understands the world through Putin's eyes from a story he once told her. In this story, a ragged man returns home from the War, stumbling through the streets to finally return home to his family. It was not unusual at the time for bombings and airstrikes to rattle the town, so he was not shocked to see a pile of bodies in the street from an explosion soon before he arrived. However, he was stunned to see a shoe poking out of the pile, his wife's shoe. The man becomes frantic, yelling "that's my wife! That's my wife's shoe!" as he scrambled to extricate his wife's seemingly lifeless body from the rubble. Guards carrying rifles yelled at him, trying to shoo him away. But at last he was able to break away with his wife's body, carrying her back to their apartment in the outskirts of the city. From there he nursed the woman back from the brink of death, and two years later, she gave birth to her oldest son, named Vladimir Putin. Hillary Clinton believed that in Putin's origin story, he saw himself as his father, and Mother Russia as his mother. All but left for dead in the rubble left behind by a crippling war, Putin saw himself as espousing the valuable and still flickering light in Russia, fighting to dig it out of the rubble and bring it back to its former glory.<sup>147</sup>

Little is known about Putin's early childhood. He provided for his young family through his station as a Russian Intelligence officer through its intelligence institution at the time, the "KGB." The KGB stationed Putin in Eastern Germany in the 1980's, which was a relatively unglamorous post. While Western German cities like Berlin were filled with intrigue and responsibility for KGB officers, Eastern Germany proved more stagnant. However, this post

---

<sup>147</sup> Clinton, Hillary. *Active Measures*. Directed by Jack Bryan. August 31, 2018.

crucially centered Putin's life at the time around a divided Germany, embodied by the Berlin Wall.<sup>148</sup>

East Germany benefited from its proximity to West Germany, and was prodded along the way towards economic recovery post 1996. However, the fragmented USSR rapidly descended into maddened chaos, with vast sections of the former country's wealth being cordoned off to a few oligarchs with powerful connections. In the frenzy, all hope of achieving a democratic solution in post-USSR states dissolved, with graft and desperation filling the void of the fragmented bureaucracy. A handful of oligarchs who were at the right place at the right time cemented for themselves and their posterity lifetimes of unimaginable wealth. Meanwhile, the rest of post-USSR citizens watched their life savings and their public institutions crumble to dust, launching their futures into uncertainty and existential peril.<sup>149</sup>

Though the communist experiment was flawed, it did provide Russians with a reliable social safety net and the idea that the society as a whole would never allow one of its members to fail. The dissolution of the USSR turned this reassurance on its head, often pitting neighbor against neighbor, sowing mistrust and disgust in Russians for their homeland, Russia. The bedlam and embarrassment that Russians saw in their day-to-day reality they also saw abounding within the top echelons of power in Russia. Russians, notably Putin, felt deeply ashamed of their new president, Boris Yeltsen, who was roundly considered incompetent at policy matters and a bumbling drunk in person. Unfortunate incidents like the alcoholic president falling off a stage at a press appearance with American President Bill Clinton struck an even deeper chord for Russians, symbolizing the stunning disgrace that Russia found itself in.<sup>150</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> "Reagan challenges Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall" *History*. March 5, 2019.

<sup>149</sup> *Active Measures*. Directed by Jack Bryan.

<sup>150</sup> Clover, Charles. "The Unlikely Origins of Russia's Manifest Destiny" *Foreign Policy*. July 27, 2016.

Putin was traumatized, along with the rest of his countrymen, by Russia's relatively sudden fall from grace. While the rest of the world might reflect on the fall of the Berlin Wall as a triumphant moment in history, Putin saw its collapse as one of the greatest tragedies of the 21st century. He endeavored to restore Russia to its former global standing, and cunningly navigated the somewhat boozy and corrupt bureaucracy to reach the station of the Presidency in 1996. Beyond a period of four years in which Putin engaged in presidential powers through the role of the Prime Minister with a close ally as the puppet-President from 2004-2008, Putin has controlled Russia as its President for decades.

Through this era of Putin at the helm of Russia, the country has switched directions from its western-embracing style under Yeltsin to an effective autocracy. A network of oligarchs dutiful to Putin control vast sections of the country's resources, with government interactions notable for their money-for-action nature. With Putin holding the purse strings of the network of oligarchs' vast collections of wealth, some financial publications like Forbes consider Putin as the wealthiest man on earth. As Putin said in a 2008 press conference, however, "the worst addiction of all is power."<sup>151</sup> Though Putin lives and works from a series of imperial palaces, critiques of his Presidency focus more on his brash grabs for power rather than a compulsion for money.

Such jolts to amass power include jailing protesters in 2004, jailing journalists beginning in 2005, allegedly ordering the assassinations of journalists in 2008, allegedly ordering the planting of bombs and execution of terror attacks throughout Moscow during his first week as President to instigate an increased appropriation of Presidential power in 2004, allegedly ordering the assassinations of political adversaries in Russia and Ukraine, using the army to quell

---

<sup>151</sup> "Transcript of Annual Big Press Conference" *The Kremlin, Moscow*. President of Russia. February 14, 2008.

uprisings in Russia during the Orange Revolution of 2004, killing 25, and as a continuation of the Arab Spring in 2008, killing 26.<sup>152</sup> Under his control, independent election auditors have downgraded the election purity to the qualification of being of dubious certainty, in other words, as rigged. Subsequently, Putin jailed independent election auditors. Additional grabs to power include a war with Georgia in 2008, the support of Syrian despot Assad, recruiting Ukrainian scientists to increase its collection of nuclear weapons, and more.

In the period of international policy under President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2004-2010, Putin was known as a consistent bad actor. However, Russia itself was not commonly regarded as a significant threat. In fact, in the third nationally broadcasted presidential debate of 2010 between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, Obama dealt what was subsequently called the death blow to the Romney campaign, casting him as so cataclysmically out of touch that his run for president never recovered. In the debate, Obama mentioned a quote from Romney's book written in 2010, with Obama saying, "when you were asked, what's the biggest geopolitical threat facing America, you said 'Russia.' Not Al-Qaeda; you said Russia. And, the 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back, because, the Cold War's been over for 20 years."<sup>153</sup> The attack sucked the air out of the room, leaving Romney stuttering and the audience compelled in Obama's favor.

Regardless of whether Russia was actually a significant geopolitical threat to the United States in 2010, the crux of the matter is that the idea of Russia as a meaningful force in Western life was laughable, and so preposterous that it sealed a bid for Presidency. Putin became notably enraged when Obama called Russia a regional force in 2010, alluding to Russia having minimal

---

<sup>152</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Russia" 2017.

<sup>153</sup> Kessler, Glenn. "Flashback: Obama's debate zinger" *The Washington Post*. March 20, 2014.



and contained power, not forceful enough to bear much relevance to the United States. Once a global superpower vying for power neck-in-neck with the United States, Russia, with Putin at its helm, was laughed off, the butt of the joke in the 21st century. These slights were not military attacks on Russia's geopolitical integrity, but were similarly shattering for Russia's stuttering social psyche. Russia no longer faced the existential peril omnipresent the previous war-addled century, but it faced the loss of its relevance, potency, and national spirit.

From the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the "regional power" comment, Putin's legitimacy went through several humiliations. Putin's regime became the object of scandal in the fallouts of the Panama Papers and Olympic doping scandal.<sup>154</sup> Putin publicly described these scandals as American-led efforts to smear Russia's reputation. One motive for Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election was Putin's embarrassment about these scandals, and his desire to unearth similarly damning information on US politicians and the US political process. In theory, these revelations might exact an eye-for-an-eye type justice, and show the hypocrisy Putin saw as latent in the US.

### *Putin's Vendetta for Clinton*

Putin aimed to discredit Clinton in the way he felt his leadership was threatened by her. Putin publicly asserted that Clinton organized the mass protests that threatened his regime in 2011 and 2012, during the Arab Spring. These attacks sought to fulfill Putin's personal agendas: personal vindication for perceived misdeeds done to Putin's legitimacy by Hillary Clinton, as well as a personal preference for Trump and his political strategy. The report ties Russia's

---

<sup>154</sup> "Assessing Russian Actions"

attacks to Putin's public claims that then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton riled up the Russian people and turned them against then-Prime Minister Putin.

Russia's leadership experienced "mass protests against his [Prime Minister Putin and his close associate, President Dmitry Medvedev] regime in late 2011 and early 2012."<sup>155</sup> The global climate boiled in 2010 as the Arab Spring spread throughout Eurasia.<sup>156</sup> Putin faced an unprecedented scale and fervor of political protests since he first gained leadership a decade prior. Both domestic and international public opinion turned sour after parliamentary elections that left Putin's party -United Russia- extremely vulnerable.

Putin publicly claimed that Clinton questioned the honesty and fairness of the election results before she had personally seen them. In doing so, Putin said, "she set the tone for some actors in our country and gave them a signal. They heard the signal and with the support of the U.S. State Department began active work."<sup>157</sup> Putin perceived Clinton as inciting the protesters and contributing to the funding of Putin's opposition. Despite numerous claims of campaign abuses, ballot meddling, and electoral fraud, United Russia's opposition nearly toppled Putin's party's majority. With Putin and his party already in a vulnerable position, protesters decried Putin and the election in demonstrations and on social media. Perhaps to avoid the full-blown revolutions unfurling in neighboring countries, Russian authorities stifled unrest by arresting hundreds of protesters, equipping police officers with riot gear, and flooding public squares with pro-Putin counter-protesters.

---

<sup>155</sup> Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution" *Intelligence Community Assessment*. January 6, 2017. P. 1

<sup>156</sup> Herskenhorn, David and Ellen Barry. "United Russia Leads in Elections, But Its Majority Shrinks" *The New York Times*. December 4, 2011.

<sup>157</sup> Herskehorn, David and Ellen Barry. "United Russia"

When questioned by the press five days after the Russian election, Clinton did not personally mention Putin. She said that the United States valued its relationship with Russia, but “at the same time, the United States and many others around the world have a strong commitment to democracy and human rights. It’s part of who we are. It’s our values. And we expressed concerns that we thought were well founded about the conduct of the elections. And we are supportive of the rights and aspirations of the Russian people to be able to make progress and to realize a better future for themselves, and we hope to see that unfold in the years ahead.”<sup>158</sup> This comment by Clinton was one of several that Putin perceived as downplaying the legitimacy and esteem of Putin.<sup>159</sup> It added to a growing list of grievances of Putin towards the US’s superciliousness about democracy, the Obama presidency, the potentially hollow nature of the campaign for a “reset with Russia,” and with Secretary of State Clinton in particular.

Another portentous moment was the Libyan revolution, resulting in the violent and video-recorded murder of its dictator, Moamar Gaddafi, in October of 2011. The video horrified Putin, who replayed the video of the mob’s assault several times.<sup>160</sup> A US intelligence assessment concluded that the video deeply impacted Putin, who blamed himself for not protecting Gaddafi better. In contrast, between televised interviews Clinton famously laughed and proclaimed, “we came, we saw, he died” upon hearing unconfirmed reports of Gaddafi’s death.<sup>161</sup> The murder of Gaddafi and several of his family members occurred two months before the highly contested elections in Russia. The geopolitical events occurring in 2011 provide a

---

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Crowley, Michael and Julia Ioffe. “Why Putin hates Hillary” *Politico*. July 25, 2016.

<sup>160</sup> Hersh, Seymour “Military to Military” *London Review of Books* vol. 38 N. 1, January 7, 2016.

<sup>161</sup> Shane, Scott and Jo Becker, Jo “A New Libya, With Very Little Time Left” *The New York Times*. February 28, 2016.

more complete picture of the fears and animosities growing with Russia's newfound vulnerability, and the United States' persistent boldness.

### *Putin's Scheme for After the Election*

Putin, like most others, anticipated that Clinton would win the Presidency in 2016. Therefore, in the months prior to the election, Russia's troll farms prepared a barrage of tweets and social media accounts focused on the illegitimacy of Clinton's presidency and her "rigged" and "unfair" victory.<sup>162</sup> Russia directed its efforts on undercutting her anticipated victory, seeking to rile political upheaval during the vulnerable transfer of power process. It is difficult to overstate the onslaught that would have proceeded after an election victory for Clinton.

According to the DNI report, a few months before the election, when it appeared likely that Clinton would be the next president, Putin redirected the influence campaign towards "undercutting Secretary Clinton's legitimacy and crippling her presidency from its start, including by impugning the fairness of the election. Before the election, Russian diplomats had publicly denounced the US electoral process and were prepared to publicly call into question the validity of the results. Pro-Kremlin bloggers had prepared a Twitter campaign, #DemocracyRIP, on election night in anticipation of Secretary Clinton's victory."<sup>163</sup> The force that carried the news coverage and public uproar about Clinton's private email server, role in the Benghazi consulate attack, and favor she received from the Democratic National Convention over her competing Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, would have continued to imperil the legitimacy

---

<sup>162</sup> "Assessing Russian Activities"

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

of her leadership, along with the new charge of having rigged her presidency as part of a powerful, coastal, liberal elite with sprawling control over rural, real America. A sizeable American opposition of Clinton, a Russian troll army, FBI Director James Comey's public upbraid of Clinton, and a Republican-controlled House of Representatives and Senate spelled a challenging presidential term for Clinton.

However, Trump won, to Moscow and the rest of the world's surprise. Putin halted the negative publicity aimed at the US election, clearly anticipating to derive so much benefit from a Trump presidency that it was worth cooperating with the Trump White House and scrapping all the media scorn pre-ready to decry the "rigged election." Putin anticipated a Clinton victory, and he planned to use her victory to accomplish two goals: denigrate Clinton's legitimacy and destabilize the democratic system. When Trump won, Putin could have continued on with the latter half of his plan, to destabilize the democratic system by tasking his troll army to churn out allegations that the US conducted a rigged or unfair election in 2016.<sup>164</sup> Putin could not attack Clinton's legitimacy because she emerged from the election with no title, but he *chose* not to lambast the election system. Putin sacrificed the latter half of his plan because he thought he could so benefit from a Trump presidency that it was not worth taking the shot at the US in its moment of political vulnerability and tumult. Putin expected to earn more from a Trump presidency than he would gain by finishing his years-long plan and decrying a US election's fairness.

### *Putin's Preference for Trump*

---

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

Aside from Putin's renowned personal dislike and perhaps intimidation by Clinton, Putin maintained some political reasons to support one of her opponents in the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump. The DNI report mentions that Putin likely avoided openly endorsing Trump out of a fear that a Kremlin endorsement would push US voters away from Trump. However, Putin and officials in his political orbit championed Trump's willingness to collaborate with Russia, as opposed to Clinton's "aggressive rhetoric."<sup>165</sup>

Putin knew Clinton's stance on foreign policy and anti-terrorism coalitions from their interactions during the Obama presidencies. Trump took a hard stance on terrorism, often speaking in unequivocal terms about the need to rid the world of all terrorist cells using any means necessary. According to journalist Seymour M. Hersh, a White House insider with connections to dealings with Russia said "before 9/11 Putin 'used to say to us: "We have the same nightmares about different places." He was referring to his problems with the caliphate in Chechnya and our early issues with al-Qaida."<sup>166</sup> Putin maintained a compelling interest in extreme measures to counter terrorism in Russia and its surrounding region. Putin saw a Trump presidency as more conducive to forming a coalition to fight Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Eurasia.<sup>167</sup> The civil war embroiling Syria frightened and motivated Putin. Putin feared Russia's proximity to the growing Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its strongholds in Syria, and saw Trump's strongman foreign policy stance as more likely to produce bold anti-terrorism measures, like creating an international counterterrorism coalition.

Putin's political orbit consists of an oligarchy of Russian families with business and political connections that push a pro-Putin agenda when desired. Putin, in the language of the

---

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Hersh, Seymour. "Military to Military"

<sup>167</sup>"Assessing Russian Activities"

DNI report, “has had many positive experiences working with Western political leaders whose business interests made them more disposed to deal with Russia, such as former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.”<sup>168</sup>

Additionally, to journalist Oliver Bullough, a key reason why the governments of post-Soviet Union nations developed not into democracies, but “authoritarian governments... dominated by these anti-democratic elites, these kleptocrats, oligarchs, people who really stole a huge amount of the country’s resources,”<sup>169</sup> was the anti-democratic ability for a certain class of citizens to hoard money through offshore bank accounts, shell corporations, and embezzlement of government funds. Bullough contends that these schemes aimed to grant privileged citizens an exception from the foundational social contract- that a citizenry pays taxes in exchange for goods and services provided for the benefit of the citizenry living in that country.

However, the privileged citizens still want to enjoy the benefits provided by the group’s taxes, but just to not have to contribute as an individual. To Bullough, this stolen money counterweights the social balance maintained through democracy, tipping the scales against oversight and equality in government.<sup>170</sup> With the US as one of the most popular destinations for storing stolen international funds due to its simple process for setting up shell companies and its low default risk, and with Russian oligarchs having perfected the process for stealing and siphoning off national funds into more private, secure locations, Putin and his oligarchs likely felt concern about the policies Clinton would set under her administration.

Trump notoriously refused to follow precedent to release his personal tax returns, later suing US House Democrats and Trump’s accounting firm to prevent them from being obtained

---

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Gross, Terry and Oliver Bullough. “ ‘Moneyland’ Reveals How Oligarchs, Kleptocrats and Crooks Stash Fortunes” *Fresh Air*, NPR

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

through the House’s subpoena. In a televised presidential debate, after candidate Clinton accused Trump of not paying federal income tax, Trump replied “that makes me smart.”<sup>171</sup> Trump embraces the anti-democratic philosophy used by Putin and the Russian oligarchy to justify taking national funds for personal gain, and then transferring them out of the national market through financial tricks to hide the stolen funds and make them more difficult for them to be retrieved. Trump’s statements imply that the Kremlin’s funds would stay safe in the US.

### *Putin’s Plan for Democracy*

The influence campaign also sought to achieve the national interest of raising Russia’s domestic and global esteem. The morally superior reactions to Russian elections, especially as Putin extended his reign over the span of decades, threatened Putin’s legitimacy at home and abroad. According to the DNI report, Putin and those in his political orbit see the “promotion” of the “US-led liberal democratic order” as antithetical to the advancement and success of Putin and Russia’s power.<sup>172</sup> Also, with viral YouTube videos depicting blatant ballot tampering, as well as reports from election security officials from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe describing outright election fraud, the promotion of democratic ideals jeopardizes the legitimacy of the current leadership regime in Russia.<sup>173</sup>

Additionally, according to the DNI report, other damaging moments for Putin came from the release of the “Panama Papers” and evidence of the doping scandal that embarrassingly changed the narrative for Russia and Sochi’s home Olympic games. Putin perceived these

---

<sup>171</sup> Reilly, Katie. “New York Is Trying to Release Trump’s State Tax Returns. Here’s Why That Might Not Work” *Time Politics*. April 10, 2019.

<sup>172</sup> “Assessing Russia’s Actions”

<sup>173</sup> Schwartz, Michael and Herszenhorn, David M. “In Russia”



revelations as events organized by the United States in an effort to malign Russia. These instances of leaked or hacked information that damaged faith in Russia's political system bear striking similarity to ensuing hacks of the Democratic National Committee emails in the lead-up to the 2016 election.

### Promoting Far-Right Candidates

During the run-up to the elections in 2014-2016 in France, Germany, the Brexit referendum in Great Britain, the United States, some noted a sharp increase in far-right or alt-right sentiment.<sup>174</sup> Political candidates like Marine le Penn of France campaigned on a platform of anti-globalism, xenophobia, and conservatism. Each of the alt-right candidates or campaigns obtained some support from Putin. Though he held back from directly endorsing some candidates for fear this would actually turn potential voters away, Putin often provided financial support, directed his social media army to their aid, or leaked damaging information about their opponents.

Potentially, Putin responded in this way to alt-right candidates for two reasons. One, because he wants to show the hypocrisy of democratic countries for claiming moral high-ground but acting the same, behind closed doors, as the governments they oppose. Second, Putin wants to change the international perception of democracy so that Russians and people in democratic countries believe that all elections are "rigged," all politicians can be bought, and that there is no such thing as a country with honest politics and politicians. This would serve to demote the notion of democracy and truth, and decrease the potential for dissatisfaction within Russia out of

---

<sup>174</sup> Apuzzo, Matt and Adam Satariano. "Russia Is Targeting"

comparison to Western countries. Third, Putin aims to tarnish or destroy the role of “values” and liberal ideals in international politics. According to journalist and former Moscow Bureau Chief for the Guardian, Luke Harding, Putin resents what he sees as trivial or disingenuous protests by the West about the Russian government’s record on human rights and democratic ideals. He wishes to return to the 19th century Imperial Era, where hegemonic global powers met to discuss the divisions of land and money, with little importance placed on discussing journalist assassinations or a country’s political prisoners.

## **CONCLUSION**

The story of Russian interference in the 2016 US election system is not one of a mighty and competent country led by a mastermind to fix a US election. The story is of this strange moment in time, where the third great social revolution- the information revolution, following the agricultural and industrial revolutions- charges forward like a tsunami, fundamentally changing the way that humans operate and relate to one another.<sup>175</sup> Within the span of many people’s lifetimes, information technology (IT) has drastically altered the way people do business, spend leisure time, and recently: the way countries conduct governance and the way they wage war.

Within the last decade, China utilized IT to develop an Orwellian surveillance state, forming a government that almost constantly monitors its citizens’ activity. Also in that time

---

<sup>175</sup> Yoneji Masuda (1985) Three Great Social Revolutions: Agricultural, Industrial, and Informational, Prometheus, 3:2, 269-274, DOI: 10.1080/08109028508628999

period, Russia has conducted cyberoperations on over a dozen countries. Over a decade ago, the tiny but techy country of Estonia switched to online elections. IT weaved itself into the basic functions of government is the inescapable reality of this period of time. Currently, countries take part in an even more expansive Space Race- the race to develop the most impenetrable government servers, the best environments to attract technology development and talent, to claim market-share of technological products like 5G internet, to amass the largest data stores, and to develop the best cyberweapons. This IT Race will crown the next global superpowers.

How the United States chooses to respond to this challenge, which was epitomized with Russia's interference in its election system, sets the trajectory for its future. As distressing as the Trump administration's ties to Russia are, there are several more pressing issues exposed by Russia's interference. How should a government police and monitor the online activity of its own citizens? How should it do so for foreign allies, or for foreign enemies? How do we incorporate the Constitution and foundational American principles into cyberspace? What are effective diplomatic responses to cyberattacks? How can we buffer our national defenses against cyberattacks, propaganda, and fake news? Countries like Italy have responded to fake news corrupting their elections by teaching how to identify legitimate information to students in school. Countries like Russia have embraced the promise of Artificial Intelligence by incorporating AI in school curriculums. How will the US respond?

According to cybersecurity and intelligence journalist Dustin Volz, "Russia is the hurricane, but China is global warming," meaning that Russia conducted a damaging and serious attack on US cyberspace, but China poses an imminent, systemic threat to the way of life in the US and abroad. Russian interference bears importance because of the damage it did and the vulnerabilities it exposed in the US, and because it forced the US to confront the ongoing threat

of cyberwarfare technology aimed at the US and other democratic systems. The tactics Russia used to interfere in the US 2016 election will reoccur, according to American national security experts. But other adversaries of the US, like China or Iran, could also exploit these tactics, or more sophisticated ones, on the US and its allies. Americans citizens or US companies could engage in technological homegrown-terrorism, using Russia's tactics on fellow Americans.

The even larger issue at hand is that, in the words of from the Edward Lucas, Senior VP at Center for European Policy Analysis, "what is true both of what we loosely call the cyberworld and the intelligence world is that open societies have a disadvantage and closed societies like China have an advantage."<sup>176</sup> Democratic countries exerting less control over the Internet maintain the risk of foreign enemies filling that vacuum of control with their tactics for using the online space to manipulate and take advantage of its users. China has demonstrated an interest in expanding its IT control globally, pitching its surveillance system to a group of world leaders during the Beijing Olympics in 2012. Its frenzied effort to install the "5G" internet framework in African countries portends a showdown in the future between the incumbent global superpower of the US, leading the liberal democratic order, and the challenging global superpower of China, and its network of closed societies interconnected through Chinese IT. In this looming clash, where closed societies hold the advantage of unfettered access to the group's technology and data, how will the liberal-democratic order protect democracy to survive the advent of non-democratic machines?

---

176

Lucas, Edward with Meghna Chakrabarti, "Why Intelligence Officials Say China Is Becoming The U.S.'s Biggest Security Threat" *On Point. NPR*. May 6, 2019.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

"A Review of Various Actions by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice in Advance of the 2016 Election". Office of the Inspector General. DOJ OIG.

Abramowitz, Alan. 2010. *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Almond, Gabriel A., and Sydney Verba. 1960. *Civic Culture Study, 1959-1960* [Computer file]. ICPSR07201-v2. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2009-02-12.

Andrew Higgins; Andrew E. Kramer; Steven Erlanger (23 February 2014). "As His Fortunes Fell in Ukraine, a President Clung to Illusions". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 12 March 2015.

Apuzzo, Matt and Adam Satariano. "Russia Is Targeting Europe's Elections. So Are Far-Right Copycats." *The New York Times*. May 12, 2019.

Atherton, Kelsey "It's not just elections: Russia hacked the US electric grid" *Vox*. March 28, 2018

"Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution" *Intelligence Community Assessment*. January 6, 2017.

Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution" *Intelligence Community Assessment*. January 6, 2017. P. 1

Barbaro, Michael. "A Founder of Facebook Says It's Time to Break It Up" *The Daily, New York Times*. May 10, 2019.

Brattberg, Erik & Tim Maurer. (2018). "Russian Election Interference – Europe's Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.; Burgess, Matt. (2017, November 10).

Bump, Philip. "Donald Trump's Falsehood-Laden Press Conference" *The Washington Post*. July 27, 2016.

Burr, Richard, Mark Warner, Susan Collins, Martin Heinrich, and James Lankford. "Senate Intel Committee Releases Unclassified 1<sup>st</sup> Installment in Russia Report, Updated Recommendations on Election Security" May 8, 2018.

Charles Clover, "The Unlikely Origins of Russia's Manifest Destiny," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2016,

Chen, Adrian. "The Agency" *The New York Times Magazine*. June 2, 2015.

Clint Watts (26 October 2015) Russia returns as al Qaeda and the Islamic State's 'Far Enemy'. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. Available at: <http://www.fpri.org/2015/10/russia-returns-as-al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-states-far-enemy/>

Clinton, Hillary. *Active Measures*. Directed by Jack Bryan. August 31, 2018.

Clover, Charles. "The Unlikely Origins of Russia's Manifest Destiny" *Foreign Policy*. July 27, 2016.

Conley, Heather. *Active Measures*. Directed by Jack Bryan, 2018

Cornell, Svante. "Georgia feels Russia's heavy hand" *The Guardian. Opinion*. June 17, 2009.

Crowley, Michael and Julia Ioffe. "Why Putin hates Hillary" *Politico*. July 25, 2016.

"Cyber Attacks: An Unprecedented Threat to U.S. National Security" Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats. 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, March 21, 2013, Serial No. 113-8

Davis, Joshua. "Hackers Take Down The Most Wired Country in Europe" *Wired Business*. August 21, 2007.

Demirjian, Karoun and Devlin Barrett. "How a dubious Russian document influenced the FBI's handling of the Clinton probe" *The Washington Post*. National Security. May 24, 2017.

Dunlop, John. "Aleksandr Dugin's Foundations of Geopolitics" (PDF). *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*. Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (George Washington University). 12(1): 41. ISSN 1074-6846. OCLC 222569720. Archived from the original (PDF) on 7 June 2016.

Fellows, Grant Scott, "The Foundations of Aleksandr Dugin's Geopolitics: Montage Fascism and Eurasianism as Blowback" (2018).

Fineout, Gary. "Florida election officials dispute Mueller report of Russian hack" *Politico*. April 18, 2019.

Frankovic, Kathy. "Belief in conspiracy theories depends largely on which side of the spectrum you fall on" *YouGov*. November 27, 2016

Gee, Taylor. "15 October Surprises That Wreaked Havoc on Politics" *Politico Magazine*. October 4, 2016.

Gigova, Radina. "Who Vladimir Putins thinks will rule the world" *CNN*. September 2, 2017.

Greenberg, Andy. "How An Entire Nation Became Russia's Test Lab for Cyberwar" *Wired*. Security. June 20, 2017

Gross, Terry and Andy Greenberg. "Experts Suspect Russia Is Using Ukraine As A Cyberwar Testing Ground" *Fresh Air*. NPR. June 22, 2017

Gross, Terry and Luke Harding. "Journalist Investigating Trump And Russia Says 'Full Picture Is One Of Collusion'" *Fresh Air*. NPR. November 21, 2017.

Gross, Terry and Oliver Bullough. "'Moneyland' Reveals How Oligarchs, Kleptocrats and Crooks Stash Fortunes" *Fresh Air*, NPR

Hakim, Danny and Matthew Rosenberg. "Data Firm Tied to Trump Campaign Talked Business With Russians" *The New York Times*. March 17, 2018.

Hamburger, Tom and Rosalind S. Helderman, Dana Priest. "In Little Moscow Russians Helped Donald Trump's Brand Survive the Recession" *The Washington Post*. November 4, 2016.

Harding, Luke. "Collusion" November 16, 2017.

Hersh, Seymour "Military to Military" *London Review of Books* vol. 38 N. 1, January 7, 2016.

Herskenhorn, David and Ellen Barry. "United Russia Leads in Elections, But Its Majority Shrinks" *The New York Times*. December 4, 2011.

Higgins, Andrew and Andrew E. Kramer. "Archrival Is Freed as Ukrainian Leader Flees" *The New York Times*. February 22, 2014.

Higgins, Andrew and Andrew E. Kramer. "Ukraine Leader Was Defeated Even Before He Was Ousted" *The New York Times*. Jan. 3, 2015.

Hoffheinz, Darrell. "Trump's former estate: The story behind the \$95-million mansion tear down" *Palm Beach Daily News*. May 2, 2018.

Human Rights Watch. "Russia" 2017.

Intelligence Community Assessment: *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*, 6 January 2017. P.7. (NOTE: all page numbers referenced are from the Unclassified ICA)

Ioffe, Julia. "What Putin Really Wants" *The Atlantic*. January/February 2018 Issue.

Jenkins, Nash. "Mark Zuckerberg's Congressional Testimony Will Mark a Stunning Reversal for the Facebook CEO" *Time*. April 9, 2018.

Kacynski, Andrew and Chris Massie, Nathan McDermott "80 times Trump talked about Putin" *CNN*.

Kash, Wyatt. "Lessons from the Cyberattacks on Estonia" *Government and computer news Journal, Volume 27, Issue 14*. June 16, 2008. P. 26.

Kenneth Geers (Ed.), *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, NATO CCD COE Publications, Tallinn 2015.

Kessler, Glenn. "Flashback: Obama's debate zinger" *The Washington Post*. March 20, 2014.

Lucas, Edward with Meghna Chakrabarti, "Why Intelligence Officials Say China Is Becoming The U.S.'s Biggest Security Threat" *On Point*. NPR. May 6, 2019.

Mite, Valentinas. "Estonia: Attacks Seen As First Case of 'Cyberwar'" *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*. Russia. May 30, 2007

New Knowledge. "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency." *Analysis by New Knowledge, Columbia University, Canfield Research, LLC*.

Nguyen, Tina. "Eric Trump Reportedly Bragged About Access to \$100 Million in Russian Money" *Vanity Fair*. May 8, 2017.

Nix, Alexander. "The Power of Big Data and Psychographics" *2016 Concordia Annual Summit in New York*.

O'Sullivan, Donie. Drew Griffin and Scott Bronstein. "The unwitting: The Trump supporters used by Russia." *CNNMoney*. February 20, 2018

Pete Earley, "Comrade J: The Untold Secrets of Russia's Master Spy in America After the End of the Cold War", Penguin Books, 2007, ISBN 978-0-399-15439-3, pages 194-195

Podesta, John. *Active Measures*. Directed by Jack Bryan, 2018

"Pushing locals aside, Russians take top rebel posts in east Ukraine". Reuters. 27 July 2014. Archived from the original on 28 July 2014. Retrieved 27 July 2014.

"Putin reveals secrets of Russia's Crimea takeover plot" *BBC Europe*. 9 March 2015.

"Reagan challenges Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall" *History*. March 5, 2019.

Reilly, Katie. "New York Is Trying to Release Trump's State Tax Returns. Here's Why That Might Not Work" *Time Politics*. April 10, 2019.

Robles, Frances. "Russian Hackers Were 'In a Position' to Alter Florida Voter Rolls, Rubio Confirms" *The New York Times*. April 26, 2019.

"Russian Government Cyber Activity Targeting Energy and Other Critical Infrastructure Sectors" Alert (TA18-074A). *US Department of Homeland Security*. CISA Cyber Infrastructure. March 15, 2018.



"Russian Targeting of Election Infrastructure During the 2016 Election: Summary of Initial Findings and Recommendations" US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. May 8, 2018.

Ruus, Kertu. "Cyber War I"

Sanger, David E. "Russian Hackers Appear to Shift Focus to U.S. Power Grid" *The New York Times*. July 27, 2018.

Schwartz, Michael and Herszenhorn, David M. "In Russia"

Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) review of Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA). July 3, 2018

Shane, Scott and Jo Becker, Jo "A New Libya, With Very Little Time Left" *The New York Times*. February 28, 2016.

Sheeter, Laura. "Estonia forges ahead with e-vote" *BBC News, Tallinn*. October 14, 2005.

Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III. "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election" *U.S. Department of Justice*. March 2019

Stewart, Emily. "Lawmakers seem confused about what Facebook does — and how to fix it" *Vox*. April 10, 2018.

Swalwell, Eric. "Russia: Not Our Friend" *Issues – Committee on Intelligence*

"The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018" *University of Oxford*. Computational Propaganda Research Project.

"The Supreme Court findings" (in Ukrainian). Supreme Court of Ukraine. 3 December 2004. Retrieved 7 July 2008.

"The Surprises in the Mueller Report" *Politico Magazine*. April 19, 2019.

"Transcript of Annual Big Press Conference" *The Kremlin, Moscow*. President of Russia. February 14, 2008.

Trump, Donald and Tony Schwartz. "The Art of the Deal" New York, November 1, 1987.

"Ukraine crisis: Timeline". BBC News. 13 November 2014.

"Ukrainian police have been provided with combat weapons – interior minister". *Kyiv Post*. Archived from the original on 21 February 2014. Retrieved 21 February 2014.

Unger, Craig. "Active Measures." Directed by Jack Bryan, 2018

Watts, Clint. "Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns" (Congressional Testimony to US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, May 30, 2017

Watts, Clint. "So What Did We Learn? Looking Back on Four Years of Russia's Cyber-Enabled "Active Measures"" *Alliance for Securing Democracy*. January 18, 2018.

Wells, Georgia and Deepa Seetharaman. "New Facebook Data Shows Russians Targeted Users by Race, Religion, Politics" *The Wall Street Journal, Tech*. November 1, 2017

Yoneji Masuda (1985) Three Great Social Revolutions: Agricultural, Industrial, and Informational, Prometheus, 3:2, 269-274, DOI: 10.1080/08109028508628999

Kate Fisher majored in Plan II, Finance, and Government at the University of Texas at Austin. After graduating, she plans to live in Austin, Texas.