



THE KREMLIN'S MALIGN INFLUENCE INSIDE THE US

NONPROFITS SOCIAL MEDIA

CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

ENERGY SEPARATISTS

FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION
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THE KREMLIN'S MALIGN INFLUENCE INSIDE THE US

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PREFACE — PUTIN'S PLOT AGAINST AMERICA

By Brian Whitmore

Vladimir Putin's regime hasn't exactly been hiding its campaign to weaponize globalization and leverage interdependence to undermine the United States (US) and other Western democracies. But just in case anybody had failed to get the message, longtime Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov effectively said the quiet part out loud in a February 2019 article in the Russian daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. In a widely circulated manifesto titled, "Putin's Long State," Surkov lays out his vision for the future of Russia and the demise of Western liberal democracy.

Surkov argues that democracy is a mirage and Western societies only work because people believe the illusion that they have choice. In contrast, Putin has created a system that can rule Russia for 100 years, if not longer, because it understands the "algorithm of the Russian people." In fact, Surkov claimed that Putin's Russia represents the fourth manifestation of the Russian state, following the iterations of Tsars Ivan III and Peter I, and Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin. And he argues that Putinism — with its stress on sovereignty, populism, traditionalism, and patriotism — is the ideology of the future and will challenge liberal democracy for supremacy.

And then there was this provocative quote:

Foreign politicians accuse Russia of interference in elections and referendums across the globe. In fact, it is even more serious — Russia is interfering with their brains, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness. Since the failed 1990s, our country abandoned ideological loans, began to produce its own meaning, and turned the information offensive back on the West. European and American experts began to err in their political

forecasts more and more often. They are surprised and enraged by the paranormal preferences of their electorates. Confused, they announced the invasion of populism. You can say so, if you have no other words.¹

Surkov is hardly a random commentator. He has served as a senior aide to every post-Soviet president. As First Deputy Kremlin Chief of Staff during Putin's first two terms, Surkov masterminded the system that became known alternatively as "sovereign democracy" and "managed democracy." This postmodern version of authoritarianism took on the external forms and ceremonies of liberal democracy but twisted these into Potemkin institutions controlled and manipulated by an overbearing executive. The signature components of this system include de facto state control of most electronic media, sham elections, fake political parties, the subordination of the legislative and judicial branches to the executive, regime-controlled youth groups, and so-called GONGOS (Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations).

This domestic political system is in essence a mockery of Western democracy. It deploys diversion, subterfuge, dramaturgy, disinformation, lawfare, and strategic corruption to maintain the continued rule of Putin and his oligarchic ruling clique. It uses sanctioned kleptocracy as a tool to keep the elite loyal and pliant, it unleashes dramaturgy and disinformation to keep the population distracted, and it tasks politicized courts and lawfare with punishing its opponents. This is Surkov's "algorithm of the Russian people," and understanding its logic is essential to understanding the Kremlin's efforts to interfere in Western democracies.² This is because in many ways Surkov-

1 Владислав Сурков, «Долгое государство Путина», *Независимая газета*, 11.2.19 (Vladislav Surkov, "Putin's Long State," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 11, 2019) https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html.

2 See Brian Whitmore, "The Revisionist: Why the West Has a Russia Problem and What To Do About It," *The Riga Conference Policy Brief*, 2020.

ism has gone international, insofar as the ethos, methods, and spirit of Russia's domestic political system have been exported as weapons to undermine Western democracies, including the United States.

Until relatively recently, Kremlin interference was largely viewed by US officials as something that happens in faraway places. Phenomena like the 2007 cyber-attacks and the Kremlin-sponsored civil unrest targeting Estonia, the ongoing use of strategic corruption, oligarchic structures, and electoral interference to undermine good governance in Ukraine, and the leveraging of the Orthodox Church and Kremlin-backed non-governmental organizations (NGOS) to weaken Georgia, though certainly a concern for the US policy community, were not viewed as direct security threats to the United States.

Even as Russia's aggression against its neighbors went beyond meddling and interference and entered the kinetic realm with the August 2008 invasion of Georgia, many policymakers in the United States and other Western countries continued to believe that Russia was essentially a status quo power with whom we could continue to do business and have friendly constructive relations. From the efforts of the administration of George W. Bush to engage Putin to the "reset" policy of President Barack Obama, the assumption was that the correct combinations of carrots and sticks could nudge Russia toward non-revisionist behavior.

Part of this wishful thinking resulted from the fact that many US and Western policymakers misread the nature of globalization, assuming that it would spread liberal democratic values, which it has to a large extent. But globalization has also allowed for the spread of illiberal values, something Russia has accomplished through disinformation, troll farms, strategic corruption, and organized crime.

As Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss write in their seminal 2014 report, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*:

If the premise of the neoliberal idea of globalization is that money is politically neutral, that interdependence will be an

impulse towards rapprochement, and that international commerce sublimates violence into harmony, the Russian view remains at best mercantilist, with money and trade used as weapons and interdependence a mechanism for aggression. The new Russia is the raider inside globalization.³

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the forceful annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas, changed many Westerners' previously held optimistic view of Russia's intentions and strategic goals. Likewise, Moscow's support for extremist and xenophobic parties and movements in Europe, including Marine Le Pen in France, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, and the Northern League in Italy, illustrated that Russia's malign influence operations are not confined to the former Soviet space.

Then came the Russian interference in the 2016 and 2020 US elections, which exposed the Kremlin's use of hacking, doxing, and social media manipulation to undermine trust in the central institution of American democracy: its elections.

To understand Russia's efforts to undermine democratic institutions and processes in the West, it is necessary to first examine its actions closer to home. Despite going to great lengths to project an external image of strength, the Putin regime is inherently insecure. It views the existence of transparent democracies on its borders as existential threats. And since civil societies in post-Soviet states like Ukraine and Georgia increasingly look to the European Union and the United States as models, the Kremlin views efforts in these countries to establish better governance as a Western plot.

When popular uprisings against what were widely believed to be rigged elections in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 resulted in pro-Western governments, the Kremlin accused the United States of orchestrating "colored revolutions" in Russia's neighbors in an effort

3 Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture, and Money," *The Interpreter/The Institute for Modern Russia*, 2014. https://imrussia.org/media/pdf/Research/Michael_Weiss_and_Peter_Pomerantsev_The_Menace_of_Unreality.pdf.

to undermine Moscow. When mass protests broke out in Moscow and other Russian cities following widespread allegations of fraud in the December 2011 parliamentary elections, Putin accused US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of instigating the demonstrations.⁴ And when Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising in 2013-14 forced the country's pro-Moscow president Viktor Yanukovich from power, the Kremlin accused the United States and its allies of staging a coup.

Because the Kremlin fears the example that stable democracies on Russia's borders could provide for its own citizens, seeing them as a force that could ultimately erode the sustainability of a Kremlin regime dependent on corruption, a key goal of Moscow's policy is to undermine good governance in the post-Soviet space and increasingly in Western democracies themselves.

In a widely cited article in 2013, Russian armed forces Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov describes what he calls the "non-linear warfare" he believes the West is waging on Russia. According to Gerasimov, the United States and its allies have created a new type of warfare that combines political subversion, propaganda, social media, sanctions, support for democracy movements, humanitarian interventions, and the use of mercenaries and proxies. In this new environment, he argues, the line between peace and war has become blurred.⁵ Analysts have widely interpreted the Gerasimov article as being as much a blueprint for Russian war fighting as a description of what he believes to be Western tactics. Put another way, Gerasimov suggests that Russia should do to the West the very things he claimed the West was doing to Russia.

An early hint of the emerging Russian policy of undermining Western democracy came with Putin's annual State of the Nation address in December 2013 in which the Kremlin leader lauded Russia's so-called "traditional values" and assailed what he called the West's "genderless and infertile" liberalism.⁶

Just days before Putin's address, the Kremlin-connected Center for Strategic Communications announced a new report titled, "Putin: World Conservatism's New Leader." The report was never released to the public, but excerpts were leaked to the media.

According to the excerpts, the report suggested that Russia should insert itself into the West's cultural and ideological battles, supporting traditional family values over feminism and gay rights and nation-based states over multiculturalism. Putin, the report says, stands for these values, while the "ideological populism of the left" in the West "is dividing society."⁷

Dmitry Abzalov of the Center for Strategic Communications said at the news conference that: "It is important for most people to preserve their way of life, their lifestyle, their traditions. So they tend toward conservatism. This is normal." This, he added, represented "a global trend."⁸

The report is clearly less about a new conservative Russian ideology and more about strategy. As the West became increasingly multicultural, less patriarchal and traditional, and more open to LGBTQ+ rights, the Kremlin believed it found a wedge issue to divide its geopolitical foes in Europe and North America. And it turned out to be a harbinger.

In the years that followed this report, Russia launched what can only be described as a non-kinetic guerilla war against the West that included election interference, disinformation campaigns, support for separatists and xenophobic parties and movements, cyberattacks, and strategic corruption aimed at establishing pro-Moscow networks of influence.

In the United Kingdom, Russia's propaganda machine worked overtime to cheerlead for the 2016 Brexit campaign and its leader Nigel Farage. In Italy in the same year, Kremlin-funded news outlets RT and Sputnik fed a barrage of fake news to a network of websites run by the far left Five Star Movement, spreading Euroskepticism

4 Irina Filatova, "Putin Blames Clinton For Unrest," *The Moscow Times*, December 8, 2011. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/12/08/putin-blames-clinton-for-unrest-a-11325>.

5 Валерий Герасимов, «Ценность науки в предвидении,» *Военно-Промышленный Курьер*, 27 февраля - 5 марта 2013 (Valery Gerasimov, *The Value of Science in Prediction*, *Voенно-Promishlenny Kuryer*, February 27-March 5, 2013) https://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf.

6 Артем Кречетников, «Путин определился с идеологией - он консерватор,» *Русская служба Би-би-си*, 12 декабря 2013 (Artyom Krechetnikov, «Putin has decided on an ideology - he is a conservative,» *BBC Russian Service*, December 12, 2013)

7 Brian Whitmore, "Vladimir Putin: Conservative Icon," *The Atlantic*, December 20, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/vladimir-putin-conservative-icon/282572/> See also Christian Neef und Matthias Schepp, "How Putin Outfoxed the West," *Der Spiegel*, December 16, 2013. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/how-vladimir-putin-ruthlessly-maintains-russia-s-grip-on-the-east-a-939286.html>.

8 Ibid.

and anti-Americanism, and undermining a constitutional referendum that ultimately led to Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's resignation. The Kremlin also continued to support Marine Le Pen, leader of the anti-immigrant National Front in France which was granted a 9-million-euro loan from a Russian bank in 2015.⁹

Hackers connected to the Russian security services famously breached the US Democratic National Committee's email servers and disseminated the contents via Wikileaks, targeted at least 21 state electoral systems, and unleashed a barrage of disinformation on social media as part of their campaign to interfere in the 2016 United States presidential elections.¹⁰ But in the years prior to that, state-backed Russian hackers had honed their skills by targeting the Warsaw Stock Exchange, a German steelmaker, the Bundestag, the US House of Representatives, the US State Department, and a French television station, just to name a few.¹¹

Russia's campaign to support disruptive elements across that West became so pervasive that Peter Pomerantsev, author of the book, *Nothing Is True And Everything Is Possible: Inside The Surreal Heart Of The New Russia*, memorably wrote in late 2016 that Putin had effectively turned himself into a 21st century version of Che Guevara for the West's anti-establishment fringe.¹²

In addition to the electoral interference, the support for fringe parties and movements, the hacking and doxing, and the disinformation campaigns, the Kremlin's war

on the West also stepped up its long-term campaign of using strategic corruption to establish networks of influence in the West.

In a globalized world, institutionalized graft has become a conveyor belt for Russian malign influence abroad. In a 2012 report for Chatham House, James Greene explains how Putin effectively weaponized corruption by turning it into an "extension of his domestic political strategy," using the carrot of corruption and the stick of *kompromat* "to establish patron-client political relationships." According to Greene, "by broadening this approach to the corrupt transnational schemes that flowed seamlessly from Russia into the rest of the former Soviet space—and oozed beyond it—Putin could extend his shadow influence beyond Russia's borders and develop a natural, captured constituency."¹³

Put another way, the Kremlin has mastered the art of the corrupt deal to create patron-client relations well beyond Russia's borders. It has used murky energy schemes with opaque ownership structures like RosUkrEnergo, EuroTransGas, and Moldovagaz as carrots to capture and control elites in former Soviet states like Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova.¹⁴ Farther west, the Kremlin has deployed shifty shell companies like Vemex, an energy trading company with a mind-bogglingly opaque ownership structure ultimately leading to Gazprom, which has captured between 10-12% of the Czech energy market.^{15 16}

In testimony before the US Senate's Foreign Relations

9 See Jason Horowitz, "Spread of Fake News Provokes Anxiety in Italy," *The New York Times*, December 2, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/world/europe/italy-fake-news.html?_r=0. See also Alberto Nardelli, "Italy's Most Popular Political Party Is Leading Europe In Fake News And Kremlin Propaganda," *BuzzFeed*, November 29, 2016. https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/italys-most-popular-political-party-is-leading-europe-in-fake?utm_term=.kw5W3QnkB#.ekJqmyAk6 and Brian Whitmore, "Putin's Perfect Storm," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 28, 2016. <https://www.rferl.org/a/putins-perfect-storm/28201276.html>.

10 Dustin Volz and Julia Edwards Ainsley, "Russians targeted 21 election systems, U.S. official says," *Reuters*, June 21, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-cyber-congress-idUSKBN19C1Y3>.

11 Michael Riley, "Cyberspace becomes second front in Russia's clash with NATO," *The Sydney Morning Herald/Bloomberg*, October 15, 2015. <https://www.smh.com.au/technology/cyberspace-becomes-second-front-in-russias-clash-with-nato-20151015-gk9l54.html> See also, Brian Whitmore, "We're All Russia's Neighbors Now," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 29, 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/were-all-russias-neighbors-power-vertical/28585339.html>.

12 Peter Pomerantsev, "How Putin Became the Che Guevara of the Right," *Politico*, November 3, 2016. <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-vladimir-putin-russia-became-che-guevara-of-right-wing/>.

13 James Greene, "Russian Responses to NATO and EU Enlargement and Outreach," *Chatham House Briefing Paper*, June 2019, p.9 See also Brian Whitmore, "Corruption is the New Communism," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 12, 2016.

14 James Greene, "Russian Responses to NATO and EU Enlargement and Outreach," *Chatham House Briefing Paper*, June 2019, p.9, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/O612bp_greene.pdf.

15 Brian Whitmore, "Vladimir Putin: Conservative Icon," *The Atlantic*, December 20, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/vladimir-putin-conservative-icon/282572/> See also Christian Neef und Matthias Schepp, «How Putin Outfoxed the West,» *Der Spiegel*, December 16, 2013. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/how-vladimir-putin-ruthlessly-maintains-russia-s-grip-on-the-east-a-939286.html>.

16 Gregory Feifer and Brian Whitmore, "The Velvet Surrender," *The New Republic*, September 17, 2010. <https://newrepublic.com/article/77397/russian-aggression-the-velvet-surrender-vladimir-putin-vaclav-klaus-czech-republic>.

Committee in June 2008, Roman Kupchinsky, the late energy analyst and former director of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)'s Ukrainian Service, said: "Gazprom, with the silent support of the Kremlin has set up 50 or so middleman companies, silently linked to Gazprom and scattered throughout Europe." In his testimony, Kupchinsky cited the Vienna-based Centrex group, owned by a Cypriot holding company, RN Privatstiftung in Austria, and the Gazprom Germania network.¹⁷ Moreover, a September 2007 investigative report by German journalist Hans-Martin Tillack uncovers how Gazprom Germania was "something of a club for former members of the East German security services." Tillack writes that "this is the story of an invasion. A massive campaign planned well in advance. The General Staff is located far away in the east, in Moscow, the capital of Russia. The target area is Germany—and the rest of Western Europe."¹⁸

In the 2016 report, *The Kremlin Playbook*, Heather Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov of the Center for Strategic and International Studies compare Russian malign influence to "a virus that attacks democracies. After inconspicuously penetrating a country through what appears to be a harmless and most likely legal business transaction, the virus begins to spread purposefully through local networks, quietly taking hold of its democratic host."¹⁹

In essence, Putin's Kremlin has taken many of the tools it has used to maintain power at home—disinformation, dramaturgy, subterfuge, and strategic corruption—and deployed them against the West. Disinformation campaigns are launched, and disruptive political movements are backed in an effort to divide, distract, polarize, and erode public trust. Strategic corruption is deployed to build networks of influential Trojan Horses. This is how, as Surkov boasted, Putin's Kremlin is attacking Western elites and institutions by "interfering with their brains."

The effort is less a centrally directed campaign and more a venture-capital-style foreign policy in which Putin sets broad goals and encourages different actors – in-

cluding state entities, nominally private actors, and Kremlin-proxies – to carry it out. As Mark Galeotti notes in a 2017 report:

*It is essentially an 'adhocracy', in which the true elite is defined by service to the needs of the Kremlin rather than any specific institutional or social identity. They may be spies, or diplomats, journalists, politicians, or millionaires; essentially, they are all 'political entrepreneurs' who both seek to serve the Kremlin or are required to do so, often regardless of their formal role.*²⁰

Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, writes in his December 2016 article in *The Atlantic* that Putin had effectively launched "an opportunistic but sophisticated campaign to sabotage democracy and bend it toward his interests, not just in some marginal, fragile places but at the very core of the liberal democratic order, Europe and the United States." Diamond adds, "We stand now at the most dangerous moment for liberal democracy since the end of World War II."²¹

This report narrows the aperture and takes a close look at one very important front in the Kremlin's war against the West. It examines various Kremlin tools that have been deployed, including efforts to infiltrate the energy and infrastructure sectors, the manipulation of NGOs, support for secessionists and other extremists, and the use of social media to spread disinformation. Call it Putin's plot against America.

17 Oil, Oligarchs, and Opportunity: From Central Asia to Europe, Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs United States Senate, June 12, 2008

18 Hans Martin Tillack, "A Tale of Gazoviki, Money, and Greed," *Stern*, September 13, 2007. <http://fliphtml5.com/asbl/ptbl>. See also, Robert Amsterdam, "The Gazoviki in Germany," robertamsterdam.com, September 17, 2007. https://robertamsterdam.com/the_gazoviki_in_germany/.

19 Heather Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov "The Kremlin Playbook," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 2016.

20 Mark Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages its Political War in Europe," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 1, 2017. https://ecfr.eu/publication/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe/.

21 Larry Diamond, "Russia and the Threat to Liberal Democracy: How Vladimir Putin is making the world safe for autocracy," *The Atlantic*, December 9, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/russia-liberal-democracy/510011/>.

The chapters that follow seek to describe the structure, influential players, agendas, and methods of the key networks of Russian influence operating on the territory of the United States. They also aim to examine the current and potential future scale of Russian influence on public opinion, political dynamics and business practices of the United States; assessing specific threats to US national security and to the stability of its political institutions, financial, technological and consumer markets stemming from the Russian presence. Finally, this volume seeks to develop a set of actionable policy recommendations for countering this influence and its associated threats.

Vladimir Milov, Russia's former deputy energy minister and a current opposition figure, deploys his expertise in two chapters to examine Russia's strategic investments in the US energy sector and infrastructure.

In the chapter, "Russian Interference in the US Energy Sector," Milov examines Russia's attempts to influence the US energy sector. These include efforts to acquire equity in oil and gas companies, attempts to influence the debate over US energy policy, and even acts of sabotage such as hacking the American energy grid. Specifically, Milov looks at efforts by the Russian oil giant Rosneft to acquire assets in the United States through its US subsidiary, Neftegaz Holding America Limited and Rosatom's moves to gain a foothold in the US nuclear energy market. The chapter also examines Russia's efforts to infiltrate the US shale market through investments in American Ethane.

Milov recommends greater transparency and due diligence in this sector, Congressional hearings, and the commissioning of a "comprehensive report profiling key Russian state-linked energy companies that have shown interest in acquiring strategic energy assets in the US, illustrating to which extent they are merely tools of projecting Putin's global geopolitical agenda, and the sources of cash for Putin's malign domestic and international activities."

In a second chapter, "Russia Influence Networks: Investments in Critical Infrastructure," Milov examines Russia's changing tactics investing in US critical infrastructure where sanctions and political scrutiny have made straightforward strategic investments difficult. As a result, many of these strategic investments have gone through obscure and opaque private equity firms. The chapter examines the infrastructure investments of the Alfa Group, Vladimir Potanin, Viktor Vekselberg, and Rosnano. These investments are supported by capital derived from Kremlin-backed

oligarchic structures and appear to be a systematic effort.

Milov makes a series of policy recommendations to address this threat, including establishing a task force to monitor Russian investment activities in the US and identify potential threats, a permanent system of monitoring Russian investments, a comprehensive report analyzing the effects of Russian investment in the infrastructure and technology sectors, the classification of risks associated with Russian investments; and a second comprehensive report suggesting appropriate countermeasures.

Maria Snegovaya, a postdoctoral fellow at Virginia Tech who has done extensive research on Russian public opinion and malign influence operations abroad, and Kohei Watanabe, an Assistant Professor at the University of Innsbruck and a computational social scientist specializing in textual data analysis, take an exhaustive look at how Kremlin proxies have used social media as a tool of influence and disruption in the United States. In this chapter they explain the Kremlin's desire to use social media for various goals including paralyzing decision making, suppressing electoral participation and public trust, strengthening pro-Moscow elements abroad, and bolstering media narratives that advance Russia's strategic objectives.

Snegovaya and Watanabe argue that Russia's social media operations have become increasingly sophisticated since 2016. Most notably, online Kremlin proxies have greatly improved their ability to conceal and obscure their identities. They also show how those who engage with Russia-aligned content tend to be on the extreme left and right of the political spectrum and to have low trust in mainstream media and institutions. Snegovaya and Watanabe offer a series of recommended measures to improve research and analysis of Russian malign influence on social media including deepening quantitative research analysis of such operations, and resisting the tendency to overfocus on Twitter in favor of looking at other platforms. They also offer policy recommendations including publicly exposing pro-Kremlin actors and in some cases sanctioning them; labeling platforms tied to the Kremlin and in some cases blocking them; and warning companies against placing advertisements on Kremlin-linked sites. They also recommend developing enhanced and targeted media-literacy training as well as raising trust in media platforms by funding credible, quality public broadcasters with a high audience outreach.

Journalist Casey Michel, author of the book *American Kleptocracy: How the U.S. Created the World's Greatest Money Laundering Scheme in History*, exam-

ines how Russia has exploited two soft spots in the United States to undermine American democracy.

In his first chapter, “For the Kremlin’s Profit,” Michel examines how a number of high-profile post-Soviet oligarchs connected directly to the Kremlin have donated hundreds of millions of dollars to American non-profits, including the US’s most prestigious think tanks, universities, and cultural institutes including Harvard University, the Council on Foreign Relations, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, and California’s Fort Ross State Park.

Michel’s research represents one of the most exhaustive examinations of how Russian oligarchs have used donations to nonprofits to launder their reputations and infiltrate the upper echelons of the American political and cultural elite. Michel notes that “non-profit institutions... [are] perfectly free to receive funds with few if any questions asked” and recommends requiring greater transparency in the reporting of donations. This could be accomplished “ideally through a centralized, publicly accessible database with information on donors and donations.”

In another chapter, “American Disunion: How Russia has cultivated American secessionists and separatists in its quest to break up the US,” Michel examines and exposes the Kremlin’s backing of various far right and separatist movements in the United States. These include white supremacists seeking to create separate racial enclaves, neo-Confederates looking to revive the losing side in the American Civil War, and state-level secessionists who aim to create independent countries out of individual US states, most notably in California and Texas. To address this threat, Michel recommends a stronger and more concerted effort to reduce partisan divisions in the United States, including reforming campaign financing and instituting ranked-choice voting. He also recommends legislation establishing greater social media transparency and extending sanctions against Russian operatives linked to stoking American separatist efforts.

As noted above, awareness of the threat of Russian malign influence among policymakers in the United States has increased markedly in recent years, particularly in the aftermath of the 2016 election, the investigation of Robert Mueller, and increasingly dire warnings from the US intelligence community.

In April 2021, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence announced that it is preparing to establish a special hub called the Foreign Malign Influence Center to combat hostile foreign meddling in US affairs. According to media reports, the center will act as a “clearinghouse for intelligence related to malign influence from multiple government agencies and provide assessments and warning of such activities.”²²

The creation of this hub follows a series of warnings from the US intelligence community about Russian malign influence campaigns in the United States dating back to 2017. Most recently, the US intelligence community warned in March that Russia again tried to interfere in the 2020 presidential election by “laundering” allegations against the eventual victor, Joe Biden, through “prominent US individuals, some of whom were close to former President Trump and his administration.”²³

The United States and its allies face a serious, persistent, and long-term threat from the current Kremlin, which wants to undermine trust in and the functioning of democratic institutions and establish networks of malign influence to advance Moscow’s strategic goals.

The first step to countering this threat is understanding it. By examining Russian malign influence in the vectors of nonprofits, support for secessionists, social media, energy, infrastructure, and technology, in such forensic detail, this volume will contribute greatly to the awareness among US policymakers, experts, and the broader public of what remains a clear and present danger not only to US national security, but to the health and cohesion of democratic society and culture as a whole.

22 Martin Matishak, “Intelligence community creating hub to gird against foreign influence,” *Politico*, April 26, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/04/26/intelligence-community-hub-foreign-influence-484604>.

23 “Foreign Threats to the 2020 U.S. Federal Election,” National Intelligence Council - Intelligence Community Assessment, March 10, 2021. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.



Photo courtesy: Jared Evans

RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN THE US ENERGY SECTOR

By Vladimir Milov

The Colonial Pipeline hack on May 7, 2021 was a particularly worrying sign of the vulnerabilities of the US energy sector to Russian interference.²⁴ As the Washington Post reported, the US Government has never carried out a thorough comprehensive cybersecurity review of the pipeline despite its extreme importance for the East Coast fuel market (about 45% of all fuel consumed on the US East Coast arrives via the Colonial Pipeline system, which runs from Houston, Texas to New York City, New York).²⁵ A possible voluntary cybersecurity review was discussed between the Colonial Pipeline and the US Transportation Security Administration in the past few years, yet in the end, no such review ever occurred.

Such in-depth cybersecurity reviews should become mandatory for critical objects of US infrastructure. According to some reports, hackers could have been inside the Colonial Pipeline's IT network for weeks, or even months, before launching May's ransomware attack that brought down the pipeline's billing system and paralyzed its commercial activity.²⁶ Also, it appears that the US Government cybersecurity capabilities (Department of Energy and Transportation Security Administration) should be seriously strengthened, so the cybersecurity reviews of the US energy enterprises, assistance in personnel training programs, and other measures become routinely opera-

tional.

Russian influence efforts targeting the US energy sector are complex and take many forms. They range from direct acts of sabotage, such as the hacking of energy grids, to campaigns seeking to influence debate and media discussion on vital US energy policy issues. This chapter offers realistic scenarios and analysis to inform policy consideration of Russian interference in the US energy sector.

Putin's Russia views the United States as its main geopolitical rival. Energy is a key instrument in Russia's current strategy to increase its global influence. The challenge posed by the US energy sector is seen by Putin and his allies as a major strategic threat, undermining the international position of Russia's energy industries. As these factors are taken into account, all Russian intrusion into the US energy sector should be considered part of a strategic game against the United States.

In this report, we aim to delineate the spectrum of interests that the Kremlin may be pursuing with regard to American energy. Despite the fact that pathways to influence are seriously constrained by sanctions and the overall deterioration of relations between the two governments, Putin's regime continues to prod on all fronts and constantly use new opportunities and openings. The

24 David E. Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, "Pipeline Attack Yields Urgent Lessons About U.S. Cybersecurity," *New York Times*, May 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/us/politics/pipeline-hack.html>.

25 Ellen Nakashima, Lori Aratani and Douglas MacMillan, "Colonial hack exposed government's light-touch oversight of pipeline cybersecurity," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/05/30/colonial-pipeline-tsa-regulation/>.

26 "Colonial hack: How did cyber-attackers shut off pipeline?" *BBC News*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-57063636>.

rapid development of US oil and gas shale production, for example, has allowed influential figures from Putin's inner circle to set up a fully controlled US private company, American Ethane that has capitalized on ethane, the previously non-commercialized byproduct of the shale revolution, to create a multi-billion-dollar export channel to Asia essentially controlled by the Russians.

There are certain disruptive activities well beyond cyberattacks and hacking, which unfortunately have received much less public attention. Rosatom, a Russian state-owned energy corporation, closed down one of the major US uranium mines, Willow Creek mine in Wyoming, which has significantly contributed to increased US dependence on uranium imports. This is a case clearly overlooked by US regulators and policymakers, and a case setting a probable pattern of behavior of Russians establishing control over US energy assets.

Continuous attempts of the Russians to shape US energy policy debate are demonstrated through the way Russians have been able to use some of the respected energy think tanks and consultancies to influence debate using Russian propaganda talking points. There are insufficient critical assessments of consequences of providing the floor to certain bearers of Russian influence.

This report will examine different ways in which Russia has attempted, or is attempting, to tap into different American industries that are vulnerable to exploitation in the future.

ATTEMPTS TO GAIN EQUITY CONTROL OVER ENERGY COMPANIES IN THE AMERICAS

Rosneft's attempts to acquire assets in American petroleum companies

Rosneft, the Russian state-controlled oil enterprise, maintains a presence in the US with the motive of acquiring ownership stakes in North American energy projects.

Specifically, it does this through its "independent indirect subsidiary," Neftegaz Holding America Limited. This Delaware-registered company was used as an acquisition arm in the 2021 Rosneft-ExxonMobil Arctic asset swap deal, under the terms of which ExxonMobil was supposed to be given several equity stakes in a number of Rosneft's oil and gas projects in the Russian Arctic. In return, ExxonMobil agreed to transfer some of its North American assets to Rosneft.²⁷ The assets acquired by Rosneft included a 30% equity stake in ExxonMobil's La Escalera Ranch project in the Delaware Basin (located in Texas) and a 30% interest in 20 blocks held by ExxonMobil in the US Gulf of Mexico.

Rosneft's acquisitions of these North American assets were supposed to be made through Neftegaz Holding America Limited. However, the Rosneft-ExxonMobil asset swap deal was canceled in 2018 due to sanctions introduced against Russia after its invasion and occupation of Ukraine.²⁸ Despite this cancellation, Rosneft maintains Neftegaz as its subsidiary company in the United States and clearly sees it as a potential tool for further participation in North American oil and gas projects.

Recently, Neftegaz Holding America Limited has been involved in licensing offshore oil and gas blocks in Mexico.²⁹ From private interviews conducted by the author with Rosneft insiders, this major Russian oil company is keen to use the first available opportunity to establish direct presence in the US oil and gas sector once the sanctions regime is somehow eased. At the present moment, this doesn't seem to be the case, but Neftegaz Holding America Limited's presence continues to be maintained, and it has opened a branch in Houston, Texas to increase its activities in North America (e.g. the cited Mexico bidding rounds participation) while the US opportunities are still closed due to sanctions regime. Rosneft has also tried to establish an equity foothold in the North American energy sector through the takeover of Citgo, a subsidiary of the Venezuelan state oil company.³⁰ Citgo is a US-based entity that owns oil and gas pipelines, gasoline stations,

27 Darya Korsunskaya and Braden Reddall, "Exxon, Rosneft tie up in Russian Arctic, U.S," *Reuters*, August 30, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-rosneft-exxon/exxon-rosneft-tie-up-in-russian-arctic-u-s-idINRE77T2OM20110831>.

28 "ExxonMobil suspends cooperation with Rosneft on Arctic oil project -Kommersant newspaper," *Reuters*, September 28, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/rosneft-arctic-exxon-mobil/exxonmobil-suspends-cooperation-with-rosneft-on-arctic-oil-project-kommersant-newspaper-idUSL6NORU07B20140929>.

29 Christopher Helman, "In Russian Oil Deal, Norway's Statoil Follows Exxon's Lead On 'Hostage Taking,'" *Forbes*, May 7, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherhelman/2012/05/07/in-russian-oil-deal-norways-statoil-follows-exxons-lead-on-hostage-taking/?sh=3a60e04b5298>.

30 Jay Solomon and Bradley Olson, "US Examines Russia's Grip on Citgo Assets," *Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-examines-russias-grip-on-citgo-assets-1495155049>.

and three large refineries across 30 American states. It is the sixth largest refinery holding in the US, as well as the second-largest foreign-owned US refiner after Saudi-owned Motiva Enterprises.

In 2016, after providing another tranche of loan financing to the Venezuelan government of Nicolas Maduro, Rosneft secured 49.9% of Citgo shares as loan collateral. There were immediate concerns in the US that Rosneft, an influence tool of the Russian government, could take control of major US downstream assets, thereby aiding the Kremlin in projecting its malign influence in the Americas. As a result of these concerns, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) introduced a ban on the sale and transfer of Citgo and its shares in October 2019.³¹ This ban mandated that any deals involving Citgo had to be approved by the US Government.

Rosneft hasn't surrendered collateral rights over Citgo shares along with other Venezuelan assets that were nominally transferred to the Russian Government as a result of the "deal" announced in March 2020. That deal was widely believed to be only a window dressing, as the assets were transferred to a hastily-created shell company that is nominally owned by the Russian Government, but effectively run by people identified as affiliates of Rosneft's CEO Igor Sechin. But that's another topic beyond the scope of the current report - the key point is that Rosneft still maintains collateral rights over Citgo shares, despite the formal announcement of an "exit" from all of its Venezuelan assets. It is clear that Rosneft is strategically interested in securing access to one of the biggest US oil and gas downstream players.

OFAC's decision is all that prevents Rosneft from acquiring Citgo. The Venezuelan government has defaulted on a series of bonds, clearing the way to a takeover of Citgo by creditors, including Rosneft. In October 2020, New York District Judge Katherine Polk Failla issued a ruling in favor of Citgo's creditors opening the way for

Rosneft's takeover of Citgo.³² In the past few months, the US courts have begun issuing rulings that allow at least some creditors to gain shares of Citgo to compensate for their investments in bonds on which Venezuela has now defaulted.³³ In January 2021, Chief District Judge Leonard Stark of the United States Court for the District of Delaware ruled in favor of moving forward with the process of selling Citgo's shares to satisfy the roughly \$1.4 billion owed by Citgo to the Canadian mining firm Crystallex. Judge Stark respected the US Government's concerns in issuing his decision, but his ruling nevertheless created a precedent that could benefit Rosneft in the future.

There's no doubt that Rosneft will use any and all opportunities to gain control over one of the largest US downstream petroleum companies. Moreover, it is certain that Rosneft's efforts will be backed by a concerted Kremlin public relations and lobbying effort to depict US prohibitions on a Russian state oil company — but not other overseas creditors — as tendentious and unwarranted. At the moment, Rosneft seemingly prefers to wait in the shadow of other creditors' actions, but once they accumulate a favorable set of rulings that may open the way for their own claim of Citgo's shares, the Russian oil company may act and get engaged into relevant litigation.

Nevertheless, both the ExxonMobil failed asset swap attempt and the acquisition of collateral rights for Citgo shares illustrate Rosneft's eagerness to establish an equity presence in the US energy sector, though it is currently constrained by US sanctions against Russia. Rosneft still maintains its Delaware- and Houston-based Neftegaz Holding America Limited investment arm, which is active in other North American activities while the US market remains closed, and it hasn't surrendered its collateral rights for Citgo shares to the Russian Government during its "complete exit from Venezuelan assets" as was announced in March 2020. It is reasonable to expect further attempts by Rosneft to acquire energy assets in the United States in the future.

31 Brian Ellsworth and Corina Pons, "US Treasury temporarily blocks creditor seizure of refiner Citgo," *Reuters*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-debt-idUSKBN1X32L2>.

32 See Citgo: How Russia Could Soon Control a U.S. Oil Company", <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/citgo-how-russia-could-soon-control-us-oil-company-174844>.

33 "US judge authorizes sale of Citgo parent shares despite Treasury ban," *Reuters*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/us-judge-authorizes-sale-citgo-parent-shares-despite-treasury-ban-2021-01-15/>.

AMERICAN ETHANE

American Ethane is the leading producer of ethane in the United States. The story of American Ethane not only demonstrates how Russians with connections are trying to enter key segments of the US energy industry, but also how they have already developed key political connections, allowing them to flourish. Ethane is a byproduct of shale oil and gas development, which became widely available due to increased production in the United States.

Ethane is a byproduct that can be produced from refinery off-gas or from natural gas processing with its demand driven by a single end use—as feedstock at steam crackers for ethylene production. When ethane has no end-use market, it is typically left in the off-gas, or the natural gas stream, and burned for its thermal value. This is because there is an expense associated with separating the ethane from the other components of its source stream, and only where a market exists to provide an incentive to undertake this process will producers consider recovering the ethane as a purity product. Consequently, the intrinsic value of ethane is often unclear, and ethane pricing mechanisms vary widely around the world.

Over the past decade, rapid unconventional oil and gas development in the United States has resulted in significantly increased ethane availability. Much of this ethane was initially left unrecovered because there was no demand for it. Increased ethane rejection reduced ethane prices to parity with natural gas, incentivizing a wave of investment in both domestic consumption and exports. Several international buyers import US ethane to fill the void left by dwindling domestic ethane supply, while others take advantage of the lower cost of US ethane to diversify and make additional investments to accommodate the more economical feedstock.³⁴

American Ethane was founded in 2014 in Houston, Texas as a privately held entity by an American attorney and oil and gas executive, John Houghtaling II, with significant investments from Russian entrepreneurs and politicians in Putin's inner circle.³⁵ The ownership of the com-

pany is publicly disclosed, but its structure can only be discerned from periodic releases by the lobbying firms American Ethane has hired.

According to the latest disclosures, 86% of American Ethane shares are owned by two Russian businessmen: Andrey Kunatbaev (who owns 56%) and Konstantin Nikolaev (who owns 30%).³⁶ Previously, American Ethane's list of investors has included Roman Abramovich, one of Putin's closest business associates; Alexander Voloshin, the former head of Putin's presidential administration; Alexandr Abramov, a Russian steel tycoon and co-owner of the Evraz Group steel holding (where his main equity partner is Abramovich); and Mikhail Yuryev, an extremely conservative and anti-Western Russian commentator and former politician.³⁷ It is worth noting, however, that Voloshin and Abramovich have recently abandoned their ownership according to press reports.

Before Yuryev died of cancer in 2019, he was one of the most vocal and active proponents of Russia's isolationist, anti-democratic, and anti-Western policies. He is known for his notorious and highly publicized articles and books on Russian nationalism. Having gained prominence in the 1990s as a democrat and member of the liberal Yabloko party, Yuryev sharply changed his ideological course in the 2000s, arguing for autocracy, anti-democratic political consolidation, and the crushing of political dissent inside Russia. Western democracies, he ranted, were the "enemies." Ironically by 2014, he had sold all of his Russian businesses and re-invested his capital in the US, admitting that it's risky to do business in Putin's Russia and that he prefers his money to be protected by America's rule of law and institutions.

Another prominent co-owner of American Ethane, with a 30% equity stake, is Konstantin Nikolaev, who has become known for providing financial support to Maria Butina, the Russian woman who pleaded guilty in the US in 2018 to working as an unregistered foreign agent. According to the New York Times:

An oligarch who helped finance a Russian gun rights activist accused of infiltrating American conservative

34 "The future of ethane as a global commodity", IHS Markit, February 11, 2021, <https://ihsmarkit.com/research-analysis/future-of-ethane-as-a-global-commodity.html>.

35 "Former Putin adviser has secret investment in US energy firm praised by Trump," The Guardian, July 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/10/former-putin-adviser-has-secret-investment-in-us-energy-firm-praised-by-trump>.

36 Theodor Meyer and Daniel Lippman, "Turnberry will lobby for Russian-backed energy company," Politico, February 22, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-influence/2019/02/22/turnberry-will-lobby-for-russian-backed-energy-company-398592>.

37 Luke Harding, "Former Putin adviser has secret investment in US energy firm praised by Trump," The Guardian, July 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/10/former-putin-adviser-has-secret-investment-in-us-energy-firm-praised-by-trump>.

circles has been a discreet source of funds for business ventures useful to the Russian military and security services, according to documents and interviews.

The oligarch, Konstantin Nikolaev, emerged in July as the enigmatic backer of Maria Butina, the activist charged with conspiring to use the National Rifle Association to cultivate Republicans in the United States. Mr. Nikolaev has acknowledged underwriting her gun rights advocacy in the past but denies any involvement in a Russian influence operation and says his only dealings with his government are limited to routine business needs.

Though his public persona is that of a billionaire in the prosaic industries of ports and railways, a cache of 9,000 hacked emails — from the account of Alexey Beseda, whose father is a general in Russia's Federal Security Service, the successor to the K.G.B. — reveals another side to his business activities.

Mr. Nikolaev has been an investor in a gun company run by his wife that developed a sniper rifle used by the Russian National Guard, which reports directly to President Vladimir V. Putin. He is also a major investor in a satellite imagery firm that has a license from the Federal Security Service, or F.S.B., to handle classified information.

Less well known is Mr. Nikolaev's role providing money for a Kremlin-backed project to develop night-vision technology that the military sought after Western sanctions made it difficult to obtain. Mr. Nikolaev's role was obscured by complex transactions involving offshore companies and Mr. Beseda, the documents show. The emails described the project as 'one of several priority lines of development' approved by Mr. Putin, saying it would counter an advantage enjoyed by "the troops of our probable enemy - NATO."³⁸

Much less is known about Andrei Kunatbaev, another major Russian partner in American Ethane who currently holds 56% equity stake according to the available public disclosures by lobbying firms. However, what little information is known also connects him to the Russian state.³⁹

In 2002, one of Russia's largest steel companies, Magnitogorsk Iron and Steel Works (MMK), filed a lawsuit against Kunatbaev and his business associate Andrei Vinogradov for alleged extortion of funds from MMK's management. Vinogradov had previously served as chairman of the government-run media agency RIA Novosti and as first deputy chief of staff of the Russian government in the 1990s. He later became one of the co-owners of the Foundation for Effective Politics, a team of political spin doctors led by Gleb Pavlovsky that helped bring Putin to power using a wide range of sophisticated political and PR tactics.

38 Mike Mcintire, "Billionaire Backer of Maria Butina Had Russian Security Ties," *New York Times*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/us/politics/aria-butina-russian-oligarch.html>.

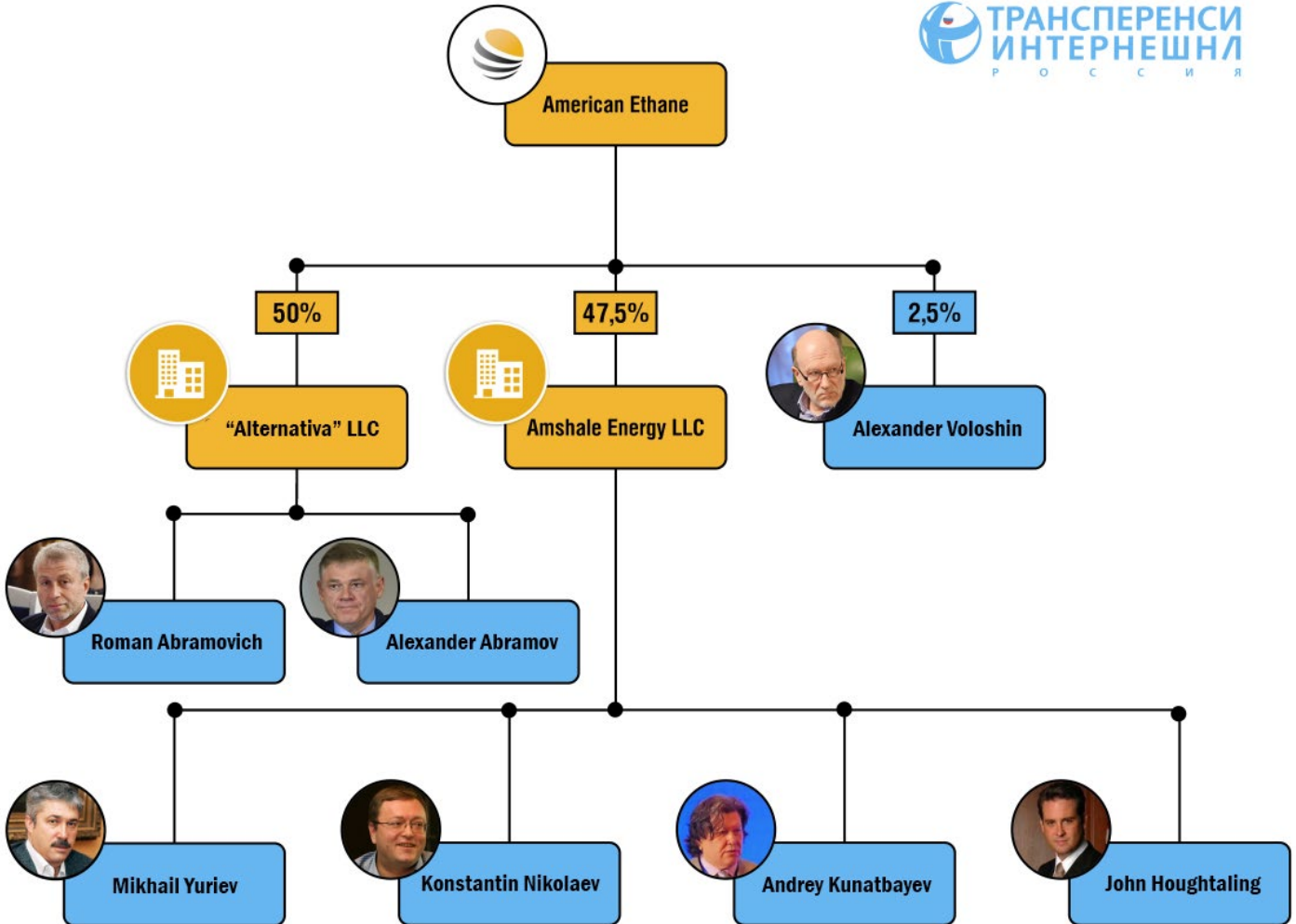
39 David Hammer, "New Orleans gas exporter's partners include ex-Putin aide," *WWL-TV*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.wwltv.com/article/news/local/investigations/new-orleans-gas-exporters-partners-include-ex-putin-aide/289-573373937>.

In 2018, Transparency International Russia has published a detailed report on the establishment, ownership and lobbying on behalf of American Ethane, which estimates the initial structure of ownership as follows:

- 50% owned by Russian “Alternativa” LLC (Abramovich and Abramov);

- 47.5% owned by “Amshale Energy” LLC (Nikolaev, Yuryev, Kunatbaev and Houghtaling);
- 2.5% owned by ex-chief of Putin’s administration Alexandr Voloshin.

Ownership scheme:



Later on the ownership has evolved with Kunatbaev and Nikolaev nominally controlling 86% of company's shares today. Some important ownership changes may have occurred since the last available disclosure; these still remain unknown to the public.

Several important conclusions can be made from the above-mentioned Transparency International Russia report on American Ethane:

- Initially, Russians who invested in American Ethane aimed at establishing a foothold in the US shale oil and gas production through ventures like Lafert LLC or Amshale Energy LLC. However, these attempts failed, and Russians shifted to focus on ethane business, which was an easier pick, because ethane, as a byproduct of the shale oil and gas revolution, was lacking demand, and American Ethane had essentially created an export channel to supply ethane to China.
- Before July 2018, when the publication by The Guardian has first disclosed the information about influential Russians from Putin's inner circle being behind the establishment and ownership of American Ethane, the company didn't disclose its owners. Its lobbyists only began to do so after the media has uncovered the Russian roots of American Ethane.

The known lobbying firms hired by American Ethane have included BGR Group, Sander Resources, Bold Strategies, Turnberry Solutions, and law firms such as Clark Hill.

What is the significance of American Ethane? The company's business is focused on purchasing relatively cheap byproduct of natural gas, which lacks end-use market, and to resell it to China (and potentially other Asian countries) as feedstock for petrochemical industries (ethane-to-ethylene production). Currently, American Ethane claims to have conditional binding contracts to supply 7.2 million tons per year of ethane to three ethane-to-ethylene cracker projects in China worth \$72 billion. The contract for 2.6 mtpa was signed by American Ethane and Nanshan Group on November 9, 2017 in Beijing in the presence of President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping. The signing of the American Ethane/Nanshan supply contract was the highlight of the US/China Summit

in November 2017.

Other contracts (also signed in 2017) include 2.6 mtpa contract with Ganergy Heavy Industry Group Co. Ltd from Liaoning Province, China, and 2.0 mtpa contract with Yangquan Coal Group from Shanxi province, China. American Ethane is also building a 10 mtpa ethane export terminal at Neches River location in Texas for the purpose of facilitating ethane exports to Asia.

American Ethane is also engaged in promoting possible ethane-to-power projects (where ethane is used as a power generation fuel) together with GE Power in countries like India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Ethane can be more competitive than LNG due to lower infrastructure costs per KWh.

If the above cited numbers are true, it means that the Texas-based firm set up by the Russians has managed to establish a very significant channel of exports of an important byproduct of the US oil and gas shale boom to China and potentially other Asian countries - a channel that is de-facto controlled by the people from the inner circle of Vladimir Putin. However, it is worth noting that the figures cited are only those provided by the company itself, since American Ethane does not make any of its financial statements public. This, for instance, has led to certain scrutiny of American Ethane business deals with China by the US Senators recently - Senate members have demanded that American Ethane submit its contracts with Chinese buyers for review by federal regulators.⁴⁰

Given the hostile nature of Vladimir Putin's regime, reliance on its cronies in large-scale commercialization of ethane feedstock available as a result of US shale oil and gas production presents certain risks, which should be properly evaluated.

ROSATOM

In 2010, Russia's state nuclear holding company ROSATOM acquired a control equity stake in Uranium One Inc., a Canadian uranium mining company with headquarters in Toronto, Ontario.⁴¹ Since 2013, Uranium One has been a fully owned subsidiary of ROSATOM, which also established control over Uranium One's American subsidiary, Uranium One USA Inc. Uranium One USA controls some major US-based uranium production

40 "Senators Scrutinize U.S.-China Ethane Supply Deals", The Wall Street Journal, September 4, 2019: <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.wsj.com/amp/articles/senators-scrutinize-u-s-china-ethane-supply-deals-11567594801>.

41 Mathew Lee, "AP Explains: What's the deal with the Uranium One deal?" Associated Press, November 14, 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/united-states-north-america-donald-trump-russia-ap-explains-d0b9963ed3654c2a8677e02bb583ef72>.

assets, including the Willow Creek uranium mine. This mine was responsible for about 10% of US uranium production in 2014. This is equivalent to roughly 1% of the total uranium consumption in the United States.

As of December 31, 2016, Willow Creek had proven and probable reserves of 6.49 million tons of ore grading 0.036% uranium (6.09 million pounds U_3O_8). Although there's a widely circulating figure indicating that Uranium One USA holds 20% of currently licensed uranium in-situ recovery production capacity in the US, in reality the company was responsible for only about 11% of US uranium production in 2014 and is not producing uranium at the moment. Uranium One also has uranium exploration projects in Arizona, Colorado and Utah.⁴²⁻⁴³

Since acquiring control over the Willow Creek uranium mine, ROSATOM has been gradually scaling back the mine's uranium production; ROSATOM completely shut down the mine in the third quarter of 2018.⁴⁴ ROSATOM cites low uranium prices as the reason for the shutdown and has applied to the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality for a ruling that would allow it to place the Willow Creek mine under care and maintenance for a period of up to five years, completely halting its uranium production. Interestingly, out of the eight mines operated by Uranium One, Willow Creek is the only one that has been shut down for "care and maintenance." The other seven mines, all of them located in Kazakhstan, have continued their operations.

We don't have any explanation from US authorities as to why they consented to ROSATOM's proposal for the five-year shut down in the production at the Willow Creek uranium mine, however as a direct result, US uranium production fell sharply by 33% in 2018 alone. Subsequently, US civilian nuclear power reactor operators were forced to substitute declining domestic uranium production with

increased uranium imports.⁴⁵

Given the above said, it becomes clear that Russian acquisitions of major US energy assets may be problematic and pose certain risks. In the first case where Russians actually acquired a major upstream energy-producing site in the US – the Willow Creek uranium mine in Wyoming after the acquisition by Russian-owned Uranium one – they have completely shut it down, increasing the US dependence on uranium imports for domestic energy needs. Although the causes for the mine closure shall be thoroughly and publicly investigated, foul play shall be suspected among other reasons, because all other Uranium One overseas uranium production sites continue to operate, despite Rosatom citing "low uranium prices" as a reason for the mine closure.

At roughly the same time, the Trump administration reached an agreement with ROSATOM in October 2020 to extend the 1992 "Agreement Suspending the Antidumping Investigation on Uranium from the Russian Federation" through 2040.⁴⁶ This agreement allows ROSATOM to supply nuclear fuel to the United States for another 20 years, though it slightly reduces the quota for Russian imports (the agreement was set to expire in December 2020).

While imposing quotas on imports of uranium under the request of some US-based uranium mining companies might have been a controversial move, possibly leading to increased energy prices for US consumers and complicating international trade relations, it is also clear that a major cause for growing US dependence on uranium imports (the closure of a key US uranium mine by ROSATOM) has been badly overlooked by US lawmakers and regulators, giving uranium importers like ROSATOM a free pass.

42 Nuclear Regulatory Commission, "Willow Creek Uranium Recovery Project" <https://www.nrc.gov/info-finder/materials/uranium/licensed-facilities/is-christensen-ranch.pdf>.

43 USA Today, "Fact check: What we know about the Uranium One deal", October 26, 2017 <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/10/26/fact-check-what-we-know-uranium-one-deal/804753001/>.

44 "Uranium One mothballs US mine," *Nuclear Engineering International*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newsuranium-one-mothballs-us-mine-6715119>.

45 "U.S. uranium production in 2018 was the lowest in nearly 70 years," *US Energy Information Administration*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39352>.

46 "US and Russia sign final amendment to uranium suspension agreement," *Nuclear Engineering International*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newsus-and-russia-sign-final-amendment-to-uranium-suspension-agreement-8172402>.

RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA INFLUENCING THE US ENERGY POLICY DEBATE

Apart from attempts to establish a direct equity presence in the US energy sector and other critical infrastructure projects, Russians have also tried to influence the US energy policy debate through both media activity and direct contact with the US energy expert community. Their aim is to cultivate allies and platforms to promote Russia's energy interests at the expense of the US's.

The strategic goals of Russian propaganda in this area can be summarized as follows:

1. Amplifying the idea that the US oil and gas shale boom may have negative consequences for the United States itself, not only from an environmental standpoint, but also due to oversupply resulting in lower oil and gas prices;
2. Promoting the idea that Russia can be a reliable oil and gas partner regardless of its human rights record and lack of respect for the international rules-based order, and that both these concerns can be sacrificed for the sake of cooperation with Russia on pragmatic energy issues (an idea strongly resonating with the worldview of US energy companies);
3. Calling for the lifting of sanctions against Russia and opening of new opportunities for American businesses in the Russian energy sector;
4. Finding new openings for possible direct equity investment in US energy assets.

ROMANCE BETWEEN ROSNEFT AND CERA/IHS MARKIT

The main Russian oil producing company, Rosneft, has for a long time viewed and respected American energy institutions as a way of promoting its influence in the United States. Specifically, Rosneft's main focus over the years has been on cooperation with Cambridge Energy Research Associates (CERA), which was integrated into IHS Energy in 2004. CERA is one of the most respect-

ed international energy research institutions, founded in 1983 by Pulitzer Prize winner Daniel Yergin with its annual energy forum CERAWeek becoming a major event.⁴⁷

Since his appointment to the position of Rosneft's CEO in 2012, Igor Sechin, one of Putin's closest affiliates, has engaged in significant efforts targeted at building Rosneft's ties with CERA/IHS and his personal ties with CERA's founder Yergin. Sechin is a frequent speaker at the CERAWeek forum where he translates Rosneft's talking points to the US and global audiences and is usually personally introduced by Yergin. Sechin gave a welcome address at the latest CERAWeek International Conference of Energy Industry Leaders on October 26th, 2020.⁴⁸

Sechin has invested a lot of effort in securing personal ties with Yergin. The two have held multiple personal meetings over the years, and in 2012, Yergin was awarded a position on Rosneft's steering committee coordinating the integration of private oil company TNK-BP into Rosneft in 2013. According to Rosneft, the steering committee has discussed issues such as the TNK-BP asset consolidation plan, staff structure, HR, and appointments to key posts.

To a great extent, this approach has worked. Although one can't call CERA/IHS "lobbyists of Rosneft's influence," partnership with CERA/IHS creates a main entryway for Rosneft into the American energy debate, and CERA/IHS conferences - a key platform for Igor Sechin to speak out Rosneft's agenda in the US. Daniel Yergin and CERA/IHS over the years have facilitated multiple public meetings and events with the participation of Igor Sechin and Rosneft, and have never on record asked them a tough question about Rosneft's role as the primary source of cash for financing Russia's domestic and international malign activities - the commentary from CERA/IHS and Mr. Yergin were indeed only complimentary.

One can always say that CERA/IHS provides the floor to anyone influential in the energy world, but the long history of building up relations between Sechin/Rosneft on one hand, and CERA/IHS and Daniel Yergin on the other, suggests that this relationship was specifically cultivated and highly praised by Rosneft, making CERA/IHS, willingly or unwillingly, the main platform for Rosneft to speak its mind in the United States energy world.

One should not forget that Rosneft is merely an arm

47 Ben Geman, "At the Super Bowl of Energy, the Big Game Is on the Sidelines," *The Atlantic*, April 23, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/at-the-super-bowl-of-energy-the-big-game-is-on-the-sidelines/446703/>.

48 "Igor Sechin Makes Welcoming Address at CERAWeek International Conference of Energy Industry Leaders," *Rosneft*, October 26, 2020, <https://www.rosneft.com/press/news/item/203561/>.

of Vladimir Putin's autocratic state and that its message has always been hostile to the United States - just take a look at some of the examples of Sechin's anti-US public rants over the recent years on wide range of issues:

- "Russia's Sechin accuses US of using energy as political weapon. Igor Sechin, CEO of Russian oil giant Rosneft, accused the United States of using energy as a political weapon and said on Thursday that the US golden age of energy had become an "era of energy colonialism" for other countries;"⁴⁹
- "Rosneft's Igor Sechin warns of US shale oil 'dotcom bubble'. Top Russian oil official accuses OPEC and the West of manipulating oil markets;"⁵⁰
- "Putin Ally Accuses West of Attempting to Influence Russian Election Through Sanctions. One of Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest allies has lamented the US and EU sanctions on his business, claiming they are an attempt to affect elections in Russia. "To be honest, I don't like to talk about sanctions," Igor Sechin, who has served as Putin's deputy during his term as prime minister and as deputy chief of staff in the Kremlin, told the Financial Times in an interview. "I believe they are totally unjustified and even illegal;"⁵¹
- "Rosneft defies US sanctions on Venezuela oil trading. Russia's state-owned oil producer Rosneft has said it will continue to do business with Venezuela despite the US bringing sanctions against its trading arm for buying and selling the country's crude;"⁵²
- "Russia's Sechin blames US Fed for low oil prices. The head of Russian oil giant Rosneft said on Wednesday the slump in global oil prices was mostly linked to a fresh interest rate hike announced by the US Federal Reserve last week."⁵³

Listening to what Rosneft and its CEO have to say is one thing - after all, it is one of the largest and most influential global oil and gas companies. However, allowing a globally respected US energy consultancy to become a permanent platform for pushing forward Rosneft's anti-Western and pro-Putin agenda is another. It looks like an established Rosneft/CERA cooperation clearly misses an important disclaimer on the US part, drawing the public attention to the fact that whatever Rosneft and Igor Sechin say are not simply the views of an important international oil and gas industry player, but talking points crafted by Kremlin's propaganda machine to achieve Putin's goals at the international energy arena. Such a disclaimer is totally missing when CERA/IHS regularly provide the floor to Igor Sechin and Rosneft at their conferences, and their top executives and experts visit Rosneft and otherwise meet and work with its officials.

GAZPROM'S GLOBAL PR CAMPAIGN AGAINST US LNG PENETRATES AMERICAN EXPERT DISCUSSION

The emergence of US liquefied natural gas (LNG) as a major competitor to Russian natural gas exports has led Gazprom and the Russian Government to pursue a coordinated global PR campaign against American LNG.⁵⁴ The ultimate aim of this PR campaign is to create favorable public opinion for divestment from projects related to exports of American LNG. Some respected American energy policy think tanks have willingly (or unwillingly) taken part in this pressure campaign, essentially relaying Gazprom's talking points on the matter.

One example of this is Tatiana Mitrova and Tim Boersma's report titled, *The Impact of US LNG on Russian Natural Gas Export Policy*, published by Columbia University's SIPA Center on Global Energy Policy (CGEP) in December 2018. The report contains, among other things,

49 "Russia's Sechin accuses U.S. of using energy as political weapon," Reuters, June 6th, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-forum-sechin-usa-idUSKCN1T70V0>.

50 "Rosneft's Igor Sechin warns of US shale oil 'dotcom bubble'. Top Russian oil official accuses OPEC and the West of manipulating oil markets," *The Telegraph*, February 10th, 2015 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/energy/11403216/Rosnefts-Igor-Sechin-warns-of-US-shale-oil-dotcom-bubble.html>.

51 "Putin Ally Accuses West of Attempting to Influence Russian Election Through Sanctions," Newsweek, May 6th, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-ally-claims-russia-sanctions-aim-influencing-its-elections-620746>.

52 "Rosneft defies US sanctions on Venezuela oil trading," *The Financial Times*, February 19th, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/bea4b5da-5331-11ea-8841-482eed0038b1>.

53 "UPDATE 1-Russia's Sechin blames U.S. Fed for low oil prices," Reuters, December 28th, 2018, <https://jp.reuters.com/article/oil-opecc-russia-sechin-idAFL8N1YV16W>.

54 Andrew Osborn, "Kremlin accuses Trump of trying to bully Europe into buying U.S. LNG," Reuters, July 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-trump-kremlin/kremlin-accuses-trump-of-trying-to-bully-europe-into-buying-u-s-lng-idUSKBN1K21A8>.

a specific chapter named, “The United States Creates Global LNG Glut,” which blames the decline of Gazprom’s gas export revenues solely on the growth of US natural gas production. This chapter includes such phrases as:

*Traditional Russian pricing strategy, which had worked excellently for half a century, had to adapt to the new reality ...The very idea that there would be more LNG in the market in a few years due to the Australian and US projects gave more confidence to the consumers in their negotiations with the traditional suppliers. Starting in 2009, Gazprom began receiving official notices from European buyers demanding that their contracts be reviewed.*⁵⁵

The report blames the wave of claims starting in 2009 from Gazprom’s European gas consumers calling on Gazprom to reconsider pricing mechanisms in Gazprom contracts and to shift from more expensive oil price indexation to use of new natural gas spot market benchmarks, solely on the rapid growth of the US natural gas production (“The unprecedented rise in North American gas production not only made Russian gas uncompetitive in this market, but ... as the United States was no longer interested in LNG imports, all this “homeless” LNG was redirected to other markets in Europe and Asia”).

This is an extreme oversimplification of the reasons why European consumers have started to put massive

pressure on Gazprom to reconsider contract pricing mechanisms. This analysis ignores certain key factors such as increased competition in the European natural gas markets, as well as development of infrastructure that fostered these greater levels of competition.⁵⁶ These projects include the construction of new gas pipeline networks, expansion of gas storage capacity in Western Europe, and the construction of new LNG regasification import terminals.

The lead role of the European Union’s energy policy in changing the pricing environment for Gazprom in Europe was later recognized in another report co-written by Tatiana Mitrova, Tim Boersma, and Akos Losz and published by SIPA in April 2019:

*The EU Commission’s antitrust ruling against Gazprom effectively connected all of the company’s European natural gas sales to spot prices at liquid European hubs, even if formal oil indexation remains in some long-term agreements, effectively replicating what was already happening in Gazprom’s Western European contracts. To adapt to the more competitive pricing environment, Gazprom has set up its own electronic trading platform and started to play a more active role in hub trading in Europe once again, after years of subdued activity.*⁵⁷

55 Tatiana Mitrova and Tim Boersma, “The Impact of U.S.LNG on Russian Natural Gas Export Policy,” Columbia University’s SIPA Center on Global Energy Policy, December 2018, https://energypolicy.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/pictures/Gazprom%20vs%20US%20LNG_CGEP_Report_121418_2.pdf.

56 “Commission publishes 4th list of Projects of Common Interest – making energy infrastructure fit for the energy union,” The European Commission, October 31, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/commission-publishes-4th-list-projects-common-interest-making-energy-infrastructure-fit-energy-union-2019-oct-31_en.

57 Tatiana Mitrova, Tim Boersma and Akos Losz, “A Changing Global Gas Order 3.0,” Columbia University’s SIPA Center on Global Energy Policy, April 8, 2019, <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/research/commentary/changing-global-gas-order-30>.

Having adjusted their causality for Gazprom's commercial travails, Mitrova and Boersma then attempt to justify Russia's export-oriented gas pipeline projects as merely the natural response to increased American LNG, which is factually untrue. The work on Russian pipeline projects via the Black Sea and Baltic Sea began as early as the late 1990s and was openly justified by the Kremlin as a way to reduce dependence on Ukrainian gas transit.⁵⁸ The motivation for these projects, therefore, had nothing to do with American LNG, which was not yet even present as a factor. The authors would also go on to include a chapter titled, "Growing Pressure on Russia to Speed Up the New Pipeline Projects," which portrays Russia as a victim of international pressure, expected to turn to export projects as a result of the development of LNG.

It is strange that a respected US think tank would pick up Gazprom's talking points and directly translate them into the American public debate on energy policy. Normally, the issue of the global gas glut is widely discussed in the US energy expert community with necessary commentary on the contribution of US LNG exports as one of many causal factors. However, it is usually couched in a more realistic way that does not portray Russia's energy sector as an understandably reactive victim to American provocations.

However, one would not be surprised after learning that Tatiana Mitrova, who became a non-resident fellow at Columbia CGEP in 2016, is a long-time affiliate of various Russian official structures, including the government itself. Since the early 2000s, Mitrova has worked for the Energy Research Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ERI RAS), producing multiple papers and policy proposals financed by Gazprom itself. Mitrova was a member of the Russian Commission on Energy Affairs and currently serves on the board of directors of Novatek, Russia's second-largest gas producing company. Gennady Timchenko, a longtime Putin associate currently under US sanctions, owns a 23.5% stake in Novatek. This example, therefore, demonstrates the immense impact that experts sympathetic to Kremlin interests can have on the US energy policy discourse.

It is apparent from her biography that Tatiana Mitro-

va is closely linked to the Russian state and big state-affiliated energy industry players. Why a respected US think tank has chosen to hire her as a research fellow remains unclear, but it's quite clear that she has used this position to translate Gazprom's talking points on the US LNG into American energy policy debate.

Tatiana Mitrova has been promoting such Gazprom-oriented views at described above during numerous events and public speeches in the US in the company of respected and well-known energy experts, which adds certain legitimacy to talking points which parrot Gazprom's propaganda.⁵⁹ This is a relatively unique example when an established and respected American think tank hires a person directly linked with the Russian official circles, who often translates points of view quite similar to the Russian propaganda and gives her the floor to promote such talking points, which can be directly characterized as repeating Russian propaganda lines.

Although the influence of Mitrova's opinion on the American policy discussion is far from decisive, it is important to understand that such an approach resonates with a perfectly normal debate on the impact of American LNG on formation of the global natural glut, which is currently a major factor negatively influencing the international gas pricing. It is clear that the glut is a result of multiple factors at play over decades - primarily, rapid development of the global LNG supply, which started long before the US even began to think about becoming a major gas exporter. Other factors have included the development of multiple competition-supporting infrastructure in gas consuming countries (LNG import terminals, interconnection gas pipeline networks, underground gas storage facilities) and competition-promoting government policies enabling consumers with wider options for supplier's choice (like the European Union 3rd energy package).

Before the shale gas boom, the US was considered by mainstream expert opinions as a market that will increase its dependence on natural gas imports over time. The United States only became a major net gas exporter and a sizable supplier of LNG to international markets in 2017-2019, according to BP Statistical Review of World Energy and other sources. However, the global oversupply of gas as a result of rapid worldwide LNG development and other factors listed above made the issues of

58 Michael Lelyveld, "Russia: Blue Stream Pipeline A Technological Feat, But An Economic Misadventure," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 23, 2002, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1101164.html>.

59 "The Impact of US LNG on Russian Natural Gas Export Policy," YouTube, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1N_KcxCQK1Q.

global gas glut and oversupply the key topics of international debate as far back as in 2009-2010 when the US was still a net importer of 75-80 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually⁶⁰. The arrival of the US LNG at the global gas market is only a very recent factor, and the glut risks were there for a long time.

Blaming the current US LNG as a key factor leading to current international gas glut risks provoking a shift to potential policies that may lead to new restrictions of permits for LNG export terminals and other actions by the US Government to contain new additional projects targeted at increasing global supplies of the US LNG - if the idea that the American LNG is to blame for the glut sticks on. The negative implications of the Kremlin's talking points repeated at discussions by the US energy think tanks are further analyzed in the "Specific threats to the US national security" section.

RUSSIAN-INSTIGATED ATTACKS ON THE US SHALE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY ON ENVIRONMENTAL GROUNDS

Russia has made extensive use of its state-funded television network, *Russia Today (RT)*, as a platform to push anti-fracking disinformation and to attack America's growing energy independence on seemingly progressive environmental grounds. A 2017 report by the US Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), drafted in coordination with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and National Security Agency (NSA), noted that *RT*, the "Kremlin's principal international propaganda outlet," is engaged in an anti-fracking campaign in the US as a way to combat American gas production and the threat it poses to Russia's projection of power in Europe through Gazprom:

RT runs anti-fracking programming, highlighting environmental issues

*and the impacts on public health. This is likely reflective of the Russian Government's concern about the impact of fracking and US natural gas production on the global energy market and the potential challenges to Gazprom's profitability.*⁶¹

In 2017, two US congressmen, Representative Lamar Smith and Representative Randy Weber, wrote a letter to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin warning of the perils of "a covert anti-fracking campaign" carried out by Russia on US territory. They cited media reports suggesting that at least some of the money for this disinformation and propaganda campaign was funneled through a Bermuda-based shell company known as Klein Ltd.⁶²

In 2018, the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology found that more than 4% of the tweets from the Internet Research Agency (IRA), the Russian "troll farm" behind Moscow's cyber campaign to influence the 2016 presidential election, were "related to energy or environmental issues, a significant portion of content when compared to the 8% of IRA tweets that were related to the election in the US."⁶³

Klein Ltd. gave a total of \$23 million in 2010 and 2011 to the Sea Change Foundation in San Francisco. The Sea Change Foundation has funded the environmentalist Sierra Club, which launched a campaign called "Beyond Natural Gas" in 2012 to fight American fracking. Klein Ltd. is run by California-based hedge fund millionaire Nathaniel Simons and its affiliated Bermuda-based company Wakefield Quin Ltd. This entity, as well as its registered

60 "FACTS: 2009-10 LNG demand flat; supplies to glut markets", *Oil & Gas Journal*, May 18th 2009, <https://www.ogj.com/pipelines-transportation/lng/article/17221432/facts-200910-lng-demand-flat-supplies-to-glut-markets>.

61 "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections," *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, January 6, 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

62 Kevin Mooney, "Putin Is Funding Green Groups to Discredit Natural Gas Fracking," *Newsweek*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-funding-green-groups-discredit-natural-gas-fracking-635052>.

63 Georgia Wells and Timothy Puko, "Russian Meddling on Social Media Targeted U.S. Energy Industry, Report Says," *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-meddling-on-social-media-targeted-u-s-energy-industry-report-says-1519902001>.

lawyers, have Russian oil and gas companies as clients — among them, Rosneft itself.⁶⁴

Wakefield Quin's managing director Nicholas Hoskins has also been listed as a director of firms associated with Russian oil and gas interests. He has served as the vice-president of the London-based Marcuard Services Ltd., whose Bermuda-based parent company Marcuard Holding Ltd. is headed by Hans-Joerg Rudloff, a member of Rosneft's board of directors.

For its part, Klein denied funneling Russian money to environmental groups, and despite Smith and Weber's letter to Mnuchin, no proper investigation has been conducted.

PAST AND POTENTIAL FUTURE DISRUPTIVE ACTIVITIES

As can be seen from the case studies described above, Russian efforts to build an influence network inside the United States are still mostly in their embryonic stages, with the notable exception of ROSATOM's ownership of the Willow Creek uranium mine. That example, however, doesn't leave room for optimism about the expansion of Russian influence, since the Willow Creek mine's production has shut down, causing an increase in US uranium import dependence - a strategic goal of the Kremlin.

In the following paragraphs, we look at specific cases of known disruptive behavior by the Russians in the US energy sector or threats of such behavior to give a general idea through which lens any Russian involvement in the US energy industries should be considered in the current circumstances. These specific cases serve as an illustration that Russia has the potential to weaponize anything related to the energy sector with the purpose of doing harm to the United States, which is why any other Russian influence in the energy world should also be treated as risky and potentially hostile. Plus, specific cases described below - like the Russian hacking of the US energy networks or Rosatom's disruptive behavior in the nuclear industry - also pose great risks that should be thoroughly mitigated, on which we provide certain recommendations.

THE HACKING OF US ENERGY NETWORKS

The US media has been awash in recent months with reports of cyber penetrations or cyber-attacks on US energy networks by Russian groups related to the special services or supposedly rogue criminal elements in Russia.

The US Government estimates that almost 94% of these attacks in 2016 consisted of malware placed into American utilities' systems. The Department of Homeland Security alleges that Russian hackers exploited the relationship between utilities and their private vendors that supply critical software and communications technologies to run the grid.⁶⁵ Hackers used spear phishing emails to steal log-in credentials from these companies and gain access to utility networks.

Such an approach has certain limitations because there are straightforward ways to deter spear phishing operations: namely by bolstering discipline among corporate and government employees not to click suspicious links and files, as well as the development of training tools for anti-phishing protection programs. These initiatives may severely reduce opportunities for this type of attack available to hackers in the near future.

It is important to understand that hackers are IT specialists, not utility experts or secret agents. They have a limited understanding of how energy systems operate, and even if they're being tutored by professional Russian energy specialists while planning their attacks, there is no real substitute for on-site access to understand how specific utilities or other energy enterprises are run. Thus, hackers are eager to recruit insiders to help them conduct their malign cyber operations.

This was demonstrated last year when a Tesla employee was allegedly offered a \$1 million bribe to install ransomware on the car company's networks in Nevada.⁶⁶ The employee, a Russian immigrant, was solicited by Egor Igorevich Kruchkov, a 27-year-old Russian émigré who arrived in the United States in July 2020. Kruchkov immediately began contacting the Tesla employee, someone who he'd personally known for years. The employee was offered a payment of \$500,000 and then \$1 million in

64 Hayden Ludwig, "Creatures of the Green Lagoon: Sea Change Foundation," *Capital Research Center*, June 17, 2021, <https://capitalresearch.org/article/creatures-of-the-green-lagoon-part-3/>.

65 Rebecca Smith, "Russian Hackers Reach US Utility Control Rooms, Homeland Security Officials Say," *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-hackers-reach-u-s-utility-control-rooms-homeland-security-officials-say-1532388110>.

66 "Russian pleads guilty to Tesla ransomware plot," *BBC News*, March 20, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56469475>.

cash or Bitcoin to either open a malicious email attachment or use an infected USB stick to directly infiltrate the company's networks. Instead, he contacted the FBI, and Kruchkov was arrested. Tesla's Nevada-based Giga-factory was the target of the hackers, as Tesla CEO Elon Musk confirmed on Twitter.

This case study shows that for hackers of critical industrial systems, the potential of remote operations is somewhat limited. Their preference now is to find recruits on the inside. Before being arrested, Kruchkov told the Tesla employee that such methods are now common, as are distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks launched against the target network to disguise the theft of valuable data. Attacks of this type, Kruchkov admitted, his own gang of hackers have been carrying out for years.

We do not know what other US enterprises were similarly targeted by groups through attempts (successful or not) to bribe and hire their employees to install malware into company's systems, but, given the scale of operations of such groups, energy businesses most certainly have been among the targets.

In this regard, the US should get prepared to Russian hacking of the US energy networks swiftly transforming from being a purely remote effort to active operations on the American soil, with recruiting personnel of energy companies to assist them in infiltrating their enterprises with Russia-originating malware. We are unaware of any specific cases of recruitment of utility personnel by Russians for that purpose just yet, but it is highly likely that it is already happening, and the Tesla hacking attempt uncovered in August 2020 is very strong proof that Russians are already using that approach.

This means that greater emphasis should be put on the human factor and working with personnel of the US energy sector companies to address the issue of potential bribery and recruitment of insiders for the purpose of assistance in carrying out hacking attacks against critical US energy infrastructure.

DISRUPTIVE IMPLICATIONS OF DEPENDENCE ON ROSATOM

US dependence on ROSATOM at present remains the biggest vulnerability of US energy security. Nuclear power makes up about 8% of the US primary energy consumption and over 19% of the total US electricity generation.⁶⁷ ROSATOM is also a key supplier of fuel to US power stations. According to the "Agreement Suspending the Antidumping Investigation on Uranium from the Russian Federation," which was extended by the Trump Administration through 2040, ROSATOM's share in the total US enrichment demand will drop gradually from the current 20% to an average of about 17% over the next 20 years. It will be no higher than 15% starting in 2028.⁶⁸

In 2019, 15% of the uranium used by US power stations came from Russia, according to the US Energy Information Administration.⁶⁹ This means that up to 3-4% of US electricity is being generated using Russian uranium fuel. So, the disruptive effects could be quite significant, if ROSATOM chose to engage in hostile actions as part of a Kremlin offensive against the US.

Can Russia disrupt uranium supplies to the United States?

Obviously, such a move will have complex consequences for the Russians, and there will be a price to pay. However, from a rational standpoint, this prospect should be treated rather as a risk to be mitigated, rather than a practical tomorrow's situation. At the same time, it should not be discounted, as Russians have already issued an open warning to the United States during the recent years of hostilities between the two countries: on October 30th, 2016, Rosatom issued a press release "disavowing American media publications on termination of EUP [enriched uranium product] deliveries."

It is a unique case when a Russian state-owned giant issues a press statement responding to unnamed "American media publications"; Rosatom does not name any publications specifically, but the ones that the Russian media has been referring to in connection with Rosatom's press release do not mention possible uranium supply disruptions at all (see below). However, Rosatom went on

67 "US total energy statistics," *US Energy Information Administration*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/us-energy-facts/data-and-statistics.php>.

68 "US and Russia sign final amendment to uranium suspension agreement," *Nuclear Engineering International*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newsus-and-russia-sign-final-amendment-to-uranium-suspension-agreement-8172402>.

69 "Nuclear explained: Where our uranium comes from," *US Energy Information Administration*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/nuclear/where-our-uranium-comes-from.php>.

to issue a menacing press release, which sounded more like a threat than a real response to certain media articles (which went unnamed in the press release):

**ROSATOM disavowed
American media publications
on termination of EUP
deliveries to the United States**

In connection with the American media on-line publications concerning the alleged preparation – as a measure to counter anti-Russian sanctions introduced by the United States – of restrictions on Uranium products deliveries to the US utilities, Rosatom State Corporation states with full responsibility that the Russian side considers no measures restricting Uranium products deliveries to the American market. Commercial cooperation in the peaceful use of atomic energy is based on long-term contracts subject to strict implementation.

“ROSATOM company JSC

Techsnabexport (TENEX), the leading exporter of Uranium products, operating over forty years on the global market, has been impeccably fulfilling its obligations even throughout the uneasy periods in Russia-US relations. A vivid example to it is successful implementation of the highly sophisticated HEU Agreement, - noted Kyrill Komarov, ROSATOM’s First Deputy General Director for Development and International Business. – Today we have no reasons to put in doubt the reliability of Russian deliveries,” - he emphasized.

That press release was originally available on Rosatom’s website, but now it was deleted; the original text was retrieved from secondary reprinting sources containing the original link.⁷⁰ Also, the original RIA Novosti release remains online.⁷¹

Were there any real publications in the US press about the risk of possible Russian uranium supply disruptions? Hardly. What the Russian state-affiliated media has been referring to in connection with the above mentioned Rosatom’s press release is a blatant lie: for instance, the Reuters publication mentioned by [Lenta.Ru](https://lenta.ru)⁷² didn’t men-

70 “ROSATOM disavowed American media publications on termination of EUP deliveries to the United States,” *Rusatom Energy*, <http://www.rusatom-energy.com/media/rosatom-news/rosatom-disavowed-american-media-publications-on-termination-of-eup-deliveries-to-the-united-states/>.

71 “Росатом не намерен ограничивать поставки урановой продукции в США,” October 30, 2016, <https://ria.ru/20161030/1480302336.html>.

72 “Russia suspends nuclear agreement, ends uranium research pact with United States,” *Reuters*, October 6, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-nuclear-uranium-idUSKCN12521J/>.

tion any “termination of uranium supplies,” it only mentions the Russian Government’s decision to terminate the agreement on co-operation in nuclear and energy-related scientific research, signed in 2013, and the uranium conversion agreement, signed in 2010, which had envisaged the development of feasibility studies into the conversion of six Russian research reactors from dangerous highly enriched uranium to more secure low enriched uranium.

In reality, the *Reuters* publication had nothing to do with speculation on “termination of uranium supplies” - however, Rosatom’s PR response was more in line with certain measures recently taken by the Russian Government meant to thwart US-Russia cooperation in the nuclear sphere. The press release by Rosatom’s truly sounded like a threat to the US authorities on the background of the anti-US measures in the nuclear sphere recently taken in case of further sanctions; the possibility of shutting down uranium supplies to the United States may as well be on the table.

It should be also mentioned that in October 2016, Russians suspended a 16-year-old deal that called for reducing some of Russia’s and the United States’ stockpiles of weapons-grade plutonium citing “Washington’s unfriendly actions toward Russia” - after months of signals from the Kremlin that Russia was ready to back out of the deal.⁷³

Rosatom’s disguised threat clearly came as part of Russia’s set of systemic steps aimed at reducing nuclear cooperation with the United States taken in October 2016 in clear political retaliation to the US sanctions previously imposed on Russia. Therefore, Russia has already demonstrated its use of “nuclear industry leverage” against the United States as retaliation to US sanctions - it can do it again, next time, possibly at a greater scale. It should be also understood that the Russian Government at present has sufficient financial resources to provide the necessary subsidies to Rosatom in case of the termination of uranium exports to the United States. Technabexport, or Tenex, Rosatom’s subsidiary that supplies uranium to the US, has reported revenue from uranium sales to America as \$7,565 million in 2019 and \$8,534 million in 2018.⁷⁴ Such sums are nothing that Putin’s government can’t handle, given the currently available \$182 billion National

Wealth Fund and other financial resources, including profitable state banks that can always provide the necessary loan financing to stabilize Tenex’s finances should the uranium exports to the US be significantly reduced or completely terminated. Tenex can also redirect supplies to other uranium importers, offering cheaper prices, so that the termination of uranium exports to the US will only lead to partial loss of revenue at best.

Therefore, financial costs of the termination of Russian uranium supplies to the United States in the event of serious escalation between the two countries are not so serious for Russia.

On top of that, the Russian state media openly brags about the destructive influence of Rosatom on the US nuclear industry - see, for instance, “[United] States on a uranium needle: how Rosatom destroyed the US nuclear industry.”⁷⁵ Interestingly, that particular article is mocking the US policies since the 1980s, which have focused on purely economic factors (relatively cheap costs) while creating dependence on Russian uranium supplies and overlooking the fundamental weaknesses arising from the underestimation of Rosatom’s strategic geopolitical threat to the US - it’s remarkable that the Russians are not afraid to publicly pronounce these things through their state-controlled media outlets.

To add to this further, as shown above, Rosatom used its first opportunity after acquiring US-based uranium production assets as a result of the Uranium One acquisition to shut down one of the US uranium mines – the Willow Creek mine in Wyoming. Although Rosatom cites legitimate reasons for this shutdown, this matter was not properly investigated by US lawmakers and regulators.

It appears that the risks associated with potential Rosatom’s disruptive behavior vis-a-vis the US nuclear power and uranium industries are seriously underestimated given how involved Rosatom is in the political anti-American agenda of the Russian authorities. For instance, the disruptive actions in recent years of Vladimir Putin and the Russian Government, who have terminated certain agreements with the United States in the nuclear sphere and indirectly threatened to cut uranium supplies through vague press releases and state-affiliated media, were downplayed by US policymakers - they haven’t led to

73 “Putin Suspends U.S.-Russia Plutonium Deal, Blaming NATO, Sanctions, Magnitsky Act”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 3, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-us-putin-cancels-plutonium-agreement/28029368.html>.

74 Tenex consolidated financial statements, <https://www.tenex.ru/en/disclosure/financial-reporting/>.

75 Штаты на урановой игле: как «Росатом» разрушил атомную промышленность США», *RIA Novosti*, January 21st, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190121/1549577354.html>.

development of a comprehensive strategy on countering these risks, which are serious.

Some American lawmakers recognize the security hazard. Former US Representative Xochitl Torres Small introduced the “Defending Against ROSATOM Exports Act,” which accurately characterized the strategic threats arising from ROSATOM:

Russia has repeatedly used its energy resources as a tool to advance its policy goals and as a weapon to manipulate the decisions of other countries; Such efforts include the nuclear energy sector, in which the ROSATOM State Nuclear Energy Corporation (ROSATOM) uses subsidies and other state support to advance the political goals of Russia’s leadership; Russia has long sought to expand its role and influence in the nuclear energy sector of the United States and of United States allies and partners.⁷⁶

Unfortunately, these recommendations have not yet been translated into policy. That leaves the United States wide open to vulnerabilities associated with fundamental dependence on Rosatom in case of possible future escalations in relationship with Putin’s Russia.

Steps necessary in this regard are:

- Diversification of the sources of uranium supply to meet the demand from US power plants, minimizing the strategic threats arising from dependence on Rosatom;
- Carrying out thorough policy and regulatory review of Rosatom’s behavior and its North American subsidiary Uranium One as direct investors in the US uranium sector, and the implications of their actions on US national security, including the reasons for closure of the Willow Creek uranium mine in Wyoming, which has contributed to growing US dependence on uranium imports;
- Identify the network of Rosatom’s lobbyists inside US policymaking circles, and develop a counterstrategy against their efforts promoting greater dependence on Russian uranium supplies and other issues.

Analyzing Rosatom’s lobbying networks inside the US is also important in terms of minimizing risky dependence of American energy sector on Russian uranium supplies and other issues related to the nuclear industry. According to lobbying databases, Tenam Corporation (Rosatom’s subsidiary in the US in 2010-2020, since January 2021 consolidated as Tenex-USA) and Uranium One have extensively hired lobbyists in the US over years for various purposes.

⁷⁶ “H. R. 7141: To extend limitations on the importation of uranium from the Russian Federation, and for other purposes,” 116th Congress, June 8th, 2020, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-116hr7141ih/html/BILLS-116hr7141ih.htm>.

Here's a table summarizing the network of Rosatom's lobbyists in the US:

Russia-controlled Client	US lobbyists
Tenam Corporation ⁷⁷	Energy Resources International Inc. (2018)
Uranium One ⁷⁸	BGR Group (2010-2011), Podesta Group - Stephen Rademaker (2012-2016), Kountoupes Denham - formerly reporting as Kountoupes Consulting, LLC (2011-2013), Mr. Robert K. Weidner - through American Clean Energy Resources Trust (ACERT) (2008-2020)

BGR Group is mentioned earlier in this chapter in connection to its lobbying activities on behalf of another Russian-controlled entity discussed above, American Ethane.

The efforts of Russian interests to influence US energy markets are bolstered by a well-funded and organized lobbying effort. For example, the BGR Group is a lobbying firm hired by Rosatom that is also contracted to advance the interests of another Russia-aligned energy concern previously discussed in this chapter, American Ethane. Another lobbying firm that worked on behalf of Rosatom is Tenam Corporation. This firm briefly hired well-known Republican political strategist John Weaver, a former senior advisor to the late Senator John McCain and chief strategist for the Republican presidential candidates John Huntsman and John Kasich.⁷⁹

In May 2019, Tenam hired Weaver through his Network Companies LLC for \$350,000 plus expenses to lobby for Rosatom's interests with US policymakers. Fletcher Newton, Tenam's president, said in an interview that the purpose of Weaver's contract was to head off any legislation that would make it harder for American utilities and nuclear power plants to buy nuclear fuel from Russia. Weaver's set task was, as Newton put it, to "work with Congress and, hopefully, make sure they don't come up with something vis-a-vis Russia that ends up hurting the United States."⁸⁰

However, the day after the story of Weaver's Russian connections broke and his foreign agent registration

statement was posted on the Justice Department's website, Weaver abruptly terminated his contract with Tenam.⁸¹ One of the more delicate issues with this lobbying arrangement was that Weaver was one of the co-founders of The Lincoln Project, a political action committee that opposed Donald Trump's re-election on the grounds of, among other things, his supposed fealty to Moscow and subjugation of American national security interests to the Kremlin. Weaver publicly stated that his abortive contract with Tenam was a "mistake" on Twitter and added that "[n]o funds were transferred, no actions taken. Now, I've got to get back to the barricades. Apologies for the momentary distraction."⁸²

Tenam has not tried to hire lobbyists since. However, it was clear from its contract with Weaver that it was going to pressure the Trump Administration against imposing quotas on uranium imports, a decision that would have greatly benefited Rosatom. Weaver was supposed to lobby against the quotas, which were disadvantageous for Rosatom. But in July 2019, Trump's administration refused to impose quotas on uranium imports under Section 232 investigation,⁸³ so further lobbying on this matter was unnecessary for the time being.

In 2018, Tenam also hired Energy Resources International Inc., which published a white paper arguing against the quotas for \$40,000, according to Justice Department filings.

77 Tenam Group: OpenSecrets, <https://www.opensecrets.org/fara/foreign-principals/F317899?cycle=2020>.

78 Uranium One: OpenSecrets, <https://www.opensecrets.org/federal-lobbying/clients/lobbyists?cycle=2015&id=D000065156>, ProPublica <https://projects.propublica.org/represent/lobbying/search?search=Uranium+One>.

79 Theodor Meyer, "Kasich adviser will lobby against potential Russia sanctions," *Politico*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/05/15/lobbying-against-russia-sanctions-weaver-kasich-1327880>.

80 Frazin, Rachel. "Former Kasich Adviser Registers to Lobby against Sanctions on Russia." *The Hill*, 16 May 2019, thehill.com/regulation/lobbying/443971-former-kasich-adviser-registers-to-lobby-against-sanctions-on-russia.

81 Richard Lardner, "GOP adviser rejects deal to lobby against Russia sanctions," *Associated Press*, May 16, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/john-kasich-russia-donald-trump-north-america-energy-industry-f789b4a43d4b4fc6b5c845aa3ee4fb9b>.

82 Lardner, Richard. "GOP Adviser Rejects Deal to Lobby against Russia Sanctions." *Associated Press*, AP, 16 May 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/f789b4a43d4b4fc6b5c845aa3ee4fb9b>.

83 "US President rejects request for uranium import quota", *World Nuclear News*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/US-President-rejects-uranium-import-restrictions>.

SPECIFIC THREATS TO US NATIONAL SECURITY

In the table below, we sum up specific threats to US national security arising from the operations of Russian influence networks inside the US energy sector.

Nature of threats	Specific threats	Comments
Immediate threats of disruptive nature	Russian hacking of the US energy networks - hiring of energy utilities personnel to help installing malware	Already happening, but it's reasonable to expect that the Russians would attempt to enhance their hacking operations by hiring on-site US energy company personnel to improve efficiency of the attacks, as happened in the summer of 2020 with Tesla facilities in Nevada
	Disruption of uranium supplies to the US nuclear power industry	High risk due to high level of dependence of the US power sector on Russian uranium supplies, lack of available response mechanism on the US side, specific threats already de-facto issued by the Russian side in 2016, and relatively low financial cost of cut-off of uranium supplies to the US for Russia
	Shutdown of US uranium mines to increase US uranium import dependence	Already happened with the Willow Creek uranium mine in Wyoming, which was shut down by Rosatom; needs to be investigated
	Russian-instigated attacks on the US shale oil and gas industry on environmental grounds	May have a negative impact on the US shale oil and gas industry and US energy independence and help promote the interests of Putin's main sources of cash like Gazprom or Rosneft. Russia's anti-fracking propaganda efforts strongly resonate with the sentiment promoted by the US environmental and anti-fracking groups
Potential threats that may evolve into disruptive activities	Acquisitions of US energy assets that may lead to potential future disruptive activities	Attempts to acquire major US energy assets were already made by Rosatom (successful) and Rosneft (yet unsuccessful); known cases show that Russian ownership of US energy assets may lead to shutdowns and disruptions
	Russian control over companies that have significant importance for the US shale oil and gas sector and commercialization of its products	American Ethane, established and controlled by people from Putin's inner circle, is the primary example of that today - Russians control a multi-billion channel of exports of an important byproduct of the US shale oil and gas industry to China and potentially other Asian countries
Longer term threats related to US energy policy development	Malicious influence over the US energy policy debate by quasi-expert Russian energy propaganda	US think tanks and consultancies should be better instructed against participation in advancing Russian energy propaganda "school of thought", the public should be better advised against specific Russian influence attempts, which should be labeled accordingly, as is being done in the media and lobbying spheres

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several options are available for countering and minimizing the risks of the Kremlin's malign influence targeting the US energy sector and other key industries.

Cyberattacks on critical US energy infrastructure are the most immediate threat. As explained above, this threat is rapidly moving from remote online operations toward close access operations conducted on US soil, primarily through bribery and recruitment of utility personnel. Given the described situation in this sphere, we recommend:

- Compiling a comprehensive report of known cases of attempted recruitment of personnel in the US energy sector with the goal of assisting Russian hackers in breaching security systems;
- Developing a set of recommendations for US utilities on how to conduct better background checks on their employees and methods for training their personnel as to how to protect their computer systems from accidental breaches;

Disruption of uranium supplies to the US nuclear power industry is a very severe threat that has been downplayed by the US Government for years. On this matter, we recommend:

- Diversifying the sources of uranium supply to meet the demand from US power plants, resulting in the minimization of strategic threats arising from dependence on Rosatom;
- Creating a regulatory review of the behavior of Rosatom and its North American subsidiary Uranium One as direct investors in the US uranium sector, and the implications of these enterprises' actions on US national security. This should include a federal investigation into the closure of the Willow Creek uranium mine in Wyoming;
- Preparing a comprehensive report, preferably under the auspices of US Congress, assessing the risks posed by American dependence on Russian uranium imports. This report must also include possible scenarios of the development of the situation in the future, and potential US response to disruptive Russian actions;
- Identifying the network of Rosatom lobbyists inside US policy making circles and developing

a counterstrategy against their efforts promoting greater dependence on Russian uranium supplies and other issues.

Shutdown of US uranium mines to increase US uranium import dependence.

We have already described the situation with the Willow Creek uranium mine. The shutdown may not have been of a malign disruptive nature, but this matter needs to be investigated, also to analyze potential further impacts of strategic US energy asset acquisitions by the Russians. In this regard, we recommend:

- Developing a comprehensive, objective, and public report on the reasons for shutdown of the Willow Creek uranium mine; the report shall verify claims by Uranium One that the shutdown was carried out purely for "economic reasons";
- Asking Congress to take a lead in investigating this matter;
- Using the conclusions from the report to develop a set of comprehensive policy recommendations for the US regulators (including the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States) on how to deal with Russian attempts to acquire strategic energy assets in the US in the future.

With respect to Russian-instigated disinformation and propaganda campaigns aimed at the US shale oil and gas industry, we recommend:

- Launching a comprehensive federal investigation of potential sources of Russian funding for the US based anti-fracking initiatives, preferably under the auspices of Congress.

There is little trust of the intentions of the Russian state-linked corporations trying to acquire strategic energy assets in the United States given the hostile and malicious nature of Putin's regime. A systemic approach to such asset acquisition attempts is needed. In this regard, we recommend:

- Profiling key Russian state-linked energy companies that have shown interest in acquiring strategic energy assets in the US and illustrating to what extent they are merely tools of projecting Putin's global geopolitical agenda and the sources of cash for Putin's malign domestic and international activities. Such a report would help relevant US regulators make the correct decisions in the event of new attempted acquisitions by Russian interests;

- Developing a set of comprehensive policy recommendations for US regulators (including the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS)) on how to deal with Russian attempts to acquire strategic energy assets in the US.

At present, more needs to be learned about the operations of American Ethane, which are secretive and likely connected to Russian state actors. We recommend:

- Investigating at the Congressional level the nature of ethane export contracts entered by American Ethane with companies from China and other Asian countries to identify the level of influence of Russian owners linked to Putin's inner circle;
- Preparing a report based on the findings of that investigation on the strategic implications of American Ethane in the US shale oil and gas industry;
- Preparing a report analyzing other new startups set up by the Russians in the areas of major shale oil and gas production in the US in order to identify other potential points of capture of strategic market positions by the Russians in this sector in the future.

Malicious influence over the US energy policy debate by Russian energy propaganda has no or few immediate implications, but it may cause the US energy debate to move in the wrong general direction in the future. US think tanks and consultancies should be better instructed against participation in advancing Russian energy propaganda. We recommend:

- Advising US think tanks and consultancies on the hazards of hiring ostensibly objective energy specialists with demonstrable ties to the Russian government;
- Issuing recommendations for the US think tanks and consultancies against hiring or providing floor to persons translating Russian energy propaganda, or asking them to issue a relevant disclaimer once these persons are given space in the US energy policy debate;
- Considering introducing mechanisms in the US think tank and expert community similar to those requiring registration as a foreign agent for those

recruiting personnel directly linked to the Russian state, translating Russia's talking points, or providing regular floor to representatives of Putin's influence circle within the United States;

- Preparing regular reports summarizing the Russian propaganda talking points in the energy industries, to assist the energy community to easily identify those who promote such ideas within the US energy debate, and to assist debunking the wrong and fake Russian propaganda claims (like "global LNG oversupply is caused by the US").

Tracking and highlighting the movement of Russian money in the United States is also critical, especially if Russian money is involved in upkeeping key tech industries used daily by the American public and officials alike. We recommend:

- Establishing a task force including experts on money laundering and investigative journalists who have been already involved in tracking and analyzing Russian investments in the US with the purpose of brainstorming and developing a set of specific recommendations on improving the transparency of foreign investments in the US;
- Increasing the transparency of foreign investments in the US;
- Developing a comprehensive report suggesting additional legislative and other measures aimed at increasing transparency of private equity funds and venture capital firms, as well as greater transparency of cross-border money transfers and investments;
- Developing recommendations for the US Government, including the Treasury Department, to enact currently available legal mechanisms (including the provisions of the Currency and Foreign Transactions Reporting Act and other legislation) to create a system of tracking cross-border money transfers, with the purpose of identifying the full picture of
- Russian investments in the US, including those hidden behind the obscure private equity funds and venture capital firms.



Photo courtesy: Steve Halama

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE NETWORKS: INVESTMENTS IN CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

By Vladimir Milov

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Kremlin's attempts to invest in critical infrastructure in the United States have been significantly complicated in the past years due to the sanctions regime introduced in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. We're not talking about some specific sanctions having particular influence here - from the Russian business point of view, it's more the overall hostile environment between Russia and the West that is more important, which risks permanent elevation of hostile measures, including possible new levels of harsher sanctions introduced in the future, which will seriously impede business in the US. Journalists, politicians, and commentators have been speculating about the various options and levels of potential new sanctions against Russian businesses - including placing some of them on the SDN list, like Oleg Deripaska and Victor Vekselberg in 2018. The overall threat of new sanctions has been elevated in the past years, which is probably more important for investment decisions of Russian businessmen than the sanctions currently in effect. Many disclaimers explaining this can be found in the financial reports and investment memoranda regularly is-

sued by the Russian companies that own assets in the US or considered doing business there.

Foreign investments in critical infrastructure traditionally face bigger regulatory scrutiny - at the very least, they require clearance from CFIUS. The risk that Russian investments may be considered by US regulators as suspicious and may not be cleared significantly increased following the US sanctions against Russia, introduced after Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Sanctions were introduced as punishment and containment measures following the Russian occupation of Ukrainian Crimea and Donbas, downing of the Malaysian civilian airplane (flight MH17) in July 2014, and, subsequently, in relation to other malicious Russian activity that have followed (interference in the US elections, cyberattacks, poisoning of Sergey and Yulia Skripal in the UK in 2018, etc.). Specific sanctions sensitive to business have included personal sanctions against several high-profile Russian businessmen (with possibility of expansion of that list to others), including the adding of some of them into SDN list (Deripaska and Vekselberg plus their companies), and sectoral and financial sanctions introduced by the US (Executive Order 13662 of September 12, 2014) that have made it much harder for Russian businesses to access international borrowing.

These sanctions, altogether, - plus the risks of new sanctions of a more serious nature that may possibly be introduced in the future, given the fact that Russia is not backing down on its policies that the West considers hostile - have prompted a large-scale exit of Russian oligarchic businesses from the US. Russian steelmakers and oil companies have been massively selling their US assets, either partially or completely. Industrial oligarchs who have chosen to partially or fully exit the US business include Alexey Mordashov's Severstal (steel), Evraz Group owned by Alexandr Abramov and Roman Abramovich (steel), Igor Zyuzin's Mechel (steel), Vagit Alekperov's Lukoil (oil), Dmitry Pumpiansky's TMK (steel). Some of the oligarchic groups, like Vladimir Lisin's NLMK (steel), have been significantly scaling back their expansion plans after the sanctions were announced in 2014.

Not all of these exit decisions were directly influenced by sanctions. There were other factors at play, and some of the exits happened before 2014, being driven by various business considerations. For instance, Lukoil had made a strategic decision to sell downstream US assets in 2007 due to low profitability and the need to buy oil from other producers to supply its US downstream network. Mechel hired a consultant to sell its West Virginia mining subsidiary Bluestone as early as 2013. However, sanctions have played a great role in accelerating such decisions, most of which have happened since 2014. Some of the oligarchs mentioned have found their enterprises included in sanctions lists, like Alexey Mordashov or Vagit Alekperov.

However, it was quite clear that sanctions played an influential role here, since Russian oligarchic ownership of US assets had begun to play a toxic role by provoking greater public outcry and, often, greater regulatory scrutiny. The US Government has even taken specific actions to prevent major Russian companies from buying critical US assets. In October 2019, the US Treasury Department (Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, or OFAC) introduced a ban over the sale and transfer of shares of a US-based downstream petroleum company Citgo, one of the largest US refiners owned by Venezuelan Government, to specifically prevent Citgo from becoming owned

by Russia's Rosneft oil company (after Rosneft had secured 49.9% of Citgo shares as loan collateral, a clear pathway to ownership on the background of Venezuela's loan defaults). The mentioned ban was introduced amid a major outcry from the public and members of the US Congress over a potential takeover of a major US downstream petroleum company by the Russians.⁸⁴

That was a clear signal that Russian investments in important infrastructure assets are unwelcome while political relations between Russia and the United States remain hostile - particularly investments by state-owned companies controlled by the government.

Given all these developments, the Russians have refrained from straightforward attempts to acquire control over material infrastructure in the US in the recent years - the risk of such acquisition attempts ending up under political scrutiny and being blocked were too high. However, the Russians have developed a different attitude: (a) investing significant amounts of money through private equity funds (such investments often lack the necessary transparency); (b) doing it through businessmen who are less exposed as direct Kremlin affiliates and may try to defend their image as 'independent private actors'; and (c) targeting not the traditional material infrastructure, but the future-oriented technology-related sectors: digital technologies, fintech, communications, data-driven marketplaces, robotics, AI, electric vehicles, etc. This also involves not only the breakthrough new technologies, but also new sectors of the American economy emerging as a result of the technological revolutions of the past. We have shown in the previous chapter how Kremlin-linked Russians have been able to establish control over significant share of the US ethane production (a byproduct of the American shale oil and gas revolution) through private-owned firm American Ethane established and controlled by the Russians.

Western observers have already begun to notice this phenomenon of strategic Russian investments in the US through obscure private equity firms.⁸⁵⁻⁸⁶ But so far, it has only been noticed on an occasional and limited

84 "Senators: Russians May Take Control of Houston-based CITGO. A Venezuelan Loan Default Could Give Putin a Stake in Texas Oil Refining", *Texas Monthly*, April 11th, 2017, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/senators-russians-may-take-control-houston-based-citgo/>.

85 "Private Equity Hides Foreign Capital From U.S. Scrutiny", *Bloomberg*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-05-23/private-equity-hides-foreign-capital-from-u-s-scrutiny>.

86 "Russian Investments in the United States: Hardening the Target", Joshua Kirschenbaum, Adam Kline, *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, August 22nd, 2018, <https://www.gmfus.org/blog/2018/08/22/russian-investments-united-states-hardening-target>.

scale, and public and policy response to the potential threats from these new Russian investments has not been sufficient.

Here we highlight some sensitive cases of Russian investments in the “new” US infrastructure - breakthrough tech companies, not all of which may yet be considered to be providers of ‘critical’ infrastructure services, but some already are, others are on the brink of it, and some other tech companies working on the solutions and in areas that may have a chance to emerge as critical infrastructure in the near future. Some of the major Russian oligarchs are involved in these investments - some directly related to Putin’s inner circle, some pretending to be independent, but the evidence suggests that in reality there may be a solid connection, which these businessmen prefer to keep hidden.

In the sections below, we analyze the scope of the investments made by the Russian oligarchs and state companies in the US technology sectors, some of which may be already considered to be critical infrastructure at present, while some emerge as critical infrastructure in the future. We also provide detailed arguments explaining why certain Russian businessmen should be seriously considered as potentially linked to the Putin’s inner circle - and may be even deliberately acting as a respected ‘independent’ front in these investments - even though publicly they may deny the connection. We believe that this possible link with Putin’s inner circle for specific individuals should be studied to the maximum possible detail, given the seriousness of reasons suggesting such link exists.

ALFA GROUP

The group of prominent Russian businessmen known as the Alfa Group is led by billionaires Mikhail Fridman and Petr Aven.⁸⁷ Though the Alfa Group does not have a consolidated ownership perimeter across its different assets, 40% of its parent company (the Gibraltar-based CTF Holdings) is owned by Mikhail Fridman. Large stakes in CTF Holdings are also owned by Alfa Group billionaires German Khan and Alexey Kuzmichev.

The Alfa Group’s largest asset is Alfa Bank, the fourth largest bank in Russia and the largest Russian pri-

vate bank not formally associated with the government. The Alfa Group owns over 75% of Alfa Bank. Specifically, Petr Aven owns over 12% of Alfa Bank and is the chairman of its board of directors. Aven is also chairman for the Cyprus-based ABH Holdings, the corporation formally in control of Alfa bank. In 1997, Alfa Group, together with Victor Vekselberg’s Renova Group and Len Blavatnik’s Access Industries, formed the Alfa Access Renova (AAR) consortium. In turn, AAR bought control over the TNK oil company, which in 2003 was merged with BP’s Russian assets. The merger led to the creation of what today is Russia’s third largest oil company, TNK-BP.⁸⁸

Before his work with the Alfa group, Petr Aven served as the Russian Minister of External Economic Relations from 1991-1992 in Yegor Gaidar’s reformist Government. Aven joined the Alfa Group shortly after his resignation from the Government. In his capacity as minister, he had direct oversight of the activities of Vladimir Putin, who in 1991-1992 chaired the Committee on External Economic Relations in the St. Petersburg city administration.

Alfa Group’s various business ventures - including its international investment arm LetterOne - vary in their ownership structure, with Mikhail Fridman maintaining a leading role in each. However, for the purposes of simplification, this report will refer to this group of businessmen collectively as the Alfa Group, disregarding the specific distribution of roles in the various ventures.

Fridman and Alfa Group have always vigorously denied links to the Kremlin, though overwhelming evidence suggests that this denial is disingenuous. The biggest piece of evidence of the friendly relations between Alfa Group and the Kremlin can be seen in the 2012-2013 deal between Alfa Group and Igor Sechin’s Rosneft.⁸⁹

In this transaction, the Alfa Access Renova consortium (including Alfa Group) was paid \$28 billion in cash by Rosneft for a 50% stake in the TNK-BP oil company (co-owned by AAR Consortium), with an estimated 40-60% premium to market price. Shockingly and without discernible explanation, Sechin had paid 40-60% more than the market value of the ½ stake he was buying in TNK-BP. This premium, paid by Sechin, meant that the Alfa Group billionaires received an excessive amount of money for their shares. Notably, BP, which owned the other 50% of TNK-BP shares, received only \$17 billion in

87 “Supervisory Board,” *The Alpha Group*, <http://www.alfagroup.org/about-us/supervisory-board/>.

88 “Mikhail Fridman,” *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/mikhail-fridman/?sh=63676c4a266e>.

89 Stanley Reed, “Rosneft Completes Acquisition of TNK-BP,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/22/business/global/rosneft-finalizes-acquisition-of-tnk-bp.html>.

cash, compared to the \$28 billion paid to their Russian co-owners for the same share.⁹⁰

This generosity from Sechin came with strings attached. Sechin is known for his ruthlessness and has famously jailed and destroyed his rivals in the past. Thus, this sudden “kindness” in overpaying the Alfa Group for their shares of TNK-BP gives credible evidence to the belief that Sechin struck some sort of a secret deal with Fridman & Co in exchange for paying an incredibly overvalued share price. It is likely that this deal will provide cover for investing this cash internationally, most likely with political purposes. The suspicious circumstances around the TNK-BP deal should warrant further investigation and analysis into Alfa Group’s investments and activities abroad.

The personality of Igor Sechin plays further into casting suspicion over Rosneft and Alfa Group’s activities. Igor Sechin, CEO of Rosneft, is by no means a kind man in his line of work. Sechin has always ruthlessly fought to secure profitable deals for Rosneft, going as far as to harass and jail his opponents. This can be seen in the example of Russian billionaire Vladimir Yevtushenkov who was put under house arrest and threatened until he had agreed to surrender the oil company Bashneft into Rosneft ownership.⁹¹ Another opponent, the former Minister of Economy Alexey Ulyukayev was arrested on ‘bribery’ charges on Rosneft premises at Sechin’s request shortly after Ulyukayev left a meeting with the CEO, thus removing a government official who was objecting to Sechin’s push to privatize Rosneftgaz and Bashneft.⁹²

LETTERONE

To better understand how this quid pro quo between Sechin and the Alfa Group might be carried out, let us now examine the Alfa Group’s international investment

arm, LetterOne. LetterOne was founded in June 2013 around the same time as the deal between the Alfa Group and Rosneft, with Mikhail Fridman, German Khan and Alexey Kuzmichev investing a combined \$15.36 billion in LetterOne.⁹³ Quite obviously this was the money they had just received from the inflated Rosneft TNK-BP acquisition deal.

Given the fact that the cash from the TNK-BP deal was used by Alfa Group to hastily set up an investment fund for acquisitions abroad (LetterOne), strong suspicions should be raised about the potential connection between Mikhail Fridman and his Alfa Group partners on one hand, and Igor Sechin and the Kremlin on the other. As evidence will show, Sechin’s principal goal in overpaying for the shares of TNK-BP was to provide the Alfa Group with capital to engage in strategic investment in western infrastructure on behalf of the Kremlin.

It is also worth noting that Alfa Group is known for suing the journalists trying to closely examine their ties with Putin and his inner circle - just a recent example includes lawsuits filed by Mikhail Fridman and Petr Aven against HarperCollins publishers for publishing Catherine Belton’s book “Putin’s People.”⁹⁴

Alfa Group’s investments should also be closely watched, not only because of the possible ties with Putin’s inner circle, but also because of potential risk of export of aggressive Russian-style corporate culture, which has already been seen in certain acquisitions in the western world. For example in Spain, Alfa Group has been widely accused of corporate raider-ship practices.⁹⁵ This can be seen in Alfa Group’s attempt to take control of Zed WorldWide, a Spanish mobile content and services business that later declared insolvency.⁹⁶

90 “The government approved the directives for the purchase of 100% of TNK-BP by Rosneft,” RIA News, November 21, 2012, <https://ria.ru/20121121/911661193.html>.

91 Vladimir Milov, “Operation Retribution: How Igor Sechin’s Attack on Vladimir Yevtushenkov’s Assets Will End,” *Forbes Russia*, June 29th, 2017, <https://www.forbes.ru/milliardery/347113-operaciya-vozmездie-chem-zakonchitsya-ataka-igorya-sechina-na-aktivny-vladimira>.

92 “Ulyukaev: there was a bribe provocation after Sechin’s false accusation,” *BBC Russian*, August 16th, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-40941194>.

93 “The case for \$16 billion: why Alfa-Group shareholders need LetterOne Technology,” RBC, April 6th, 2015, https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/06/04/2015/5522bcac9a79476183292019.

94 “Russian billionaires file lawsuits over book on Putin’s rise. Mikhail Fridman is among those to have filed a suit against publisher HarperCollins”, *The Financial Times*, May 1st, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/a355a200-4b90-4d73-b193-b73650ab8b77>.

95 Agustín Marco, “Fridman, ‘el gran jefe’ ruso de la trama que asalta los súper de DIA,” *El Confidencial*, December 22nd, 2018, <https://www.elconfidencial.com/empresas/2018-12-22/fridman-el-gran-jefe-de-la-1723986/>.

96 Daniel Dombey, “Mikhail Fridman faces quizzing on Spanish corporate ‘raid,’” *The Financial Times*, October 6, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/f9959dac-e370-11e9-9743-db5a370481bc>.

INVESTMENTS IN UBER AND LYFT

Arguably the most important investment by the Alfa Group in critical US infrastructure has been its investment in Uber Technologies, Inc. from 2016-2019. Uber is one of the leaders of the sharing economy and a pioneer service aggregator. In the US, Uber enjoys a 70% market share for ridesharing and a 22% market share for food delivery.

In 2016, LetterOne invested \$200 million in Uber shares, acquiring about 3% of the company according to calculations by Russian media company RBC.⁹⁷ Their stake was later sold in 2019 for \$173 million, resulting in substantial losses for the Alfa Group due to the drop in Uber's share price.

Uber was the Alfa Group's largest and most important investment since 2016. Fridman boasted about Alfa Group's "strategic partnership" with Uber and how Uber was "transforming into one of the most outstanding technology businesses," but later their stake was sold, and no new investments were made.⁹⁸ LetterOne didn't publicly comment on its divestment from Uber, and the divestment itself wasn't even discovered until journalists analyzed Alfa's reports. However, initial statements from Mikhail Fridman upon acquisition of Uber equity stake in 2016 suggested that the group viewed its investments as strategic and counted on Uber as a future technology leader.⁹⁹

The divestment from Uber was never LetterOne's final plan, but rather a general scaling down of initial plans the company had for investing in the US. In the years leading up to their investment in Uber, Alfa Group and Fridman announced ambitious plans for investments in the US, including infrastructure investments.¹⁰⁰

Uber and Lyft represent new technologies that may be potentially interesting for the Kremlin in several different ways. Because of the scale of Uber's operations across US cities and its access to data, understanding Uber's technological architecture would help the Krem-

lin to achieve an advanced understanding of many areas of American life - how a modern city is organized and evolves. Crucially, it could also help the Putin administration identify vulnerable spots in American infrastructure where a relatively minor disruption may cause significant chaos. This strategy of targeted disruption was put into use during the Colonial Pipeline attack. In that instance, an outage of the billing system due to a narrow and targeted hacking attack forced the Colonial Pipeline to halt operations despite major technological systems continuing their normal operations.

INVESTMENTS IN DATA AND CYBERSECURITY FIRMS

Alfa Group-linked entities have already made attempts to acquire minority stakes in US firms connected with data and cybersecurity. In 2018-2019, the Fridman-connected investment fund Pamplona Capital Management made a failed attempt to invest in the US cybersecurity firm Cofense Inc. Based in Leesburg, Virginia, Cofense Inc. provides phishing solutions - a vital service in combating cyberattacks. Pamplona bought a minority stake in Cofense, which serves major corporations, in February 2018 when the company was known as PhishMe. However, in 2019, the Committee for Foreign Investment in the United States directed Pamplona to sell the stake in Cofense Inc. by July 2019.¹⁰¹

Although this particular deal eventually failed due to the timely intervention of the US Government, it clearly illustrates that Russian oligarchs have interest in obtaining access to important data and cybersecurity technologies in the United States even through minor investments. This was very likely the Alfa Group's motivation for investment in Uber.

No major new investment plans in the US have been announced by LetterOne since their divestment from Uber, apart from some limited investments in the healthcare sector, which fall outside the scope of 'critical infrastructure'.

97 Rinat Tairov, "Fridman's investment company sold a stake in Uber at a loss," *Forbes Russia*, June 8th, 2020, <https://www.forbes.ru/newsroom/finansy-i-investicii/402489->.

98 Daniel Thomas, "Billionaire Fridman targets US and Europe in \$16bn telecoms spree," *Financial Times*, April 5th, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/f0a1579a-d876-11e4-ba53-00144feab7de>.

99 Rinat Tairov, "Fridman's investment company sold a stake in Uber at a loss," *Forbes Russia*, June 8th, 2020, <https://www.forbes.ru/newsroom/finansy-i-investicii/402489->.

100 Morrison, Caitlin. "Investment Firm LetterOne Headed up by Russian Billionaire Mikhail Fridman Launches Health Business in US." *CityAM*, 6 June 2016, www.cityam.com/investment-firm-letterone-headed-up-by-russian-billionaire-mikhail-fridman-launches-health-business-in-us/.

101 Carl O'Donnell, "Cybersecurity firm Cofense says Pamplona to sell stake after US probe," *Reuters*, April 11th, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cofense-m-a-idUSKCN1RM30W>.

Furthermore, some of the past articles bragging about major US investment plans have been removed from LetterOne's website. It is unclear if this scaling-down was a result of the escalating risks of sanctions and regulatory scrutiny related to worsening US-Russia relations and public calls for more sanctions against Russian oligarchs. What is clear, however, is that despite maintaining its U.S. based office, LetterOne is much less active with US investments than it was 4-com5 years ago.¹⁰²

INVESTMENTS IN FREEDOMPOP

In 2016, LetterOne invested \$50 million in FreedomPop, a wireless Internet and mobile virtual network operator (MVNO) based in Los Angeles, California. This investment was even cleared by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States.¹⁰³

FreedomPop is one of the pioneers of the "Wi-Fi First" service model. "Wi-Fi First" is a network service model that prioritizes the use of WiFi over cellular networks for voice, SMS, and data traffic. It provides an alternative, cheaper option compared to traditional cellular network models, ultimately resulting in lower-priced contracts than mobile network operators. It is a disruptive technology challenging the market domination of traditional cellular operator companies. Using an Over-the-Top (OTT) app, phone calls and text messages can be transmitted through data alone—conceivably, it is no longer necessary to have a mobile phone or SIM with a contracted number of minutes and texts. It reforms users' dependency upon cellular networks, which are relegated to a supportive position, and enables users to play with effectively unlimited quantities of roaming data.

FreedomPop eventually merged with its competing rival in the MVNO market, Red Pocket Mobile.¹⁰⁴ It is not known how LetterOne views the results of its investment in FreedomPop, but it's clear that it had significant interest in

the "Wi-Fi First" network service model and traveled to great lengths so as to receive CFIUS clearance for such an investment.

VLADIMIR POTANIN

Vladimir Potanin is one of the wealthiest Russian oligarchs and the owner of "Norilsk Nickel," one of the world's largest producers of nickel and copper and the leading global producer of palladium. Potanin maintains a significant investment portfolio in US high tech industries through his private equity firm, Altpoint Capital, registered in Connecticut.

Just like Alfa Group's investment in Uber, Vladimir Potanin also invested into rideshare firms, specifically he invested in Uber's competitor, Lyft.¹⁰⁵ Potanin's Altpoint also made headlines in 2015 for buying Sidus Group, which was contracted to host Maryland's online voter services, election-night website, voter registration website, and candidacy/election management systems.¹⁰⁶ Potanin admits that he maintains hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of investments in the US, mostly in digital infrastructure to keep an eye on the most advanced trends:

There are investments in the US, mostly in the digital direction, to keep an eye on the pulse, several hundred million dollars.¹⁰⁷

Similar to the Alfa Group's Uber acquisition and Russian oligarchic non-commercial interest in telecom providers like FreedomPop, Potanin's investment in Lyft can be explained through the desire to obtain companies focused on data collection, as well as through the Kremlin's wish to understand disruptive technology and identify vulnerable spots within the infrastructure that may serve as the potential pathways for effective disruptive activities.

Potanin is in charge of very important Vladimir Putin's personal projects, including the 2014 Sochi Winter Olym-

102 375 Park Avenue, 22nd Floor, New York, NY 10152, tel: 347-916-9442

103 "LetterOne and FreedomPop announce strategic partnership," *LetterOne Newsletter*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.letterone.com/news-insight/news/2016/letterone-and-freedompop-announce-strategic-partnership/>.

104 Joe Paonessa, "FreedomPop Has Been Acquired By Red Pocket Mobile," *MVNO*, June 7, 2019, <https://bestmvno.com/freedompop/freedompop-has-been-acquired-by-red-pocket-mobile/>.

105 Seth Hettena, "A Russian Oligarch Is Investing in US Companies. Should We Be Worried?" April 6, 2020, sethhettena.com/2019/06/05/a-russian-oligarch-is-investing-in-u-s-companies-should-we-be-worried/.

106 "Maryland told its voter registration vendor financed by Russian oligarch", *CBS News*, July 13th, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/maryland-voter-registration-platform-russian-oligarch/>.

107 "I never liked fights with injured opponents," *Kommersant-Dengi Magazine*, October 24th, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3779060>. "How Silicon Valley Became a Den of Spies. The West Coast is a growing target of foreign espionage. And it's not ready to fight back," *Politico Magazine*, July 27th, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/07/27/silicon-valley-spies-china-russia-219071>.

pics, where he was one of the major investors in luxurious resorts built in connection with the Olympic Games and subsequently used by Putin, for which Potanin was personally awarded by Putin.¹⁰⁸ Potanin is also Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Night Hockey League founded by Putin in 2011 - an 'amateur' ice hockey league where Putin often plays himself, alongside the Russian president's most trusted and closest persons. Potanin is one of the major sponsors of the League. In 2020, Potanin was allowed to get away with relatively mild fines and without a major setback after the largest environmental catastrophe in the history of the Arctic that happened at "Norilsk Nickel" facilities in May 2020, spilling 21,000 tons of diesel fuel into local rivers and lakes.¹⁰⁹ Putin was so eager to shield Potanin from the consequences of the disaster, so he had even downplayed the "Norilsk Nickel" company name while hosting an open discussion on the matter immediately after the accident, trying to avoid mentioning the corporate brand and Potanin at all.¹¹⁰

Given that level of proximity to Vladimir Putin, it's quite clear that Potanin's investments in the US infrastructure should be looked at with great concern. But it's not only Potanin himself, his US partners should also be viewed with concern due to their clear Russian ties. For instance, one of Potanin's US companies identified by Potanin's ex-wife Natalia Potanina through court proceedings (Mrs. Potanina has tried to identify Potanin's assets in a divorce litigation) was Apollo Global Management LLC. Apollo co-founder, Leon Black, was a member of the advisory board of the \$10 billion Russian Direct Investment Fund from 2011.¹¹¹ The RDIF was added to the sanctions list in 2015 by the US Treasury Department.

Here are some examples of Potanin's investments in what may be considered US critical infrastructure. Generally, very good analysis of Potanin's investments in the US was performed by investigative journalist Seth Hettena.¹¹²

108 "Putin awarded Potanin the Order of Merit to the Fatherland", *Meduza*, November 13th, 2019, <https://meduza.io/news/2019/11/13/putin-nagradi-potanina-ordenom-za-zaslugi-pered-otechestvom-boris-rotenberg-poluchil-orden-aleksandra-nevskogo>.

109 "Another Awful Arctic Accident By Russian Metals Giant Norilsk Nickel", *RFE/RL*, July 14th, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-metal-giant-reports-another-arctic-fuel-spill/30725491.html>.

110 See: Meeting on cleaning up diesel fuel leak in Krasnoyarsk Territory, President of Russia, June 3rd, 2020 (full transcript in Russian), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63450>, neither Potanin nor "Norilsk Nickel" are mentioned in any negative light.

111 https://rdif.ru/Eng_fullNews/53/.

112 "A Russian Oligarch is Investing in U.S. Companies. Should We Be Worried?" Seth Hettena, June 5th, 2019, <https://sethhettena.com/2019/06/05/a-russian-oligarch-is-investing-in-u-s-companies-should-we-be-worried/>.

113 "Company with Russian investment no longer owns firm that hosts Maryland election data" Feb 04, 2019, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/politics/bs-md-dpw-elections-data-20190204-story.html>.

114 "Maryland election systems hosted by Russia-linked firm were not compromised, DHS says" NOV 30, 2018, | STATESCOOP <https://statescoop.com/maryland-election-systems-not-compromised/>.

BYTEGRID

Potanin's Altpoint began investing in ByteGrid Holdings LLC, a data center company based in McLean, Virginia in 2011. According to court documents, Altpoint purchased 3,925 of the total 4,000 Class A Units of ByteGrid and was granted the right to appoint four of the six members of the Board of ByteGrid. Between 2011 and 2016, Altpoint financed Bytegrid's acquisition of a half dozen data centers in Silver Spring, Maryland; Alpharetta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Lynnwood, Washington; and Annapolis, Maryland (see Decision in *Lynwood Tech Holdings LLC v NR Int. LLC*, Circuit Court of Fairfax County, Virginia.).

It is through ByteGrid that Potanin's Altpoint has controlled the Sidus Group, which had the above-mentioned contract to manage Maryland's voting system. Since the ownership by a Russian oligarch became a public scandal in mid-2018, Potanin has given up control in Sidus Group,¹¹³ and it was determined that the elections systems were not compromised as such.¹¹⁴ However, this was a dangerous and alarming precedent showing how much the US public doesn't know about effective Russian control over critical American infrastructure through technology and data storage and processing firms through obscure private equity funds.

As shown above, Potanin's control over American data centers has spread across six US states, well beyond just the Maryland voting systems case.

Altpoint has also backed a host of startup firms like Factual, a location data company, and had founded a hedge fund dealing in cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin.

LYFT

Potinin's Altpoint Capital was an early investor in Lyft, the second-largest ride-sharing company in the United States after Uber with 30% market share. It is quite remarkable that two major Russian oligarchic groups have nearly simultaneously invested in pioneer innovator companies in the US urban transport, which altogether dominate the American ride-sharing market – Alfa Group, as described above, has invested in Uber, and Potinin's Altpoint Capital in Lyft.

Little is known about potential coordination between these efforts and possible underlying goals, but such a remarkable pivot of the Russians into the US breakthrough urban transport services providers should raise serious alarm, particularly given the connections between the mentioned oligarchs and the Russian authorities.

ONLINE COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS: ZOOM, REDBOOTH

Altpoint Capital's website indicates that its founder and managing partner Gerald T. Banks (his original name was Guerman Aliev; he used to work for Potinin's Interros but changed his name to Gerald T. Banks in 2008) was an early investor in Zoom Video Communications, Inc., an American communications technology company headquartered in San Jose, California, which provides video-telephony and online chat services through a cloud-based peer-to-peer software platform and is used for teleconferencing, telecommuting, distance education, and social relations. Zoom Video Communications has gained particular global importance due to sharp increase in online video communications during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021.

Potinin's Altpoint Capital funded the online communications startup Redbooth, Inc. (formerly Teambox Technologies S.L.). Redbooth/Teambox is a web-based workplace collaboration tool and communication platform. In June 2013, Teambox partnered with Zoom Video Communications to provide HD videoconferencing to its users.

VICTOR VEKSELBERG

Victor Vekselberg is also among Russia's wealthiest oligarchs (#20 in the Forbes list of Russian billionaires with estimated net worth \$9 billion in 2021) and owner of the Renova Group. In April 2018, the United States imposed sanctions on Vekselberg and the Renova Group in accordance with the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), after which Vekselberg insisted that he maintains no operations in the US. However, there's a New York-headquartered private investment company named Columbus Nova linked to Vekselberg, which was very active over the years investing in some advanced technologies across the US. Probably none of these investments can be classified as 'critical infrastructure', but we nonetheless mention them in the report in a systemic context:

- To illustrate a systematic push by the Russian tycoons for investing oligarchic capital earned in Russia into advanced technologies firms in the US;
- To stress that Vekselberg has also earned a lot of money through sale of his stake in the oil company TNK-BP to Rosneft in 2013 under same deal as Alfa Group mentioned above, so Vekselberg's investments in US high tech are de-facto made from funds paid by Rosneft, likely with political strings attached.

Vekselberg has earned about \$6 billion from sale of his stake in TNK-BP oil company to state-owned Rosneft in 2013, under the same deal as Alfa Group.¹¹⁵ It is an important common feature of the situation that Rosneft's CEO Igor Sechin has surprisingly agreed to pay huge premium to Russian co-owners of TNK-BP way above company's market value at the time being - something Sechin is not normally inclined to doing, and that Alfa Group and Vekselberg immediately began investing significant amount of cash in high tech businesses abroad, including the US. This creates reasonable suspicions that former Russian TNK-BP co-owners may have simply agreed to act as a front for Putin-linked investments in sensitive new technologies in the US, whereas in reality this investment activity was not only financed by proceeds from deal with Rosneft, but also possibly backed by Putin-linked circles. This possibility is so serious that it needs to be thoroughly investigated.

115 "Fridman and Vekselberg, having sold shares of TNK-BP, will rise in the Forbes list", *RIA Novosti*, November 22nd, 2012, <https://ria.ru/20121122/911765361.html>.

COLUMBUS NOVA TECH INVESTMENTS

Columbus Nova is a private-equity firm founded in 2000 by Andrew Intrater, who is Vekselberg's cousin. Originally it was formed under the name 'Renova US Management.' Although Columbus Nova now denies formal links to Vekselberg's Renova and says it was always owned by American citizens, Renova's website had previously listed Columbus Nova in Renova's corporate structure, and a 2007 filing with the US Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) identifies Columbus Nova as "the US-based affiliate of the Renova Group of companies."¹¹⁶⁻¹¹⁷

For years, one of Columbus Nova's biggest assets was its controlling stake in CIFIC, a publicly traded New York firm that managed credit investments. Intrater was on CIFIC's board together with Paolo Amato, an executive at Vekselberg's Renova. Columbus Nova used to advertise managing \$15 billion, but most of it appeared to be the debt securities managed by CIFIC. Columbus Nova sold CIFIC to a firm funded by Qatar's royal family for \$333 million in 2016.

However, another component of Columbus Nova has been its technology partners unit (Columbus Nova Technology Partners), which has made 38 tech investments in private companies according to PitchBook. Known investments include deep machine learning, communication platforms, and other advanced tech solutions.

It seems that the strategy of Vekselberg and Columbus Nova since Vekselberg fell under US sanctions in 2018 was to simply deny any formal link between the two, and to present Columbus Nova and its tech investments as independent from Vekselberg and Renova Group, though the actual evidence suggests the contrary.

RUSNANO / RUSSIAN VENTURE COMPANY

Rusnano and Russian Venture Company are wholly state-owned entities specifically created to promote inno-

vation and development of high technology sectors. Their activity is intertwined in a lot of ways, which is why they are combined into one section. They are quite active in investing in technology companies in the US, which had raised suspicion in 2018. *Politico Magazine* directly accused Rusnano USA as being involved in espionage on behalf of the Russian Government:

Some of the [potential intelligence-gathering] activities Rusnano USA was involved in were not only related to the acquisition of technology, but also inserting people into venture capital groups, in developing those relationships in Silicon Valley that allowed them to get their tentacles into everything," one former intelligence official told me. "And Rusnano USA was kind of the mechanism for that."¹¹⁸

The Rusnano Group is state-owned and was established in 2007 for the purpose of coordinating innovation in the field of nanotechnology and bringing Russian nanotechnologies to market. Since its foundation, it was chaired by Anatoly Chubais, one of the well-known reformers of the 1990s, who has always had strong ties with the government and was an influential member of the ruling nomenklatura for the past 30 years. In December 2020, Chubais was dismissed from his post, and was replaced as CEO by Sergey Kulikov, a longtime close associate of one of Putin's closest oligarchs Sergey Chemezov, who has been under US sanctions since 2014.¹¹⁹ Kulikov has been working at various top positions in Che-

116 "Columbus Nova: A Family Office For A Russian Billionaire Owned By Americans", *Forbes*, May 9th, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nathanvardi/2018/05/09/columbus-nova-a-family-office-owned-by-americans/?sh=28323c6a4c20>.

117 "Columbus Nova: Meet The Russia-Linked Firm That Hired Trump's Lawyer", *RFE/RL*, May 9th, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/columbus-nova-meet-the-russia-linked-firm-that-hired-trump-s-lawyer/29217547.html>.

118 "How Silicon Valley Became a Den of Spies. The West Coast is a growing target of foreign espionage. And it's not ready to fight back", *Politico Magazine*, July 27th, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/07/27/silicon-valley-spies-china-russia-219071>.

119 "Announcement Of Additional Treasury Sanctions On Russian Government Officials And Entities," *US Treasury*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2369.aspx>.

mezov-led companies Rosoboronexport and Rostec since 2000, and was appointed First Deputy Chairman of the Board of the Military-Industrial Commission of the Russian Federation in 2018.

The boards of directors of the main companies within the Rusnano Group - "Rusnano Management Company LLC" and JSC "Rusnano" - are filled with high-ranking Russian Government officials, proving that the company's activity is directly governed and coordinated by the Russian state.

Rusnano maintains a US subsidiary Rusnano USA, headquartered at the heart of Silicon Valley (3000 Sand Hill Rd, 2-240 Menlo Park, California 94025), which was directly mentioned in the above cited *Politico* article as the Russian intelligence-gathering center in the Silicon Valley. Through Rusnano USA, multiple investments in the US technology areas are maintained. The Rusnano 2019 annual report,¹²⁰ the latest available to date, lists the US technology investments by Rusnano Group in the following areas:

- Aquantia Corp., a manufacturer of high-speed transceivers, offering products for ethernet connectivity in the data center, access, and enterprise infrastructure markets;
- A number of the US biotechnology companies (Panacela Labs, Inc.; Cleveland Biolabs, Inc.; Selecta Biosciences, Inc.);
- Crocus Technology International Corp., a semiconductor startup company developing magnetoresistive random-access memory (MRAM) technology licensed for stand-alone and embedded chip applications;
- NeoPhotonics Corporation - a leading developer and manufacturer of ultra-pure light lasers and optoelectronic products that transmit, receive, and switch the highest speed over distance digital optical signals for Cloud and hyper-scale data center internet content providers and telecom networks;
- Advenira Enterprises, Inc., founded in Silicon Valley in 2010 by a group of Russians, holds the patents for the equipment for depositing nanocomposite coatings, which have many applications: manufacturing of low-emission architectural glass, photovoltaic solar panels, displays, microelectronic equipment, as well as packaging and antibacterial materials.

The Russian Venture Company (RVC) was founded in 2006 as a state fund of funds and a development agency promoting technological innovation. Its activity has always been closely intertwined with that of Rusnano, with many top Rusnano officials occupying management positions at RVC (as can be seen from, for instance, Rusnano's 2019 annual report. RVC is fully controlled by the state, its Board of Directors is chaired by Russian Economic Minister Maxim Reshetnikov and is filled with high ranked Russian state officials).

RVC maintains investments in the US through RVC USA Inc., which in turn owns RVC IVFRT LP, a subsidiary fund registered in 2011 as Russian Venture Capital II LP and eventually reorganized as RVC IVFRT LP (due to the joining of the second investor - Investment and Venture Fund of the Republic of Tatarstan). RVC IVFRT is managed by Volga Venture Management Inc., a Delaware-incorporated company. RVC IVFRT portfolio includes investments in major venture capital funds:

- DCM (focused on information technologies, internet, strategic computer technologies and software, digital media), which has invested in about 400 high-tech companies in the United States and Asia;
- Trident Capital (IT security, special expertise in cloud computing investments);
- IVP, or Institutional Venture Partners (strategic computer technologies and software, development of application software for a variety of business applications).

Although Rusnano USA and RVC USA have no recorded investments in what can be defined as 'critical infrastructure,' it's clear that they are investing across the board in advanced technologies, many of which have the chance to become critical in the future once some innovation startups evolve into widely distributed technologies and products. Unlike the oligarch-owned structures discussed above whose links with Putin's inner circle definitely exist but have to be proven. In the case of Rusnano USA and RVC USA, the footprint of the Russian Government is very clear with government officials directly governing their investments. The wide range of technology investment areas by Rusnano USA and RVC USA allows the gathering of first-hand information about the development of breakthrough technologies in a large variety of important tech sectors given the fact that these entities are directly controlled by the Russian Government, intelli-

120 https://www.rusnano.com/upload/images/normativedocs/ROSNANO-AO_Annual_Report_2019_RUS.pdf.

gence-gathering may well be a direct purpose of such a broad-spectrum investment strategy.

It should be also noted that investments in US technology firms whose activity is related to data storage and transmission are also heavily present in the case of Rusnano USA and RVC USA, as much as with private investments of the Russian oligarchs listed above. Data centers clearly are some of the main targets of the Russian high tech investments in the US. Although each of the investments alone may not look like the case of control of 'critical infrastructure,' but when combined, all these investments do have an aura of a systemic effort.

SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS

Here's a brief summary of observations from cross-sector analysis of the investments by the Russian oligarchs and state-owned entities in the US infrastructure and technology sector as described above:

1. Investments in advanced technologies in the US by the Russian oligarchs linked to Putin look very much like a systemic effort. There's a clear behavioral pattern among large-scale Russian investors: they prefer to invest in forward-looking technologies, which may not dominate or have critical importance today (with the exception of Uber/Lyft, which already have critical importance), but may conquer the markets with new products sometime in the future.
2. Investments are made using the capital derived from Government-backed oligarchic activity in Russia: exploitation of Russia's natural resources under the protection of the Government, with direct preferences or aid provided by the Government, and, in some major cases, using money originating from deals with the Russian Government or state-owned entities. This type of capital is usually tightly, informally controlled by the Russian authorities, who have the ability to bring down owners of Russian strategic assets through regulatory or direct pressure.
3. The Russian investors in question either have indisputable ties to Putin's inner circle, or there are solid reasons and evidence supporting the assumptions that such ties exist, which should be verified through relevant investigations.
4. Points (2) and (3) above suggest concrete reasons to suspect such investment activity to be coordinated

with the possible participation of the Russian Government and Putin's inner circle. Another reason to expect coordination is that different oligarchic groups have targeted similar types of businesses, often investing in competitors in the relevant sectors, like Alfa Group buying a stake in Uber, while Vladimir Potanin's Altpoint Capital had invested in its competitor Lyft.

5. Investments cover sensitive areas which may assist disruptive efforts in the future, from data centers to online communication platforms to biotechnologies to public transport. Apart from potential risks of direct disruptive activities, investments in such areas may be helpful to the Russians to gather intelligence and establish better understanding of how advanced technology sectors in the US are operated.

Given the systemic nature of Russian oligarchic attention to advanced technology sectors in the US, it is reasonable to expect that the various data obtained across these sectors is collected in a centralized manner for the purposes of broad analysis. This may be a multi-purpose effort, partially driven by the intention to catch up with the most advanced technological trends, but the possible development of disruptive component shall be taken seriously.

What we do know about Russian oligarchic investments in the advanced technology areas:

- Investors are different oligarchic groups and companies, including the state-owned Rusnano and RVC, but the targeted areas are often similar, and these are advanced technologies that have a chance to conquer the markets in the future. This has a clear feature of a systemic effort;
- In some of the interviews and public comments (see, for instance, remarks by Fridman and Potanin quoted above), Russian businessmen have specifically indicated that the aim of their US technology investments is to keep an eye on the most advanced technology trends;
- Some of the Russian investors are companies directly controlled by the state, others are large businesses which in Russia are traditionally exposed to heavy cooperation with state security services and even open presence of state security personnel on their staff chart (so-called "first departments"), as was exposed many times in books and publications by

experts on the Russian security services like Andrey Soldatov and Irina Borogan;

- Since Russian security services are known to be involved in disruptive activities on US soil in the past and also have easy access to information obtained by the Russian oligarchs through their new technology investments in the US, it would be only logical to assume that the obtained information and intelligence may, with a high degree of probability, be used for disruptive purposes in the future;
- Since Russian oligarchic investments in US infrastructure and technology are happening across a wide variety of companies and sectors, the information gathered through such investments may present a very good, high-quality material for assembling a systemic picture of the most up-to-date technology and market trends in the US, assisting to plan potential disruptive actions at early stages.

For instance, understanding the details of how ride-sharing business is operated, or how modern online communication platforms are run, or the vulnerabilities of data storage networks, and how operational and management systems in these areas are run may greatly assist those who are planning specific physical disruptive activities in the future. This is a very serious risk that should be considered in connection with every Russian investment in critical infrastructure and/or advanced technologies.

Investments in Uber and Lyft can be considered as the most serious Russian attempts to acquire control over US critical infrastructure so far. Together, these two companies completely dominate the US ridesharing market, with Uber controlling about 68% of the market in April 2021, and Lyft - 32%.¹²¹ Even despite Alfa Group's subsequent exit from Uber, it's clear that major Russian business groups have demonstrated systemic interest in participating in the innovative US passenger transport businesses.

A particular interest from various Russian oligarchic and state-controlled investment funds to the US data storage facilities can also clearly be detected. Russian access to data storage across the US creates many risks: from potential disruptive activities to access to Americans' personal data that can be used for malign purposes, etc. A list of specific threats to US national security arising from Russian investments is provided below.

More work is needed to systemically uncover the investment activities in the US by Putin-linked Russians, as these efforts are often hidden behind the non-transparent and obscure private equity and venture capital funds. The US Government should do more to greatly increase the transparency of this segment of the US economy. This process requires additional brainstorming, preferably with the participation of commentators who have extensively published before on suspicious Russian investments in the US through obscure oligarchic firms - like Joshua Kirschenbaum (Visiting Fellow, Alliance for Securing Democracy, German Marshall Fund of the United States) or Seth Hettena (an award-winning journalist and long-time investigative reporter for the Associated Press where he covered numerous stories of political corruption), both quoted in this report in relation to their previously published articles exposing the scale of Russian oligarchic investments in the US. These analysts and commentators have also provided interesting recommendations for the US Government to greatly increase transparency over private investment sector, allowing for the tracking of potentially suspicious foreign investment:

While Congress must pass a law to ban anonymous companies nationwide, one powerful tool already available to combat illicit finance continues to go unused. The Treasury Department for over a decade has had the legal authority to set up a database of international funds transfers conducted through the US banking system but has not done so. This collection would be a true game-changer in combating illicit financial flows, whose largest drivers are China and the former Soviet states. The FBI stated in a report to Congress that such raw transactional data – which it has received from Treasury in limited quantities – enhances the bureau's ability to combat illicit Russian financial flows and bolsters counterintelligence and investigations into money laundering and transnational organized crime.

A comprehensive American strategy to combat authoritarian interference must put countering illicit finance and bolstering financial transparency front and center. A modest investment in transparency will pay major security dividends.¹²²

Some of the recommendations on addressing the above-mentioned challenges are suggested below.

121 "Uber vs. Lyft: Who's tops in the battle of U.S. rideshare companies", Bloomberg Second Measure, May 14th, 2021, <https://secondmeasure.com/datapoints/rideshare-industry-overview/>.

122 ("Private Equity Hides Foreign Capital From U.S. Scrutiny", Bloomberg, by Joshua Kirschenbaum and David Murray, May 23, 2019 <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-05-23/private-equity-hides-foreign-capital-from-u-s-scrutiny>).

SPECIFIC THREATS TO US NATIONAL SECURITY

Below, we provide a brief classification of the specific threats to US national security arising from Russian oligarchic and state-linked investments in US infrastructure and technology.

IMMEDIATE THREATS OF DISRUPTIVE NATURE

Some of the threats posed by the Russian investments may create immediate risks. Russian oligarchic and state-linked investments in the US may already be used for disruptive purposes at present and should be used with suspicion. Data gathering, intelligence gathering, influence and potential coercion of important technological startups, access to management of critically important systems that opens them for potential malign interference - multiple risks arise from Russian oligarchic ownership of important infrastructure and technology companies. Major threats include:

- Collecting Americans' personal data and other types of data to be potentially used by Russia for malign purposes;
- Intelligence gathering through deep penetration in high tech sectors;
- Disruptive threats to critical infrastructure - in case some data, technologies or corporate control mechanisms may be already used for immediate disruption of critical processes (when the infrastructure is already important enough so that disruptions may be already damaging - like ridesharing businesses, Uber and Lyft - and data about their processes obtained by the Russians sufficient enough to assist disruptive actions).

Other than ridesharing infrastructure, examples may include online communication platforms or data storage. Russians may be looking for ways to break into communication platforms to steal important confidential data to better understand certain critical processes or planning etc. Ownership of data storage systems may also help the Russians to find weak spots so that the data may be stolen for malign purposes, or data storage systems be compromised to interfere with some critical processes in different areas.

POTENTIAL THREATS THAT MAY

EVOLVE INTO DISRUPTIVE ACTIVITIES

Second tier includes threats that have the potential to evolve into full-scale disruptive capabilities in the future, and hence have to be closely watched. While some of the Russian oligarchic and state-linked investments in the US can't be classified at the moment as 'critical infrastructure,' they may be in the future once certain early-stage technologies over which the Russians establish control evolve into serious market domination (early Russian investments in Uber and Lyft may serve as an example of that).

It's probably beyond the scope of this report to identify specific areas where new ideas may evolve potentially market-dominating technologies, but heavy Russian presence in the venture capital firms, Silicon Valley, etc., should be closely watched to better understand which advanced or frontier technologies capture their biggest interest, and to be able to identify at early stages the extent of their foothold in the potential products with chance of gaining significant importance and market share in the future.

SPECIFIC SCENARIOS IN WHICH THESE THREATS CAN MANIFEST

Specific scenarios under which the threats of Russia-caused disruption through investment in critical infrastructure and technology can manifest can be classified as follows:

1. On-and off disruption scenario. Periodic on-and-off disruptive activities (like the recent cyber-attacks against the US Colonial oil pipeline, the world's largest meat processing company JBS, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York) with purpose to cause more or less permanent losses from disruption of operations of important infrastructure and to put constant pressure on vital US businesses;
2. Escalation scenario. Periods of serious political escalations between Russia and the US, when Russian authorities may decide to "switch on" permanent disruptive activity mode, targeting important businesses and infrastructure on a weekly or even daily basis, multiplying the scale of attacks like those mentioned above (the US Colonial oil pipeline, JBS, or New York Subway system);
3. Lasting damage scenario. Attempts to shut down vital businesses and activities for lasting, undetermined

periods of time. This is the most serious threat from potential disruption activities, with undetermined consequences (because of a limited understanding of the extent of damage that the disruptors can inflict). For instance, the recent Colonial Pipeline hack involved a ransom payment demand, after the fulfilling of which a decryption tool was sent to pipeline allowing the deactivation of the installed ransomware. However, the decryption tool worked slowly and ineffectively, and there was no guarantee that it would work at all. The Colonial Pipeline hack illustrates that possible disruptive effects from intrusion into critical infrastructure may be lasting, and the return to normalcy may prove a challenging effort.

NEAR-TERM PROBABILITY OF DIFFERENT SCENARIOS AND POSSIBLE DAMAGE

Given the recent pattern of disruptive behavior by Russia, the probability of an “on-and-off” disruption scenario is very likely. Russia will most likely use its knowledge of US technologies and possession of data to create relatively minor, but still damaging disruptions across various sectors of the economy, and also continuously test its disruptive capabilities on specific businesses and sectors. Dispersed case-by-case disruptive activities also create flexibility to shift blame from the Russian Government to “unknown individual groups.” Damage from such “on-and-off” disruptions may vary according to specific circumstances but may be estimated in the range of millions to dozens of millions of dollars on the annual basis.

The escalation scenario is highly possible in the event of serious political escalation between Russia and the US, and the potential damage may be far greater, measuring in the hundreds of millions of dollars at the very least. The problem with assessing the damage of the “escalation scenario” is the fact that we have little knowledge of what data and/or understanding of weak points of US infrastructure the Russians possess, and how much they

can actually disrupt - e.g. in the case of Colonial pipeline, they were only able to affect the customer billing system, but not the operations of the pipeline. The Colonial pipeline cyberattack case tells us that even a relatively minor disruption of operations for a critical infrastructure system may be a reason for a severe larger-scale shutdown of wider range of activities due to broader security concerns, so the damage may quickly erupt to reach billions of dollars.

Lasting damage scenario is less likely to occur in the near term. It may become possible in the event of a serious lasting unmanageable confrontation between Russia and the US, with full-scale Russian asymmetric responses involved on multiple fronts. It is also more difficult to assess in terms of specific damage. We don't know what capabilities and knowledge have already been accumulated by the Russians in the areas of critical infrastructure and technology, so it's hard to assess the long-term attack and disruption capabilities. It should be assumed, given the current level of confrontation with the Putin's regime, that such a scenario of a long-term disruptive activities against US infrastructure is very likely being worked on, and the Russian investments in the US are most certainly being used as important sources of information on how critical American systems operate, and where are the weak spots of advanced technologies that may gain greater importance in the US in the future.

The above-mentioned scenarios consider the occurrence of real disruptive events, and do not account for hidden activities like information and intelligence-gathering, which can hardly be measured in terms of specific damage in various scenarios at the moment. At the same time, they allow for greater capacity-building for potential future disruptive activities through accumulating a broader picture of technological and infrastructure developments in the US and of management systems in critical areas. It is often difficult to assess specific damage, which is why it is important to trace the Russian activities and analyze the possible risks on a real-time basis to allow the best assessment of potential damage and response.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Below we provide a list of specific policy recommendations to deal with the risks of Russia's malign influence in the United States energy sector, based on the analysis provided above.

INCREASING TRANSPARENCY OF FOREIGN INVESTMENTS IN THE US

One of the critical obstacles in ensuring better understanding of the Russian investments in US infrastructure is the institutional non-transparency of private equity and venture capital funds. As indicated by Joshua Kirschenbaum of the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, "the US, unlike Europe, does not require managers of private funds to maintain programs to prevent money laundering", and many instruments that may be helpful in tracking the suspicious foreign investments in the infrastructure sector aren't legally available, or are available but not used. The specific recommendations here are as follows:

- To establish a task force including the most renowned experts on money laundering and investigative journalists who have been already involved in tracking and analyzing Russian investments in the US, with purpose to brainstorm and develop a set of specific recommendations on improving the transparency of foreign investments in the US;
- To develop a comprehensive report suggesting additional legislative and other measures aimed at increasing transparency of private equity funds and venture capital firms, as well as greater transparency of cross-border money transfers and investments;
- To develop recommendations for the US Government, including the Treasury Department, to enact currently available legal mechanisms (including the provisions of the Currency and Foreign Transactions Reporting Act and other legislation) to create a system of tracking cross-border money transfers with the purpose of identifying the full picture of Russian investments in the US, including those hidden behind the obscure private equity funds and venture capital firms.

ESTABLISHING A SYSTEM OF MONITORING OF RUSSIAN INVESTMENT ACTIVITIES IN THE US

Taking into account how adversarial Russia has become to the United States (which is now officially confirmed by Russia with the list of 'hostile foreign states' including the US and Czech Republic, approved by the Resolution of the Russian Government #1230-r of May 13th, 2021), it is worth considering establishing a permanent system of tracking Russian investments in the US, with the purpose of quickly identifying investments in critical infrastructure and technologies and the associated risks to avoid repeating cases like 'Potanin incident' - an eye-opening situation when Altpoint Capital owned by Vladimir Potanin has bought Sidus Group, which had the contract to host Maryland's online voter services, while the Maryland authorities were unaware of this acquisition and were only informed about it by the FBI (this case was described above).

In this regard, we recommend the following:

- To establish a task force preparing specific recommendations for establishment of the permanent system of monitoring of Russian investment activities in the US and identification of the potential threats associated with these investments;
- After the establishment of the permanent system of monitoring of Russian investment activities in the US, to carry out a comprehensive review of the actual Russian investments in the US infrastructure and technology sectors, with an emphasis on the connections between specific Russian investors in those sectors and Putin's inner circle, as well as on critical importance and potential future role of the relevant sectors and technologies.

DEVELOPING A SET OF PROTECTIVE MEASURES AGAINST POSSIBLE RUSSIAN MALIGN ACTIONS IN THE CRITICAL US INFRASTRUCTURE SECTORS

In tandem with the proper measures aimed at improving the financial and ownership transparency framework in the US for private equity funds, venture capital firms, and other investment vehicles, and with establishment of a system of monitoring of Russian investment activities in the US is established, specific risks related to the

Russian investments in the US infrastructure and technology sectors should be identified, and a set of measures to mitigate those risks should be developed. In this regard, we recommend the following:

- To develop a comprehensive report analyzing the effects of Russian investments in the US infrastructure and technology sectors that have already happened, with the purpose of better understanding what is the actual goal of the Russian investments, which sensitive technologies and data were accessed through such investments, and how the Russian investment activity had assisted intelligence-gathering and improving Russian undue influence and coercion capabilities;
- To develop a system of classification of risks associated with Russian investments in US infrastructure - risks of immediate disruption, risks of compromising personal and other sensitive data, other types of risks;
- To develop a comprehensive report suggesting countermeasures to address the relevant risks.

With all the above suggested measures being implemented, US preparedness for containing the potential negative consequences of the Russian interference in the US infrastructure and technology sectors will significantly improve, and the risks associated with the Russian investments will be significantly reduced.

We do not believe that the US consumption of Russian products and services directly falls under the scope of this chapter. This chapter covers Russian investments in the US, which allows to determine a spectrum of areas of Russian interest regarding the US infrastructure and technologies. Buying Russian products and services is another thing - it involves analysis of the US consumer behavior, markets of products and services in the United States, which is a broader exercise than just tracking Russian in-

vestments. The FaceApp case, for instance, is a clear case of Americans buying Russian products developed in Russia (a St. Petersburg-based company Wireless Lab)

However, analyzing US demand for critical Russian products and services is important, and probably deserves a separate chapter. Most popular US messengers (Facebook Messenger, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Signal) are not controlled by the Russians; the only significant messenger controlled by the Russians is Telegram founded by Pavel Durov, but its market share in the US is not too big (around 3,5-4 million users), and Telegram's owners were at odds with the Russian Government to the extent that Telegram was blocked in Russia in 2018-2021. On the other hand, there are questions regarding the extent of true security of data for Telegram messenger users, and the true relations between the Durov team and the Russian Government - however, this analysis falls outside of the scope of the current chapter. Also, there's another popular messenger, Viber, which was developed by the Russian-born Igor Magazinnik and is an Israeli-Belarus developed messenger; Viber has a history of cooperating with Russian authorities, including moving their data to Russian servers in 2014 as a result of the relevant demands from the Russian Government. However, Viber is not popular in the US.

Snapchat messenger, which is a second most-popular messaging app in the US after Facebook Messenger, has received investments from the IVP (Institutional Venture Partners), which is further mentioned in this report in connection with receiving investments from the Russian Venture Company. However, IVP is a large venture capital institution, and the fact that it raised some limited amount of money from the Russian Venture Company doesn't produce a direct link with its earlier investments in Snapchat (Snap Inc. has received \$60 million from IVP in 2013).



ЮДБАУАХ, ЯМАХ, НА ЧЕР
CELLA...PITS AND...C

Vladimir Putin with Viktor Vekselberg. Photo credits: Kremlin.ru

ALL THE KREMLIN'S MEN

CHARITABLE GIVING IN THE US

By Casey Michel

OLIGARCHS AND NONPROFITS

Including key donations linked to oligarchs or their companies/foundations

Len Blavatnik, oligarch connected to Mueller investigation

Harvard University (\$200 million), Carnegie Hall (at least \$25 million), Council on Foreign Relations (\$13 million), Lincoln Center (\$5-10 million), Center for Jewish History (at least \$1 million), American Foundation for AIDS Research (at least \$1 million)

Viktor Pinchuk, oligarch funding Paul Manafort's work in Ukraine

Clinton Foundation (\$10-25 million), Brookings Institution (between \$1,300,000 and \$2,999,991), Atlantic Council (between \$300,000 and \$749,997)

Viktor Vekselberg, oligarch sanctioned by the US

Clinton Foundation (between \$245,006 and \$500,000)

Ihor Kolomoisky, oligarch sanctioned by the US

Hillel International (undisclosed amount)

Vladimir Potanin, oligarch close to the Kremlin

Kennedy Center (at least \$6.45 million)

Dmitry Rybolovlev, oligarch close to the Kremlin

Mayo Clinic (between \$1-10 million)

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, several post-Soviet oligarchs have made headlines for their direct involvement in US politics. Nearly a dozen, including the sanctioned Viktor Vekselberg and Oleg Deripaska, became subjects of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 election. Another two, Dmitry Firtash and Igor Kolomoisky, came under scrutiny during Donald Trump's recent impeachment saga.¹²³ According to regional experts, all of them acted as effective proxies for the Kremlin and non-governmental forces dedicated to expanding the Kremlin's malign activities and kleptocratic networks. While these oligarchs are all businessmen with international financial interests, they rely on the Kremlin's good graces by constantly favoring President Vladimir Putin. These oligarchs are aware that Putin can take away their businesses and assets, or even put them in prison at any moment if they ever cross him.

The oligarch's activities are not limited to commercial interests to expand the wealth of Kremlin figures or to the Kremlin's political interference campaigns. They also extend their range to include philanthropic activities in American nonprofits. Working alongside David Szakonyi, a professor at George Washington University and member of the Anti-Corruption Data Collective, I helped put together a new database.¹²⁴ We discovered that a few high-profile oligarchs have donated between \$372 million and \$435 million to more than 200 of the leading nonprofit institutions in the US over the past two decades. The list of recipients covers an entire span of organizations, including think tanks such as the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations, world-renowned universities such as Harvard University and the University

123 "Players," The Moscow Project, <https://themoscowproject.org/players/index.html>.

124 "Anti-Corruption Data Collective," Anti-Corruption Data Collective - ACDC, <https://www.acdatacollective.org/>.

of Southern California (USC), and cultural centers such as the New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Unfortunately, because no comprehensive database of philanthropic donations exists in the US, we cannot identify every donation made by the oligarchs, particularly to smaller institutions.

Additionally, the publicly available documents we accessed often capture only the monetary range each donation falls into rather than its specific value. Therefore, some of the numbers cited are estimated based on these ranges. The substantial donations come from either the oligarchs directly or via the companies or foundations they oversee. The donations raise questions about how US organizations scrutinize the money they receive. It is unknown whether these organizations inquired where the money was coming from or raised concerns about the oligarchs' ties to the Kremlin and possible risk to their reputations. The research illustrates that "if you just disguise your money a little bit, the US system is fully penetrable."¹²⁵

While the findings are staggering enough – as Foreign Policy's headline read, "America's Cultural Institutions Are Quietly Fueled by Russian Corruption"¹²⁶ – we were unable to dive into specific instances. While readers learned about the overall picture and the kinds of monies involved, much of our data remains unpublished. The information uncovered in our search came from documents these organizations published themselves, which no analysts or journalists have ever looked through. Other information came from tax filings of these organizations, which reveal the financial links to the oligarchs in question.

The earliest relevant donations we uncovered appeared in the 2000s, shortly after Putin became president, and accelerated toward the beginning of the 2010s. As detailed below, these donations allowed now-sanctioned oligarchs to meet with high-level American politicians during the first term of the Obama Administration when Washington's "reset" policy was in full swing. These donations didn't launch the "reset" itself, but they deepened and accelerated the thaw between Washington and Moscow. Given that some of these donations allowed the oligarchs access to leading Democratic policymakers, they may have helped slow down the US's response

when relations began to sour following Russia's invasion of Georgia and especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Even though these donations peaked in the early 2010s, they haven't stopped. In the late 2010s, the oligarchs close to the Kremlin continued sending substantial sums to American nonprofits.

We also see from the findings that instead of a clear, top-down effort to target American nonprofits, the donations appear to be part of a broader oligarchic playbook, the Kremlin's "ad hoc" approach of infiltrating Western polities.¹²⁷ Similar to Russia's 2016 social media interference operations, or funding links with extremist and separatist groups in the West, these oligarchs appear to create their own ad-hoc links and relationships, which the Kremlin can then exploit for its own gains.

WHAT ARE AMERICAN NONPROFITS?

While these oligarchs have been associated with many nonprofits in the United Kingdom and France, our research centered on American nonprofits for several reasons. Firstly, thanks to open-source data, American nonprofit tax information is easier to access than anywhere else. Secondly, given that Moscow's 2016 interference efforts in the US have arguably been the most successful of the Kremlin's interference operations to date, we attempted to examine the roles these nonprofit donations may have played in the lead-up to and aftermath of such interference operations. Even though this research is not a fully comprehensive examination of nonprofit donations throughout the West, it still highlights the need for a broader examination of how ambitious and successful oligarchs' operations were.

Nonprofits rely largely on donations, especially from wealthy donors. With these donations come both access to the nonprofit entity and its prestige. Such donations allow titans of industry or those in the wealthier class to refashion themselves as "philanthropists," improving their image in the public eye. Such prestige only rises if the broader public is aware of such donations—hence why wealthy American figures such as Andrew Carnegie (founder of the Carnegie Endowment), William Marsh

125 Casey Michel, "Money Talks: Len Blavatnik And The Council On Foreign Relations," *bellingcat*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2019/10/10/money-talks-len-blavatnik-and-the-council-on-foreign-relations/>.

126 Ibid.

127 Mark Galeotti, "Russia's Murderous Adhocracy," *The Moscow Times* (The Moscow Times, August 22, 2020), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/08/22/russias-murderous-adhocracy-a71219>.

Rice (founder of Rice University), or Leland Stanford (founder of Stanford University), named nonprofits they founded after themselves. When naming the nonprofit institute after someone is not an option, these nonprofit entities can rename certain aspects of the organization after “philanthropists” such as entire programs or buildings. The donations are often straightforward, tax-deductible, and unlimited.

THINK TANKS

In Washington DC, think tanks dedicated to research and public engagement have the most social cachet and political capital. Besides conducting research, they host events and maintain close links with policymakers in the Administration, the Hill, and elsewhere. They are also under no legal obligation to publish their lists of donors, which makes it difficult to assess their finances. Nevertheless, the donations to these think tanks appear to follow two specific threads. Donating to think tanks may be about establishing a potential toehold over policy decisions in Washington.¹²⁸ Such considerations have helped spark recent calls for greater transparency within American think tank funding with many failing to disclose details about substantial donations they received.¹²⁹ In late 2020, the State Department specifically called on think tanks to “disclose prominently on their websites the funding they receive from foreign governments, including state-owned or state-operated subsidiary entities.”¹³⁰

However, the scrutiny that think tanks have faced regarding their finances has focused largely on donations coming from governments elsewhere, including from dictatorial regimes like Azerbaijan or Saudi Arabia.¹³¹ Little attention has been given to the donations coming from

oligarchs. For instance, Viktor Vekselberg and his company Renova Group were sanctioned in 2018 by the US for contributing to Russia’s malign operations abroad.¹³² Yet several years earlier, Vekselberg had successfully donated unspecified amounts to the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a prominent think tank in DC.¹³³ Indeed, the Wilson Center’s description of Vekselberg sounds like a hagiography:

This year, the Wilson Center Awards honored Viktor F. Vekselberg. . .who [has] dedicated a significant part of his career to strengthening relations between the United States and Russia...

Vekselberg, known internationally as one of the most successful entrepreneurs of his generation, was awarded the Woodrow Wilson Award for Public Service for his outstanding contributions to the rebirth of Russian philanthropy. Using his success in business to benefit his community and beyond, Vekselberg’s “The Link of Times” foundation has led the way in repatriating Russian artwork and important artifacts of Russia’s cultural heritage for permanent display throughout Russia, including the inspiring acquisition of the Forbes collection of 15 Fabergé eggs. He has generously funded the restoration of the Lowell House Bells to their original location in the St. Danilov Monastery while also providing Harvard University with Russian-made replicas of these pre-revolutionary bells. The “Dobry Vek” foundation, one of the few family foundations operating in Russia today, was established by Vekselberg and his wife Marina to support projects related to psychiatric issues and research. In recognition of his leadership in artistic and civic organizations, the Government of the Russian Federation recognized Dr. Vekselberg’s philanthropic and business contributions in 2005

128 “Foreign Government Contributions to Nine Think Tanks,” The New York Times (The New York Times, September 7, 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-government-contributions-to-nine-think-tanks.html>.

129 Ben Freeman, “Foreign Funding of Think Tanks in America” (Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative, n.d.). https://static.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ba8a1_4f06e99f35d4485b801f8dbfe33b6a3f.pdf.

130 “On Transparency and Foreign Funding of US Think Tanks - United States Department of State,” US Department of State (US Department of State, December 1, 2020), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/on-transparency-and-foreign-funding-of-u-s-think-tanks/index.html>.

131 Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, “New Report Details \$174 Million in Foreign Funding to D.C. Think Tanks,” Responsible Statecraft, January 30, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/01/29/new-report-details-174-million-in-foreign-funding-to-d-c-think-tanks/>.

132 “Treasury Designates Russian Oligarchs, Officials, and Entities in Response to Worldwide Malign Activity,” US Department of the Treasury, November 6, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0338>.

133 “Wilson Center Honors Vekselberg and Cloherty at First Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Awards Dinner,” Wilson Center, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/wilson-center-honors-vekselberg-and-cloherty-first-kathryn-and-shelby-cullom-davis-awards>.

by awarding him “The Order of Honor.”¹³⁴

The Atlantic Council, one of the US’s biggest think tanks focusing on trans-Atlantic relations, recently accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars from Victor Pinchuk, a Ukrainian oligarch who has been accused by a “coalition of journalists, academics and London-based activists” of being involved in helping cover up the murder of a former Ukrainian journalist,¹³⁵ and bankrolled some of Paul Manafort’s efforts to help spin the former pro-Kremlin Ukrainian strongman Viktor Yanukovich.^{136,-137} When Western nations decried Yanukovich’s authoritarian consolidation and targeting of political opponents, Manafort helped broker an arrangement between Yanukovich’s regime and a powerhouse American law firm, Skadden Arps, in order to spin the investigation as something normal.¹³⁸ Pinchuk used Manafort’s shell company to hide the payment, according to DOJ filings.¹³⁹ He denied any connection to Manafort, despite testimony and filings indicating otherwise.¹⁴⁰

Pinchuk also sent millions in donations to the Brook-

ings Institution¹⁴¹ and the Clinton Foundation.¹⁴² Although the latter received criticism for its donor list, it saw no problem accepting tens of thousands of dollars annually from Vekselberg’s Renova Group in the seven years before Vekselberg was sanctioned.¹⁴³

BLAVATNIK’S THINK TANK

Soviet-born oligarch Len Blavatnik, now an American citizen, has faced scrutiny regarding his relationship with the Kremlin and the sources of his enormous wealth, most of which was made in Russia in the chaotic 1990s.¹⁴⁴ Blavatnik had previously worked closely in Russia with sanctioned oligarchs Oleg Deripaska and Victor Vekselberg¹⁴⁵ who described Blavatnik as his “friend and business partner.”¹⁴⁶

Following Russia’s 2016 interference efforts, it emerged that Blavatnik was investigated by Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s office for his donations to President Trump’s inauguration.¹⁴⁷ Vekselberg also told the Financial Times that he attended Trump’s inauguration at a table

134 “Wilson Center Honors Vekselberg and Cloherty at First Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Awards Dinner,” Wilson Center, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/wilson-center-honors-vekselberg-and-cloherty-first-kathryn-and-shelby-cullom-davis-awards>.

135 Maximilian Hess, “Wooing the West: Who Is Ukraine’s Viktor Pinchuk?,” Eurasianet, February 26, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/wooning-the-west-who-is-ukraines-viktor-pinchuk>.

136 Sharon Lafraniere, “Trial of High-Powered Lawyer Gregory Craig Exposes Seamy Side of Washington’s Elite,” The New York Times (The New York Times, August 26, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/26/us/politics/gregory-craig-trial.html>.

137 h Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as amended, US Department of Justice, January 18, 2019, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6617-Registration-Statement-20190118-1.pdf>.

138 Theodor Meyer and Rebecca Morin, “Law Firm That Worked with Manafort in Ukraine Admits to Misleading DOJ,” POLITICO, January 17, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/17/manafort-law-firm-ukraine-justice-department-1110362>.

139 Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as amended, US Department of Justice, January 18, 2019, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6617-Registration-Statement-20190118-1.pdf> and Maximilian Hess, “Wooing the West: Who Is Ukraine’s Viktor Pinchuk?,” Eurasianet, February 26, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/wooning-the-west-who-is-ukraines-viktor-pinchuk>.

140 “Prominent Global Law Firm Agrees to Register as an Agent of a Foreign Principal,” The United States Department of Justice, January 17, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/prominent-global-law-firm-agrees-register-agent-foreign-principal>.

141 “International Advisory Board,” Atlantic Council, June 23, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/about/international-advisory-board/>.

142 Maximilian Hess, “Wooing the West: Who Is Ukraine’s Viktor Pinchuk?,” Eurasianet, February 26, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/wooning-the-west-who-is-ukraines-viktor-pinchuk>.

143 Anthony Zurcher, “US Election: Why Is Clinton’s Foundation so Controversial?,” BBC News (BBC, August 23, 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37168505>.

144 “Len Blavatnik,” Forbes (Forbes Magazine), accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/len-blavatnik/#1d330cb856f3>.

145 Max Seddon, “From Russian Oil to Rock’n’roll: the Rise of Len Blavatnik,” Subscribe to read | Financial Times (Financial Times, June 6, 2019), <https://www.ft.com/content/c1889f48-871a-11e9-a028-86cea8523dc2>.

146 Kerry A. Dolan, “Russian Billionaire Vekselberg’s Non-Oil Endeavor: Raising Funds For A California State Park,” Forbes (Forbes Magazine, October 20, 2012), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2012/10/19/russian-billionaire-vekselbergs-non-oil-endeavor-raising-funds-for-a-california-state-park/?sh=65a7c3fd71dc%5C>.

147 John Santucci et al., “ABC News,” ABC News (ABC News Network, May 11, 2018), <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/exclusive-special-counsel-probing-donations-foreign-connections-trump/story?id=55054482%5C>.

Blavatnik paid for, although Blavatnik's spokesperson denied this.¹⁴⁸

Up to that point, Blavatnik had donated significant amounts to Western nonprofits, including tens of millions of dollars to Oxford University when he founded the Blavatnik School of Government. Shortly after, it emerged that Blavatnik attempted to donate to the Hudson Institute, the leading think tank in DC dedicated to combating kleptocracy via its Kleptocracy Initiative. The Institute refused the attempted donation.¹⁴⁹ The Hudson Institute's donor policy reads, "As a matter of institutional policy, Hudson does not seek or accept financial contributions from non-democratic foreign governments or groups or individuals acting on their behalf. With rare and very few exceptions for gifts whose donors prefer to remain anonymous, Hudson Institute publicly identifies the sources and levels of all outside revenue received each calendar year in its annual reports."¹⁵⁰ Blavatnik fits this mold as an oligarch believed to be acting on behalf of the Kremlin.

Interestingly, based on the examination of the documents in our database, none of the oligarchs appeared to try to donate to any conservative think tanks other than Hudson. It's unclear why the Kremlin has used convicted agent Maria Butina to infiltrate conservative organizations such as the National Rifle Association, but it may stem from the fact that Republicans have generally been more hawkish on Moscow than Democrats (e.g., in 2011, The Richard Nixon Family Foundation disassociated itself from the Nixon Center, citing concerns about the Center's pro-Russian slant and later renamed itself the Center for the National Interest.¹⁵¹). Even with Trump's strange fealty toward Moscow, his administration was tougher than President Obama's administration, from expanding sanctions regimes to providing Ukraine with lethal weaponry. It's possible that the oligarchs saw little room for impact at

the right-leaning think tanks but plenty of space available at centrist think tanks, which they could use to advocate for rapprochement. This appears to be what Blavatnik did.

After the Hudson Institute rebuffed Blavatnik, the oligarch wasn't down for long. In 2019, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), one of America's leading think tanks, announced that it had received a substantial donation that would help round out the organization's upcoming budget. As a statement on the think tank's website detailed, a CFR member had graciously decided to help facilitate funding for CFR's intern program.¹⁵²

The donation, as CFR's statement detailed, would provide "paid internships to over one hundred interns each year" and would help "cultivate the next generation of leaders in government, academia, and the private sector." CFR President Richard Haass wrote on Twitter that he was "grateful for the generous gift." A CFR spokesperson said that the donation totaled \$12 million.¹⁵³ As CFR noted, the donation had come from the Blavatnik Family Foundation and was facilitated by CFR member Len Blavatnik.

The donation generated significant pushback within the trans-Atlantic anti-corruption and anti-kleptocracy community. "It is more than disappointing to see the Council on Foreign Relations take millions of dollars from a shady billionaire like Leonid Blavatnik, and excuse it by claiming the money will help interns," Elise Bean, former staff director and chief counsel on the US Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, said. "The CFR is helping to neutralize Mr. Blavatnik's notoriety and extend his influence by enabling him to hitch a ride on its once sterling reputation. It is painful to see how money talks and the odor of corruption is ignored by CFR leadership when it comes to the Blavatnik's millions."¹⁵⁴

148 Casey Michel, "US Politicians Can't Stop Taking Len Blavatnik's Money," *bellingcat*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2019/10/21/u-s-politicians-cant-stop-taking-len-blavatniks-money/>.

149 "Policy Centers - Kleptocracy Initiative - Hudson Institute," Policy Centers - Kleptocracy Initiative - Hudson Institute, <https://www.hudson.org/policycenters/31-kleptocracy-initiative>.

150 "Hudson Institute," Hudson Institute, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.hudson.org/transparency>.

151 Ben Smith, "Divorce for Nixon Center, Foundation," *POLITICO*, April 19, 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/04/divorce-for-nixon-center-foundation-053384>.

152 "Blavatnik Internship Program," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blavatnik-internship-program>.

153 @RichardHaass <https://twitter.com/RichardHaass/status/1171519768077029376>

154 Michael, Casey. "Money Talks: LEN Blavatnik and the Council on Foreign Relations." *Bellingcat*, 10 Oct. 2019, www.bellingcat.com/news/2019/10/10/money-talks-len-blavatnik-and-the-council-on-foreign-relations/.

A group of foreign policy professionals summed up the opposition to Blavatnik's financial contribution to CFR well in a formal letter signed by some of the most prominent voices studying, and trying to combat, the Kremlin and modern kleptocracy. As the initial letter sent to Haass read:

We are US, European, and Russian foreign policy experts and anti-corruption activists who are deeply troubled by your announcement last week of a new \$12 million CFR internship program to be named after the donor, Leonid (Len) Blavatnik. We regard this as another step in the longstanding effort of Mr. Blavatnik — who, as we explain below, has close ties to the Kremlin and its kleptocratic network — to launder his image in the West...Blavatnik's connections to corrupt Putin-supported oligarchs and officials are longstanding and well known. For example, Blavatnik's business partners include several individuals who are sanctioned by the United States government, such as Viktor Vekselberg, Oleg Deripaska (both designated by the US Treasury in April 2018 under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act), and Alexander Makhonov (via Blavatnik's media enterprise Amediateka — the Russian analog of Netflix).¹⁵⁵

The letter noted that the willingness of CFR to accept the donation from Blavatnik's foundation came as "the role of Russian networks in undermining democracy from Eastern Europe to the United States has become plain." As such, the signatories, including leading anti-corruption experts and fellow CFR members like Louise Shelley, head of George Mason University's Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center, urged CFR "to review your decision, and to apply the high standards of ethics and due diligence that an organization of CFR's leading stature should wish to model."

As the signatories concluded:

It is our considered view that Blavatnik uses his "philanthropy" — funds obtained by and with the consent of the Kremlin, at the expense of the state budget and the Russian

people — at leading Western academic and cultural institutions to advance his access to political circles. Such "philanthropic" capital enables the infiltration of the US and U.K. political and economic establishments at the highest levels. It is also a means by which Blavatnik exports Russian kleptocratic practices to the West.

CFR and Haass, however, appeared unperturbed. Haass' response to the letter took over a week to arrive and didn't offer any details on any due diligence CFR may have done on the provenance of Blavatnik's wealth. Instead, he noted the "rigorous review" CFR undertakes to pertain to donations from individuals and foundations, "consistent with best practices for organizations that accept charitable contributions to make sure that acceptance of the gift poses no risk to our reputation for non-partisanship, independence, integrity, and academic freedom."¹⁵⁶ CFR, Haass noted, was "confident that this gift from the Blavatnik Family Foundation to fund the internship program here meets these criteria." Haass also wrote that CFR apparently received a "highly positive response" from other CFR members regarding the donation, although he did not specify who these members were.

Shortly afterward, Haass received another note with further criticism and further questions. "The letter's signatories and we found [Haass's response] disappointing," the response letter noted. If anything, the second letter was even more critical of CFR's willingness to accept the donation from Blavatnik's foundation and to publicly praise it along the way.

Indeed, Blavatnik's donation appears to be the most successful discovered in our examination, both in terms of size and response from the nonprofit in question. Not only did CFR rename an entire program for him, but that program specifically targets future American policymakers, the next generation of rising American experts and officials. In a way, we won't know the true effects of Blavatnik's donations for years to come. However, "Blavatnik interns," who go on to work in the US government, will be less likely to criticize him or question his relationship

155 "Sept 2019 Letter to CFR on Blavatnik Donation." Scribd, Scribd, 18 Sept. 2019, www.scribd.com/document/429188556/18-Sept-2019-Letter-to-CFR-on-Blavatnik-Donation.

156 Casey Michel, "Money Talks: Len Blavatnik And The Council On Foreign Relations," *bellingcat*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2019/10/10/money-talks-len-blavatnik-and-the-council-on-foreign-relations/>.

with the Kremlin. Blavatnik will continue to accrue status and sway in the US, allowing him to access even more political circles, accrue more wealth, and fund more organizations.

We already see the manifestations of Blavatnik's prominence in the US. In 2021, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, a member of the Russian band Pussy Riot, which has been targeted repeatedly by Putin's regime, revealed that Blavatnik had helped kill a potential music deal at Warner Brothers. Blavatnik, according to Tolokonnikova, said that the partnership with Pussy Riot would only happen "over his dead body."¹⁵⁷ Per Tolokonnikova, he was responsible for effectively preventing music from one of the members of Pussy Riot from being made. And yet, in Washington, DC, Blavatnik will continue to be viewed as a "philanthropist."

UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH

American universities and the research centers affiliated with them are the most prestigious nonprofits in the US. They also rely on a range of funding sources, including tuition, grants, and large-scale donations. Like other nonprofits, universities are also under no compunction to publicize the donations, reveal the sources of funds, or conduct any due diligence on the sources of income. Russian oligarchs are also willing to bankroll university operations and fund academic research, especially as it pertains to highlighting the history of Russia. When it comes to university donations, no oligarch has kept pace with Blavatnik. Recipients of his donations, through his business Access Industries, include Columbia University, Middlebury College, Babson College, Barnard College, Sarah Lawrence College, George Washington University, Cornell University, Yeshiva University, University of California Los Angeles, New York University, and USC.

1	DonorName	DonationAmount	DonationAmount	RecipientName	DonationYear
2	Access Industries	\$50,000	\$99,999	American Jewish Historical Society	2005-2006
3	Access Industries	\$250	\$499	Breast Cancer Connections	2008-2009
4	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Center for the Study of the Presidency	2007-2007
5	Access Industries	\$30,000	\$99,999	Chicago Symphony Orchestra	2012-2012
6	Access Industries	\$25,000	\$49,999	Educational Alliance	2005-2006
7	Access Industries	\$25,000	\$49,999	Educational Alliance	2007-2008
8	Access Industries	\$25,000	\$49,999	Educational Alliance	2008-2009
9	Access Industries	\$10,000	\$24,999	Educational Alliance	2010-2010
10	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Family Conservancy	2001-2001
11	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Foundation For International Arts And Education	2010-2010
12	Access Industries	\$10,000	\$24,999	Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International	2006-2007
13	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Metropolitan Museum of Art	2007-2008
14	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Metropolitan Museum of Art	2008-2009
15	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Metropolitan Museum of Art	2009-2010
16	Access Industries	\$50,000	\$99,999	New York Academy of Sciences	2005-2006
17	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	New York Academy of Sciences	2005-2006
18	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Person to Person	2006-2006
19	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Person-to-Person	2003-2003
20	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Person-to-Person	2009-2009
21	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Person-to-Person	2009-2009
22	Access Industries	\$2,500	\$4,999	Prostate Cancer Foundation	2013-2013
23	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	SAVE Inc.	2004-2005
24	Access Industries	\$5,500	\$9,999	Scenarios USA	2006-2006
25	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Summer On The Hill	2010-2010
26	Access Industries	Not Specified	Not Specified	Summer On The Hill	2014-2014
27	Access Industries	\$25,000	\$49,999	U.S. Soccer Foundation	2007-2008
28	Access Industries	\$25,000	\$49,999	Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars	2007-2008
29	Access Industries Inc.	\$1	\$249	Student Sponsor Partners	2008-2009
30	Access Industries Incorporated	\$25,000	\$49,999	RAND Corporation	2002-2002

Sample of nonprofit donations linked to Blavatnik's Access Industries.

Especially prominent is a single donation Blavatnik made to Harvard University in 2018 - a \$200 million donation to Harvard's Medical School.¹⁵⁸ As Ann Marlowe wrote in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Blavatnik is entitled to spend his money how he pleases. But institutions like Harvard, which stand for the ethical pursuit of knowledge, sully themselves by accepting it."¹⁵⁹

However, not all funding of academic and research pursuits in the US has gone to universities.

FORT ROSS AND RUSSIAN HISTORY

The legacies of Russian colonization and expansionism in the US are focused on Russian efforts in Alaska, which Russia sold to the US in 1867, and the Pacific Coast, specifically Spanish California. While much of the evidence of Russian exploration of the American Pacific Coast has been lost to time, one area in northern California attests to Russia's former presence in the region.

Known as Fort Ross, the tsarist-era construction is not especially large or even well-known outside of northern California. For years, the settlement was largely an afterthought to both the American and Californian governments. Indeed, with few visitors, the settlement fell into

¹⁵⁷ Воскресный Стрим. Надя Толоконникова, Youtube (Навальный LIVE, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwKYulQkPG0>.

¹⁵⁸ Alvin Powell, "A \$200M Pledge to Harvard to Turn Medical Discoveries into Treatments," *Harvard Gazette* (*Harvard Gazette*, January 23, 2019), <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/11/a-gift-to-harvard-to-turn-medical-discoveries-into-treatments/>.

¹⁵⁹ Ann Marlowe, "Is Harvard Whitewashing a Russian Oligarch's Fortune?," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, December 5, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/05/opinion/harvard-russian-oligarch-whitewash.html>.

clear disarray by the beginning of the 21st century, with little interest from tourists or researchers. For the Kremlin, though, Fort Ross was an indication of two things. Firstly, given that Russian explorers settled in California before Americans arrived, Fort Ross serves as a reminder to the world of the Kremlin's claimed power status. And secondly, the Fort Ross compound, founded in 1812, was an easy avenue for expanding Russian soft power in the US. Looking at the past (rather than at the absence of human rights or at political situations in modern Russia) allowed the Kremlin to distract others from current frictions and to highlight accomplishments without concerns about criticism from governments and civil society groups in the US.

In 2009, when the State of California revealed it was considering closing the Fort Ross settlement for good, Victor Vekselberg signed an agreement with the Californian government to establish a new nonprofit foundation that would oversee Fort Ross. Known as the Renova Fort Ross Foundation, it was specifically tasked with maintaining the settlement and attracting new donors and visitors.¹⁶⁰ As American tax filings reveal, Vekselberg served as the chair of the Renova Fort Ross Foundation up until he was sanctioned by the US.¹⁶¹ The foundation dedicated nearly \$2 million at the outset for rehabilitation and outreach. As one California official said, the new oversight "has created a renewed interest for people in California and in Russia in Fort Ross."¹⁶²

Vekselberg's move was one of the most effective any Russian oligarch has taken to date to whitewash both his

own and the Kremlin's image in the West. As one headline in the *San Francisco Chronicle* read, "Rich Russian comes to aid of Fort Ross."¹⁶³ Similarly, *The New York Times* headline read, "Russians Come to the Rescue of Sonoma's Fort Ross Park."¹⁶⁴ A local NBC affiliate wrote, "Russian Billionaire Saves Fort Ross."¹⁶⁵

In a certain sense, Vekselberg's involvement was exactly what Fort Ross needed.¹⁶⁶ It also helped Vekselberg gain access to elite circles in both California and Washington. In 2012, Vekselberg hosted an additional fundraiser for Fort Ross.¹⁶⁷ "The Russian billionaire told attendees at a black-tie event at San Francisco's elegant City Hall rotunda that Fort Ross holds a special place in his heart because it was established by Russians as a settlement 200 years ago – the first European settlement on the West Coast," wrote *Forbes*. "Vekselberg is on a mission to, as he said, 'breathe a second life' into the park...The gala at city hall featured speeches by Vekselberg, Senator Dianne Feinstein, Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky, and messages from Russian President Vladimir Putin (read by Sergei Kislyak, Russian Ambassador to the US)."¹⁶⁸

Other donors to the revamped Fort Ross also included Chevron, Stanford University, and American billionaire Steve Schwarzman, who founded the Blackstone Group and served as chair of the Strategic and Policy Council for President Trump. Blavatnik Family Foundation was also one of the donors.

Thanks to his donations and the clear willingness of

160 @renovafortross <https://twitter.com/renovafortross>.

161 Short Form Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax for Renova Fort Ross Foundation, 2018 https://apps.irs.gov/pub/epostcard/cor/272382718_201812_990EZ_2019060716392456.pdf.

162 Kerry A. Dolan, "Russian Billionaire Vekselberg's Non-Oil Endeavor: Raising Funds For A California State Park," *Forbes* (*Forbes Magazine*, October 20, 2012), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2012/10/19/russian-billionaire-vekselbergs-non-oil-endeavor-raising-funds-for-a-california-state-park/>.

163 Carl Nolte, "Rich Russian Comes to Aid of Fort Ross," *SFGATE* (*San Francisco Chronicle*, February 9, 2012), <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Rich-Russian-comes-to-aid-of-Fort-Ross-3183955.php>.

164 Rachel Gross, "Russians Come to the Rescue of Sonoma's Fort Ross Park," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, October 21, 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/21/us/fort-ross-park-saved-from-closing-by-renova-group-of-russia.html>.

165 Jackson West, "Russian Billionaire Saves Fort Ross," *NBC Bay Area* (*NBC Bay Area*, June 23, 2010), <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/politics/russian-billionaire-promises-to-save-fort-ross-jw/1888873/>.

166 Amy Crawford, "When Russia Colonized California: Celebrating 200 Years of Fort Ross," *Smithsonian.com* (*Smithsonian Institution*, July 5, 2012), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/when-russia-colonized-california-celebrating-200-years-of-fort-ross-880099/>.

167 "Support Fort Ross," *Support Fort Ross*, accessed 7AD, <http://www.supportfortross.org/>.

168 Dolan, Kerry A. "Russian Billionaire Vekselberg's Non-Oil ENDEAVOR: Raising Funds for a California State Park." *Forbes*, *Forbes Magazine*, 20 Oct. 2012, www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2012/10/19/russian-billionaire-vekselbergs-non-oil-endeavor-raising-funds-for-a-california-state-park/?sh=40d67d1171dc%3A.

American entities to accept this money, Vekselberg got to “rub shoulders” with some of the highest levels of American political and economic society like Steve Schwarzman and Dianne Feinstein. Accessing the highest levels of American commercial society, such as Citigroup and Chevron, allowed Vekselberg to help push for commercial relations between the US and Russia, the relations that have undercut the US’s response to events like Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In other words, Vekselberg’s donations helped him access American policymaking circles without any lobbyists or the need to file any paperwork that would offer any insight into potential discussions or policy recommendations he may have pushed for.

However, by the time Vekselberg was sanctioned by the US in 2018, the rhetoric in the media changed from praising him as a philanthropist to discussing how Vekselberg had used Fort Ross to whitewash both his own and the Kremlin’s images, and how he used the nonprofit involvement to build relationships with American policymakers.

As CNBC wrote after the US sanctioned Vekselberg: *The goodwill that Vekselberg has accrued through his philanthropy has translated into political access.... Taken together, the Fort Ross Dialogue and the photo exhibition reflect a kind of soft power cultural diplomacy that Russia has traditionally struggled to pull off in the United States.*

*The overlapping events were noteworthy because they occurred just weeks after the State Department had ordered the Russian Consulate in San Francisco to close amid rising tensions between Washington and Moscow.*¹⁶⁹

It’s unclear what will happen to Fort Ross, given that its primary beneficiary is a sanctioned oligarch who appeared to use the settlement as a nonprofit gateway into elite American circles. As one of the remaining Fort Ross employees said after Vekselberg was sanctioned, “Renova Fort Ross Foundation was extremely beneficial, and I’m grateful for that. But in the end, we have a park that is sacred land for many people and common land with a

unique history from the native, the Russian, and the ranching period. We’re focusing on that history.”

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES

Cultural and religious institutes is another category of nonprofits that received substantial donations from Russian oligarchs.

To clarify, Russia maintains a deep well of cultural output to draw from and has provided some of the world’s most cherished cultural and religious traditions. And none of these findings should be taken that these cultural or religious institutes are somehow unworthy of all the praise, admiration, and respect they’ve received. Instead, it’s precisely the praise, admiration, and respect that the Kremlin and the assorted oligarchs are willing to take advantage of for their own designs. Like the aforementioned nonprofits, cultural and religious centers have no legal oversight or due diligence requirement about the sources of donations.

A 2019 article from the *New York Times* focused on how successfully post-Soviet oligarchs had managed to donate to a range of American entities:¹⁷⁰

Though wealthy patrons have long used the arts to advance their individual tastes and social standing, much of the Russian giving is different. While the oligarchs also promote their personal preferences and support a wide range of cultural activities, they often employ philanthropy to celebrate their homeland, depicting it as an enlightened wellspring of masterworks in dance, painting, opera, and the like.

These patrons have been quite public in their philanthropy, and there is little evidence that their donations have been directed or coordinated by Moscow. But they all enjoy good relations with the Kremlin — a prerequisite to flourish in business in Russia — and their giving fits seamlessly with President Vladimir V. Putin’s expanding efforts to use the “soft power” of cultural diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy.

The effect, however cultivated, helps burnish the im-

169 Christina Wilkie, “How a Russian Oligarch Linked to Trump Lawyer Michael Cohen Turned a California State Park into a Mini Moscow,” CNBC (CNBC, January 22, 2019), <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/17/russian-oligarch-viktor-vekselberg-chairs-nonprofit-backed-by-us-firms-politicians.html>.

170 Graham Bowley, “Oligarchs, as US Arts Patrons, Present a Softer Image of Russia,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, October 6, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/06/arts/russia-oligarchs-arts.html>.

age of a nation whose aggression in Ukraine and election meddling have led it to be viewed by many as a hostile power.

The *Times* is not alone in this assessment. “When Western publics think about Russia, Putin wants them to think about Pushkin, Tolstoy, Tchaikovsky,” Andrew Foxall, a Russia expert at the Henry Jackson Society in London, told the *Times*. “What he does not want Western publics to think about is the actions of his regime that goes to war with its near neighbors.”

Nor has the Kremlin been subtle regarding how these efforts and donations can aid its “soft power” efforts. As the *Times* continued:

*But the Russian government has made clear, as it said in a 2016 statement of principles, that “‘soft power’ has become an integral part of efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives.” The following year, the Foreign Ministry created a working group of advisers,¹⁷¹ including government officials and corporate executives, “to coordinate steps to strengthen Russian-American cultural ties, preserve and develop Russian-associated memorial sites and heritage sites in the United States, and implement relevant future projects,” according to a document provided to *The New York Times* by the Russian government.¹⁷²*

For instance, Russian oligarch Mikhail Fridman, via his Genesis Philanthropy Group, has donated tens of thousands of dollars to the Jewish Museum in New York. Another Russian oligarch Leonid Mikhelson provided support for New York’s New Museum, which later made him a trustee – a position that continued for “three years after

the company he directs was placed under sanctions by the United States government.”¹⁷³ Vladimir Potanin, donated millions to Washington’s Kennedy Center where he founded the Center’s “Russian Lounge.” In response, the Kennedy Center described Potanin as a successful “Russian entrepreneur” – rather than a Russian oligarch who, as the *Guardian* noted, is “close” with Putin.¹⁷⁴ Likewise, “entrepreneur” sounds far better than how journalist David Hoffman described Potanin during Russia’s corrupt privatization schemes of the 1990s. As Hoffman wrote, Potanin “became a ringleader of all the [oligarchs] in 1995 in their greatest single property grab,” helping create a process that “was not open to foreigners, was not transparent, and turned out to be rigged. It also had one profound consequence that they did not foresee: the [privatization process] was the beginning of a merger between the Russian [oligarchs] and the government.”¹⁷⁵

Potanin also donated to the Guggenheim Museum where he has served as a board member since 2002. Other exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum have been underwritten by companies steered in part of Russian oligarch Pyotr Aven.¹⁷⁶

Likewise, Blavatnik’s foundation, whose mission is to create “a meaningful and lasting impact in the world by supporting leaders who see today’s challenges as an opportunity to create a better tomorrow,” – has donated millions of dollars to a number of leading American cultural institutions such as New York’s Lincoln Center, the Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and National Gallery of Art.¹⁷⁷ The foundation has also donated hundreds of millions of dollars to Carnegie Hall,

171 “Press Release on a Meeting of the Coordinating Expert Council of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Preserving Russian Historical and Cultural Heritage in the United States,” [washington.mid.ru](https://washington.mid.ru/en/press-centre/news/press_release_on_a_meeting_of_the_coordinating_expert_council_of_the_interdepartmental_working_group/) (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the USA, August 28, 2017), https://washington.mid.ru/en/press-centre/news/press_release_on_a_meeting_of_the_coordinating_expert_council_of_the_interdepartmental_working_group/.

172 “About Project,” About project, accessed 7AD, <http://rus-amerika.mid.ru/en/about/>.

173 Graham Bowley, “Oligarchs, as US Arts Patrons, Present a Softer Image of Russia,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, October 6, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/06/arts/russia-oligarchs-arts.html>.

174 “Maryland Elections Company Bought by Russian Oligarch Close to Putin,” *The Guardian* (*Guardian News and Media*, July 14, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/14/maryland-elections-company-russian-oligarch-putin>.

175 David E. Hoffman, *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

176 Graham Bowley, “Oligarchs, as US Arts Patrons, Present a Softer Image of Russia,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, October 6, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/06/arts/russia-oligarchs-arts.html>.

177 “Our Mission,” Blavatnik Family Foundation, accessed 7AD, <http://blavatnikfoundation.org/>.

which counts Blavatnik as a trustee.¹⁷⁸⁻¹⁷⁹

Finally, the Kremlin-owned VTB bank, sanctioned by the US, sponsored multiple galas at the Kennedy Center, including one featuring a “special performance by the stars of the Bolshoi Ballet.” Though, such a move appeared to at least partially backfire: “I was not going to the Kennedy Center for a VTB thing and be photographed with them,” said Daniel Fried, a former State Department official focused on sanctions. “The optics were terrible. We are not their friends.”¹⁸⁰

KOLOMOISKY’S TEAM

In our research, one oligarch’s name stood out because of his affiliation to a massive trans-national money laundering network stretching across the US Igor Kolomoisky, a Ukrainian oligarch linked to President Donald Trump’s impeachment scandal, is accused of running potentially the largest Ponzi scheme in history with billions of dollars allegedly looted via Kolomoisky’s former bank.¹⁸¹

According to both American and Ukrainian authorities, Kolomoisky and his team hid a significant amount of those funds looted from Ukrainian depositors in American real estate.¹⁸² US court filings show that in the span of a few years, Kolomoisky and his colleagues became the largest real estate kingpins in major American cities like Cleveland, Ohio, as well as the primary commercial own-

ers in small steel and factory towns in states like Kentucky, West Virginia, and Illinois.¹⁸³

Over the past few years, as the US moved to sanction him and as Ukrainian authorities continued investigating the depths of his alleged money laundering, Kolomoisky has also become one of the biggest advocates in Ukraine of rapprochement with the Kremlin. “Give it five, ten years, and the blood will be forgotten,” Kolomoisky said in 2019 about Ukrainian relations with Russia.¹⁸⁴ As Kolomoisky added, Moscow was “stronger anyway... Russian tanks will be stationed near [Poland]. Your NATO will be soiling its pants and buying Pampers.”¹⁸⁵

As our research uncovered, Kolomoisky donated to American institutions before the US began investigating his assets. For instance, he donated undisclosed amounts to the Washington-based Hillel International, an organization that encourages “generations of young adults to celebrate Jewish learning and living, pursue social justice... and connect to their peers and the global Jewish people.”¹⁸⁶ The organization even listed Kolomoisky¹⁸⁷ multiple times under its “partners and investors.”¹⁸⁸

It’s unclear why he donated directly to Hillel, but the nonprofit donations associated with Kolomoisky’s alleged laundering network don’t stop there. As the Jewish newspaper *The Forward* uncovered, the Americans aiding Kolomoisky’s alleged laundering network all linked back

178 “Board of Trustees,” Board of Trustees, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.carnegiehall.org/About/Leadership-and-Staff/Board-of-Trustees>.

179 “Carnegie Hall Names Blavatnik Family First Tier in Recognition of \$25 Million Gift,” Names Blavatnik Family First Tier in Recognition of \$25 Million Gift, accessed July 11, 2021, <https://www.carnegiehall.org/About/Press/Press-Releases/2019/08/14/Len-Blavatnik-First-Tier-Donation-6-22-2016>.

180 Graham Bowley, “Oligarchs, as US Arts Patrons, Present a Softer Image of Russia,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, October 6, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/06/arts/russia-oligarchs-arts.html>.

181 Anders Aslund, “How Kolomoisky Does Business in the United States,” Atlantic Council, June 4, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-kolomoisky-does-business-in-the-united-states/>.

182 “Meet Trumpworld’s Next Top Ukrainian Grifter,” *The New Republic*, December 16, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/155991/meet-trumpworlds-next-top-ukrainian-grifter>.

183 John Caniglia, “Ukrainian Oligarch at the Center of Cleveland Raid Described as ‘Ruthless’ Businessman Who Laundered Millions, Records Say,” *Cleveland.com* (Cleveland.com, August 5, 2020), <https://www.cleveland.com/business/2020/08/ukrainian-oligarch-at-the-center-of-cleveland-raid-described-as-ruthless-businessman-who-laundered-millions-records-say.html>.

184 Anton Troianovski, “A Ukrainian Billionaire Fought Russia. Now He’s Ready to Embrace It,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, November 13, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/13/world/europe/ukraine-ihor-kolomoisky-russia.html>.

185 Ibid.

186 Casey Michel, “Meet Trumpworld’s Next Top Ukrainian Grifter,” *The New Republic*, July 11, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/155991/meet-trumpworlds-next-top-ukrainian-grifter>.

187 Publication. Towards Excellence. Hillel International, 2014. <http://www.hillel.org/docs/default-source/office-of-the-president/ar2014web.pdf?sfvrsn=2>.

188 Rep. The Path to the Jewish Future. Hillel International, 2013. https://www.hillel.org/docs/default-source/annual-reports/ar-2013web.pdf?sfvrsn=76690df0_6.

AZERBAIJAN AND AMERICAN NONPROFITS

to his pilfered funds.¹⁸⁹ Florida-based Mordechai Korf and Uri Laber founded a pair of foundations in the late 2000s that funneled millions of dollars to other nonprofits through 2018 when the US finally began moving against Kolomoisky. As *The Forward* wrote, Korf and Laber had come to “represent the pinnacle of generosity to many religious Jews in Florida.”

As *The Forward* continued:

Weeks of the investigation into Korf and Laber turned up new questions with each answer. It is unclear how they made their money; most of the active businesses for which they’re listed as officers in the world’s largest open database of company records are implicated in the alleged bank scheme.

Peter Henning, a law professor at Wayne State University who prosecuted bank fraud at the Department of Justice, said launderers frequently slide money into charities to evade taxes and scrutiny or to get “pats on the back.”

“If you’re going to funnel money to a charity, no one’s going to ask a lot of questions,” he said. “If you’re willing to give money, they’re going to take it.”

The recipients of funds linked to Korf’s and Laber’s largesse reached across the country. Again, the source of the funds was unclear, but these nonprofits were more than willing to take the funds regardless of Korf’s and Laber’s connections to Kolomoisky. “I think [Kolomoisky] is a shareholder,” Korf claimed at one point to an inquiring reporter, downplaying a years-long relationship and downplaying a relationship to an oligarch who is now sanctioned by the US and who remains one of the most vocal backers of the Kremlin in Kyiv.

The system of monitoring and oversight among nonprofit donations in the US is clearly broken. Nonprofit funding abuse is a rampant phenomenon in the US, among both domestic and foreign actors. In that sense, what post-Soviet and pro-Kremlin oligarchs have done is not new.

A similar reputation-laundering situation is seen between Azerbaijan and the US. Like the Kremlin, the government in Baku remains a kleptocratic dictatorship, immiserating its population and launching subversive campaigns. Many of those campaigns were aimed at Western audiences, trying to whitewash the brutality of President Ilham Aliyev’s regime and convincing Western audiences to continue doing business with Baku. A few years ago, they managed to do so through American nonprofits.

As the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) reported in May of 2013, the government of Azerbaijan, via its State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR), injected \$750,000 into an obscure Texas-based nonprofit, the Assembly of the Friends of Azerbaijan (AFAZ). The assembly then flipped the funds into a series of secondary nonprofits – a constellation of US-based 501(c)(3) organizations scattered across America all pushing Azerbaijani interests.

A few weeks later, nine members of the US Congress touched down in Baku, flown and feted by those very funds. The gathering included sumptuous dinners, fireworks, gifts of hand-woven carpets, crystal tea sets, silk scarves, and DVDs praising the country’s president—all free of charge and costing well more than the permissible limits of gifts to Congress. As *The Washington Diplomat* stated, it was “among the biggest concentrations of American political star power ever seen in the Caucasus.” It was also, according to a recent report from the US’s Office of Congressional Ethics (OCE), one of the most egregious ethics violations Washington has seen since the days of uber-lobbyist Jack Abramoff whose rule-flouting activities spurred the US’s last round of ethics reforms nearly a decade ago.

189 Isabel Vincent and Kathianne Boniello, “Businessmen Accused of Ukraine Money Laundering Gave Millions to New York Charities,” *New York Post* (New York Post, March 6, 2021), <https://nypost.com/2021/03/06/businessmen-accused-of-ukraine-money-laundering-gave-millions-to-ny-charities/>.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The revelations launched the biggest scandal ever seen in US-Azeri relations. After SOCAR donated to the AFAZ and paid for the trip via a network of secondary nonprofits, it caused “willful and intentional misrepresentations” to American officials about who was secretly funding the trip. The revelations “should result in a Department of Justice investigation and serious criminal penalties against SOCAR, if not the Azerbaijan government itself,” ethics expert Craig Holman said. “I’ve been waiting for a scandal like this to happen again so we can go back to ethics committees and say, ‘Close your loopholes.’”¹⁹⁰

It was not the only similar scandal involving foreign financing and nonprofits in the US in recent years. A 2011 trip saw dozens of US lawmakers tour Israel thanks to a nonprofit closely linked to AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobbying group.¹⁹¹ A 2009 trip to Liechtenstein and Germany was sponsored by a nonprofit whose president, according to *The New York Times*, was a lobbyist.¹⁹² Even a 2011 trip to South Africa and Botswana that focused on conservation and anti-poaching work came through a nonprofit with close ties to several lobbying organizations.¹⁹³

“I suspect this type of laundering of funds to pay for congressional travel happens uncomfortably often,” Meredith McGehee, policy director at the Campaign Legal Center, said. “And as for the Baku trip, this wasn’t a case where someone just said, ‘Oops’—this was a lot of effort to make this happen,” she added.¹⁹⁴

There are certain actions that could significantly clean up the nonprofit sector and keep corrupt or politically exposed oligarchs from using and abusing nonprofit structures to launder their reputations and sway American economic and security policy on behalf of foreign regimes. Accepting such gifts doesn’t come without consequences for both the recipients and the broader public. By not adequately doing their due diligence, charitable institutions can face blowback from laundering the image of foreign oligarchs directly involved in efforts to upend American democracy and directly aiding the Kremlin.

We’ve already seen elements of this play out in other places. For instance, British universities have suffered significant reputational damage from taking money from post-Soviet oligarchs - Cambridge University found itself at a center of a financing scandal after a multimillion-pound gift from a foundation linked to Ukrainian oligarch Dmitry Firtash. Numerous news articles linked Cambridge to Firtash both before and after his 2014 arrest¹⁹⁵ – with articles continuing to come out in the American press given his role in the Trump impeachment saga.¹⁹⁶

Some in the broader public might welcome the generosity of oligarchs toward cultural and charitable institutions that desperately need the funding. But in this case, the ends cannot justify the means. These oligarchs have unfairly exploited economic opportunities in their home countries only to pivot to a new and better life in the West. If the US is serious about promoting democratization and economic justice abroad, we – and American nonprofits

190 Michel, Casey. “US/Azerbaijan: Lobbyists Continue to FLOUT Travel Rules - CORRUPTISTAN.” OCCRP, 24 Apr. 2016, www.occrp.org/en/corruptistan/azerbaijan/2016/04/24/us-azerbaijan-lobbyists-continue-to-flout-travel-rules.en.html.

191 Amanda Becker and Rachael Blade, “Members Flock to Israel With Travel Loophole,” Roll Call (Roll Call, December 13, 2019), <https://rollcall.com/2011/09/09/members-flock-to-israel-with-travel-loophole/>.

192 Eric Lipton and Eric Lichtblau, “Rules for Congress Curb but Don’t End Junkets,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, December 7, 2009), https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/07/us/politics/07trips.html?_r=0.

193 Casey Michel, “US/Azerbaijan: Lobbyists Continue to Flout Travel Rules - Corruptistan,” OCCRP, April 24, 2016, <https://www.occrp.org/en/corruptistan/azerbaijan/2016/04/24/us-azerbaijan-lobbyists-continue-to-flout-travel-rules.en.html>.

194 Ibid.

195 Janet McFarland, “Controversy Puts Oligarch’s Charity Contributions under the Microscope,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 19, 2014, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/international-business/european-business/controversy-puts-oligarchs-charity-contributions-under-the-microscope/article18068219/> and Sean O’Neill, “Accused Oligarch Donated £6m to Cambridge,” *News | The Times* (The Times, February 25, 2017), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/wanted-oligarch-donated-6m-to-cambridge-3dqnpqcmzl>.

196 Natasha Bertrand, “A Suspected Russian Spy, With Curious Ties to Washington,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, April 7, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/a-dc-operatives-long-relationship-with-a-suspected-russian-spy/557438/>.

especially – cannot blindly accept the proceeds of such looting, even if they find a home among institutions we value. The opacity plaguing philanthropy also obscures how powerful elites can use charitable contributions to achieve political aims and push their own interests above the average voter.¹⁹⁷

More transparency is needed, ideally through a centralized, publicly accessible database with information on donors and donations. A forthcoming paper from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) regarding oligarchic funding for American and British universities recommends a “comprehensive, searchable list of all donations (foreign and domestic) over a modest threshold,” as well as “the identity of donor, amount and major stipulations,” all of which should be a perfectly acceptable threshold to American universities. Such a move should also set a model for the think tanks, cultural centers, and foundations mentioned above.

However, transparency is not the only solution. To that end, these institutes and their governing bodies should provide greater details regarding gift acceptance policy, including “the ethical guidelines and core principles that

all donations should conform to,” as the NED paper mentions. They should also create formal committees to review donations. When it comes to vetting these donors, there must be greater emphasis and effort at conducting due diligence. All potential donors should be vetted for the sources of their wealth and extensive search should be implemented for all negative news coverage.

Charitable institutions should consider accessing basic systems other financial entities (like banks) use to identify potential politically exposed persons (PEPs),¹⁹⁸ such as the PEP database offered by LexisNexis.¹⁹⁹ Given that these PEPs undergo enhanced scrutiny when trying to enter the American financial system, there is no reason they shouldn’t face the same scrutiny when routing their cash to nonprofits.

Unfortunately, the pro-Kremlin oligarchs are just the tip of the iceberg. Much more research is needed on the risks of donations originating from Chinese state entities, Gulf kleptocrats, and others. Until the necessary policies are implemented, there’s little reason to think these practices will stop soon.

197 Marianne Bertrand et al., “Tax-Exempt Lobbying: Corporate Philanthropy as a Tool for Political Influence,” NBER, April 2, 2018, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24451>.

198 LLC. (CPS IT Solutions) Complete Professional Services, “BSA/AML Manual,” BSA/AML InfoBase, accessed July 11, 2021, <https://bsaaml.ffiec.gov/manual/RisksAssociatedWithMoneyLaunderingAndTerroristFinancing/23>.

199 “Identify Politically Exposed Persons: PEPs: Due Diligence,” Identify Politically Exposed Persons: PEPs | Due Diligence | LexisNexis Hong Kong, accessed July 11, 2021, <https://internationalsales.lexisnexis.com/hk/pages/pep-database>.



Photo courtesy: Drei Kubik. Collage by Free Russia Foundation

AMERICAN DISUNION

HOW RUSSIA HAS CULTIVATED AMERICAN SECESSIONISTS AND SEPARATISTS IN ITS QUEST TO BREAK UP THE US

By Casey Michel

INTRODUCTION

“The Texans ... might with equal reason have planted themselves in Russia, and then have unfurled the banner of independence near the throne of the Czar, because (they were) denied the immunities of their native land.”

– William Ellery Channing,
1837 letter to Sen. Henry Clay

For the past half-dozen years, Russia has supported American secessionist movements, all in the hopes of sowing division in the US. These efforts have spanned a range of tactics, from bankrolling travel and resources for American secessionists, to setting up markedly popular social-media accounts and organizing on-the-ground rallies, to even reportedly hosting leaders of separatist movements outright in Russia. And such efforts have extended to several disparate movements, including those like The Base, a white supremacist outfit dedicated to creating a white ethno-state in the Pacific Northwest. Moscow has supported neo-Confederate groups such as the League of the South, which seeks a reprise of the Civil War, with the end goal being the establishment of an independent plantocracy on American soil. Still other quixotic movements include the Texas National Movement and YesCalifornia, which advocate for Texas and California’s independence from the union.

While none of these efforts have had any real political traction at home, Russian sponsorship of them has at least contributed a growing cadre of American subversives funded or morally supported by Moscow—itsself a

tactical win for the Kremlin’s broader strategy of recruiting sympathizers within the US, while also fomenting political and social chaos there. The potential for secessionists to be repurposed for other pro-Russian interests is also a byproduct of this effort; after all, many have been flown to Moscow over the past several years to liaise with other secessionist movements, creating a kind of 21st century l’Internationale for cranks.

Nor is Russian underwriting of these trips and Moscow-hosted events marginal. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the US-sanctioned oligarch responsible for funding mercenaries and election interference campaigns on behalf of the Kremlin, and possibly even Vladimir Putin himself, have contributed to secessionist financing. The Russian government has likewise staked “non-governmental” organizations at home such as the Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia, which has received thousands of dollars to organize American secessionists and which Putin has personally praised. In other instances, Russian security and intelligence services have reportedly hired and compensated American separatists in order to push violence in the US and potentially break up the US outright. It’s unclear how much Russian financing has been allocated to these efforts, but the total reaches at least thousands upon thousands of dollars, if not more.

While the majority of individuals claim to be peaceful, they also contain remarkably violent strains. For instance, multiple American supporters of the white supremacist group The Base – Brian Lemley Jr., William Billbrough, and Patrik Mathews – were arrested on Jan. 16, 2020, in Virginia for federal firearm and arms-related charges

at a pro-Second Amendment rally in Richmond,²⁰⁰ while those affiliated with neo-Confederacy and Texas secession movements have resorted to violence in the past. The US Justice Department had said that The Base's aim was to create tension that would lead to the overthrow of the US., which they would then replace with a white-supremacist regime—by no means a peaceful political project.

Thankfully, there are means of protecting the US, and countering Russian support for these dangerous (and in some cases racist) fringe movements. Social media companies have already clamped down on fake Twitter and Facebook accounts targeting American separatists, although they could be more proactive with the identification and action against Russian-run ones, especially those tied to Prigozhin's notorious Internet Research Agency, the St. Petersburg "troll farm."

Likewise, the US and federal and state governments should curtail financial and in-kind support from Russia for these groups, including banning foreign-funded travel, communications with sanctioned Russian figures and their proxies, and coordination with foreign election interference efforts.

SOVIET REDUX

In order to understand the context in which Russia and Kremlin proxies have supported American secession movements, it's worth examining the legacy of the Soviet Union's dissolution—and how Moscow has tried to parrot a similar disintegration in Western countries, including the US.

Nearly thirty years ago, the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin for the final time. Nearly three-quarters of a century after the October Revolution and nearly fifty years after the Soviet Union's resounding victory in the Second World War, the country had, at long last, fallen apart.

In the USSR's stead rose fifteen new, independent republics, free from the grip of Soviet imperialism. A num-

ber of these countries, including Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, had never formally recognized Soviet sovereignty over their territories, nor had the West ever formally recognized Soviet claims to the Baltic states. A number of these new countries, including Georgia, Armenia, and even Russia, were returning to the formal independence they had once known as independent nations, free from Soviet administration. And a number of these new nations had, as Russian President Vladimir Putin points out on occasion,²⁰¹ never known formal statehood, at least in the modern conceptions of it, including Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

By the end of 1991, each of these 15 republics were recognized by the United Nations. Of course, Moscow's respect for these post-Soviet states as independent entities unto themselves quickly faded – and may as well have never been more than mere lip-service. The administration of President Boris Yeltsin, while claiming to recognize the independence of these countries, nonetheless immediately began claiming that Moscow should be granted, as Yeltsin's Deputy Foreign Minister Fedor Shelov-Kovedyayev put it, the role of "leader [in terms] of stability and military security on the entire territory of the former USSR," with Moscow's "quite special interests in the region" recognized across the world. In 1992, the pro-Kremlin pundit Andranik Migranyan, then an adviser to the Duma Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, claimed that Russia "should declare the entire geopolitical space of the former USSR a sphere of its vital interests (like the US.'s Monroe Doctrine)."²⁰² And while Yeltsin never claimed outright that his government should be able to control the destiny of the newly independent republics, his spokesperson, Pavel Voshchanov, effectively said it for him: "The Russian Federation casts no doubt on the constitutional right of every state and people to self-determination. There exists, however, the problem of borders, the non-settlement of which is possible and admissible only on condition of allied relations secured by an appropriate treaty. In the event of their termination, [Moscow] reserves the right to raise the question of the revision of boundaries."²⁰³ Voshcha-

200 "Three Alleged Members of the Violent Extremist Group 'The Base' Facing Federal Firearms and Alien-Related Charges," The United States Department of Justice (The United States Department of Justice, January 16, 2020), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-md/pr/three-alleged-members-violent-extremist-group-base-facing-federal-firearms-and-alien>.

201 See Putin's 2014 comments on Kazakhstan's lack of pre-1991 statehood: Casey Michel, "Putin's Chilling Kazakhstan Comments," The Diplomat (The Diplomat, October 3, 2014), <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/putins-chilling-kazakhstan-comments/>.

202 Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).

203 Serhii Plokhyy, *The Last Empire: the Final Days of the Soviet Union* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015).

nov later specifically pointed to a handful of areas that would be up for potential discussion with respect to shifting post-Soviet borders: Abkhazia, the Donbas, Crimea, and northern Kazakhstan.

Nearly three decades after the Soviet collapse, Russia has militarily occupied three out of those four territories and the post-Soviet borders remain far more fragile than anyone in 1991 expected. In 2014, Moscow led the first forced annexation in Europe since World War II, flooding Crimea with unmarked Russian troops – just as it did later in the Donbas – while in Abkhazia, Russia remains the patron of the separatist region whose supposed independence is recognized by only a handful of other nations, including illiberal regimes in places like Venezuela and Cuba.²⁰⁴ Northern Kazakhstan remains, for the time being, free from Russian forces, although the region has suffered through its own spate of pro-Russian separatism and secessionist rhetoric.²⁰⁵

For Putin's regime, clearly, the borders of modern nation-states are effectively up for grabs, and no longer only in the Former Soviet Union. Russia has also opted to buttress secessionist movements with troops and spies in Western and Southern Europe.

In Catalonia, for instance, recent reports indicate that Russia sent an elite GRU unit to inflame secessionist sentiment in the Spanish region. These efforts included links with a supposedly grassroots Catalanian independence group that, according to Spanish newspaper *El País*, used an offshoot to begin "planning acts of violence in the lead up to the second anniversary of the unauthorized referendum on Catalan independence, and ahead of the Supreme Court's ruling in October on the fate of Catalan separatist leaders who were tried earlier this year in connection with the unilateral secession attempt of 2017."²⁰⁶ Members of this offshoot were arrested along-

side a substantial cache of explosive materials.

In the Balkans, Moscow has backed the separatist efforts from Bosnia's Republika Srpska (RS) contingent, led by Milorad Dodik – who is himself sanctioned by the US. for his efforts to tear apart Bosnia. Dodik, as the *New York Times* reported, "counts [Putin] among his closest allies,"²⁰⁷ and has further welcomed the Night Wolves, a pro-Kremlin biker group (which includes individuals sanctioned by the US) while simultaneously calling for RS to recognize Russia's supposed annexation of Crimea.²⁰⁸

Where Russia has deployed GRU operatives and pro-Kremlin gangs to the continent, in America it has opted for remote cultivation and recruitment of homegrown elements. As seen in the aftermath of the Kremlin's interference efforts in the 2016 US presidential election, one of the thrusts of Moscow's push to sow domestic chaos centered on cultivating secessionist and separatist groups, movements, and individuals, both online and in person.

"A WHITE MAN'S COUNTRY"

"Imagine what could happen to our party when Russia takes interest." – Matthew Heimbach²⁰⁹

For American white nationalist/white ethno-state contingents, Russia has been by far the most prominent foreign country backing their efforts, both in rhetoric and alleged financial support. It's unclear just how much money has been allocated, but these efforts culminated in early 2020, when members of The Base, a white nationalist movement, were arrested while plotting to attack a pro-Second Amendment rally in Virginia, hoping to spark a conflagration of violence across the US. The man lead-

204 Joshua Keating, "Putin Deputy: No Quid pro Quo with Cuba for Abkhazia Recognition," *Foreign Policy* (Foreign Policy, February 18, 2010), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/02/18/putin-deputy-no-quid-pro-quo-with-cuba-for-abkhazia-recognition/>.

205 "Trump Has Squandered the Legacy of the Berlin Wall," *The New Republic* (The New Republic, 7AD), <https://newrepublic.com/article/155633/trump-squandered-legacy-berlin-wall>.

206 Fernando J. Pérez Óscar López-Fonseca, "Spain's High Court Opens Investigation into Russian Spying Unit in Catalonia," *EL PAÍS*, November 21, 2019,

207 Barbara Surk, "Milorad Dodik Wants to Carve Up Bosnia. Peacefully, If Possible," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 16, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/world/europe/dodik-republika-srpska-bosnia.html>.

208 Maxim Edwards, "The President Who Wants to Break Up His Own Country," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, January 2, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/serb-president-dodik-bosnia/579199/>.

209 Casey Michel, "How Russia Surpassed Germany to Become the Racist Ideal for Trump-Loving White Supremacists," *Quartz* (Quartz), accessed July 8, 2021, <https://qz.com/869938/how-russia-surpassed-germany-to-become-the-dangerous-new-role-model-for-trump-loving-american-white-supremacists/>.

ing The Base has not only advocated for the creation of a white ethno-state in the Pacific Northwest, but according to reports, lives in Russia and works directly for the Russian government, effectively formalizing the relationship between Moscow and this homegrown racist movement.

THE BASE

There are few photos available of Rinaldo Nazzaro who goes by the alter egos “Norman Spear” and “Roman Wolf.” A small number of photos show a white man with a receding hairline and a bushy beard stretching down toward his throat. There are no known videos of Nazzaro, and scant social media information is linked to him.

Nazzaro’s background is similarly opaque. According to property records, he is in his mid-40s, and has been linked to property in New Jersey and the state of Washington. He has claimed to work as an American intelligence official, as well as with the American military in Afghanistan, but it remains unclear if any of this is true.

What is true, however, is that Nazzaro has one clear role. He is affiliated with the Northwest Front, a white ethno-state separatist group attempting to break the Pacific Northwest off from the US. in order to form a whites-only country. Nazzaro has himself called for “achieving independence, realizing the ultimate goal which is an independent nation state in the Pacific Northwest, an ethno-state.” The founder of the Northwest Front, the late Harold Covington, once described Russia a few years ago as the “last great White empire.”²¹⁰ Property records have linked Nazzaro to large land purchases in eastern Washington to help train like-minded white ethno-state separatists.

Similarly, Nazzaro is the head of another American white nationalist group called The Base, a group that only began expanding in late 2018. In court documents, The

Base was described as a “racially motivated violent extremist group,” one dedicated to “seek[ing] to accelerate the downfall of the United States government, incite a race war, and establish a white ethno-state.”²¹¹ According to leaked online chats, Nazzaro has called for followers to dedicate themselves to their goals for decades to come.²¹²

The Base gained broad notoriety in late 2019 when a number of members of Nazzaro’s group were arrested after plotting deadly assaults at a gun rally in Virginia. Their plan was to create a bloodbath at a Second Amendment rally in which hundreds of heavily armed gun-rights protesters were in attendance and included shooting “unsuspecting civilians and police officers.” They hoped, as American authorities said, to ignite a “full-blown civil war.”²¹³ As one of The Base’s members said, “we could essentially be like literally hunting people,” adding that they could “kick off the economic collapse.” The three men under Nazzaro were arrested before they could do any damage.

Around the same time as the planned attack on the Virginian gun rally, another member of The Base, 18-year-old Richard Tobin, was arrested for ordering the vandalism of numerous American synagogues.

With the arrests, eyes turned toward Nazzaro – and the role that Russia has continued to play in stoking, funding, and supporting American white ethno-state efforts. Despite Nazzaro’s low profile, property records in Russia indicate that Nazzaro has been living with his Russian wife in St. Petersburg since at least July 2018, which just so happens to coincide with the same month that The Base was officially formed.²¹⁴ Furthermore, in one of the few photos publicly available of Nazzaro, he can be seen wearing a shirt with an image of Putin and the words “Russia, absolute power” written on the front. A Russian government security exhibition in Moscow – one focusing on

210 Alexander Reid Ross, “America’s Neo-Nazi Terrorists Have a Powerful New Patron: Vladimir Putin: Opinion,” [Haaretz.com](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/premium-america-s-neo-nazi-terrorists-have-a-powerful-new-patron-vladimir-putin-1.8471461) (Haaretz, February 2, 2020), <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/premium-america-s-neo-nazi-terrorists-have-a-powerful-new-patron-vladimir-putin-1.8471461>.

211 Anna Palmer and Jake Sherman, “POLITICO Playbook PM: Lordy, There’s a Tape,” *POLITICO*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/playbook-pm/2020/01/24/lordy-theres-a-tape-488149>.

212 Jason Wilson, “Prepping for a Race War: Documents Reveal Inner Workings of Neo-Nazi Group,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, January 25, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/25/inside-the-base-neo-nazi-terror-group>.

213 Paul M Duggan, “Alleged White Supremacists Planned Deadly Violence at Richmond Gun Rally, Federal Prosecutors Say,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, January 21, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/alleged-white-supremacists-planned-deadly-violence-at-richmond-gun-rally-federal-prosecutors-say/2020/01/21/7c7ccdba-396d-11ea-bb7b-265f4554af6d_story.html.

214 Andrei Soshnikov & Ali Winston Daniel De Simone, “Neo-Nazi Rinaldo Nazzaro Running US Militant Group The Base from Russia,” *BBC News* (BBC, January 24, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51236915>.

the supposed “results of state policy and achievements” – listed Nazzaro as a guest.

The fact that the leader of one of the most threatening and violent white supremacist and secessionist groups in the US lives in Russia would have been notable enough to demonstrate Russian involvement with US groups, but especially given the prior inroads Russian operators had made among America’s white nationalist community. However, Nazzaro’s links to Moscow appear far deeper than simply living in St. Petersburg.

According to Tobin, who had plotted to vandalize synagogues in Michigan and Wisconsin with images of swastikas, one of Nazzaro’s aliases, Norman Spear was, in fact, a Russian spy.²¹⁵

Moscow has not confirmed Nazzaro’s work as a spy or even commented on his presence in St. Petersburg, but US law enforcement appears to have lent credence to Tobin’s theory. As *The Guardian* reported, “Law enforcement sources have indicated on background that Nazzaro is believed by some agencies to be working for the Russian government...”²¹⁶

Thus far, there has been very little media coverage of Nazzaro’s relationship with Russian officials or Russian intelligence services. Numerous questions remain: Who brought Nazzaro to Russia? Who bankrolls his stateside activities? What other members of The Base (or other similar organizations) has Nazzaro helped introduce to Russian figures? And, perhaps most importantly, which members of the Kremlin are aware of Nazzaro’s ongoing presence and operations out of St. Petersburg – and what do they have planned next?

THE SOUTH WILL RISE AGAIN

“We understand that the Russian people and Southerners are natural allies in blood, culture, and religion.” – Michael Hill²¹⁷

Those advocating a return of the Confederacy have found a reliable overseas ally in Moscow. Neo-Confederate efforts track back to late 2014, to a small conference gathered in Moscow’s Izmailovo Alfa Hotel. Organized by a Russian group called the Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia (AGMR) – by 2016, it had received direct funding from the Kremlin – the one-day conference was, according to a press release, dedicated to the “struggle for independence and creation of new sovereign geopolitical entities on the map of the world.”

The 2014 meeting in Moscow was relatively small and generated almost no press coverage, but it did attract the participation of one of the best-known neo-Confederate groups still operating in the US: the League of the South. Described by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a group dedicated to reforming the Confederacy, the League of the South envisions a new country in the American South that would be dominated by “white Christians.” While the group’s president, Michael Hill, was unable to attend the 2014 conference in person – this was two years before AGMR, with Kremlin backing he could afford to help individuals from other state-level secessionist movements travel to Moscow – he Skyped in, presenting an opportunity for neo-Confederates to reach out to potential Russian partners in their quest to break up the US.

Hill gave a talk to the conference that centered on the “independence of the Southern people,” and the “South’s identity as an historic ‘blood and soil’ nation.” It was full of the kind of separatist, neo-Confederate rhetoric Hill had long espoused. As Hill later wrote, his talk “was very

215 Jason Wilson, “Revealed: the True Identity of the Leader of an American Neo-Nazi Terror Group,” *The Guardian* (*Guardian News and Media*, January 24, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/23/revealed-the-true-identity-of-the-leader-of-americas-neo-nazi-terror-group>.

216 *Ibid.*

217 Alexandra Hutzler, “The League of the South Launched Its Russian Language Page Just Days after President Trump Met with Vladimir Putin,” *Newsweek* (*Newsweek*, July 21, 2018), <https://www.newsweek.com/league-south-white-nationalism-russia-language-page-donald-trump-vladimir-1035916>.

well received (through a translator) by the largely Russian audience.”²¹⁸

The invitation for Hill to speak marks one of the earliest instances of interest in Russia in stoking secessionist movements across the US. (In a sign of overlapping interests, Matthew Heimbach, one of the white nationalists detailed above, would later take a photo with the League of the South’s flag — while simultaneously holding a book written by Russia’s foremost fascist philosopher, Alexander Dugin.) This was hardly the last time that Hill would personally reach out to Russian patrons, or that Russian operatives took an interest in stoking neo-Confederates in the US.

STARS AND BARS

Around the same time that Nazzaro moved to St. Petersburg, and around the same time as he formed The Base, Hill followed a similar trajectory. Instead of joining Nazzaro in Russia, however, Hill and his neo-Confederate movement opted for a different tactic. In July 2018, Hill, who had previously described Russians and “Southern people” as “fellow Christians and traditionalists,” penned a note on the League of the South’s website to his “Russian friends.” He announced that the League of the South would soon have a “Russian language section” on the group’s website, and continued:

We understand that the Russian people and Southerners are natural allies in blood, culture, and religion. As fellow Whites of northern European extraction, we come from the same general gene pool. As inheritors of the European cultural tradition, we share similar values, customs, and ways of life. And

as Christians, we worship the same Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and our common faith binds us as brothers and sisters...

“[W]e believe that the Russian people and the Southern people are natural allies against the destructive and impersonal impulses of globalism. We ought to encourage closer ties between our two peoples and between those who represent our interests in all phases of life, including government, business, education, the arts, and other areas. Moreover, we should seek peace and goodwill between our peoples as the foundation for all our cooperative efforts.”²¹⁹

As the note stated, Hill and the League of the South would soon be launching a “Russian language section” on the group’s website. It’s unclear how the Kremlin received the League of the South’s entreaties, but, as other American white nationalists wrote in response to the group’s decision, “We were already pro-Russia long before this... Why wouldn’t the League of the South open a Russian language section on its website?”²²⁰

One month later, the Russian-language section went live, full of the kind of secessionist rhetoric Hill’s group had long pushed. (As one section read, “Life under the yoke of

218 “The League of the South Takes Its Southern Nationalist Message to Moscow,” League of The South, December 13, 2014, <https://leagueofthesouth.com/the-league-of-the-south-takes-its-southern-nationalist-message-to-moscow/>.

219 “To Our Russian Friends,” League of The South, July 17, 2018, <https://leagueofthesouth.com/to-our-russian-friends/>.

220 Hunter Wallace et al., “League of the South Launches Russian Language Page To Promote Southern Nationalism,” *Occidental Dissent*, July 20, 2018, <http://www.occidentaldissent.com/2018/07/20/league-of-the-south-launches-russian-language-page-to-promote-southern-nationalism/>.

CAPTAIN CONFEDERATE

the Yankee Empire has already caused great harm to our Southern culture. Can we leave something for our children and grandchildren? Not if we let the Yankee Empire continue!” One of the pages details the “basic beliefs of the League of the South”: a “return to our own lofty cultural heritage,” and a call to “throw off the yoke of imperial oppression.” As the group wrote on its Russian language “Reforms” page, “men and women of the South should be outraged but should not be surprised that the government of the United States has long humiliated citizens of several states... Secession is always preferable to slavery.”²²¹

Hill also added another post on the League of the South’s site regarding the group’s ties to Russia. As he wrote, “What these unhinged responses [to the Russian-language program] tell us is simple: that we have hit a big nerve on the Left. They indeed fear good relations between the Russian and Southern people (and the American people in general) and that such a detente might actually result in peace and cooperation between two of the world’s largest and most powerful White nations (meaning discrete people groups).”

In Hill’s opinion, the links between Russia and neo-Confederates were obvious. “It is our opinion that the Left would prefer another ‘brothers’ war’ in which White men slaughtered each other by the millions. We will do all we can to prevent such a tragedy from ever occurring again.” This, to Hill, was the entire reason that he and his neo-Confederates had continued to build up links in Russia. As he wrote, “This is the main goal of our outreach to the Russian people.”²²²

Russian links with, and outreach to, neo-Confederates following 2016 weren’t limited to individuals like Hill or his League of the South. Unfortunately, the digital space – specifically social media – remains a front of disinformation and fake accounts, with divisive material aimed at American audiences. Much of this material, unsurprisingly, targets not only divisive issues like gun rights and control, religious schisms, or racial animus, but also aimed directly at the kind of neo-Confederates Hill has helped lead.

For instance, one of the most popular fake Russian Facebook pages linked directly to the Internet Research Agency (IRA) was called “South United,” which also maintained an Instagram presence. This account published all manner of pro-Confederate material, ranging from claims that supporting the Confederacy was about “heritage, not hate” to images of Barack Obama as a Nazi to anti-LGBT rhetoric. “South United” was one of the “10 most active IRA-administered Facebook pages,”²²³ according to a later Senate Intelligence Committee investigation on the topic. Special Counsel Robert Mueller cited the page as the work of the IRA in a 2018 indictment of 13 IRA employees and officials.²²⁴ All told, the “South United” Facebook page reached a height of 138,000 followers and harvested a total of 1.5 million likes and 2.3 million shares before it was shut down in 2017.

Needless to say, the “South United” account was part of a far larger, and remarkably successful, social media disinformation effort run by the IRA, which was itself overseen by US-sanctioned Putin associate Yevgeny Prigozhin. In September 2017, Facebook and Instagram removed hundreds of these fake accounts linked back to the IRA, and numerous journalists, academics, and American

221 “Российский Охват – Russian Outreach,” League of The South, July 26, 2018, <https://leagueofthesouth.com/%d1%80%d0%be%d1%81%d0%b8%d0%b9%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b8%d0%b9-%d0%be%d1%85%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%82-russian-outreach/>.

222 “Our Russia Outreach Has Struck a Nerve!,” League of The South, July 23, 2018, <https://leagueofthesouth.com/our-russia-outreach-has-struck-a-nerve/>.

223 Rep, 2019. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.

224 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA v. INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY LLC A/K/A MEDIASINTEZ LLC A/K/A GLAVSET LLC A/K/A MIXINFO LLC A/K/A AZIMUT LLC A/K/A NOVINFO LLC, CONCORD MANAGEMENT AND CONSULTING LLC, CONCORD CATERING, YEVGENIY VIKTOROVICH PRIGOZHIN, MIKHAIL IVANOVICH BYSTROV, MIKHAIL LEONIDOVICH BURCHIK A/K/A MIKHAIL ABRAMOV, ALEKSANDRA YURYEVNA KRYLOVA, ANNA VLADISLAVOVNA BOGACHEVA, SERGEY PAVLOVICH POLOZOV, MARIA ANATOLYEVNA BOVDA A/K/A MARIA ANATOLYEVNA BELYAEVA, ROBERT SERGEYEVICH BOVDA, DZHEYKHUN NASIMI OGLY ASLANOV A/K/A JAYHOON ASLANOV A/K/A JAY ASLANOV, VADIM VLADIMIROVICH PODKOPAEV, GLEB IGOREVICH VASILCHENKO, IRINA VIKTOROVNA KAVERZINA, and VLADIMIR VENKOV. US Department of Justice (UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA 2018).

investigators have a far better understanding of the means and mechanisms with which Russian operators targeted Americans in and around the 2016 election.²²⁵

In late 2019, Facebook announced that it had removed dozens of Instagram accounts that originated in Russia, some of which published pro-Confederate material targeted at American audiences. “The people behind this operation often posted on both sides of political issues including topics like US. elections, environmental issues, racial tensions, LGBTQ issues, political candidates, Confederate ideas, conservatism and liberalism,” Facebook said in a statement. “They also maintained accounts presenting themselves as local in some swing states and posed as either conservatives or progressives.”²²⁶

However, in spite of the efforts platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have taken to tackle Russian (and other) disinformation efforts on their platforms, they have nonetheless allowed Russian disinformation to remain available to American audiences. And much of that material is directly targeted at the neo-Confederate audiences who proved susceptible in 2016, and who, thanks to the work of people like Hill, have continued to express admiration for the Kremlin.

Dozens of accounts still remain live on Instagram that continue to publish fake Russian “South United” material to their followers. They not only continue to reach new audiences, but they continue to inject the exact same discourse, rhetoric, and divisiveness that proved so useful, and so successful, to Russia’s 2016 operations.²²⁷

A number of the accounts that remain live—which hail the Confederate flag as “Protecting Us From Tyranny Since 1861” and state that “The Civil War was not about slavery”—claim to be state chapters of the original “South United” page, with names like “South United Iowa” and “South United Tennessee.” They all use a similar logo to the IRA Facebook account, and some posts even use memes with stilted phrases like “History is written By victor...” and “Can it be any simple?”—language reminiscent of the non-native English used in some IRA propaganda memes. The operators of some of these Instagram accounts

also promoted a Russian-organized pro-Trump rally, which was supposedly a “patriotic state-wide flash mob” in support of Trump’s candidacy. The advertisement for the rally featured an image of Hillary Clinton in a prison cell.

A number of the accounts still on Instagram even claim to be directly related to the original Russian page. “South United Louisiana” says it’s “the South United page for the state of Louisiana,” while the “South United Georgia” page said it was the “@south_united page made for the great people of Georgia.”

These accounts used not just IRA memes but other inflammatory content from outside the “South United” network. The accounts reposted a variety of memes along the same lines of neo-Confederate political and cultural resentments, including pro-Confederacy, pro-gun, and anti-Islam material. One particularly horrific example saw the “South United Florida” account posted an image of four bodies with gunshot wounds to the heads, with the words “King Barrak, Queen Michelle, Usurper Hillary, George Soros” above each corpse. Another image on one of these accounts still up is a “South United” image of a Confederate stick figure kicking a rainbow-colored stick figure, with the caption reading, “My response to LGBT-propaganda!” Some of the posts are also lighter fare, including an image of “Captain Confederate” – a rip-off of the Captain America superhero, now decked out in Confederate insignia.²²⁸

Not all of this material is relegated solely to accounts that claim to be part of the “South United” operation. Several other accounts that are still up on Instagram appear to be part of this neo-Confederate network.

For instance, a series of “Rebel Flag” accounts not only appear connected to the original “South United” accounts (including those that are still up) but share similar behavior patterns – further indications that these accounts are part of a broader Russian operation to sow division and inflame divisions among Americans. They range across a number of targeted states, including Virginia, Alabama, Florida, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Texas, as well as others.

225 Mike Isaac and Daisuke Wakabayashi, “Russian Influence Reached 126 Million Through Facebook Alone,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, October 30, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/technology/facebook-google-russia.html>.

226 “Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From Iran and Russia,” *About Facebook*, March 24, 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/removing-more-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-iran-and-russia/>.

227 Casey Michel Adam Rawnsley, “Instagram Won’t Pull These Racist, Russian-Inspired Accounts,” *The Daily Beast* (The Daily Beast Company, December 16, 2019), <https://www.thedailybeast.com/instagram-wont-pull-these-racist-violent-russian-inspired-accounts>.

228 @south_united-florida https://www.instagram.com/south_united_florida/.

The “Rebel Flag Army Alabama” account includes “South United” posts that removed the “South United” watermark. This post claims that the Confederate flag “never symbolized hate, racism or white pride. It stands for the Dixieland, freedom and independence.” The account also uses hashtags like #secession, #independence, and #wewillriseagain – all calls to reignite the Confederacy movement.²²⁹ The “Rebel Flag Army Florida” account contains posts pushing identical material and directs followers to the other accounts in the “Rebel Flag” network.²³⁰

One account, “Alabama Rebel,” (which has since been deleted) admits that it was directly connected to “South United,” posting material advertising Russian-organized rallies, as well as material originally found on the “South United” account. As one caption read, “we were a cause but now we are a movement!! Show your support to the movement by following the other south united pages!!” Another post, which directs users to all of the “South United” accounts, also contains some of the typos that fake Russian accounts memorably published in the lead-up to the 2016 election. As that post reads, “so we are not suppose [sic] to judge all Muslems [sic] by the acts of a few extremists, but we must condemn all Confederate Americans by the actions of a few nut cases [sic].”²³¹

A whole range of other accounts post similar material, and present similar behavior. One account that appears connected, “CSA Pride,” mistakenly describes Americans as “Native Americans,” and claims that “THE SOUTH WILL RISE AGAIN.”²³² Another, “The CS Army,” explicitly posted material originally from the “South United” page. (“CSA” stands for “Confederates States of America,” while “CS” stands for “Confederate States.”)²³³

Dozens of such accounts, with thousands of followers cumulatively, remain active nearly four years after Facebook and Instagram began removing material directly linked to IRA operations. They can therefore reach brand new audiences in the US, while simultaneously convincing neo-Confederates that their movement is substantially

larger than it may be on the ground.

While none of the accounts have yet called for armed rallies across the states in question, they nonetheless continue to parallel and build off of other attempts at recruiting neo-Confederates, and those aiming to resurrect the deadliest and most treasonous separatist movement the US has ever known. And the longer these accounts remain up, the more viewers they can reach – and the more potential separatists can be drawn to the Russian material, egged on by troll operators in Russia to try to pick up where the original Confederacy left off.

E PLURIBUS UNUM

*“In Love with Texas Shape.”
– “Heart of Texas” Facebook
page, secretly run by Russian
operatives²³⁴*

For those advocating for the secession of specific states, Russia has provided not only rhetorical support, but also a willingness to bring the leading American secession advocates directly to Moscow in order to lobby for their cause. These efforts have focused on two states in particular: Texas and California. For Texas, Russian actors created wildly popular fake social media accounts to attract new followers – such as the “Heart of Texas” Facebook page, which garnered approximately 250,000 followers before it was shuttered – and helped Texas secessionists travel to Russia multiple times in March 2015 and September 2016 for support. For California, Kremlin-funded operatives did much the same and even went so far as to open an official “embassy” in Moscow itself for the California secession movement. As of 2021, the man leading California’s secession movement, Louis Marinelli, continues to live in Russia, advocating for the state to break off

229 @rebel_flag_army_alabama https://www.instagram.com/rebel_flag_army_alabama/.

230 @rebel_flag_army_florida_ https://www.instagram.com/rebel_flag_army_florida/.

231 @alabamarebel_01 https://instagram.com/alabamarebel_01.

232 @csa.pride <https://www.instagram.com/csa.pride/>.

233 @thecsarmy <https://www.instagram.com/thecsarmy/>.

234 Casey Michel, “Opinion | How the Russians Pretended to Be Texans - and Texans Believed Them,” The Washington Post (WP Company, April 1, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/10/17/how-the-russians-pretended-to-be-texans-and-texans-believed-them/>.

the American union and potentially leading to the complete dissolution of the US itself.

These efforts track back to the days before the 2016 election. Nathan Smith, who styles himself the “foreign minister” for the Texas Nationalist Movement (TNM), appeared in the spring of 2015 at a far-right gathering in St. Petersburg, Russia. Roaming around in his cowboy hat, Smith kept his presence low-key at the conference. A photo posted by Rodina – a far-right Russian party linked to sanctioned Russian official Dmitry Rogozin – featured Smith grinning in St. Petersburg. But Smith’s travel to Russia remained largely unpublicized, at least in the US.²³⁵

However, at least one Russian newspaper, *Vzglyad*, caught up with the American, noting that TNM is “hardly a marginal group,” and quoted Smith liberally on the excellent prospects for a break-up of the United States.²³⁶ According to Smith, the Texas National Movement has 250,000 supporters—including all the Texans currently serving in the US. Army—all of whom “identify themselves first and foremost as Texans” but are being forced to remain Americans. The United States, Smith added, “is not a democracy, but a dictatorship.”²³⁷

The interview was, at least in Russia, a clear sign that the time was ripe for revisiting the topic of state-level secession in the US., and potentially even supporting the topic through financing and material backing. Russian state media echoed the rhetoric of the Texas secessionist and compared it to Russia’s recent invasion of Crimea. According to Sputnik, the ballot-by-bayonet “referendum” in Crimea saw its historical precedent in Texas. “If one accepts the current status of Texas despite its controversial origin story, then they are more than obliged to recognize the future status of Crimea,” the outlet wrote.²³⁸ The Kremlin’s famed troll farms also took Smith’s interview and ran with it, with dozens of bots instantly tweeting about “Свободный Техас,” or “Free Texas.”

The incident was the first real indication of Russian backing for state-level secession movements in the US. Whereas white ethno-state separatists aimed at creating separate independent racial enclaves in the US, and whereas neo-Confederates aimed to reprise the Confederacy and consolidate former Confederate states into a new independent union, state-level separatist movements presented another prong with which Russian operatives could target American divisions – and, if things worked out, even potentially break apart the US state-by-state.

As this section outlined, these efforts focused primarily on two states in particular: Texas and California. And while we are far more aware of the lengths to which Russian actors went to cultivate these separate movements, new information detailed in this chapter will reveal that such efforts have continued, building off of the remarkable successes Russia found in the lead-up to the 2016 election.

LONE STAR DREAMS

In his interview with *Vzglyad*, Smith revealed who had brought him to Russia. It was one of TNM’s “friends”: a man, often spotted in well-tailored suits and crocodile shoes, named Alexander Ionov. As the head of the Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia (AGMR) – the same group that hosted Michael Hill’s neo-Confederate talk in 2014 – Ionov has served as one of the primary linchpins in Moscow’s cultivation of American secessionists.

In 2015, a few months after Smith’s visit, Ionov organized his first “Dialogue of Nations” conference. Ionov’s AGMR hoped to build a group of Western secessionists capable of emulating the state fracture already underway in Ukraine.²³⁹ According to the *Guardian*, the conference was partially paid for by a grant from Russia’s National Charity Fund²⁴⁰ – and as *Vice* would later report, AG-

235 Nathan Smith *Shaking Hands at a Conference in St. Petersburg*, n.d., Rodina, n.d., <https://rodina.ru/images/thumbnails/thumbnaill-640x359/4744dd63809c00c2ef0a3819c2bf9ba9902e84a0.jpg>.

236 “У Нас Нет Причин Оставаться в Составе США,” *ВЗГЛЯД.РУ*, accessed July 9, 2021, <https://vz.ru/politics/2015/3/23/735599.html>.

237 “У Нас Нет Причин Оставаться в Составе США,” *ВЗГЛЯД.РУ*, accessed July 9, 2021, <https://vz.ru/politics/2015/3/23/735599.html>.

238 http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/news/2014_03_03/Crimea-as-the-Russian-Texas-9288/

239 “Парад Суверенитетов В Москву Съехались Сепаратисты Со Всего Мира. Репортаж Андрея Козенко,” *Meduza*, accessed July 9, 2021, <https://meduza.io/feature/2015/09/21/parad-suverenitetov>.

240 “Russia Funds Moscow Conference for US, EU and Ukraine Separatists,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, September 20, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/20/russia-funds-moscow-conference-us-eu-ukraine-separatists>.

MR's office features a letter from Putin himself thanking Ionov for "work[ing] to strengthen friendship between peoples[.]"²⁴¹ Ionov specifically singled out Smith and the TNM, whom he described as "big friends."²⁴²

When Ionov began strengthening ties between Russia and Texas secessionists, Russian troll operators in St. Petersburg followed suit. According to Russian journalists at RBK, the most popular fake Russian Facebook page devoted to "political questions" wasn't centered on Trump, gun rights, or racial tensions.²⁴³ Instead, with over a quarter-million followers – more than the official TNM Facebook page, and more than the official Texas Democratic and Texas Republican Facebook pages combined – the Russian IRA operators had created a massively popular page dedicated to advocating for Texas secession, called the "Heart of Texas."

From the outset, the page's target audience was clear. Much of the material – characterized by numerous typos and syntax errors – was geared to far-right Texans, railing against vegetarians and LGBTQ individuals, claiming that Texas is a "Christian state" and criticizing "Killary Rotten Clinton." As one post memorably staked, "NO HYPOCLINTOS [sic] IN THE GOD BLESSED TEXAS". The page also routinely advocated for Texas secession, calling for Texas – which had existed as an independent polity for nearly a decade in the 19th century – to once more break free.

But the page didn't simply post memes, hashtags, and inflammatory material. It also managed to organize a May 2016 protest in Houston – one that was arguably the Russians' most successful effort at on-the-ground mobilization in the US. in 2016. Dubbed the "Stop Islamization of Texas" rally, the Heart of Texas page managed to convince a number of white supremacists and Texas secessionists, some armed with weapons like AR-15s, to travel to downtown Houston, where they faced down a

larger group of counterdemonstrators; no one was injured during the protest. Nonetheless, Russian trolls had managed to mobilize armed white supremacists and separatists into an urban environment, during a season of tremendous political tension.²⁴⁴

The Russian page also pushed other pro-secession rallies across the state throughout the year. For instance, in the days before the election, the page pushed "Secede IF Hillary!" rallies from Lubbock to San Antonio to Dallas. The Russian operatives called on followers to "open carry" and "make photos." It's unclear how many Texans actually showed up, but unlike the May rally in Houston, the statewide rallies planned by Russian operatives pointed directly to coordination with the Texas Nationalist Movement. The "Heart of Texas" event page circulated a petition for followers and their "folks" to sign – which would then be "pass[ed]... to the TNM."

All of which means that the Russian "Heart of Texas" page effectively acted as a recruiting tool for Texas's biggest separatist organization and even managed to get names and contact info for all those Texas who'd expressed support for the movement.

While the "Heart of Texas" Facebook page was pledging to gather supporters' information for TNM, the organization sent Smith back to Moscow in 2016 for the second annual "Dialogue of Nations" conference. As TNM head, Daniel Miller related in a later interview, AGMR had helped fund the Texans' latest voyage to Russia. According to Ionov, about one-third of his group's budget came directly from the Kremlin, while private donors in "Texas and other countries" provided the rest.²⁴⁵ Miller confirmed the funding in a December 2016 interview, but "declined to disclose how much money the Kremlin gave" to the Texas Nationalist Movement.²⁴⁶

Once back in Russia, Smith reprised his role in Mos-

241 Alec Luhn, "California Secessionist Movement Opens First 'Embassy' – and It's in Moscow," VICE, accessed July 9, 2021, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/434k49/california-secessionist-movement-opens-first-embassy-and-its-in-moscow.

242 Mansur Mirovalev, "Moscow Welcomes the (Would-Be) Sovereign Nations of California and Texas," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, September 27, 2016), <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-separatists-snap-story.html>.

243 Андрей Захаров and Полина Русяева, "'Фабрика Троллей' Потратила На Работу в США Около \$2,3 Млн," РБК, October 17, 2017, https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/17/10/2017/59e4eb7a9a79472577375776.

244 Tim Lister and Clare Sebastian, "Stoking Islamophobia and Secession in Texas – from an Office in Russia | CNN Politics," CNN (Cable News Network, October 6, 2017), <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/05/politics/heart-of-texas-russia-event/index.html>.

245 Mansur Mirovalev, "Moscow Welcomes the (Would-Be) Sovereign Nations of California and Texas," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, September 27, 2016), <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-separatists-snap-story.html>.

246 John Sepulvado, "From His Home in Russia, #Calexit Leader Plots California Secession," KQED, December 13, 2016, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11217187/from-his-home-in-russia-calexit-leader-plots-california-secession>.

cow advocating for Texas secession and swapping tactics and encouragement with those from Spain, Ireland, and Italy. While there, though, he was joined by another American: one leading a movement, like Smith, to try to break apart the US, but with a different state entirely leading the charge.

GOLDEN STATE OF MIND

Louis Marinelli always seemed like an odd fit for someone trying to lead a “California independence” movement (known colloquially as “Calexit”). A former member of the vociferously anti-gay National Organization for Marriage, Marinelli originally hailed from New York, and as of 2021, has lived longer in Russia than in California. However, following a supposed political transformation, Marinelli decided that he should be the man to lead the movement for California secession, aptly named YesCalifornia. With his 2016 travel to Moscow paid for by the Kremlin-funded AGMR,²⁴⁷ Marinelli claimed in front of his Russian audience that Californians had a “different worldview” than Americans.²⁴⁸ He further declared that California was a “separate nation.” Meanwhile, back in San Francisco, Marinelli’s US-based team at YesCalifornia hung a public banner exclaiming that “California and Russia will always be friends!”²⁴⁹

Following the election, Russian trolls apparently started pushing support for California’s secession online. Following the 2016 election, the #Calexit hashtag burst forth on social media, with #Calexit, at the time, standing as one of Twitter’s most popular hashtags, but that sudden

surge wasn’t entirely organic. One analysis found that Twitter feeds “with ties to Russia pushed a huge Twitter trend in favor of” #Calexit,²⁵⁰ while a separate analysis found that YesCalifornia’s message was “amplified by many of the same accounts that infiltrated conservative Twitter communities and promoted a pro-Trump, white nationalist agenda.”²⁵¹

In December 2016, Marinelli let slip that he had begun working with the Russian IRA to push his messaging. According to KQED, Marinelli said that “he worked with [the IRA] to ‘raise awareness’ of Calexit goals.”²⁵² (YesCalifornia has disputed KQED’s reporting.) Russian trolls also pushed for California independence, including on Medium, writing that California should declare its independence, and abandon America.²⁵³

As these bots and Russian networks pumped out pro-#Calexit messages, Ionov and his Kremlin-backed AGMR found another means of supporting the dream of an independent California. In December 2016, the AGMR provided a rent-free space in the middle of Moscow for Marinelli and YesCalifornia to open the first “Embassy of the Independent Republic of California.”²⁵⁴

Marinelli was already appearing weekly on Russian state media and comparing a planned California referendum on independence to the supposed “independence referendum” in Crimea. Now he began describing the Kremlin-funded AGMR as a “partner.”²⁵⁵ He announced that the “embassy” would help fortify relations between Russia and California. (YesCalifornia’s platform for secession just so happened to call for California to be removed

247 <http://www.laweekly.com/news/a-second-california-independence-initiative-aims-for-the-ballot-8539741>.

248 Louis J. Marinelli Represents California at “Dialogue of Nations”, Louis J. Marinelli Represents California at “Dialogue of Nations” (Yes California, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzsPb1d-huM>.

249 Важно Помнить, Кто Твой Друг»: в США Активистам Помешали Повесить Плакат о Дружбе с Россией (RT на русском, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1my7g715KKA>.

250 Will Yates and Mike Wendling, “‘Russian Trolls’ Promoted California Independence,” BBC News (BBC, November 4, 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41853131>.

251 Jonathon Morgan, “Sockpuppets, Secessionists, and Breitbart,” Medium (Data for Democracy, April 1, 2017), <https://medium.com/data-for-democracy/sockpuppets-secessionists-and-breitbart-7171b1134cd5>.

252 John Sepulvado, “Latest Mueller Indictments Shed Light on One Californian’s Role in Russian Disinformation Campaign,” KQED, February 16, 2018, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11650681/latest-mueller-indictments-shed-light-on-one-californians-role-in-russian-disinformation-campaign>.

253 <https://medium.com/@CaliforniaRep/>.

254 CBS Los Angeles, “Pro-Secession Group Opens California ‘Embassy’ In Moscow,” CBS Los Angeles (CBS Los Angeles, December 22, 2016), <https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2016/12/22/pro-secession-group-opens-california-embassy-in-moscow/>.

255 Natasha Bertrand, “California Exit, Secession Leader Welcomes Julian Assange Support,” Business Insider (Business Insider), accessed July 9, 2021, <https://amp.businessinsider.com/california-exit-secession-leader-calexit-julian-assange-2017-10>.

from NATO.)²⁵⁶ On Twitter, Marinelli and YesCalifornia announced the embassy's opening, describing it as a "hub/embassy in Russia to gain Russian support for Californian independence."

The embassy was, needless to say, the most substantial, and most obvious, indicator of Russian support for American secession movements. None of the other secession movements Russia had backed in Europe – in Catalonia, in Scotland, or in northern Italy – had even gone so far as to outright open an embassy in Moscow.

Nonetheless, increased scrutiny began highlighting the links between Marinelli, YesCalifornia, and Russia, as well as the increasing questions about Russia's social media interference operations. The *San Jose Mercury News* called Marinelli's project a "con," while a fellow #CalExit supporter described YesCalifornia as a "Russian front organization."²⁵⁷ The increased scrutiny even convinced Marinelli and YesCalifornia that publicizing the opening of the "embassy" had been a tactical mistake. A few months after it opened, the embassy's Twitter feed went dormant, and the embassy, by all appearances, closed. And, for a while at least, it appeared that Russia's links with California's secession movement had effectively ended.

CALIFORNIA CALLING

Through 2018 and 2019, Russia's support for California's separatist hopes appeared all but dead. No more Twitter accounts were advocating for #CalExit. No more separatist conferences were flying California secessionists to Mosco, and no more "embassies" were opening up abroad.

However, Marinelli, as he shared on his social media accounts, continued living in and traveling around Russia. It's unclear why he elected to move to Russia in the first place. Marinelli has given a wide range of answers, from claiming that rent in Russia was cheaper, to claiming he "could no longer live under an American flag."²⁵⁸

Nonetheless, he continued to publicize his presence in Russia for followers and supporters, writing glowingly of his life there. Like Nazzaro, Marinelli remains in Russia.

And now, the answer as to why he decided to stay there, rather than return to California to try to lead the effort for independence from Sacramento is apparent. As new documents reveal, not only has the California independence movement continued, but Marinelli appears to remain involved – and the "embassy" in Moscow appears to be still open.

I obtained the documents in question through a Freedom of Information request from the California state government. In 2018, YesCalifornia was accused of using their group to act "as a pass-through false entity" for the "personal benefit" of its leadership, including Marinelli. The allegations also claimed that YesCalifornia had "accepted laundered foreign contributions," with Marinelli then seeking "exile in Russia."

As it is, a year-long state-wide investigation into the allegations ultimately found the allegations without any merit, at least when it came to embezzling or money-laundering, but in the course of the investigations, the state of California received a formal letter from Marinelli – one that was issued from the supposedly closed "embassy" in Moscow.

Writing in March 2019 on "Embassy of the Independent Republic of California, Moscow" letterhead, Marinelli denied the allegations, noting that it was "based on falsehoods... by a political opponent." The letter concluded by requesting that all "future correspondence" be directed "to Mr. Marinelli at the following address: Embassy of the Independent Republic of California."²⁵⁹ The embassy's formal address was blacked out.

Marinelli did not respond to my questions about the letter. However, the letter made one thing clear: instead of being closed, as many presumed, the "California embassy" in Russia appears, by all indications, to be open and continuing to operate. It has clearly laid low following the

256 Yes California's CalExit Blue Book. Yes California, n.d. https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/yescalifornia/pages/1/attachments/original/1482608371/CalExit_Book_1.1.pdf?1482608371.

257 Mercury News Editorial Board, "Editorial: CalExit Mastermind Prefers Russia? Really? Explains a Lot," *The Mercury News* (The Mercury News, April 18, 2017), <https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/04/17/editorial-calexit-mastermind-prefers-russia-really-explains-a-lot/>.

258 Natasha Bertrand, "'We Want to Rock the Boat': American 'Progressives' Are Teaming up with Russia to Push for a 'CalExit,'" *Yahoo! Finance* (Yahoo!), accessed July 9, 2021, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/far-russian-political-party-helping-135803274.html>.

259 Casey Michel, "Yes California, #CalExit, and Russian Funding Allegations," *Scribd* (Scribd), accessed July 9, 2021, <https://www.scribd.com/document/445425470/Yes-California-CalExit-and-Russian-Funding-Allegations>.

critical coverage YesCalifornia received in 2017 for its links to Russia. But given Marinelli's continued presence in Russia, the fact that he maintains formal communications as a representative of the "embassy," and that he directs all formal correspondence to its Russian location, shows that the connection between Russia and the California secession movement is by no means dead. Like the Texas secession movement, it's simply receded into the background for the time being.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For decades, separatism and secession in America has been largely an after-thought for American politicians. The outcome of the American Civil War effectively nullified secession as a viable policy option, especially among state-level governments; as the Supreme Court declared in its seminal 1869 *Texas v. White* ruling, unilateral secession is effectively illegal, barring "revolution or through consent of the States."²⁶⁰ The case specifically looked at the case of Texas secession, with the majority ruling finding that Texas had "entered into an indissoluble relation" with the US., with the union "as complete, as perpetual, and as indissoluble as the union between the original States."²⁶¹

But just because secession has been made effectively illegal, does not mean, as the past few years have made clear, that actors both foreign and domestic ignore it completely. Buttressed by increasing partisanship in the US, some American officials have openly flirted with secession as a potential policy platform moving forward.²⁶² And as America increasingly moves toward majority-minority racial demographics – as it no longer becomes, as it's been since its inception, a majority-white country – variations of white nationalism appear to be on the rise, especially since the introduction of Trump into the national political scene.

Likewise, as we saw in the fractious election of 2016, left-wing support for potential separatism, manifested in

support for California's secession, is also a political reality. As *Reuters* found in the immediate aftermath of Trump's election, approximately one-third of Californians backed California's "peaceful withdrawal from the union... sharply higher than the last time the poll asked Californians about secession, in 2014, when... 20 percent favored it."²⁶³

Russian operatives supported a number of different efforts to interfere in US. elections in 2016, so too did they, and their larger network– social media operators, state funding apparatuses, propaganda organs, etc. – specifically seek to inflame, support, and materially back those who dream of cracking up the United States.

Some of these efforts centered on the far-right, augmented Russia's efforts to specifically recruit and target white nationalists, and others who dream of creating a white ethno-state from the remains of the US. Some of those efforts targeted other secessionists on the American far-right: neo-Confederates who dream of resurrecting the Confederacy. And some of those efforts were aimed specifically at those who dream of transforming individual states into individual nations, from those in Texas who want to recreate the Lone Star Republic to those in California who want nothing to do with Trump's America and their unequal exchange: federal taxes paid versus federal aid received, the disproportionate underrepresentation in the Senate and Electoral College, and the mismatch of values, especially surrounding environmental regulation.

Moscow has arguably influenced American history more than any other country, outside of Britain during the American Civil War, in offering material support for American secession movements, aiming its propaganda outlets, its material support, and its disinformation campaigns to further its own goals of splintering the US.

Fortunately, even after the 2020 election, Russia appears far from successful. The American Union appears, as it has for decades past, sturdy.

But that doesn't mean things can't change – or that Russia and Russian operatives have given up on stoking secessionist and separatist sentiment in the US., some of

260 "TEXAS v. WHITE ET AL.," Legal Information Institute (Legal Information Institute), accessed July 9, 2021, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/74/700>.

261 *Ibid.*

262 Alexander Mooney, "Texas Governor Says Secession Possible," CNN (Cable News Network, April 16, 2009), <https://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2009/04/16/texas-governor-says-secession-possible/>.

263 Sharon Bernstein, "More Californians Dreaming of a Country without Trump: Poll," Reuters (Thomson Reuters, January 23, 2017), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-california-secession/more-californians-dreaming-of-a-country-without-trump-poll-idUSKBN1572KB>.

which risks massive bloodshed and untold violence. For instance, as detailed above, certain American agencies believe that perhaps America's most dangerous white ethno-state separatist, Rinaldo Nazario, not only lives in Russia proper, directing violent actions in the US, but is working directly on behalf of the Russian government. Given the violence seen in places like Charlottesville or in Washington on Jan. 6, 2021, it's not too much of a stretch to imagine some kind of violent reprise in the near future, or even, potentially, in the aftermath of a disputed election.

Likewise, it's clear that the fake Russian IRA material that gained prominence in 2016 remains live on social media platforms, reaching new audiences, available to share and amplify to any and all. Much of this fake Russian material remains aimed at Confederate sympathizers such as those like Dylann Roof, who, in 2015, proclaimed his dreams of neo-Confederate success while murdering nine black Americans in South Carolina.

And while states like California and Texas remain some of the most populous, most economically successful, and most culturally significant American states in the US., Russian efforts to target secessionists in these states presented some of Moscow's primary interference efforts in 2016. They were also, arguably, among the most successful efforts, from Facebook campaigns to recruiting Americans like Marinelli to lobby for secession from the friendly comfort of Moscow. And there's little reason to think the Kremlin will forget about these successes anytime soon. As seen with the recent revelations that the "California embassy" in Russia continues to operate, there is every reason to believe that Russia will continue to specifically target Texas and California secession as we move forward.

RESTORING THE UNION

One of the most obvious solutions to mitigating Russian-backed efforts to stoke secessionist sentiment or civil unrest in the US. is greater social media transparency. As we saw in 2016, Russia's most successful operations in conning Americans focused on Texas and California, as well as neo-Confederates. All of the most prominent accounts have since been removed, and as the *New York*

Times recently reported, Facebook remains on the lookout for "self-proclaimed Texas secessionists logging in from St. Petersburg."²⁶⁴

But removing these accounts is, unfortunately, not enough. For instance, Facebook has continued to allow dozens of Instagram accounts to remain live, all of which have exhibited suspicious behavior, especially as it pertains to posting IRA content or material that appears connected to Russian operations. Some of these accounts have even outright claimed to be connected to some of the original Russian pages, such as the "South United" account. There is absolutely no reason for these accounts to remain live, especially if they have specifically broadcast IRA content or claim an outright connection to fake Russian accounts like "South United."

While Facebook has previously said that procedures for removal are predicated on behavior rather than content – that is, they will be removed if they *act* like fake Russian pages, not if they just *post* fake Russian material aimed at Americans – that policy does not go far enough in making sure that fake Russian material can't reach new American audiences and can't accomplish the exact same things that Moscow achieved in 2016. American policymakers should continue to pressure social media companies to remove this material, preventing it from reaching new generations of Americans.

After all, as a new generation of social media users rise, what is to stop them from seeing, sharing, or amplifying the fake Russian material they find on one of the live accounts, starting the cycle anew? Just because the fake Russian material isn't as new as it was in 2016 doesn't mean that more neo-Confederates or Confederate sympathizers won't see it or won't find its content appealing – or that they won't prove as susceptible as Americans proved in 2016. Needless to say, American officials need to remove all statues and names honoring the Confederacy, as well.²⁶⁵

It's also worth considering extending America's sanctions regime against those Russian operatives directly linked to stoking American separatist efforts. Alexander Ionov has been one of the organizing leaders attempting to build bridges between Russia and American secessionists. Ionov also happens to be the official Russian spokes-

264 Matthew Rosenberg, Nicole Perloth, and David E. Sanger, "'Chaos Is the Point': Russian Hackers and Trolls Grow Stealthier in 2020," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, January 10, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/us/politics/russia-hacking-disinformation-election.html>.

265 Brian Palmer and Seth Freed Wessler, "The Costs of the Confederacy," *Smithsonian.com* (Smithsonian Institution), accessed July 9, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/costs-confederacy-special-report-180970731/>.

person for Maria Butina, the convicted foreign agent who helped lead Russian efforts to infiltrate the National Rifle Association.²⁶⁶

Some of the primary Russian contacts for American separatists, such as Alexander Dugin, are already sanctioned, but there's little reason that the remainder of those working to propel the break-up of the US. shouldn't be specifically sanctioned as well. Policymakers should make it illegal for Americans to coordinate with foreign interference election efforts – and should likewise make it illegal for Americans to specifically coordinate with the parts of those interference efforts dedicated to breaking up the US.

As it pertains to state-level secession movements, First Amendment protections continue to provide a wide range of opportunities for those advocating for Texas or California secession. And the last thing those opposed to secession movements should want to do is curtail the right to free speech, especially in the political arena. However, there are a number of avenues that can be taken to shine more light on the foreign financing of groups like the Texas Nationalist Movement or YesCalifornia. At either state or federal levels, for instance, there should be greater oversight pertaining to foreign funding for non-profit or political advocacy groups such as these. These include things

like foreign financing for trips abroad; foreign financing or in-kind offerings for goods abroad (such as the “California embassy”); or foreign funding for any domestic operations. American policymakers should especially make it illegal for groups advocating for the break-up of the US. to receive any kind of foreign funding or in-kind donation, such as we saw play out multiple times with the California secession movement and its leaders, from their receipt of a rent-free “embassy” in Moscow, to financing for travel in Russia (which the Texas secessionists also used).

All told, the cracks that Russia and pro-Kremlin operatives exploited in the US in 2016 remain. Secessionist movements may, for the time being, appear fanciful, and without any real chance of success. But such a view risks a lack of imagination and a lack of awareness about the most successful Russian interference efforts in 2016 and beyond. Few predicted the break-up of the Soviet Union until it was effectively a *fait accompli*. And those who tried to pick up the pieces of shattered empire – those in the Kremlin, wrapped in the cloak of conspiracy-laden revanchism – would like nothing more than to witness the same process play out in the country they blame for the collapse of their empire.²⁶⁷

266 Natasha Bertrand, “The Enigmatic Russian Paying Maria Butina’s Legal Bills,” The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, March 20, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/03/alexander-ionov-helps-fund-maria-butinas-legal-bills/585112/>.

267 Patrick Ottenhoff, “Map of the Day: Ex-KGB Analyst Predicts Balkanization of US,” The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, July 1, 2010), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/06/map-of-the-day-ex-kgb-analyst-predicts-balkanization-of-us/58945/>.



A MOVING TARGET

THE KREMLIN'S SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE INSIDE THE UNITED STATES

By Maria Snegovaya and Kohei Watanabe

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Russia has executed a series of influence operations in the United States. The main goal of these operations with regard to the United States is to sow domestic discord, disrupt and discredit democratic governance, undermine US international standing and influence, and weaken the existing international system (Kenney et al., 2019; Posard et al., 2020). To achieve these goals, Russia's information operations manipulate internal domestic vulnerabilities and seek to amplify existing societal fractures within the United States (Mueller 2019; Tucker 2020). With these strategic goals in mind, Russia's information operations on social media appear to have multiple objectives, including inducing decision-making paralysis, suppressing electoral participation, strengthening groups that share Russia's objectives or point of view, and creating alternative media narratives that advance Russia's objectives (Helmus et al., 2018: 2). In fostering divisions, Kremlin proxies focus on political hot-button topics, in particular race, nationalism, immigration, terrorism, guns, and LGBT issues (Kim, 2020: 8).

This report examines recent research on the constituent elements of the Kremlin's social media operations, as well as the results of our own analysis conducted in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election in the US. We find that, since 2016, the Kremlin's social media operations have significantly evolved by improving their ability to conceal the identity of Kremlin proxies, as well as using the changing and more polarized US internet environment. We also find that the groups most likely to engage with Russia-aligned content are found on the extremes of both the right and left ends of the political spectrum in the US and tend to share lower trust in mainstream media and institutions. In terms of its impact, higher engagement with Russia-aligned content correlated with increased individual propensity to take part in the 2020 US presidential election, and with decreased individual propensity to support the presidential candidates from the opposite political camp among individuals on both sides of the political spectrum. This finding is consistent with the argument that the Kremlin attempts to exacerbate the existing political divisions within the United States.

DEFINITIONS

Information operations can be defined as a means of conveying specific information that predisposes targets to voluntarily make a decision desired by the initiator of the action (Snegovaya 2015:10). Russia deploys information operations as a soft-power tool based on disinformation campaigns, propaganda, and subversion (Snegovaya 2015; Galeotti 2016). We define disinformation as information that foreign state-linked online media promote aiming to influence the American political process. In the Communist period, the Kremlin commonly used disinformation strategies to reinforce people's existing beliefs and fears and to sow divisions among targeted social groups. In the post-Communist period, a decline in traditional forms of ideological contestation made the promotion of disinformation an even more useful tool than traditional propaganda campaigns (Nye 1990; Sakwa 2012: 581). The Kremlin's long-standing disinformation tactics have been updated to account for the new context with sharing hacked information and spreading sensationalized stories through actors who serve to repeat, promote, and amplify Russian themes and messages in an effort to reach out to American audiences (Kelly and Samuels, 2019).

The Kremlin's approach to information operations is holistic and based on development of the informational ecosystem. It taps into the government's widespread intelligence and espionage capabilities through numerous intelligence agencies, traditional media, covert websites and social networks, online bots, trolls, and unwitting individuals unknowingly amplifying pro-Kremlin narratives (Kenney et al., 2019). The new information environment is conducive for advancing the Kremlin goals, as it allows it to spread its narratives faster and to conceal its identity more successfully.

OUR CONTRIBUTION

While there is hardly a lack of analysis of the Kremlin's information operations, this report pays particular attention to the evolution of its social media approach. By reviewing existing studies on this issue, we analyze how Kremlin proxies modified their approach between 2016 and 2020 in response to the adoption of counter-measures by the US intelligence and policy communities.

We conclude that in recent years US counter-measures have achieved significant progress in combatting Russia's influence operations. In particular, these efforts

decreased the size of the audiences reached by the Kremlin and susceptible to its message. To conceal their identity, Kremlin proxies now have to rely on promoters with fewer followers and smaller platforms. However, in response to this counter-effort, Kremlin influence operations have also evolved and became harder to detect. To conceal their identity more effectively, Kremlin proxies adopted more sophisticated approaches by co-opting authentic domestic voices and institutions to promote their narratives, by more actively "laundering" narratives, and by adjusting the behavior of bots and trolls to make them appear more authentic. Most importantly, the domestic information environment in the US as well as deepening polarization in recent years have provided the Kremlin more opportunities to exacerbate existing divides by amplifying narratives produced by legitimate US sources, rather than creating their own. Our key conclusion in this report is that the battle against the Kremlin's information operations is far from over.

Because Russia's disinformation is so commonly tailored to specific audiences, generic counter-approaches are unlikely to be sufficiently effective without knowing who is at risk (Partin 2020). Many analysts have identified the lack of attention to the targeted audiences as a particularly worrisome gap in policy analysis (Lucas and Pomerantsev 2016; Kalenský 2019). Therefore, we devote part of this report to quantitative analysis of US Twitter users' engagement with Russia-linked content to analyze the characteristics that make Americans more likely to engage with it. This study took place during the 2020 US presidential election.

Our project included a two-stage approach that combined improved data sampling methods for Twitter with survey methodology.

First, we recruited 2,000 US respondents who are active on Twitter for personal purposes through the Lucid Market Research Ltd. online panel. Subsequently, these respondents were surveyed with the purpose of identifying their demographic and attitudinal characteristics. Next, we collected messages posted to Twitter by our survey respondents as well as by users with whom our respondents engaged in the last year. Using quantitative text analysis techniques and the large collection of Twitter posts, we measured how often our survey respondents engaged with narratives spread by Russia. Based on this analysis, we created an index of exposure to Russia-aligned content. Finally, we correlated the resulting in-

dex with the identified characteristics of our respondents. We found that US Twitter users more likely to engage with Russia-aligned content tend to have lower socioeconomic status, belong to racial minorities, be male, share extreme ideological positions (both left and right), and have lower levels of trust in mainstream media and institutions. Our analysis has discovered a higher propensity to participate in the 2020 presidential election among the respondents more actively engaged with Russia-aligned content. We also found that engagement with Russia-aligned content tended to negatively correlate with propensity to support the presidential candidates from the opposite political camp among individuals on both sides of the political spectrum. This finding is consistent with an argument that the Kremlin attempts to exacerbate the existing political divisions within the United States.

Our policy recommendations build on these findings.

RUSSIA'S SOCIAL MEDIA OPERATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

NEW INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

While there is a great deal of continuity between the information operations implemented by the Soviets and today's Kremlin operatives (Snegovaya 2015; Giles et al., 2015), recent technological innovations and development of the new media have fundamentally altered the information environment and information-related capabilities against which these campaigns are implemented, providing Russia a "cheap, efficient, and highly effective access to foreign audiences with plausible deniability of their influence" (Watts, 2017). These changes allowed for fast and efficient coordination across different elements of the information operations (actors and platforms) providing the Kremlin with more leverage (Snegovaya 2015: 14).

Below we summarize the key elements of the new information environment that have facilitated the Kremlin's influence operations in the United States.

First, the spread of the internet and expanding number of platforms dramatically increased content choices available to American audiences. The expansion of entertainment options, particularly for people with low interest in politics, deepened the gap in political knowledge be-

tween those who are interested in politics and those who are not (Graber and Dunaway, 2017: 106).

Second, the abundance of choices created incentives for media organizations and audiences to self-select into partisan and ideologically oriented sources of information. While the aggregate levels of knowledge increased, both Democrats and Republicans learned at different rates depending on whether the information they encountered aligned with their partisan predilections (Jerit and Barabas, 2012: 672). As a result, people online increasingly self-selected into "echo chambers" (communities of people with similar opinions), which limited their exposure to alternative viewpoints (Pariser 2011; del Vicario et al. 2016). This further deepened the partisanship and polarization in American society, providing ample opportunities for the Kremlin's effort to amplify US domestic divisions.

Third, while the spread of social media allowed for faster, cheaper, and easier ways of capturing and sharing news and information, it has also created additional channels through which the audiences may be misled with false information. Due to a low threshold of information access and lack of filtering, online media with questionable reputations received an opportunity to reach wide audiences, which contributed to a rapid spread of unsubstantiated or false information (Baum and Groeling 2008; Ribeiro et al. 2017). This allowed Kremlin-linked actors to bypass assistance from intermediaries, such as established broadcasters and publishers, which in the past would have limited the spread of disinformation, and directly reach out to targeted audiences, rapidly gain momentum, and thereby advance their objectives.

Fourth, the new information environment has also provided the Kremlin with new instruments, such as hackers, bots and trolls. Russian trolls are individuals in online discussion forums who attempt to derail conversations, spam them with indecent comments, spread disinformation, and steer online conversations with pro-Kremlin rhetoric. By contrast, Russian bots are programs that automatically send mass spamming with short, often identical, messages. The use of these new internet technologies gave Russia an additional tool to amplify its messages among targeted audiences.

These characteristics of the new information environment facilitated access to US audiences by the Kremlin, which is important given that it predominantly implements its operations from outside of the United States (Kenney et

al., 2019). Speed is another valuable advantage provided by the new information environment as it limits the ability of counter-actors, such as NATO, to quickly respond and adjust to constantly evolving Russian information operations (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 18; Rid 2020).

DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Russia's approach to information operations is based on developing a disinformation ecosystem that allows for varied and overlapping approaches and narratives on social media to reinforce each other. This ecosystem combines various sources of disinformation and propaganda pushed on platforms such as state-funded media outlets, proxy websites, social media pages by promoters—including bots, trolls, false social media personalities, and (witting or unwitting) individuals (GEC, 2020: 5; Martin and Shapiro, 2019; Hanlon, 2018). Simultaneous engagement of these multiple channels creates the effect of the “firehose of falsehood,” due to high numbers of platforms and messages and a fast, continuous, repetitive pace of activity (Paul and Matthews, 2016). For example, the information operation leading up to the 2016 US presidential and congressional elections was part of a three-pronged strategy, which also included the attempted hacking of the voting system; the cyberattack on the Democratic National Committee email server and subsequent release of confidential emails to the data dump WikiLeaks website; and a sustained social media operation designed to exert political influence and exacerbate social divisions in the US (DiResta et al. 2018: 9; Cosenzino, 2020).

A recent report by the Global Engagement Center identifies three reasons why the disinformation ecosystem is particularly well-suited to serve the Kremlin's goals.

First, it allows the different elements of the ecosystem to adjust their narratives to fit different audiences. Since various channels the Kremlin has at its disposal do not require consistency (unlike traditional media), its message can be crafted to fit preferences of specific groups. This ability is important given the tendency of internet users to self-select into echo-chambers, and hence messages need to be tailored toward the specific preferences of target groups, which is consistent with the Kremlin's reflexive control approach (Snegovaya, 2015). This allows Kremlin proxies to reach out to groups of different, even opposite, ideological leanings. For example, Golovchenko et

al. (2020) show that in the 2016 US presidential election, Russian trolls on social media engaged with ideologically diverse sources and promoted links to both sides of the US ideological spectrum. Other studies have demonstrated that the Kremlin commonly “recycles” bots – meaning that it uses the same bots to achieve different goals in different contexts (Starbird et al. 2014; Nied et al. 2017). For example, a series of bots that were producing alt-right narratives during the 2016 US presidential election disappeared after November 8, 2016 and reappeared in the run-up to the 2017 French election, tweeting anti-Macron content (Ferrara 2017).

Second, different elements of the ecosystem are not openly linked to Russia, allowing the Kremlin plausible deniability when their proxy platforms and promoters peddle misleading and false narratives, and providing it the ability to shield itself from criticism (Snegovaya 2015: 15-17). Russian information operations are “designed to be deniable because they use a mix of agents of influence, cutouts, front organizations, and false-flag operations” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017: 2).

Third, the disinformation ecosystem creates a media multiplier and amplifier effect among its different elements, increasing their outreach and resonance (GEC, 2020: 5). Social media appear to be the key tool of amplification of the messages the Kremlin spreads.

Coordination across these moving pieces of the disinformation ecosystem is important, although not always achieved. The most successful Kremlin operations tend to combine covert hacking and dissemination operations and social media operations with more overt channels, such as Kremlin-funded media (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 16).

KREMLIN OPERATIVES

Moscow commonly adopts a decentralized approach in its influence operations. Diffuse organizations on the initiative of individuals are “guided by their sense of the Kremlin's desires rather than any detailed master plan” (Galeotti, 2017a), while others are directly linked to the Kremlin and report to Russia's president. The competition among these many rival agencies is often intense (Galeotti, 2017b; Soldatov and Rochlitz, 2018), and it is not uncommon for them to go after the same target (Galeotti, 2016b).

The assessment of US intelligence reveals a sprawling

campaign of influence involving several of Russia's intelligence agencies: the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), as well as pro-Kremlin oligarch-led private company the Internet Research Agency (IRA) (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). Of the intelligence agencies, the GRU is the most active group as it has access to large amounts of resources to support its cyber operations (Cunningham, 2020).

The convergence of all these groups on one common goal of interference in the US political process is one of the most obvious indicators that the interference has been directly ordered by President Vladimir Putin.

INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY

The activities of the IRA have received particular attention in the literature. The St. Petersburg-based company received guidance and funding from the oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin, who has close ties to Vladimir Putin and Russia's intelligence. As early as April 2014, the IRA formed a new department (known internally as the "Translator" (Переводчик) department) that focused solely on social media operations in the US (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 30; Mueller 2019: 20).

The IRA has implemented multiple social media operations in the United States, including the earliest known to date, reaching out to millions of Americans. In the 2016 US election operation, the IRA developed sustained relationships with targeted groups by infiltrating communities on social media, masquerading as members of those groups and gradually increasing the number of followers of its accounts. The IRA targeted audiences through segmentation and interest-based techniques using concise messaging, visuals with high virality potential, and provocative, edgy humor (DiResta and Grossman, 2019: 91). Twitter and Facebook proved to be particularly effective platforms for IRA purposes due to the speed and the outreach to the US audiences that they provided (DiResta et al., 2018).

In recent years successful counter-efforts aimed at exposing IRA-linked accounts made it modify its strategy. The IRA has focused less on cultivating large numbers of followers online (which requires a lot of effort and is easy to lose when an account gets blocked) and shifted more towards working with local native freelancers and outlets to promote pro-Kremlin narratives.

MAIN INTELLIGENCE DIRECTORATE (GRU)

Another actor actively involved in information operations in the United States is the GRU, the intelligence service of the Russian armed forces.

While the GRU's information operations capabilities overlap with those of the IRA (promotion of the same divisive narratives through similar means – creating fake media entities, fake personas, and fake amplification patterns), its operations are somewhat different. For example, in 2016, instead of cultivating relationships with its audience, the GRU tended to run these operations within a very short timeframe, often with frenetic posting patterns (DiResta and Grossman, 2019: 91). The GRU operations also actively relied on the strategy of "narrative laundering," which included planting a pro-Kremlin message or a story and attempting to have it picked up and distributed by larger and larger media outlets while concealing its origin. These stories were then promoted and legitimized through repetition or a citation chain across the IRA-attributed social media accounts, other fake personas on social media, made-up think tanks, alternative news outlets, and the media outlets created by the GRU operatives (DiResta and Grossman, 2019: 9; Kelly and Samuels, 2019).

The GRU also used the "hack and leak" strategy, hacking US organizations and leaking the information to data-dump websites and journalists. For example, Fancy Bear (also known as Sofacy or APT 28), one of the groups that hacked the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in 2015-2016, was identified as GRU-linked. In 2016, Fancy Bear leaked the hacked emails to the data-dump website WikiLeaks, successfully disrupting the Democrats' national convention in the midst of the presidential campaign. The contents of these leaks, which were widely reported on, became one of the major national narratives of the 2016 election (Kelly and Samuels, 2019; Jamieson 2020).

FEDERAL SECURITY SERVICE (SVR) AND FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE SERVICE (FSB)

The primary focus of the SVR and the FSB seems to be on cyber operations. Russian hackers, known by their nicknames APT29 or Cozy Bear, are connected to the SVR (Alperovitch, 2016). In 2014 and 2015, this group ran a wide-ranging cyber-espionage campaign target-

ing thousands of organizations, including government agencies, foreign embassies, energy companies, telecommunications firms, and universities. The unclassified email systems of the White House, the Pentagon's Joint Chiefs of Staff, the State Department and the DNC were hacked as part of that operation (Nakashima and Timberg, 2020). Unlike the GRU-linked Fancy Bear, Cozy Bear did not leak the stolen emails. This is likely because contrary to the GRU, the SVR tends to steal the information for traditional espionage purposes, seeking secrets that might help the Kremlin understand plans and motives of US politicians and policymakers (Nakashima and Timberg, 2020). In 2020 Cozy Bear was yet again involved in a very successful wide-ranging hacking operation that which targeted multiple US federal and local agencies as well as private businesses (see also Chapter 3.1).

For its influence operations to be effective, the Kremlin needs to develop a deep understanding of American society. John Sipher, a retired 28-year veteran of the CIA's National Clandestine Service, suggests that it is possible that the SVR plays a role in this area as well. Their agents, assets, agents of influence, and confidential contacts all help them determine US weak spots, and help them craft their attacks. Further, they likely assist in helping the social media operations evolve and better cover their actions.

While the FSB's functions primarily focus on domestic operations on Russia's territory, in recent years it has become increasingly involved in foreign cyber operations. Cyber hacking groups such as Palmetto Fusion, Turla, and Gamaredon Group are believed to be affiliated with the FSB. These organizations target different entities in different countries including the United States (Cunningham, 2020).

MAIN ELEMENTS

By drawing parallels with the former Soviets' methodology in active measures, one can classify the tools at Moscow's disposal based on their degree of public association with the Kremlin – overt ("white") and covert ("gray" and "black") (Weisburd et al. 2016). In recent years, as having a known association with Russia has increasingly become more toxic, the Kremlin has relied more on covert operations to achieve its geopolitical aims (Carpenter, 2019: 3). Covert measures are more efficient, as they allow Russia proxies to expand audiences for a certain message or narrative without exposing their direct

association with the Kremlin. This approach also permits integration into pro-Kremlin groups of promoters whose interests only temporarily align with Russia's ("fellow travelers" and "useful idiots," who can broadly be referred to as Russia-aligned users) and who otherwise would have distanced themselves from the Kremlin. This allows for increased outreach of the information operations.

This marked shift "toward harder to detect, more targeted information operations that cover greater swaths of the information ecosystem" (Brandt and Frankland, 2020) constitutes an important recent development in the way Russia implements its information operations (discussed in more detail in Ch.4). In an effort to create "a fog of ambiguity between the Kremlin's actions and the Kremlin itself" (Meleshevich and Schafer, 2018), Russian proxies have engaged in more and more sophisticated approaches, by recruiting local authentic actors such as American freelance journalists and columnists to write articles (instead of their former method of having Kremlin proxies write them), modify trolls' and bots' behavior to make them seem more authentic, and more actively laundering narratives across the information ecosystem (Brandt and Frankland, 2020).

Below we categorize the elements of the Kremlin disinformation ecosystem as platforms that are used to create pro-Kremlin messages and narratives, and promoters that push and amplify those communications.

PLATFORMS

In this section we describe Kremlin-linked platforms that create and/or promote narratives that are favorable to the Kremlin. These include websites and social media platforms overtly or covertly funded by the Kremlin.

Online Kremlin-funded News Outlets

Russia's social media campaigns are part of its information operations involving traditional media channels openly funded by the Kremlin. These "white" channels include overt Russian state news outlets, such as the state-funded broadcast network RT (formerly Russia Today), its subsidiary Ruptly, the news agency Sputnik, websites of pro-Russian think tanks and foreign-based Russia-funded media that craft and promote pro-Kremlin narratives on TV, radio, and the internet. By mixing true information with manipulated or fake stories, these channels create messages that are favorable to the Kremlin and then disseminate them online.

After successfully deploying its information operations in the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 (Snegovaya 2015), the Kremlin has significantly intensified its information operations in the West, employing primarily the RT and Sputnik News. RT, formerly Russia Today, (and its multiple branches, such as RT America and Going Underground RT) is a satellite broadcaster founded originally for public diplomacy in 2005 and which has subsequently become an outlet for active disinformation against the West. The Kremlin is involved in RT operations in different ways such as supervising hiring of managers, imposing story angles, and occasionally disapproving of stories (Elsawah and Howard, 2020: 21). RT, whose annual budget exceeds \$300 million, claims to be the most-watched news channel on YouTube (McFaul, 2020). RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan, has recently reported that based on Tubular Audience Rating in November 2020, RT ranked third among the world's news broadcasters in terms of the number of unique users on social networks above 18 years old, bypassing the BBC and CNN. RT also ranked fourth in terms of the number of unique users on social networks, ahead of CNN. However, these numbers need to be treated carefully, given that RT is known for fudging its ratings (it often reports numbers that refer to the theoretical geographical scope of the audience) (Erickson, 2017).

Part of RT's popularity is explained by its ability to mix the entertaining content with pro-Kremlin narratives. RT provides rather critical coverage of the United States. For example, in the run-up to the 2020 election RT consistently portrayed the United States as rife with political violence, chaotic, anarchic, and on the edge of collapse (Dubow et al., 2020). RT flagship shows suggested that the 9/11 attacks were implemented by Americans themselves (Yablokov, 2015: 306). RT content seems to be directed at both extreme left and right audiences in Europe and the US (Yablokov, 2015: 306).

Sputnik News was founded in 2014 to spread pro-Russian narratives on the internet in more than 30 languages.

Disinformation operations through traditional media channels remain important for the Kremlin. Over the years, the Kremlin committed significant resources to these efforts, especially their social media footprint, and contin-

uously expanded their funding (for example, by the draft law prepared by Russia's Finance Ministry, subsidies to RT can be increased to 27.3 billion rubles or USD 363.8 million in 2021) and their outreach (for example, RT plans to open its German-language version in 2021) (TASS, 2020).²⁶⁸

Besides traditional media channels, other online "white" measures include websites directly linked to Russia. Overtly Kremlin-backed English-language sites, such as Redfish and Ruptly, have a significant presence on social media, with millions of views and engagements. Ruptly TV is an openly acknowledged RT subsidiary based in Berlin with 113,000 Twitter followers and 1.63 million YouTube subscribers. Its most popular videos exceed 3 million views. Just as RT, Ruptly content mixes "light news" videos designed to attract clicks mixed with content that is favorable to the Kremlin, such as Russia's President Putin urging the lifting of sanctions during his UN speech (Dilanian and Ramgopal, 2020).

As examples of other websites openly affiliated with the Kremlin, the US Global Engagement Center has recently identified the "Strategic Culture Foundation," an online journal registered in Russia that is directed by SVR and closely affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; "New Eastern Outlook," a pseudo-academic publication of the Russian Academy of Science's Institute of Oriental Studies that promotes disinformation and propaganda focused primarily on the Middle East, Asia, and Africa and that combines pro-Kremlin views of Russian academics with anti-US views of Western fringe voices and conspiracy theorists; "Katehon," a Moscow-based quasi-think-tank led by Russian-intelligence-linked individuals and that is a proliferator of virulent anti-Western disinformation and propaganda via its website, which is active in five languages (GEC, 2020: 13).

Media Outlets Without Direct Attribution

This group includes media outlets that frequently echo the Kremlin line but are not openly affiliated with Russia, such as conspiracy websites, far-right or far-left websites, data dump websites as well as various news aggregators with unclear funding and motivations that amplify narratives the Kremlin spreads (Weisburd et al. 2016). While

268 For comparison: Healthcare spending in 2021 in Russia is expected to decrease by 3% compared to 2020, and by 4% by 2023. These cuts are primarily due to the federal budget decrease, where expenses in prices adjusted for inflation in 2021 will decrease by 14% compared to 2020, and by 23% by 2023 (Бюджет – 2021, 2020).

in 2016 Kremlin operatives such as GRU periodically tried creating their own content, in recent years they increasingly recruit Americans on both sides of the political spectrum to write articles and posts for these websites that indirectly align with Moscow's agenda.

For example, *Maffick Media* is a Berlin-based company registered in March 2018 that runs a network of media productions with a significant social media presence and content targeted towards young, English speakers (Hanlon and Morley, 2019). Soapbox and "In the Now" media productions of Maffick Media take strong, often-fringe political stances on contemporary social and political issues and curate content, "packaged as meme-able satire and no-nonsense takes on history, environmental issues, and sensitive global politics" (Hanlon and Morley, 2019). Many are oriented toward younger Americans and the political left, and are meant to dealign these individuals from the Democratic party as well as to exacerbate American political tensions the same way the IRA tried to do in 2016 (Dilanian and Ramgopal, 2020; Collier and Dilanian, 2020). Although none of Maffick Media's accounts openly admit their connection to the Kremlin, the majority shareholder of the company is Ruptly TV, an overt Berlin-based RT subsidiary. Moreover, the company's history and financial filings reveal close ties to Kremlin-controlled media (Hanlon and Morley, 2019).

Another Russia-linked network targeting progressive and left-wing audiences in the US and the UK, Peace Data, launched in 2020 with coverage focused largely on the environment and corporate and political corruption. The network-linked personas masqueraded as left-wing journalists and editors. While some of Peace Data's freelance journalists were real reporters, others were personas whose profile pictures were deep fakes, or AI-generated (Collier and Dilanian, 2020; Nimmo et al, 2020). They published and shared articles about the race protests in the United States, accusations of foreign interference and war crimes committed by the US, corruption, and capitalism-induced suffering, and they criticized both right-wing and center-left politicians while endorsing progressive and left-wing policies (Nimmo et al., 2020: 3).

Another such organization, the Newsroom for American and European Based Citizens (NAEBC), run by IRA-linked people, focused on the right side of the U.S. political spectrum. In an effort to influence US voters ahead of the 2020 election, the website focused primarily on US politics and current events, republishing articles

from conservative media and paying Americans to write about various politically sensitive issues. A network of accounts posing as editors and journalists then promoted the articles on social media sites favored by right-wing users (Stubbs, 2020).

Social Media Pages, Groups and Ads

A significant part of the Kremlin operation focuses on directly planting pro-Kremlin narratives on the social platforms through pages, groups, and ads.

The scale that such operations have reached in the US is mind-boggling. Throughout the 2016 election, at least 470 pages and accounts, followed by some 3.3 million Facebook users, were identified as IRA-created. These pages were associated with about 76.5 million user interactions, including 30.4 million shares, 37.6 million likes, 3.3 million comments, and 5.2 million reactions. According to Facebook's estimates between January 2015 and August 2017, up to 126 million Americans came into contact with content manufactured and disseminated by the IRA via its Facebook pages (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 40).

Rather than directly expressing clear support for one presidential candidate over another, most of the content disseminated by the IRA discreetly messages narratives of disunity, discontent, hopelessness, and contempt of others, all aimed at sowing societal division (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 32). The IRA-linked Facebook groups cover a range of politically sensitive issues in an effort to deepen the existing partisan division in US politics. In the 2016 election they included conservative and anti-immigration groups ("Being Patriotic," "Stop All Immigrants," "Secured Borders," and "Tea Party News"), purported Black social justice groups ("Black Matters," "Blacktivist," and "Don't Shoot Us"), LGBTQ groups ("LGBT United"), and religious groups ("United Muslims of America") (Mueller, 2019: 24-25).

However, recent analysis shades some skepticism on the scale of these operations. For example, according to Rid (2020; Howell 2020) the effect of the IRA activities was substantively overstated. First, referring to the 126 million impressions (the number of Americans who touched or saw the IRA content in 2015-17) on Facebook, many of those numbers refer to impressions (rather than views, or direct engagements). Second, according to his estimates, many of those took place after the 2016 US elections. By

Rid's estimates, approximately 37% of impressions took place before the 2016 elections and the majority – almost two-thirds – took place after the elections. Hence, they were unlikely to influence the outcome of the 2016 elections. Before the 2016 elections many of the IRA accounts had significantly fewer followers, sometimes as low as one-fifth of the overall number of followers estimated by Facebook (Rid 2020; Howell, 2020). The question remains as to what extent one can make such far-reaching conclusions based on isolated elements of Russia's social media operations. Jakub Kalenský, a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, for example, suggests that "taking just social media posts, as well as just a few news articles, or just a few statements, and analyzing them as isolated phenomena does not give us a reliable information about the impact of Kremlin's campaign. It is not one measure that matters, but rather the sum and accumulation of them, and the synergy between them." (see also McCauley, 2013) Moreover, as we demonstrate in this report, since the Kremlin's social media operations continued into 2020, the evidence of a rise in impressions continuing after the 2016 elections looks more meaningful. The election of Donald Trump and subsequent deepening polarization of US society has also potentially augmented the possibilities for IRA's work.

The paid advertisements purchased by the IRA throughout 2015-17 received a lot of media attention. However, the ads are only a minor element of the IRA's 2016 election interference, as compared to the more prevalent use of free content via multiple social media platforms. Between June 2015 and August 2017, the IRA purchased about 3,400 ads on Facebook and Instagram, which constituted only a minor share of approximately 61,500 IRA-created Facebook posts, 116,000 Instagram posts, and 10.4 million tweets. The IRA spent only a tiny share (less one tenth) of its overall operational costs of approximately USD 1.25 million per month on advertaintments (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 40).

The IRA mainly used interest-based targeting (Kim, 2018). The ad content was distributed to target audiences through social media algorithms designed to shape content to correspond to their needs and interests. These were identified based on the users' record of following similar pages or viewing related content, as well as the information they provided in their profiles, including their interests, activities, favorite music, movies, and TV shows.

For example, the IRA used Facebook's geographic

targeting feature to deliver ads to targeted audiences in specific US locations, down to the state, city, or even university level (Stretch, 2017; 116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 44). These ads were then catered to specific interests of targeted groups, be it supporters of Second Amendment, Muslims, or supporters of Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton, based on specific issues which were at the forefront of political debates in the 2016 elections (Timberg et al., 2017; Kim, 2018: 7). The ability to use Facebook algorithms magnified the IRA's effectiveness. The most effective ads tended to have less positive sentiment, focus on past events, and were more specific and personalized in nature (Dutt et al., 2018). The IRA-funded political ads spread their narratives to an estimated 23-70 million Facebook users (Hanlon, 2018).

While disinformation operations targeting users outside the US continued in subsequent years, their scale has significantly dropped due to the tech companies' effort to block content linked to Kremlin influence operations.

PROMOTERS

This section explores actors who serve to repeat, promote, and amplify Russian themes and messages. These include trolls/fake personas and individuals who are knowingly or unknowingly used by the Kremlin to amplify its narratives, as well as non-human actors – automated accounts or bots. Studies have found that human actors play a key role in spreading false information on Twitter (Starbird, 2017).

Trolls, Honeypots and Fake Personas

To conduct its influence campaigns in the United States the IRA in 2014-16 created thousands of *troll accounts* on social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Trolls are real people using Internet proxy services to hide their IP addresses and to post inflammatory, harassing, or misleading messages online in an attempt to provoke a response from other users. These accounts seek to connect with Americans on social networks and potentially push them to take actions in the real world that are favorable to the Kremlin (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 20). Russian trolls engage in a variety of influence techniques including aggressively using offensive slurs and attacks; utilizing irony and sarcasm; peddling conspiracy theories; diverting discourse to other problems;

posting misleading information on popular websites; and presenting indigestible amounts of data without sources or verification (Svetoka et al., 2016; 116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 19).

A particular subgroup in this category includes “honeypots”: fake social media profiles that are designed to engage in conversation with real people online. They may include a “component of sexual appeal or attraction, but they just as often appear to be people who share specific political views, obscure personal hobbies, or issues related to family history” (Weisburd et al. 2016). The honeypots are designed to earn the trust of unsuspecting users to disseminate content from white and gray propaganda channels, or to persuade targets to click on malicious links or deceive people into downloading viruses. Successful honey pots manage to expose to such malware specific individuals of interest (politicians, public figures), allowing Kremlin operatives to access and publish their personal information. Subsequently such information becomes instrumental in constructing narratives beneficial for the Kremlin and gets promoted through traditional white channels (Weisburd et al. 2016).

The GRU-linked accounts shared some similarities, which allowed them to be identified as suspicious. First, their author bios often claimed that they were independent freelance journalists or graduate students of a relevant academic discipline in order to justify their publication patterns of placing a single article across multiple publications. Second, they had an underdeveloped background; they often talked about only one topic, had only one photo, lacked social presence on other media; some had followers who also looked inauthentic (DiResta and Grossman, 2019: 28)

Kremlin-linked trolls engage with a wide variety of channels and means, having infiltrated and utilized nearly every social media and online information platform, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, YouTube, Tumblr, 4chan, 9GAG, and Pinterest (Rosenberger, 2018). There were even attempts to infiltrate internet games, browser extensions, and music apps, for example by encouraging users of the game Pokémon Go, which was very popular at the time of the 2016 presidential election, to use politically divisive usernames (DiResta et al., 2020). Between 2015 and 2017, Russian trolls posing as American activists created Facebook events seen by more than 300,000 Facebook users (O’Sullivan, 2018).

Studies have identified several behavioral patterns of

pro-Russian trolls in the United States (Zannettou, 2019a). First, their pattern of behavior in sharing of images is tightly coupled with real-world events. For instance, scholars have found a peak in activity coinciding with the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville that took place in August 2017, suggesting their effort to sow discord during divisive events (Zannettou et al., 2020). Second, in terms of their content, Russian trolls were mainly posting about Russia, Ukraine, and the USA. However, specific targets varied over time. For instance, Russian trolls were posting images related to Ukraine almost exclusively in 2014, and those related to Donald Trump mainly after 2016 (Zannettou et al., 2020).

In terms of their political leanings and preferences, trolls tend to promote links to both sides of the ideological spectrum by infiltrating right- and left-leaning political communities and participating in their discussions (Zannettou et al., 2019c). In the 2016 election the “conservative” trolls tended to be more active than the “liberal” ones, which was consistent with the IRA’s support for Donald Trump’s campaign (Golovchenko et al., 2020). Trolls are quite sophisticated in their messaging, i.e., they target right- and left-leaning communities differently with approaches tailored to each groups’ interests to maximize hostility across the political spectrum in the US (Boyd et al., 2016).

In recent years social media platforms became quite successful in identifying and blocking Russian trolls (see, e.g., Im et al., 2020; Ghanem et al., 2019). In response, Kremlin proxies seem to have adjusted their approach. First, in the past, Russian trolls tended to publish posts with many language errors, which made them suspicious and easily identifiable. However, they have recently adopted a new approach by copying and pasting chunks of texts written by native English speakers to avoid errors; using less text and fewer hashtags and reposting screenshots; using accounts with fewer followers; and removing or blurring watermarks (Alba, 2020). Second, instead of disseminating messages as widely as possible, as in 2016, in 2020 Russian actors have been shifting to platforms with a more limited outreach (such as blogs, 4chan and Reddit) that are harder to monitor (Barnes and Goldman, 2020). Third, the Kremlin has also relied on more targeted information operations that engage trolls and fake personas less and instead seek to co-opt authentic domestic voices and real US-based individuals. These approaches, which allow it to co-locate trolls within the targeted

population, have been successfully tried by the Kremlin in several African countries and in the United States (Brandt and Frankland, 2020).

Individuals

Since 2016, the Kremlin and its proxies have moved towards harder-to-detect approaches attempting to co-opt real-world domestic voices within target societies, especially journalists and activists, and renting social media accounts of genuine users to share content that looks authentic. This allows them to disguise their information operations as authentic advocacy (Brandt and Frankland, 2020).

Real-life individuals, publicly promoting pro-Kremlin narratives, might be subcategorized into three classes.

The first group, the “*useful idiots*,” consists of unwitting Americans who are exploited by the Kremlin to further amplify Russian propaganda (Weisburd et al. 2016). These individuals are usually sympathetic to the pro-Kremlin actor’s cause but do not fully comprehend the objectives of their campaign, and ultimately end up spreading disinformation without knowing they are actively participating in the Kremlin’s information operations (Guge, 2020: 16). The IRA set the goal of targeting US persons who could be used to advance its operational goals at least in 2014 (Mueller, 2019: 31). Since then, multiple US social media influencers (very well-networked accounts that spread messages effectively and quickly) often picked up and promoted a pro-Kremlin agenda. Since 2018, in an effort to conceal their origin, Kremlin operations appear to prioritize legitimate US-based journalists and activists over large troll farms (Brandt and Frankland, 2020). For instance, the Peace Data website launched by Kremlin-linked proxies in 2020 has hired US journalists to publish op-eds and push news that aligned with the Kremlin’s agenda.

The second group, the “*fellow travelers*,” are the individuals who are ideologically sympathetic to anti-western viewpoints and whose beliefs therefore temporarily align with the Kremlin’s agenda. These are commonly found among radical movements and fringe party sympathizers that are dissatisfied with the establishment and the existing political status quo. Reactionary impulses among these social groups make them embrace the themes intensely promoted by the Kremlin information operations (Snegovaya, 2020). Successful IRA efforts sometimes attracted

high-profile individuals to promote their narratives. For example, several high-profile individuals in the US, such as Roger Stone, Sean Hannity, Donald Trump Jr., a number of black social justice activists, were spreading content—presumably unwittingly—created by the IRA leading up to the 2016 election (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 40; Guge, 2020: 21). Throughout the 2016 election, members of the Trump campaign repeatedly promoted (by linking, retweeting etc.) pro-Trump or anti-Clinton content published by the IRA through IRA-controlled social media accounts (Mueller, 2019: 33). Since 2016 Russians no longer need to spend much time creating “fake news.” Instead, they increasingly make a stronger emphasis on amplifying the “fake news” being created in the US.

This group also includes Americans such as Larry King and Jesse Ventura, who have held programs on RT and other media outlets (Bodine-Baron et al., 2018: 27). For example, the American journalist Max Blumenthal, a frequent contributor to Russia Today and Sputnik, often embraces pro-Kremlin narratives in his coverage of the war in Syria. In his article, Blumenthal, who visited Moscow in December 2015 to attend the 10th anniversary of the RT network, embraces common Kremlin frames regarding the war in Syria. For example, he condemns the aggressive terrorist and economic war (a reference to US sanctions) launched against Syria by “international imperialism,” calls for a media campaign to galvanize world public opinion in support of the Syrian government and accuses US policy of besieging independent and free countries (Johnson, 2019).

Third, “agent provocateurs” are individuals knowingly committing illegal or clandestine acts on behalf of the Russian government (Watts, 2017). For instance, in its 2016 operation, the IRA operatives posing as grassroots activists on social media convinced many unwitting Americans to engage in offline activities such as political rallies. This activity resulted in at least 130 events promoted and organized online, and over 300,000 Facebook users engaged with content promoting these physical events (Stretch, 2017; Guge, 2020: 25).

In recent years, Russia’s tactics have been shifting towards amplifying and using America’s polarized internet culture against itself—and the personas and conspiracy theories that inhabit it (such as QAnon). Therefore, in subsequent parts of this report we rely less on the terminology of “useful idiots” and “fellow travelers” and instead use terms such as Russia-aligned users.

Automated Accounts/Bots

Bots or automated accounts on social media are computer algorithms designed to execute specific online tasks autonomously and repetitively. Bots simulate human behavior on social media, which allows them to believably and strategically interact with users and promote relevant content (Guge, 2020: 15). They help Kremlin operatives artificially amplify and increase the spread of the online content to attract the attention of target audiences and mainstream media (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 18) and to proliferate on social media platform with Application Program Interfaces (APIs).

Twitter networks are almost completely bounded by highly automated accounts. About 45 percent of Russia's activity on Twitter occurs through mostly automated accounts (Woolley and Howard, 2017). Bots tend to become more active around the time of important political events (such as elections or national conventions of the US Democratic and Republican parties) (Ferrara et al., 2020). For example, nearly 19 percent of all tweets related to the US presidential election in 2016 were generated by bots (Bessi and Ferrara, 2016); and over 50,000 Kremlin-linked automated accounts were tweeting election-related content (Twitter Public Policy Blog, 2018).

Just like other Kremlin-linked promoters, Russian bots tend to target both right-leaning and left-leaning users (Ferrara et al., 2020). However, in 2020 a large amount of bot activity on Twitter was found to be associated with rightwing conspiracy theories such as QAnon or depicting COVID-19 as a liberal scam. According to the findings, bots constituted approximately one in four accounts that used QAnon hashtags and retweeted the far-right outlets, such as Infowars and One America News Network (Ferrara et al., 2020).

Studies of available datasets of Russian bots on Twitter have revealed that they tend to be more formal and structured in their language in comparison to human accounts (trolls/fake personas), which can be identified through the use of slurs, slang, X-rated words, incorrect English, etc. (Alsmadi and O'Brien, 2020). Behavior of the automated accounts is easier to predict, and US tech companies have become much better at fighting them. As a result, in the 2020 election, bots had smaller impact on the US online conversation, as compared to 2016 (Samuels and Akhtar, 2019).

However, in response, Kremlin proxies have ad-

justed bot activity to make them more sophisticated and harder to detect. Compared to the earlier (fairly primitive) 2016 automation (Guglielmi, 2020), recent bots have adopted more believable online profiles, more advanced conversational skills, and stronger resemblance to real-life users embedded in human networks. In addition, some accounts are now partially managed by humans to make them appear more authentic (the so-called "cyborgs" or "sock puppets") (Samuels and Akhtar, 2019). Another novelty is the emergence of "inorganic coordinated activity," where a group of bots, humans, or a combination thereof tries to influence online conversation by strategically releasing premeditated messaging at a specific time. This makes a fairly small number of these accounts appear larger in size. A recent analysis has discovered that such networks of coordinated users tried to promote unrelated causes and disinformation (such as anti-vaccine content) using the viral hashtag the #DemDebates during the Democratic debate held on October 15, 2019 (the so-called "hashtag hijacking" or "hashtag surfing" (Samuels and Akhtar, 2019).

TRENDS IN THE RUSSIAN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

WHAT'S NEW IN 2020?

Despite the counter-measures adopted by the US policy and intelligence communities, the Kremlin's attempts to interfere in the US political process continued during the 2020 US presidential election.

Some tactics for 2020 election interference remained the same as in 2016. For example, the IRA-backed trolls pretended to be locals, targeted Americans on both the left and right with posts designed to foment outrage, fear, and hostility and to discourage specific demographics from voting with a particular focus on swing states (Kim, 2020). Among other goals, Kremlin proxies allegedly tried to promote the presidential nomination of Senator Bernie Sanders and assist the reelection of President Donald Trump, whose statements they often amplified (Sanger and Kanno-Youngs, 2020).

However, Kremlin proxies also learned from past mistakes. For example, the IRA-linked trolls became more sophisticated in their attempts to conceal their identities, making it harder to identify and track them. In particular, the IRA trolls became better at impersonating candidates

and parties, and instead of creating their own fake advocacy groups (as they did in the past) got better at mimicking and appropriating names and logos of actual official campaigns and groups (Kim, 2020). Some of these efforts have been taken outside of Russia. In contrast to 2016, when much of the trolling was operated from the IRA office in St. Petersburg, in 2020 part of the influence operation was outsourced to troll farms in Ghana and Nigeria (Ward et al., 2020).

In 2020, Kremlin proxies also improved their techniques for concealing the origin of information, a tactic known as “information laundering.” Under such an approach, pro-Kremlin narratives are spread on Russia-affiliated websites and then picked up and promoted by more legitimate news outlets (Brandt and Frankland, 2020). For example, Kremlin proxies create an account and post a false story on it; then they deploy a second set of fake accounts or websites to post expanded versions of the story referencing the original post as their source; and eventually they engage a third set of accounts or websites to attract the attention of traditional media outlets (Aleksejeva et al., 2019). In 2020, at least two new websites were identified (and subsequently blocked by Twitter and Facebook) as being part of such an operation, the left-leaning PeaceData and the right-leaning NAEBC (see also Chapter 2.4).

Kremlin proxies also increased the use of seemingly nonpolitical content and commercial accounts, which allowed them to conceal their attempts at building networks of influence (Alba 2020; Kim, 2020).

In 2020 the Kremlin also succeeded in implementing one of the most serious cyberattacks ever suffered by the United States, targeting multiple US government entities, including federal, local, and territorial networks, as well as many business organizations. The attack, which had gone undetected for months, began no later than March 2020. It was allegedly implemented by the SVR-linked hacking group Cozy Bear (APT29), which exploited software from at least three US firms: Microsoft, SolarWinds, and VMware.

While attempts to estimate the damage are still ongoing, by some accounts the stolen information has multiple uses and might provide the Kremlin significant leverage in the next years (Tidy, 2020). Another reason for concern is that the attackers used unusual and creative ways to carry out their operation by disguising the initial attack within legitimate software updates (Fung, 2020).

While this alleged hack illustrates the capabilities of Russia’s foreign intelligence services, it is not a trend or a new development in 2020; it represents more of a traditional espionage operation rather than a social media operation (unless some of the stolen information is to be gradually published through mass media).

THE MOVING TARGET

Looking at Kremlin operations on social media over recent years, one clear conclusion is that the Kremlin’s influence effort isn’t going away. Despite the sanctions levied on Russia and multiple counter-measures developed by the US policy community and social media companies, the Kremlin’s influence operations did not stop. Instead, they slowed and evolved to avoid detection (Kelly and Samuels, 2019). The Kremlin adjusted the use of platforms and promoters to better conceal their identities and links to Russia.

While failing to fully block the Kremlin interference effort, US countermeasures seem to have succeeded in diminishing the outreach of the Kremlin proxies, which now are forced to rely on accounts with fewer followers and smaller platforms with less monitoring and regulation to avoid detection. That, however, does not mean that the war against Kremlin disinformation is won. Among other things, in recent years, the spread of domestic online disinformation has significantly facilitated the task of Kremlin proxies, which now can resort to amplifying misleading and biased narratives already present in the US information environment (instead of creating their own original content and trying to make it seem true).

Below we summarize the key elements of the evolving Russian influence strategy.

PLATFORMS

1. *More efforts to polarize online discussions by drawing on existing narratives.* Given domestic political divisions in the US in recent years more of the disinformation started to be produced by legitimate US sources. Accordingly, Russian proxies shifted to primarily amplifying them rather than creating them. Instead of creating their own false content, Russian proxies tend to increasingly rely on existing narratives to further polarize online conversations. To do so they often use false-flag operations or amplify homegrown conspiracy theories (Brandt and Frankland, 2020) and content (CNBC, 2020). This

approach also makes it harder to detect Kremlin-linked accounts.

2. *Growing identities hijacking.* Kremlin proxies have also become more likely to take over authentic hashtags, and mimic or appropriate names and logos of official campaigns and local groups. Many IRA posts increasingly adopt the identity of legitimate, relatively popular nonprofits, political action committees, or grassroots organizations by using posts from those groups or creating their own content (Kim, 2020). In the past, Kremlin proxies tried creating their own think tanks and “alternative news” sites to serve as initial content drops (DiResta and Grossman, 2019). By 2020, they seem to prefer hijacking the existing ones from the authentic actors. For example, networks of coordinated users (trolls and bots) were found in 2019 attempting to promote unrelated causes and disinformation using the hashtag the #DemDebates during the Democratic debate (Samuels and Akhtar, 2019).
3. *Moving to smaller platforms.* Instead of increasing its outreach as widely as possible, as in 2016, in 2020 Russian operatives have been using platforms with a more limited outreach (Barnes and Goldman, 2020). The total number of influence efforts declined in news outlets, on Twitter, and on Facebook after 2017. There were also fewer operations on Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms. Instead, Kremlin proxies often moved to smaller platforms such as blogs, 4chan and Reddit, or used closed chat rooms, private Facebook groups with less regulation and monitoring (Martin and Shapiro, 2019; Kelly and Samuels, 2019).
4. *Narratives laundering.* While used by Kremlin proxies in the past, narrative laundering seems to have grown in popularity in recent years (Brandt and Frankland, 2020). “This approach is suggestive of intelligence operators whose mission is to carry out their work undetected, without creating a discernible community” (Aleksejeva et al., 2019: 8).
5. *More efforts to polarize online discussions by drawing on existing narratives.* Because in recent years more of the disinformation started to be produced by legitimate US sources, Russian proxies shifted to primarily amplifying them rather than creating their messages. Instead of creating their own

false content, Russian proxies tend to increasingly rely on existing narratives to further polarize online conversations. To do so they often use false-flag operations or amplify homegrown conspiracy theories (Brandt and Frankland, 2020) and content (CNBC, 2020). This approach also makes it harder to detect Kremlin-linked accounts.

PROMOTERS

6. *Declining number of bots, trolls, and fake accounts, and declining number of followers.* Because themed accounts with politically divisive content and multiple followers have become more suspicious and attracted attention of regulatory and investigative bodies, Kremlin proxies appear to be working harder at hiding their origin and tend to rely more on accounts with fewer followers (Alba, 2020).
7. *Trolls and bots adjusting their behavior.* The IRA trolls have been adjusting their image to make detecting them harder. For example, while in the past Russian trolls often published posts with many English errors, in recent years they started copying and pasting chunks of texts written by English natives to make fewer errors. They also use less text and fewer hashtags, by reposting pictures and screenshots instead, removing or blurring watermarks (Alba, 2020), as well as using AI-generated profile pictures (Nimmo et al, 2020).

Bots have evolved as well, adopting more believable online profiles, more sophisticated conversational skills, and stronger resemblance to real-life users embedded in human networks. Some accounts are now partially managed by humans (the so-called “cyborgs” or “sock puppets,”) which makes them appear more authentic (Samuels and Akhtar, 2019). The “inorganic coordinated activity” is another new technique: a group of bots, humans, or a combination thereof strategically releases premeditated messages at a specific time in order to influence the online conversation. This approach allows these accounts to appear larger in size (Samuels and Akhtar, 2019).

The above evidence is consistent with a broader argument about the flexibility and adaptability of the Kremlin’s information warfare tactics to the changing geo-strategic environment (Mölder and Sazonov, 2018). The Kremlin’s continuous focus on the information environment

is evidenced by its ongoing expansion of Russia's information influence globally (Bugayova, 2020), as well as by the growing budgets of the Kremlin-funded news outlets such as RT (see Chapter 2.3). This suggests that Kremlin information operations will remain a challenge for the United States in years to come.

MEASURING IMPACT

Who Is Targeted?

The above analysis has demonstrated that the proxies often carefully tailor their messages to specific interests of target US audiences. This approach is linked to the concept of *reflexive control* which Russia has used in its influence operations since the Soviet times. *Reflexive control* allows a controlling party to influence the target into unknowingly making bad decisions by interfering with its perceptions (Thomas, 1996; 2004; 2009; Snegovaya 2015). For reflexive control to be effective, a controlling party (the Kremlin) needs to understand its target's filter. *Filter* refers to concepts, knowledge, ideas, and experience of the target that are the basis of their decision-making (Thomas, 2004: 2). The goal of reflexive control is to find, emphasize, and exploit a weak link in the enemy's filter by imitating the target's reasoning and causing them to make a decision unfavorable to themselves (Leonenko, 1995: 28).

The use of interest targeting while designing Facebook ads, for example, is an example of how a target's filter can be identified (see Ch.2.4). The IRA designed ads based on the information about users' following similar pages or viewing related content, as well as their profile information (such as their geographic location, interests, activities, favorite music, movies and TV shows) (Stretch, 2017; Timberg et al., 2017; 116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 44).

What are the specific filters commonly exploited by Kremlin proxies in their US social media operations? Below we explore the characteristics of social groups that may make them more likely to engage with Russia's disinformation.

Demographic Characteristics

Lower education and lower socioeconomic status may be associated with higher propensity to engage with

disinformation. Respondents with lower education and socioeconomic circumstances are less likely to check information they come across online (Carmi et al., 2020: 13), which makes them more likely to engage with such content (Bargaoanu and Radu, 2018; Glenski et al. 2018). Groups more prone to engage with disinformation are found among the representatives of the lower middle class or working class with only a basic education (Kandrik and Jevčák 2018: 3).

Race is another important variable that in the US context may predict higher levels of engagement with Russia-aligned content. Studies have identified the African American community as being targeted particularly actively by Kremlin proxies. Given the salience of racial issues in the US context, IRA operations were purposefully designed to inflame racial tensions and influence presidential elections in both 2016 and 2020. For example, throughout the 2016 campaign, the IRA Facebook ads (over 66% containing a race-related term), its social media pages (the "Blacktivist" page on Facebook generating 11.2 million engagements with Facebook users) and Twitter and Instagram accounts (five of the top 10 IRA Instagram accounts focused on African-American issues and audiences, the most popular @blackstagram account collected 303,663 followers) all consistently pushed racially divisive narratives (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 7; DiResta et al., 2018). After 2016, fueling the racial divide remained a running theme of the IRA social media operations. In 2020 they kept pushing the narrative related to police brutality and racism against African Americans, as well as attempting to mobilize hate and supremacist groups. In addition to social media accounts, more traditional channels, such as RT and even Russian government Twitter feeds, promoted related themes (Barnes and Goldman, 2020).

Partisanship/Political Ideology

Many studies in the US show that partisanship consistently predicts people's engagement with disinformation (Kahan, 2017; Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018). Kremlin proxies spread negatively framed information that is tailored to these groups' political views, i.e. each group receives information about their political opponents that is deemed politically damaging. For example, conservatives are often given information about outrages committed by liberals, immigrants, George Soros, and others; liberals are shown the information about misdeeds of Re-

publicans, Trump administration, or evangelical Christians (Linville and Warren, 2019; Freelon et al., 2020).

However, political partisanship alone is unlikely to fully account for people's susceptibility to disinformation. First, people on both sides of the political spectrum are more likely to engage with disinformation. This suggests that partisans on both sides of the political spectrum may have similar characteristics that explain parallels in their behavior. Second, some studies find that partisan bias of presented information and individual political affiliation play little role in perceptions of information accuracy (Pennycook and Rand 2019). Hence factors other than partisanship may also play a role in individual susceptibility to disinformation. For example, the effect of stronger partisanship might be mediated by variables, such as lower trust in media and the establishment.

Trust in Media and Institutions

Studies find that lower trust in traditional media might (somewhat ironically) make people more likely to engage with disinformation (Zimmermann and Kohring 2020). In the US context the effects of lower media trust may be particularly pronounced given the frustration with the traditional media that has spread among Americans in recent years (Brennan, 2019). According to the data from Edelman's annual [trust barometer](#), by the end of 2020 trust in traditional media in the U.S. has declined to an all-time low with fewer than half of all Americans having trust in traditional media (Salmon, 2021). This finds its confirmation in popularity of the term "mainstream media." Often used with a negative or pejorative connotation, this term refers to various large traditional media conglomerates that influence and shape prevailing ideological positions of the largest audiences (Chomsky, 1997; LaMarco, 2018). The "mainstream media" are then contrasted to "alternative media" on the internet, which allegedly allow for the expression of more alternative viewpoints (Tkacheva et al., 2013). In the US context, the mistrust in media is particularly pronounced among self-identified conservatives who often accuse "mainstream media" of having a "liberal bias" (Lee 2005; Gauchat, 2012; Kraft et al., 2014). However, both liberals and conservatives freely associate traditionally rightwing and leftwing media sources respectively with the term fake news (van der Linden et al., 2020). The amalgamation of terms now also includes the "lame-stream" media often used by conservatives to describe how out of touch traditional (primarily

left-leaning) outlets have become. Therefore, mistrust in "mainstream media" may make Americans on both sides of the political spectrum more likely to engage with Russia's disinformation.

Similar reasoning may be applicable to institutional trust more broadly (be it traditional media, big corporations, international institutions, the political establishment, and so on) (Freeman et al. 2020; Kim and Cao, 2016; Einstein and Glick, 2015). Recent studies suggest that the lack of trust in political institutions may be among the key factors that make people on both sides of the political spectrum susceptible to disinformation (Gunther and Storey 2003; Zimmermann and Kohring 2020; van der Linden et al., 2020) especially given that Russia's online disinformation campaigns are directly targeted at fomenting mistrust in the establishment and political institutions (Watanabe 2018).

If trust in established institutions is low, media literacy programs that are (in view of mistrustful social groups) promoted by the establishment itself will not be effective in changing their views and information consumption patterns. Groups with low levels of media and institutional trust require more sophisticated approaches designed to restore their confidence in actors promoting those programs in the first place (Silverblatt 2015; Humprecht et al. 2020).

IS RUSSIA SUCCESSFUL?

To what extent have Russia's disinformation operations succeeded in achieving Russia's goals?

The answer largely depends on how one understands the goals of Kremlin operatives. For example, while in its 2016 election interference the IRA expended significant effort building up a presence on social media platforms and was able to amplify its messages across wide audiences, the GRU largely failed to achieve virality on social media (DiResta and Grossman, 2019: 9-10). However, when viewed as traditional media operations, the GRU campaigns were fairly successful throughout the same period. The GRU placed articles from multiple fake personas in over 140 media outlets and those were periodically amplified by large state media entities (DiResta and Grossman, 2019: 9-10). Given the success of the US counter-measures in blocking Kremlin-linked accounts with a large number of followers, in recent years the IRA approach shifted to more closely resemble the GRU oper-

ations, planting pro-Kremlin narratives in local outlets run by partisan American groups (see Chapter 4).

Quantitative studies of the impact of Russia's influence operations return mixed results. On the one hand, some successes are undeniable. Throughout 2016 IRA-linked Facebook groups succeeded in organizing multiple opposing rallies, drawing American citizens into the streets in direct opposition to one another (116th Congress, 1st Session Senate, 2019: 37, 40, 42, 46; Mueller, 2019). A recent RAND study demonstrates that Russian disinformation may be able to deepen polarization within American society. By targeting users with extreme partisan views on both sides of the political divide, the Kremlin's disinformation narratives are able to successfully elicit strong partisan responses that may help exacerbate divisions in American society (Helmus et al., 2020).

Jamieson (2020) argues that the DNC leaks by Russian hackers were able to successfully shift the media agenda in the final presidential debates and the final month of the 2016 election, which benefited Donald Trump and ultimately likely brought him victory. As result, according to Jamieson, Russian trolls and hackers probably affected the outcome of the 2016 election by mobilizing potential Trump voters and discouraging liberal voters who weren't keen on Clinton. However, she points out that quantifying the impact of the Russian activity is impossible in the absence of "real-time, rolling cross-sectional polling data tied to media messaging and exposure in each of the three decisive states," Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. And even if one had such a panel, the effect of specific Russian propaganda efforts would be hard to isolate from confounding factors, because of the difficulty of finding a control group not exposed to them (Jamieson, 2020; Bershidsky, 2019).

On the other hand, a number of studies find that the impact of disinformation on US users' opinions is minimal. For example, the longitudinal analysis of data on Republicans and Democrats from late 2017 and Twitter accounts operated by the IRA found no evidence that interacting with these accounts substantially impacted US respondents' political attitudes and behaviors (PNAS, Bail et al. 2020). Similarly, scholars who investigated Russian trolls' ability to spread news stories found that their effect was marginal, with the significant exception being the news

published by the state-funded RT outlet (Zannettou et al. 2019c). Eventually, a high number of complicating factors make it hard to estimate the real impact of these operations (see also Rid 2020).

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

While most studies exploring the impact of Russia's social media operations are conducted on Twitter for data availability reasons (e.g., Gatewood and O'Connor, 2020; Golovchenko et al., 2020; Helmus et al., 2018; Marcellino et al., 2020), this impact cannot be measured accurately without careful sampling of users and messages on the platform.

Keyword-based sampling of messages tends to overemphasize the influence of Russia's disinformation, because such a sample usually contains messages about divisive topics (e.g., election and racial inequality). While keyword-based sampling can be justified as it grants researchers efficiency in revealing Russia's disinformation strategies, the analytical result does not carry implications for Twitter users who are not interested in these topics.

Random sampling of messages is also unsuitable for measuring accurately the influence of agents/trolls on average users, because such a sample will be dominated by a small number of highly active users.²⁶⁹ Although random sampling is a better approach to measuring impact than keyword-based sampling as it offers a wider picture, the results cannot be generalized beyond the Twitter user community.

Random sampling of users leads to a biased estimation of the impact, because only a small number of Americans use Twitter, and their demography is very different from the American population: only 22% of Americans answered they ever used Twitter, and these are more liberal and concentrated among younger generations (Perrin and Anderson, 2019).

To study the impact of Russia's social media operations on Twitter and other platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Reddit etc.), researchers must combine the information about users' individual-level characteristics and their engagement with the analysis of the content promoted by the Russian agents/trolls. Combining these pieces of information allows one to capture how individual-level characteristics (such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and political orientations) correlate with exposure to

269 Earlier study shows that average Twitter users post messages only twice a month. 80% of posts are produced by 10% of active users (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019).

disinformation. Since Twitter does not collect information on users' personal characteristics, researchers must combine surveys of users along with content analysis of social media posts. The below study presents the results of such an analysis.

THE STUDY OF TWITTER USERS' ENGAGEMENT WITH RUSSIA-ALIGNED ACCOUNTS ON TWITTER

Social media analysis provides a window into the perspectives, thoughts, and online behavior of a wide range of relevant audiences against which information operations are implemented. Social media platforms allow researchers to study users' susceptibility to particular narratives among social groups targeted by the Kremlin's information operations if combined with information on their demographics that is obtained through a questionnaire survey. This knowledge could help inform policymakers and help them develop countermeasures crafted to the needs of particular audiences and groups (Marcelino et al.2020).

We conducted an analysis of Twitter users' demographic information, attitudes, and political ideology along with their online behavior prior to the 2020 presidential election. We expected that the Kremlin would intensify its information operation during this politically important period, allowing us to reveal its overarching strategy, but its tactics could be specific to the political and social circumstances of the time as our analysis of hashtags indicates.

The result of this analysis shows that the direct impact of the Kremlin's information operation through in the United States is limited, but there are highly active and strongly ideological Twitter users who promote the same narratives as the Kremlin's proxies do. American social media users with low socioeconomic status tend to be susceptible to their ideological messages. This ecosystem on the social

media platform allows the Kremlin to penetrate the public discussion on political and social issues in the United States more deeply.

Identifying Russia-Aligned Handle Names

Studies existing to date have predominantly relied on external datasets to identify Twitter handle names associated with the activities of Kremlin proxies (IRA or GRU). However, no existing lists are suitable for our study, as they quickly become obsolete after publication.²⁷⁰ Instead, in this study we relied on a novel approach, applying a home-grown list of accounts to analyze online behavior of our survey respondents. First, we surveyed 2,000 Twitter users in the United States, asking them questions on their demographic and attitudinal characteristics. Next, we generated a list of "Russia-aligned accounts" who resemble pro-Russian media, using the word-embedding technique as described below.

The identified Russia-aligned accounts are not necessarily affiliated with IRA or GRU (establishing that link is beyond our capacity in this study), but they promote narratives that are also actively pushed by Kremlin proxies. This is sufficient for our purposes, since we assume that our survey respondents who frequently engage with Russia-aligned accounts should have similar personal characteristics as social media users who frequently engage with *actual* Russian-aligned accounts given that content of posts made by both types of accounts is very similar.²⁷¹

We use the list of identified Russia-aligned accounts to measure how often our survey respondents were exposed to narratives that the Kremlin promotes. By combining the information about their engagement with Russia-aligned accounts we revealed the individual-level characteristics that distinguished those Americans in our sample who were more prone to engage with Russia's narratives.

Such an analysis allows us not only to identify how widely Russia's narratives spread on social media but also to discover specific individual characteristics of social me-

270 A list of Twitter handle names identified as under the control of the IRA was published by the US Congress soon after the 2016 Presidential Election (<https://intelligence.house.gov/social-media-content/>), but these lists become obsolete as soon as they are published because they will be deleted or suspended by platforms and new accounts will be created by the disinformation agents. Twitter also released a dataset of anonymized posts by users affiliated with foreign states including Russia (<https://transparency.twitter.com/en/reports/information-operations.html>) but it only covers from May 2009 to December 2019.

271 In other words, it does not matter if social media users who promote Russia's narratives are actually affiliated with the Russian state or not from the respondents' perspective. This approach is analogous to survey experiments, in which mockup texts are used as a device to analyze participants' responses.

dia users who are more prone to engage with pro-Russian narratives. Given our attempt to ensure representativeness of the survey sample in two different ways (see chapter 5.3 below), the frequency of engagement with Russia-aligned accounts among our users may be hypothesized to reflect how often Americans on Twitter encounter pro-Russian narratives. To identify Russia-aligned users we collected Twitter posts and computed the similarity between handle names using only publicly available tools and resources. We used Twitter Timeline API to collect users' most recent posts retrospectively up to 3,200 in data collection, and R packages (quanteda and LSX) for the similarity computation. Quanteda is a highly efficient preprocessing tool for textual data analysis (Benoit et al., 2018); LSX implements the Latent Semantic Scaling (LSS) technique to compute similarity between words accurately (Watanabe 2020).

The advantage of this proxy approach is that it allows us to generate a long list of Russia-aligned accounts while only collecting pro-Russian media posts and handle names on Twitter. This method also allows us to identify handle names of those users whose accounts have been deleted or suspended by the time of our data collection, because it only relies on whether Russia-aligned accounts are mentioned in other users' posts. However, this approach has its limitations. For example, it does not allow us to automatically determine whether the identified Russia-aligned accounts are de facto affiliated with the Kremlin. This approach also does not allow us to discover those accounts that promote narratives that are different from the ones pushed by pro-Russian media.

Data collection

To identify Russia-aligned accounts, we collected 880,000 publicly available Twitter posts by our survey respondents since January 2020 through the Timeline API in November ("main collection") and extracted 14,139 handle names of users they mentioned in their posts at least 10 times since the beginning of the same year. Next, we downloaded 7 million Twitter posts by the users in October 2020 ("expanded collection") when the social media users were active on political and social issues prior to the election.

Similarity Computation

First, we selected widely recognized pro-Russian and international/foreign media as "seed accounts" (see the list of the identified media in Table 1). Second, we fitted the LSS on the expanded collection to compute the similarity between all the handle names ($n = 98,348$) based on their surrounding words and hashtags in the posts.²⁷² Third, we selected 5% of the handle names with highest and lowest proximity to the handle names of the seed accounts, and treated handle names with high proximity as Russia-aligned accounts and those with low proximity as "benchmark" accounts ($n=2,459$ each).

Pro-Russian media accounts	Benchmark media accounts
@sputnikint	@telegraph
@sputniknewsuk	@ajenglish
@sputniknewsus	@bbcworld
@rt_america	@dwnews
@rt_com	@skynews
@rt_doc	@financialtimes
@rtuknews	@cnni
@tassagency_en	@cnn
@russiainsider	
@ruptly	
@redfishstream	

Table 1. List of handle names of the seed accounts. Benchmark media are used to control users' general interest in non-US news stories.

INTERACTION WITH RUSSIA-ALIGNED ACCOUNTS

We measured how often our survey respondents interacted with the Russia-aligned users in 2020 by searching their Twitter posts in the main collection for the handle names. We do not provide specific handle names of users that we identified as being aligned with pro-Russian media in this report to comply with Twitter's policy on privacy protection. We manually inspected posts and profiles of the accounts most strongly aligned with the pro-Russian media to find that they are highly active and ideological personas, who often express American patriotism, sup-

²⁷² Word embedding techniques are utilized in the state-of-art natural language processing tools. We used SVD as the underlying algorithm for dimension reduction with $k = 300$. This technique is analogue to factor analysis of a document feature matrix to identify a smaller number of common contexts. We can generate a list of users who post similar content as pro-Russian media because they are mentioned in similar contexts by users in the expanded collection.

port for Republican candidates, religious views, or conspiracy beliefs in their posts and profiles. However, many accounts were inaccessible because they were suspended or deleted, presumably due to violation of Twitter's rules on hate speech and disinformation.²⁷³

Content of Posts by Russia-Aligned Accounts

We collected messages posted in October by the accounts identified as Russia-aligned and benchmark and compared the frequency of hashtags they used in order to identify narratives promoted by Russia-aligned accounts (Table 2). Based on our associated hashtags, we argue that posts by Russia-aligned accounts were thematically related to the November 2020 presidential election but were not necessarily supportive of Donald Trump, while the posts by benchmark accounts were often devoted to broader social issues (e.g., police reforms and the COVID-19 pandemic).

	Russia-aligned accounts	Benchmark accounts
1	#maga	#endsars
2	#fbr	#sarsmustend
3	#trump2020	#endswat
4	#resist	#endsarsnow
5	#fbrparty	#endpolicebrutality
6	#bidencrimefamily	#lekkimassacre
7	#vote	#endpolicebrutalityinnigeria
8	#kag	#endsarsprotests
9	#patriots	#nigeria
10	#45	#belarus
11	#trump	#breaking
12	#veterans	#endsarsprotest
13	#np	#iran
14	#trump2020landslide	#sarsmustendnow
15	#writingcommunity	#madeinlagos
16	#joebiden	#sarsmustgonow
17	#demvoice1	#sarsmustgo
18	#biden	#endpolicebrutalityinnigera
19	#follow	#endsarsimmediately
20	#obamagate	#sars

Table 2. Hashtags frequently used by Russia-aligned and benchmark accounts. #trump2020, #trump, #trump-2020landslide, #45 (the 45th president) signal support for Donald Trump in the election; #maga (make America great again) and #kag (keep America great) also related to his campaign slogan. #bidencrimefamily and #obamagate are used to express distrust in the Democratic candidate. #fbr (follow back resist), #fbrparty and #resist are used to show disapproval of Donald Trump. #sars, #endsars, #sarsmustend, #endsarsnow,

#sarsmustgonow, #sarsmustgo and #endsarsimmediately are related to the ongoing COVID19 pandemic; #endswat and #endpolicebrutality are used to criticize violence by the police.

Engagement with Russia-Aligned Accounts

We found that between January and November 2020 our survey respondents referenced pro-Russian and benchmark media that we used as seed accounts (see their list in Table 1) only 37 and 1,846 times, respectively. However, the numbers were much greater with the identified Russia-aligned and the benchmark accounts: 12,259 and 37,148 times, respectively. The absolute frequency of mentions increased towards September mainly because of the retrospective data collection; the frequency increased sharply in October and fell after the election (Figure 1). The ratio of the frequency between mentions of Russia-aligned and benchmark accounts surged in February, but gradually increased until the end of September; the ratio increased again at the end of October.²⁷⁴

The total number of mentions of Russia-aligned accounts during the 11 months was high, despite the fact that these accounts did not belong to celebrities (such as political leaders or pop stars): even the share of top-10 most frequently mentioned accounts was only 1-5% of total mentions. The level of partisanship expressed in the posts on political and social issues by most frequently mentioned accounts was moderate. The number of our survey respondents who engaged with the top-500 most extreme accounts was 16, which is only 1% of the sample (Figure 3).

273 <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>

274 Twitter started labeling state-affiliated accounts and excluding them from automated recommendation in users' pages in August and reportedly deleted automated accounts in October. // www.cnet.com/news/twitter-deletes-over-10k-accounts-discouraging-voting-in-midterm-elections-report-says

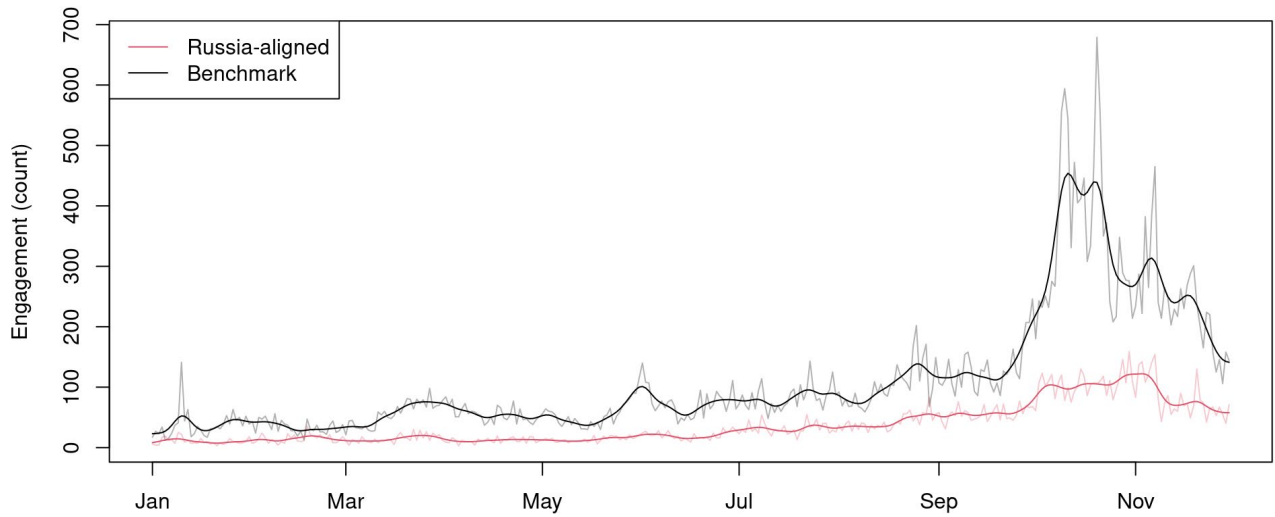


Figure 1. Engagement with Russia-aligned and benchmark accounts. Engagement with Russia-aligned accounts increased in October but fell after the November presidential election.

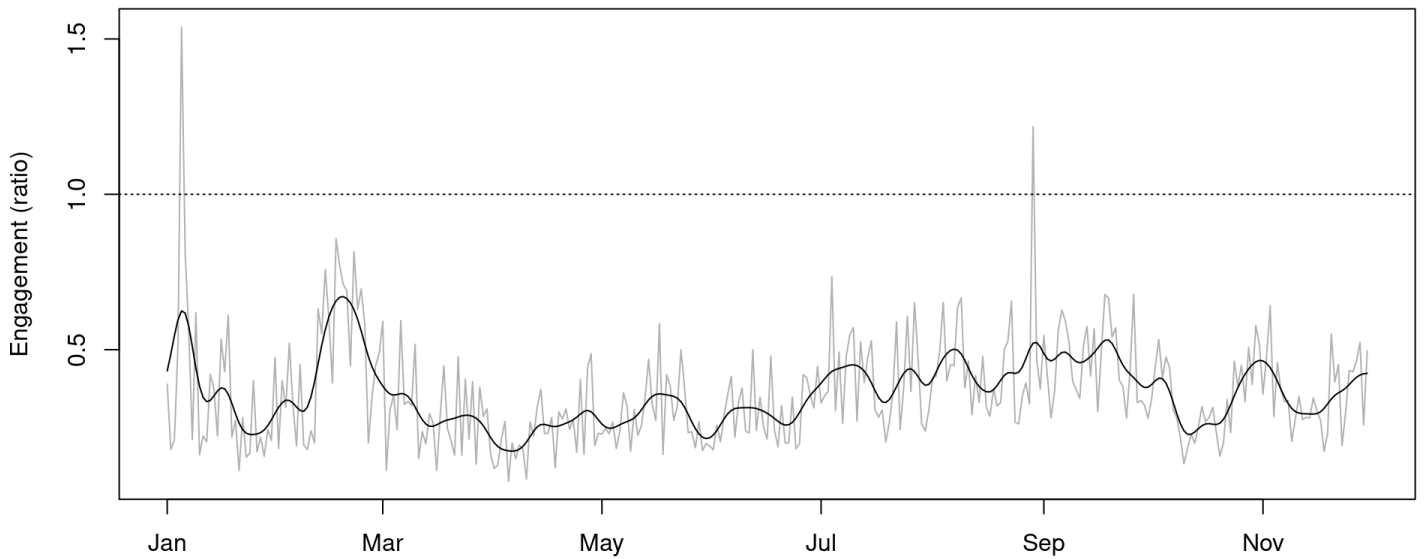


Figure 1 a. Ratios between engagement with Russia-aligned and benchmark accounts on Twitter. The ratio gradually increased from April to September but fell in October.

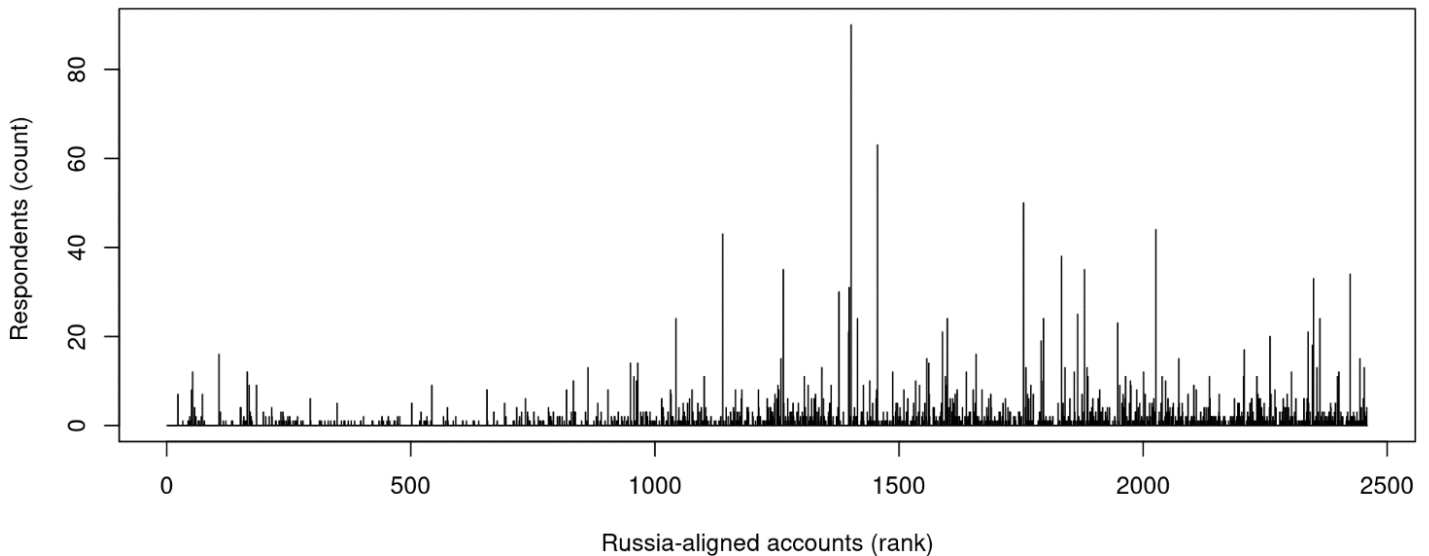


Figure 2. Frequency of mentions of Russia-aligned accounts. The accounts are sorted by their handle names' proximity to the pro-Russian seed accounts. Less than 1% of our respondents engaged with the most extreme users (left-hand side).

Discussion

The results of the analysis show that, although pro-Russian media have very limited direct reach on social media, there are multiple users on Twitter who actively post partisan messages that resemble the narratives promoted by Kremlin proxies. Social media users interact with Russia-aligned accounts that frequently post divisive partisan tweets on social and political issues. These users can then be exploited by the Kremlin operations as “useful idiots” or “fellow travelers” and (unwittingly or not) help amplify narratives that benefit Russia. Although based on our analysis most of the Russia-aligned accounts our respondents interacted with were ideologically moderate, the sheer number of such Russia-aligned accounts and the frequency of engagement with them is likely to impact beliefs of those Americans who are active on social media (by, for example, making them more partisan).

While we have identified those Russia-aligned accounts that were expressly supportive of Republican/Conservative politicians or skeptical about established political institutions, their influence seemed limited because they interacted with only 1% of social media users in our sample. Our data does not allow us to identify whether these accounts were actually affiliated with the Russian state agencies, but we believe many of them were not (as Twitter earlier blocked many of the accounts explicitly identified as being Kremlin-linked).

The increase in frequency of interaction with Russia-aligned accounts before the November election despite Twitter's new actions may suggest that Russia's collocation strategy that blurs distinctions between Kremlin proxies and ideological American citizens is successful. However, this strategy makes controlling the flow of information difficult not only for social media platforms but for pro-Kremlin actors themselves. Therefore, the extent to which they succeed in spreading disinformation on social media by having a measurable impact on electoral outcomes is questionable.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TWITTER USERS PREDICTING THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH RUSSIA-ALIGNED ACCOUNTS

Having identified Russia-aligned accounts and frequency of our respondents' engagement with them, we correlated the resulting index of exposure to Russia-aligned content with respondents' sociodemographic and attitudinal characteristics. Those were obtained through a survey run by the Lucid Market Research Ltd. online panel (a reputable US-based online panel) between October 22nd and November 12th, 2020, around the time of the 2020 US presidential election. Participants were recruited through banners on various internet sites, via email, or via a Panel Portal to ensure the survey's high ecological validity. Most survey participants collected

points that were subsequently exchanged for rewards.

We defined as “Twitter users” respondents who had a Twitter ID and active (post/share/like) on Twitter at least once a week. We analyzed Twitter handles provided by respondents and dropped those respondents who likely provided fake handles, such as celebrity Twitter handles, those with more than 10,000 followers or those that were located outside of the United States (based on their geolocation).

Ensuring sampling representativeness on Twitter is a tricky question, as no one knows exactly what a representative sample of Twitter users looks like. Because of high and non-random attrition (all respondents lacking Twitter handles, not sufficiently active on Twitter, those who provided identical Twitter handle names etc. were dropped from the analysis), we do not assume that our sample represents any well-defined population. However, to ensure that our study participants’ demographic characteristics resemble the characteristics obtained from participants in other high-quality studies, we followed the below approach. First, the initial sample broadly representative of

the general US population was collected by Lucid based on their Twitter users’ quotas for age, gender, race, state of residence, and income representative of the US population. We used this sample for our basic analysis. Second, we also generated weights relying on a recent Pew study (Wojcik and Hughes 2019) that analyzed the characteristics of the US population on Twitter. The Pew study has found that Twitter users differ from the general US population in that they are much younger than the average American adult and are also more likely than the general public to have a college degree. To account for these differences between the general US population and Twitter users, we generated weights to make our sample comparable to the US Twitter population identified by the Pew study.

The dependent variable—frequency of engagement with Russia-aligned content on Twitter—was generated for the 21-days of the survey duration (from October 22nd to November 12th, 2020). The distribution of the dependent variable is shown in the below figure.

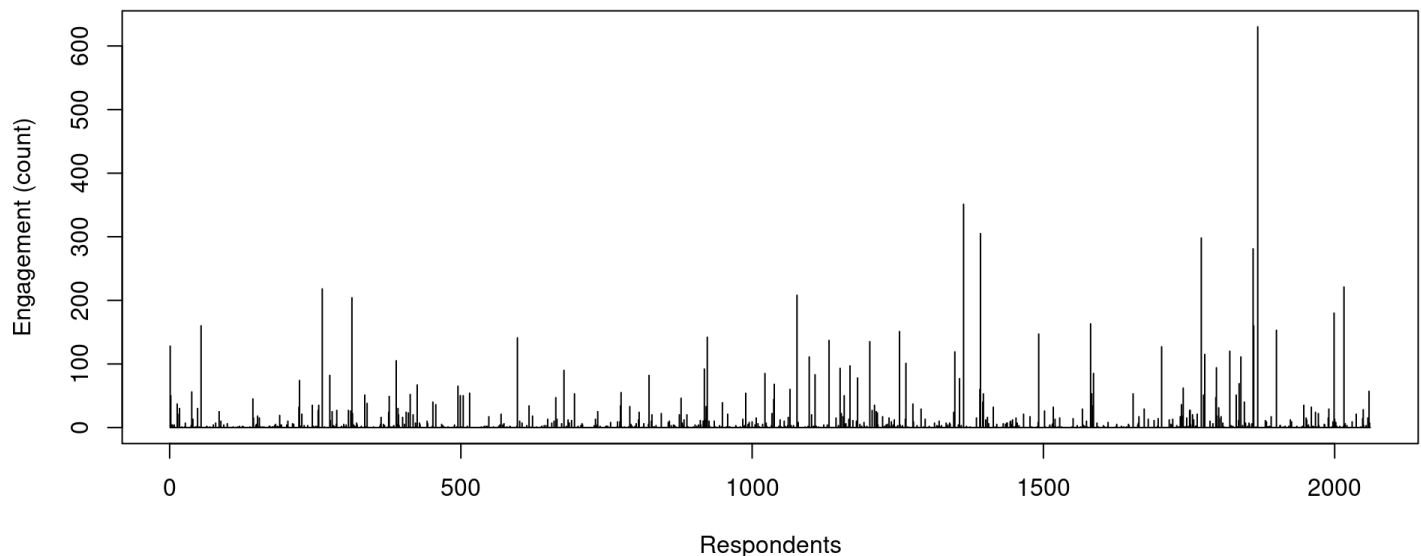


Figure 3. Dependent variable: Engagement with Russia-aligned accounts among the survey respondents

We then ran our analysis using OLS models set at the individual level on both samples with and without Pew

weights to check robustness of our findings.²⁷⁵ For the robustness check we also measured our models using the

275 As to the error clustering, the primary filter we selected for sampling our respondents was pre-identified Twitter users. That by itself yields a sample that is very reflective of our target population. We did not target states specifically, so the end result across demographics (state included) could be a reflection of the prevalence of Twitter users (and further, those willing to provide accurate Twitter IDs) across subgroups. Looking at the data by state, all states are represented to a certain extent—albeit with very small numbers in some cases. For instance, Vermont and Maine have the fewest respondents of any states with just 2 each. But those numbers are not drastically different from the distribution of the US population as a whole. Those states each represent about 0.18% of the population and about 0.1% of the survey

binary probit model and the zero-inflated negative binomial regression (that fits the distribution of our dependent variable, where number of zeros is excessive). Most results were robust to alternative model specifications (available upon request).

Below we present the results of the analysis.

Basic Demographic Characteristics

This section focuses on the basic demographic characteristics that identify Twitter users more likely to engage with Russia-aligned content. All regressions include a number of sociodemographic variables:

- *Gender* (male/female). “Female” gender chosen as base category.
- *Age*.
- *Quadratic age term*.
- *Race* (White / Black or African American / American Indian or Alaska Native / Asian / Pacific Islander / Some other race). “White” chosen as base category.
- *Education* (less than a high school diploma / regular high school diploma / vocational school / union certificate / some college, no degree / bachelor’s degree / master’s degree / degree higher than a master’s). Degree higher than a master’s chosen as base category.
- *Household’s total income before taxes* (\$49,999 or less / \$50,000-\$74,999 / \$75,000-\$99,999 / \$100,000-\$149,999 / \$150,000 or more). “\$150,000 or more” option was chosen as base

category.

- *Social class* — recorded based on answer to the question: “If you were asked to use one of four names for your social class, which would you say you belong in: the lower class, the working class, the middle class, or the upper class?” (lower class / working class / middle class / upper class). The “upper-class” option was chosen as the base category. Low socioeconomic status usually captures the interaction between low individual educational achievement and/or low household income.
- *Place of residence* a respondent lives in (a large central city / a suburb of a large central city / a medium size city (50,000 to 249,999) / a suburb of a medium size city / small city or town (10,000 to 49,999) / a town or village (2,500 to 9,999) / rural area less than 10 miles from the closest town / rural area more than 10 miles from the closest town). The “large central city” option was chosen as the base category.
- *Twitter Usage* — measured through answers to the question “How often are you on Twitter?” (the following categories ranked from 1 to 4: once a week / several times a week / once a day / several times a day).

The Table 3 reports results from an OLS regression with robust standard errors using the index of engagement with Russia-aligned content as the dependent variable and including basic individual-level characteristics of respondents as explanatory variables.

“completes.” Similarly, California’s 234 “completes” represent 11.3% of the survey, which lines up closely with the 11.9% of the US population that California represents. We therefore assumed that our respondents are fairly representatively distributed across different regions. Thus, we used robust standard errors rather than clustering errors by state of residence.

	(1) Original sample	(2) Pew-weights adjusted sample
male	1.550 (1.215)	2.811*** (1.646)
age	-0.429*** (0.255)	-0.490 (0.351)
age squared	0.006*** (0.003)	0.007*** (0.004)
Education:		
Less than a high school diploma	-3.011 (2.807)	-1.040 (2.486)
Regular high school diploma	1.073 (3.482)	4.516 (5.077)
Vocational school/ union certificate	0.930 (3.469)	1.648 (2.814)
Some college, no degree	-0.012 (2.556)	0.505 (2.060)
Bachelor's degree	-1.555 (2.136)	-1.114 (1.940)
Master's degree	0.880 (2.191)	1.704 (1.751)
Socioeconomic status:		
Lower class	5.973*** (2.643)	5.895*** (2.467)
Working class	2.770*** (1.671)	2.246 (1.687)
Middle class	2.033 (1.324)	1.906 (1.284)
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.597 (2.778)	0.648 (2.524)
Asian	5.514 (5.023)	7.660 (7.150)
African American	3.010*** (1.755)	1.922 (1.578)
Pacific Islander	0.514 (3.361)	2.802 (3.938)
Some other race	-0.353 (1.305)	-0.838 (1.630)
Medium size city (50,000 to 249,999)	-0.825 (1.335)	-1.021 (1.381)
Place of residence:		

Suburb of a large central city	5.143***	6.552***
	(1.849)	(2.436)
Suburb of a medium size city	2.338	1.504
	(1.653)	(1.549)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	3.887	3.903
	(3.133)	(3.125)
Rural area < 10 miles from the closest town	2.595	3.035
	(2.333)	(2.433)
Rural area > 10 miles from the closest town	-2.101	-0.943
	(1.726)	(1.957)
Small city or town (10,000 to 49,999)	3.446***	3.258***
	(1.950)	(1.648)
Income		
below -\$49,999	1.223	-0.150
	(2.514)	(2.748)
\$50,000-\$74,999	-0.339	-1.089
	(2.358)	(2.313)
\$75,000-\$99,999	1.459	3.300
	(2.720)	(3.809)
\$100,000-\$149,999	-0.429	-0.458
	(1.962)	(1.962)
Twitter Usage Frequency	4.057***	3.652***
	(0.521)	(0.494)
Constant	-8.699	-6.683
	(6.087)	(7.726)
Observations	2,048	2,048
R-squared	0.0381	0.0378

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 3. OLS regression model explaining engagement with Russia-Aligned Accounts (Basic Demographic Characteristics)

Looking at the results in Table 4, there are several demographic characteristics positively correlated with engagement with Russia-aligned users (however, not all are robust to alternative sample specification).

Gender: male respondents tend to be more exposed to Russia-aligned content (however, the effect of gender is only significant for Pew-weights adjusted sample). This might have to do with the fact that the male gender may be associated with higher odds of radicalization, as other studies have shown (Givens, 2004).

Age: interestingly, in our sample, younger age, as well as quadratic age term, positively correlates with fre-

quency of engagement with Russia-aligned accounts. This might suggest that both older and younger respondents are more likely to engage with such content (although the impact is fairly small based on the size of the coefficient).

Socioeconomic status: respondents with lower socioeconomic status (subjective measure) tend to more frequently engage with Russia-aligned content. This effect remains consistent when we adjust for weights.

Race: the African-Americans in our sample are more likely to engage with Russia-aligned content although the coefficient is only significant for the original sample and disappears when we adjust for Pew weights. This find-

ing is consistent with earlier studies that emphasized that the Kremlin proxies have consistently targeted the African-American groups in an effort to polarize existing social divisions in the United States (see Chapter 4.1).

Place of residence: respondents residing in suburbs of large cities or in small towns are more likely to engage with Russia-aligned content.

Twitter Usage Frequency: ultimately, more frequent engagement with Twitter predictably significantly increases a respondent’s odds to encounter Russia-aligned content.

Contrary to earlier studies (Chapter 4.1), we do not find effects of other factors such as education or lower income on engagement with Russia-aligned content. In the Appendix III we provide the same analysis including fixed controls for days of engagement (over an observed period of 21 days). The main conclusions remain unchanged to the inclusion of fixed day effects.

Overall, while we find that respondents’ subjective perception of their socioeconomic status is clearly related to the engagement with Russia-aligned content, objective indicators of their status (education and income) are not related. This implies that the cultivation of grievances in social media is grounded in cultural and psychological

dimensions (e.g. institutional trust and media trust). For example, if new policies improved the current economic crisis conditions and stopped the trend toward greater income inequality, this would not necessarily hinder the work of IRA et al.

Ideology

As our next step, we focus on the role of the respondents’ political ideology in predicting engagement with Russia-aligned content. As described in Chapter 4.1, studies have consistently demonstrated that partisanship plays a significant role in explaining engagement with disinformation.

In this section, as a measure of respondents’ political ideology we used the question “Where would you place yourself on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 means very liberal and 7 means very conservative?” The responses, ranging from 1 to 7, were ranked as follows: 1 Very liberal / 2 Liberal / 3 Somewhat liberal / 4 Middle of the road / 5 Somewhat conservative / 6 Conservative / 7 Very conservative. Given that stronger political ideology is expected to predict higher engagement with Russia’s disinformation, we chose the middle option “4” Middle of the road, as our base category.

The results are presented in Table 4.

	(1) Original sample	(2) Pew-weights adjusted sample
Very liberal	3.851*** (1.800)	4.104*** (1.793)
Liberal	2.115 (2.762)	4.879 (5.349)
Somewhat liberal	-0.123 (1.457)	-0.878 (1.593)
Somewhat conservative	-2.544*** (1.146)	-2.218*** (1.172)
Conservative	1.743 (1.974)	2.584 (2.122)
Very conservative	4.677*** (2.805)	4.029 (2.449)
male	1.657 (1.197)	2.769*** (1.504)
age	-0.384 (0.254)	-0.439 (0.347)
age squared	0.006***	0.006***

	(0.003)	(0.004)
Bachelor's degree	-0.678	0.070
	(2.095)	(1.722)
Less than a high school diploma	0.271	2.644
	(2.984)	(2.702)
Master's degree	0.884	1.895
	(2.196)	(1.780)
Regular high school diploma	2.494	6.231
	(3.821)	(5.826)
Some college, no degree	1.422	2.096
	(2.528)	(2.089)
Vocational school/ union certificate	2.848	3.829
	(3.569)	(3.144)
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.970	1.291
	(2.676)	(2.352)
Asian	5.750	8.178
	(5.254)	(7.556)
African American	2.988***	1.733
	(1.808)	(1.675)
Pacific Islander	-1.208	-0.156
	(4.070)	(3.027)
Some other race	-0.990	-1.607
	(1.356)	(1.830)
Medium size city (50,000 to 249,999)	-0.331	-0.549
	(1.359)	(1.300)
Suburb of a large central city	5.543***	7.012***
	(1.920)	(2.658)
Suburb of a medium size city	2.560	1.759
	(1.698)	(1.583)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	3.414	3.453
	(3.112)	(3.108)
Rural area < 10 miles from the closest town	2.823	3.273
	(2.446)	(2.536)
Rural area > 10 miles from the closest town	-2.086	-0.794
	(1.771)	(2.091)
Small city or town (10,000 to 49,999)	3.909***	3.957***
	(2.027)	(1.743)
below -\$49,999	2.855	1.283
	(2.507)	(3.019)
\$50,000-\$74,999	0.599	-0.467
	(2.337)	(2.468)
\$75,000-\$99,999	2.511	4.211
	(2.651)	(3.684)

\$100,000-\$149,999	0.173 (1.990)	-0.101 (2.057)
Twitter Usage Frequency	3.867***	3.514***
	(0.515)	(0.496)
Constant	-9.949*** (5.805)	-8.773 (6.931)
Observations	2,019	2,019
R-squared	0.042	0.043

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 4. OLS regression model explaining engagement with Russia-Aligned Users (Ideology)

The results in Table 4 suggest that respondents on both sides of the political spectrum indeed tend to show higher engagement with our measures of Russia-aligned content. Respondents who describe themselves as “Very Liberal” and “Very Conservative” tend to interact with Russia-aligned content more frequently, as compared to respondents who describe themselves as centrists (“Middle of the Road.”) This finding is consistent with earlier studies that have identified partisanship as one of the key predictors of higher engagement with disinformation (see Chapter 4.1). While the ideological spectrum overlaps with partisanship, it’s important to keep in mind that, in the US two-party system, each party has its own ideological spectrum. When ideological differences are exploited by Russia-aligned content, it might make it harder for each party to govern internally, in addition to making the country as a whole more polarized.

Similarly, Table 4 demonstrates a consistent association between the demographic characteristics described earlier and the engagement with Russia-aligned content, including place of residence, quadratic age term, gender, and race. The inclusion of controls for days of the survey does not alter these results (Appendix IV).

Trust in Media and Institutions

Studies have demonstrated that higher propensity to believe in disinformation may be associated with lower trust in mainstream media (see Chapter 4.1). To test this hypothesis, we included in our analysis measures of media trust. To compose the trust in media variable we asked respondents whether they agreed with the following four statements:

- The news media pay enough attention to important political topics.

- Over time most news media reporting is pretty accurate.
- In presenting the news dealing with political and social issues, news organizations deal fairly with all sides.
- The mainstream media is more interested in making money than telling the truth.

Subsequently, we correlated the resulting (1–4 scale, 1 = “not at all,” 2 = “not very much”, 3 = “somewhat,” 4 = “completely”) variables to construct a cumulative media trust index based on factor analysis. The variables were recorded so that a higher value on the index is associated to a higher degree of media trust.

Higher propensity to engage with Russia-aligned content may also be associated with lower levels of institutional trust (Chapter 4.1). To control for this possibility, we also included in our analysis the index of institutional trust. To build this index we asked respondents how much confidence they had in the list of the below institutions (not at all, not very much, somewhat, completely):

- Major news organizations
- Judicial institutions like Supreme Court
- Ivy League universities
- Global corporations
- International organizations like the United Nations (the UN), the World Trade Organization (the WTO), World Bank
- World Health Organization (WHO)
- The two main political parties
- Elected officials in Washington

- U.S. police
- U.S. military

Subsequently, we correlated the resulting (1–4 scale, 1 = “not at all,” 2 = “not very much”, 3 = “somewhat,” 4 = “completely”) variables to construct a cumulative index institutional trust. Higher value on the index is associated with a higher degree institutional trust.

Next, we regressed the resulting indicators of media and institutional trust on our indicator of respondents’ engagement with Russia-aligned content. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 5.

	(1) Original sample	(2) Pew- weights	(3) Original sample	(4) Pew- weights	(5) Original sample	(6) Pew-weights
Media trust	-1.525*** (0.598)	-1.500*** (0.574)			-0.128 (0.741)	-0.564 (0.915)
Institutional trust			-2.435*** (0.613)	-1.904*** (0.673)	-2.361*** (0.761)	-1.582 (1.007)
Very liberal	4.163*** (1.807)	4.367*** (1.814)	3.672*** (1.810)	4.017*** (1.808)	3.704*** (1.854)	4.130*** (1.895)
Liberal	2.463 (2.789)	5.154 (5.386)	2.319 (2.744)	5.017 (5.327)	2.342 (2.813)	5.097 (5.426)
Somewhat liberal	0.154 (1.460)	-0.719 (1.590)	-0.217 (1.446)	-1.030 (1.571)	-0.190 (1.458)	-0.944 (1.532)
Somewhat conservative	-3.125*** (1.161)	-2.768*** (1.154)	-2.629*** (1.158)	-2.259*** (1.180)	-2.675*** (1.120)	-2.459*** (1.089)
Conservative	0.800 (1.890)	1.673 (2.000)	1.880 (1.963)	2.784 (2.099)	1.797 (1.875)	2.407 (1.887)
Very conservative	3.722 (2.648)	3.128 (2.288)	4.927*** (2.798)	4.340*** (2.439)	4.840*** (2.671)	3.949*** (2.276)
male	1.620 (1.194)	2.743*** (1.499)	1.448 (1.192)	2.613*** (1.525)	1.451 (1.194)	2.629*** (1.541)
age	-0.364 (0.255)	-0.427 (0.346)	-0.372 (0.255)	-0.436 (0.348)	-0.370 (0.254)	-0.432 (0.344)
age squared	0.006*** (0.003)	0.006*** (0.004)	0.006*** (0.003)	0.006 (0.004)	0.006*** (0.003)	0.006 (0.004)
Bachelor’s degree	-0.849 (2.068)	-0.191 (1.726)	-0.745 (2.056)	-0.109 (1.695)	-0.758 (2.059)	-0.177 (1.716)
Less than a high school diploma	-0.539 (2.956)	1.794 (2.659)	-0.030 (2.936)	2.324 (2.678)	-0.089 (2.904)	2.058 (2.595)
Master’s degree	0.983 (2.167)	1.929 (1.776)	1.445 (2.165)	2.225 (1.771)	1.436 (2.166)	2.182 (1.773)
Regular high school diploma	2.253 (3.795)	5.830 (5.773)	2.288 (3.805)	5.841 (5.909)	2.274 (3.789)	5.757 (5.814)
Some college, no degree	1.021 (2.483)	1.571 (2.047)	1.103 (2.488)	1.641 (2.072)	1.079 (2.475)	1.521 (2.037)
Vocational school/ union certificate	2.519	3.313	2.910	3.641	2.881	3.478

	(3.524)	(3.087)	(3.537)	(3.146)	(3.500)	(3.035)
American Indian / Alaska Native	0.970	1.259	0.758	0.954	0.764	0.999
	(2.606)	(2.283)	(2.608)	(2.289)	(2.607)	(2.281)
Asian	5.591	8.001	5.888	8.232	5.871	8.157
	(5.242)	(7.532)	(5.252)	(7.558)	(5.212)	(7.467)
African American	3.172***	1.903	2.751	1.510	2.774	1.611
	(1.803)	(1.664)	(1.774)	(1.634)	(1.739)	(1.574)
Pacific Islander	-1.550	-0.418	-1.687	-0.160	-1.701	-0.258
	(4.225)	(3.208)	(5.547)	(4.156)	(5.514)	(4.030)
Some other race	-1.198	-1.750	-1.756	-2.128	-1.750	-2.094
	(1.374)	(1.844)	(1.395)	(1.775)	(1.392)	(1.747)
Medium size city	-0.643	-0.853	-1.101	-1.179	-1.104	-1.187
	(1.360)	(1.318)	(1.409)	(1.273)	(1.406)	(1.276)
Suburb of a large central city	5.144***	6.603***	4.841***	6.385***	4.828***	6.337***
	(1.865)	(2.594)	(1.928)	(2.771)	(1.896)	(2.716)
Suburb of a medium size city	2.168	1.365	1.866	1.264	1.854	1.200
	(1.702)	(1.612)	(1.720)	(1.550)	(1.714)	(1.579)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	2.933	3.050	2.463	2.776	2.451	2.738
	(3.063)	(3.058)	(3.081)	(3.050)	(3.070)	(3.041)
Rural area < 10 miles from town	2.211	2.558	2.153	2.609	2.121	2.452
	(2.499)	(2.594)	(2.514)	(2.613)	(2.511)	(2.611)
Rural area > 10 miles from town	-2.630	-1.273	-2.810	-1.312	-2.834	-1.404
	(1.827)	(2.100)	(1.905)	(2.229)	(1.876)	(2.157)
Small city or town	3.584***	3.622***	3.174	3.362***	3.168	3.337***
	(2.028)	(1.757)	(2.078)	(1.824)	(2.072)	(1.817)
below -\$49,999	2.379	0.906	1.397	0.285	1.401	0.312
	(2.509)	(3.048)	(2.401)	(2.833)	(2.395)	(2.806)
\$50,000-\$74,999	0.284	-0.694	-0.518	-1.206	-0.511	-1.167
	(2.337)	(2.484)	(2.291)	(2.372)	(2.284)	(2.341)
\$75,000-\$99,999	2.091	3.833	1.572	3.585	1.565	3.548
	(2.633)	(3.645)	(2.703)	(3.814)	(2.692)	(3.776)
\$100,000-\$149,999	-0.182	-0.441	-0.560	-0.648	-0.567	-0.684
	(2.016)	(2.097)	(1.983)	(2.025)	(1.995)	(2.047)
Twitter Usage Frequency	3.960***	3.608***	3.990***	3.608***	3.994***	3.627***
	(0.526)	(0.503)	(0.532)	(0.513)	(0.530)	(0.507)
Constant	-9.720***	-8.316	-8.504	-7.419	-8.528	-7.476
	(5.795)	(6.949)	(5.675)	(6.651)	(5.669)	(6.609)
Observations	2,019	2,019	2,019	2,019	2,019	2,019
R-squared	0.044	0.045	0.048	0.046	0.048	0.046

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 5. OLS regression model explaining engagement with Russia-Aligned Users (Trust in Media)

The results demonstrate that trust in media and trust in institutions both are negatively correlated to the engagement with Russia aligned content, i.e., respondents in our sample with lower levels of institutional and media trust tend to be more engaged with Russia-aligned content. For every one-unit decrease in media trust, the predicted value of engagement with Russia-aligned media increases by about 1.5 times. For every one-unit decrease in institutional trust, the predicted value of engagement with Russia-aligned media increases about twofold.

That inclusion of the media trust variable eliminates the independent effect of ideology (being very conservative) on propensity to engage with Russia-aligned content, suggesting that for conservative respondents these effects may be mediated through trust in mainstream media (in fact, an interaction between the ideology variable and media trust variable confirms this – the interaction is significant for “very conservative” respondents; the results are available upon request).

Similarly, we also find that including the institutional trust variable tends to eliminate the independent effect of race, which suggests that higher propensity to engage with Russia-aligned content for African-Americans on Twitter might be associated with lower levels of institutional trust (although in this case we only find a significant interaction between race and police and military rather than other institutions; the results are available upon request).

When both trust measures are included together, the institutional trust coefficient remains significant (except in the model with pew sample weights) while the effect of media trust disappears, likely because the institutional trust variable already includes media trust indicators. The change in significance of the coefficient to the media trust variable may hence have to do with endogeneity issues.

This finding is also in line with other studies that have

found that people skeptical about traditional news media and other institutions are more prone to engage with disinformation (Zimmermann and Kohring, 2020; Gauchat, 2012; Jones, 2004; Kraft, Lodge, and Taber, 2014; Lee, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2017; van der Linden, Panagopoulos, and Roozenbeek, 2020 and Chapter 3). Feeling betrayed by traditional institutions and media, such people often turn to alternative information sources, which in turn further alienate them from mainstream institutions, creating a vicious circle. Our findings provide some empirical support for the argument that disinformation spreads due to an erosion of institutional trust and trust in media, which leads respondents to form an opposition to the established information system (Bennett and Livingston, 2018).

Impact of Engagement with Russia-Aligned Accounts on Voting Behavior

In our last section we examine the impact of the engagement with Russia-aligned content on voting intentions of our respondents. As described in Chapter 4.2, studies of the impact of Russia’s influence operations on voting intentions tend to return mixed results.

In this section, we have asked our respondents several measures of respondents’ voting intentions. First, we posed a question on the respondents’ willingness to take part in the election: “Are you planning to vote, or have you already voted, in the 2020 presidential election?” The responses were as follows: “Yes” / “No” / “Don’t Know.”

Given the binary nature of the dependent variable we used probit model in this specification. Table 6 reports results from a probit regression with robust standard errors using the engagement with Russia-aligned content and basic individual-level characteristics of respondents as explanatory variables.

Are you planning to vote, or have you already voted, in the 2020 presidential election?	(1) Original sample	(2) Marginal effects	(3) Pew-weights	(4) Marginal effects
Engagement with Russia-aligned content	0.006***	0.001***	0.004	0.000
	(0.003)	(0.000)	(0.003)	(0.000)
male	-0.036	-0.004	0.020	0.002
	(0.096)	(0.011)	(0.100)	(0.012)
age	0.023	0.001***	0.034***	0.001***
	(0.019)	(0.001)	(0.020)	(0.001)
age squared	-0.000		-0.000	
	(0.000)		(0.000)	
Bachelor's degree	0.195	0.022	0.257	0.031
	(0.325)	(0.041)	(0.336)	(0.047)
Less than a high school diploma	-0.906***	-0.194***	-0.770***	-0.165***
	(0.402)	(0.084)	(0.411)	(0.085)
Master's degree	0.366	0.037	0.369	0.041
	(0.358)	(0.042)	(0.368)	(0.048)
Regular high school diploma	-0.110	-0.015	0.002	0.000
	(0.346)	(0.045)	(0.358)	(0.050)
Some college, no degree	0.051	0.006	0.143	0.018
	(0.333)	(0.042)	(0.344)	(0.048)
Vocational school/ union certificate	0.150	0.017	0.350	0.039
	(0.389)	(0.047)	(0.397)	(0.050)
American Indian / Alaska Native	-0.368	-0.049	-0.358	-0.047
	(0.257)	(0.041)	(0.252)	(0.040)
Asian	-0.468***	-0.066***	-0.428***	-0.059***
	(0.167)	(0.029)	(0.169)	(0.028)
African American	-0.162	-0.019	-0.234***	-0.029
	(0.131)	(0.016)	(0.139)	(0.018)
Some other race	-0.213	-0.025	-0.042	-0.005
	(0.214)	(0.029)	(0.237)	(0.026)
Very liberal	0.404***	0.049***	0.441***	0.055***
	(0.144)	(0.016)	(0.146)	(0.017)
Liberal	0.487***	0.056***	0.519***	0.062***
	(0.162)	(0.016)	(0.173)	(0.018)
Somewhat liberal	0.066	0.010	0.134	0.020
	(0.137)	(0.020)	(0.151)	(0.022)
Somewhat conservative	0.257	0.034	0.382***	0.049***
	(0.179)	(0.021)	(0.185)	(0.021)
Conservative	0.334***	0.042***	0.387***	0.050***
	(0.188)	(0.021)	(0.192)	(0.021)
Very conservative	0.396***	0.048***	0.412***	0.052***
	(0.183)	(0.019)	(0.187)	(0.021)
Medium size city	-0.083	-0.009	-0.064	-0.006
	(0.161)	(0.017)	(0.169)	(0.017)
Suburb of a large central city	-0.171	-0.019	-0.214	-0.024
	(0.138)	(0.016)	(0.144)	(0.016)
Suburb of a medium size city	-0.195	-0.022	-0.264	-0.031
	(0.166)	(0.020)	(0.177)	(0.022)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	-0.388***	-0.050	-0.437***	-0.057
	(0.212)	(0.032)	(0.238)	(0.037)
Rural area < 10 miles from town	0.259	0.021	0.123	0.011
	(0.238)	(0.018)	(0.231)	(0.020)
Rural area > 10 miles from town	0.077	0.007	-0.132	-0.014

	(0.260)	(0.024)	(0.270)	(0.031)
Small city or town	-0.206	-0.024	-0.256***	-0.030
	(0.153)	(0.018)	(0.154)	(0.019)
below -\$49,999	-0.576***	-0.058***	-0.739***	-0.075***
	(0.257)	(0.019)	(0.256)	(0.018)
\$50,000-\$74,999	-0.293	-0.024	-0.408	-0.032***
	(0.272)	(0.019)	(0.268)	(0.018)
\$75,000-\$99,999	-0.036	-0.002	-0.202	-0.013
	(0.285)	(0.018)	(0.283)	(0.018)
\$100,000-\$149,999	-0.196	-0.015	-0.312	-0.022
	(0.296)	(0.021)	(0.291)	(0.020)
Twitter Usage Frequency	0.105***	0.012***	0.092***	0.011***
	(0.048)	(0.006)	(0.052)	(0.006)
Constant	0.937		0.802	
	(0.588)		(0.625)	
Observations	1,981	1,981	1,981	1,981
r^2_p	0.135		0.155	

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 6. Probit regression model: predictor of willingness to take part in November 2020 election

The results indicate that higher engagement with Russia-aligned content predicts stronger willingness to vote in the election, although this effect is fairly small and disappears following the inclusion of Pew sample-based weights.²⁷⁶ This correlation between the Russia-aligned content and voting intentions may be related to the fact that our measure of Russia-aligned content corresponds to more partisan messages on both sides of the US political spectrum. Stronger partisan messaging may correspond to higher mobilization, which was higher among both liberals and conservatives in the November 2020 US election.

Next, we looked at specific voting preferences of our respondents by asking them which candidate they supported in the election: “For whom do you plan to (or have) vote(d) for in this 2020 presidential race?” The responses were as follows: “Donald Trump” / “Joe Biden” / “Another candidate” / “Don’t plan to vote” / “Don’t know.” Given the binary nature of the dependent variable we used probit model in this specification. Table 7 reports the results of this analysis for those respondents who said they will vote for Donald Trump in November 2020 election.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
“For whom do you plan to (or have) vote(d) for in this 2020 presidential race? Donald Trump	Original sample	Marginal effects	Pew-weights	Marginal effects
Engagement with Russia-aligned content	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)
male	-0.155***	-0.037***	-0.110	-0.026
	(0.070)	(0.017)	(0.073)	(0.017)
age	0.052***	0.001***	0.055***	0.001***
	(0.014)	(0.001)	(0.015)	(0.001)
age squared	-0.001***		-0.001***	

276 Respondents who engaged with Russia-aligned content 10 times had an only 1% increase in the chance that the respondents would cast a vote when weighted by the Pew sample. The overall impact of Russia-aligned content engagement is small as our respondents engaged with such content 6 times on average between January and November. However 1% of respondents engaged with Russia-aligned content more than 100 times in the period, which increased their chance to cast vote by 10%.

	(0.000)		(0.000)	
Bachelor's degree	0.212	0.048	0.245	0.056
	(0.215)	(0.046)	(0.225)	(0.049)
Less than a high school diploma	-0.241	-0.048	-0.242	-0.049
	(0.355)	(0.070)	(0.355)	(0.071)
Master's degree	0.102	0.022	0.110	0.025
	(0.220)	(0.047)	(0.228)	(0.050)
Regular high school diploma	0.361	0.084	0.410***	0.098***
	(0.232)	(0.051)	(0.243)	(0.055)
Some college, no degree	0.239	0.054	0.224	0.051
	(0.221)	(0.048)	(0.232)	(0.051)
Vocational school/ union certificate	0.386	0.090	0.381	0.090
	(0.257)	(0.058)	(0.266)	(0.061)
American Indian / Alaska Native	-0.056	-0.014	-0.126	-0.032
	(0.283)	(0.070)	(0.264)	(0.064)
Asian	-0.194	-0.047	-0.147	-0.037
	(0.150)	(0.035)	(0.152)	(0.037)
African American	-0.639***	-0.139***	-0.593***	-0.132***
	(0.128)	(0.024)	(0.129)	(0.026)
Some other race	-0.354***	-0.083***	-0.357***	-0.085***
	(0.209)	(0.045)	(0.208)	(0.045)
Very liberal	-0.626***	-0.141***	-0.587***	-0.135***
	(0.111)	(0.023)	(0.114)	(0.024)
Liberal	-0.583***	-0.134***	-0.570***	-0.132***
	(0.127)	(0.026)	(0.134)	(0.028)
Somewhat liberal	-0.671***	-0.148***	-0.632***	-0.142***
	(0.134)	(0.025)	(0.141)	(0.027)
Somewhat conservative	0.811***	0.282***	0.791***	0.275***
	(0.116)	(0.041)	(0.122)	(0.043)
Conservative	1.190***	0.420***	1.205***	0.426***
	(0.113)	(0.038)	(0.119)	(0.040)
Very conservative	1.447***	0.504***	1.442***	0.503***
	(0.120)	(0.037)	(0.123)	(0.038)
Medium size city	0.033	0.008	0.046	0.011
	(0.127)	(0.029)	(0.136)	(0.032)
Suburb of a large central city	0.191***	0.045***	0.196***	0.047***
	(0.100)	(0.023)	(0.104)	(0.025)
Suburb of a medium size city	0.051	0.012	0.062	0.014
	(0.129)	(0.029)	(0.136)	(0.031)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	0.195	0.046	0.200	0.048
	(0.151)	(0.036)	(0.155)	(0.038)
Rural area < 10 miles from town	0.257***	0.061***	0.248***	0.060
	(0.149)	(0.036)	(0.150)	(0.037)

Rural area > 10 miles from town	0.569*** (0.211)	0.144*** (0.057)	0.472*** (0.227)	0.119*** (0.061)
Small city or town	0.293*** (0.122)	0.070*** (0.030)	0.320*** (0.133)	0.078*** (0.033)
below -\$49,999	-0.374*** (0.142)	-0.091*** (0.036)	-0.392*** (0.144)	-0.097*** (0.037)
\$50,000-\$74,999	-0.296*** (0.151)	-0.073*** (0.038)	-0.317*** (0.151)	-0.080*** (0.039)
\$75,000-\$99,999	-0.074 (0.154)	-0.019 (0.040)	-0.106 (0.155)	-0.028 (0.041)
\$100,000-\$149,999	-0.139 (0.158)	-0.036 (0.041)	-0.146 (0.157)	-0.038 (0.041)
Twitter Usage Frequency	-0.042 (0.036)	-0.010 (0.009)	-0.039 (0.038)	-0.009 (0.009)
Constant	-1.553*** (0.417)		-1.673*** (0.434)	
Observations	2,017	2,017	2,017	2,017
r ² _p	0.295	.	0.285	.

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 7. Probit regression model: predictor of voting for Donald Trump to take part in November 2020 election

The Table 8 reports the results of this analysis for those respondents who said they would vote for Joe Biden in November 2020 election.

	(1) Original sample	(2) Marginal effects	(3) Pew-weights	(4) Marginal effects
"For whom do you plan to (or have) vote(d) for in this 2020 presidential race? Joe Biden				
Engagement with Russia-aligned content	0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)	0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
male	0.112*** (0.065)	0.033*** (0.019)	0.090 (0.068)	0.027 (0.020)
age	-0.031*** (0.013)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.028*** (0.014)	-0.000 (0.001)
age squared	0.000*** (0.000)		0.000*** (0.000)	
Bachelor's degree	-0.271 (0.204)	-0.076 (0.055)	-0.288 (0.213)	-0.082 (0.058)
Less than a high school diploma	-0.898*** (0.314)	-0.265*** (0.091)	-0.962*** (0.332)	-0.290*** (0.098)
Master's degree	-0.124 (0.209)	-0.034 (0.056)	-0.130 (0.218)	-0.036 (0.060)
Regular high school diploma	-0.494*** (0.220)	-0.142*** (0.060)	-0.500*** (0.230)	-0.147*** (0.064)
Some college, no degree	-0.436*** (0.209)	-0.124*** (0.056)	-0.399*** (0.220)	-0.116*** (0.061)
Vocational school/ union certificate	-0.376 (0.249)	-0.106 (0.069)	-0.342 (0.257)	-0.099 (0.073)
American Indian / Alaska Native	-0.313	-0.095	-0.241	-0.074

	(0.238)	(0.073)	(0.233)	(0.072)
Asian	-0.012	-0.004	-0.031	-0.010
	(0.132)	(0.039)	(0.137)	(0.042)
African American	0.282***	0.081***	0.229***	0.068***
	(0.102)	(0.029)	(0.104)	(0.030)
Some other race	0.149	0.044	0.196	0.058
	(0.176)	(0.051)	(0.193)	(0.056)
Very liberal	0.751***	0.244***	0.707***	0.233***
	(0.097)	(0.029)	(0.103)	(0.031)
Liberal	0.867***	0.271***	0.808***	0.258***
	(0.109)	(0.030)	(0.119)	(0.034)
Somewhat liberal	0.549***	0.188***	0.542***	0.186***
	(0.105)	(0.034)	(0.113)	(0.036)
Somewhat conservative	-0.663***	-0.247***	-0.595***	-0.223***
	(0.117)	(0.041)	(0.125)	(0.045)
Conservative	-0.943***	-0.338***	-0.959***	-0.341***
	(0.115)	(0.036)	(0.120)	(0.038)
Very conservative	-1.247***	-0.418***	-1.240***	-0.414***
	(0.124)	(0.033)	(0.127)	(0.034)
Medium size city	0.002	0.001	0.010	0.003
	(0.114)	(0.033)	(0.123)	(0.036)
Suburb of a large central city	-0.284***	-0.084***	-0.305***	-0.092***
	(0.091)	(0.027)	(0.097)	(0.029)
Suburb of a medium size city	-0.075	-0.022	-0.097	-0.029
	(0.116)	(0.033)	(0.123)	(0.037)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	-0.328***	-0.097***	-0.330***	-0.100***
	(0.148)	(0.045)	(0.178)	(0.055)
Rural area < 10 miles from town	-0.222***	-0.065	-0.299***	-0.090***
	(0.134)	(0.040)	(0.137)	(0.042)
Rural area > 10 miles from town	-0.402***	-0.120***	-0.415***	-0.127***
	(0.194)	(0.059)	(0.208)	(0.065)
Small city or town	-0.352***	-0.104***	-0.413***	-0.126***
	(0.109)	(0.033)	(0.115)	(0.035)
below -\$49,999	0.067	0.020	0.052	0.016
	(0.135)	(0.040)	(0.139)	(0.042)
\$50,000-\$74,999	0.261***	0.076***	0.248***	0.073***
	(0.143)	(0.042)	(0.144)	(0.043)
\$75,000-\$99,999	0.065	0.019	0.001	0.000
	(0.145)	(0.043)	(0.148)	(0.045)
\$100,000-\$149,999	0.097	0.029	0.086	0.026
	(0.150)	(0.044)	(0.149)	(0.045)
Twitter Usage Frequency	0.096***	0.028***	0.084***	0.025***
	(0.033)	(0.010)	(0.035)	(0.010)
Constant	0.708***		0.760***	
	(0.378)		(0.398)	
Observations	2,017	2,017	2,017	2,017
r ² p	0.235		0.221	

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 8. Probit regression model: predictor of voting for Joe Biden to take part in November 2020 election

Overall, we do not find a significant impact of engagement with Russia-aligned content on respondents' propensity to support Donald Trump or Joe Biden. This might be partly because Russia's disinformation targets respondents of various political ideologies.

We have also included interaction terms between

engagement with Russia-aligned content and the demographic variables to further analyze its impact on people's voting behavior. We have found that Russia-aligned content has no interaction with respondents' race or political engagement but it has a statistically significant negative effect on voting intention for candidates from

the opposite political camp: liberal respondents ('Very liberal' and 'Somewhat liberal') are less likely to support Donald Trump while conservative respondents ('Very conservative') are less likely to support Joe Biden when

they frequently engage with Russia-aligned content (Table 9). This finding is consistent with an argument that the Kremlin's strategy attempts to exacerbate existing political divides in the US political climate.

	Donald Trump		Joe Biden	
	(1) Original sample	(2) Pew-weights	(3) Original sample	(4) Pew-weights
Engagement with Russia-aligned content	0.001 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.003)
Very liberal	-0.404*** (0.121)	-0.385*** (0.124)	0.701*** (0.103)	0.653*** (0.109)
Liberal	-0.503*** (0.136)	-0.499*** (0.142)	0.844*** (0.112)	0.780*** (0.122)
Somewhat liberal	-0.594*** (0.139)	-0.555*** (0.145)	0.533*** (0.109)	0.520*** (0.117)
Somewhat conservative	0.818*** (0.119)	0.800*** (0.125)	-0.659*** (0.120)	-0.594*** (0.128)
Conservative	1.184*** (0.116)	1.197*** (0.122)	-0.918*** (0.117)	-0.938*** (0.123)
Very conservative	1.372*** (0.126)	1.378*** (0.129)	-1.089*** (0.131)	-1.095*** (0.135)
Very liberal # Russia-aligned content	-0.206*** (0.085)	-0.179*** (0.075)	0.010 (0.007)	0.011 (0.007)
Liberal # Russia-aligned content	-0.058 (0.051)	-0.044 (0.047)	0.008 (0.009)	0.009 (0.009)
Somewhat liberal # Russia-aligned content	-0.047*** (0.026)	-0.045*** (0.025)	0.005 (0.008)	0.007 (0.008)
Somewhat conservative # Russia-aligned content	-0.000 (0.013)	-0.001 (0.013)	-0.002 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.015)
Conservative # Russia-aligned content	0.001 (0.004)	0.001 (0.005)	-0.006 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.005)
Very conservative # Russia-aligned content	0.021 (0.015)	0.016 (0.013)	-0.262*** (0.122)	-0.255*** (0.132)
male	-0.142*** (0.071)	-0.097 (0.074)	0.103 (0.065)	0.078 (0.069)
age	0.051*** (0.014)	0.055*** (0.015)	-0.032*** (0.013)	-0.029*** (0.014)
age squared	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Bachelor's degree	0.196 (0.216)	0.229 (0.224)	-0.270 (0.205)	-0.273 (0.211)

Less than a high school diploma	-0.323 (0.376)	-0.293 (0.369)	-0.896*** (0.317)	-0.951*** (0.334)
Master's degree	0.087 (0.219)	0.098 (0.227)	-0.118 (0.210)	-0.116 (0.216)
Regular high school diploma	0.359 (0.234)	0.414*** (0.243)	-0.511*** (0.221)	-0.502*** (0.229)
Some college, no degree	0.220 (0.222)	0.209 (0.232)	-0.433*** (0.211)	-0.384*** (0.219)
Vocational school/ union certificate	0.375 (0.260)	0.371 (0.268)	-0.367 (0.252)	-0.323 (0.258)
American Indian or Alaska Native	-0.088 (0.282)	-0.155 (0.262)	-0.310 (0.239)	-0.234 (0.234)
Asian	-0.193 (0.151)	-0.145 (0.154)	-0.010 (0.133)	-0.029 (0.138)
Black, or African American	-0.651*** (0.126)	-0.603*** (0.127)	0.276*** (0.102)	0.221*** (0.104)
Some other race	-0.341 (0.213)	-0.349*** (0.212)	0.152 (0.176)	0.203 (0.195)
Medium size city (50,000 to 249,999)	0.035 (0.127)	0.049 (0.137)	0.017 (0.115)	0.026 (0.124)
Suburb of a large central city	0.212*** (0.102)	0.217*** (0.106)	-0.274*** (0.092)	-0.298*** (0.097)
Suburb of a medium size city	0.068 (0.130)	0.076 (0.137)	-0.063 (0.117)	-0.087 (0.124)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	0.226 (0.156)	0.221 (0.159)	-0.320*** (0.151)	-0.321*** (0.180)
Rural area < 10 miles from the closest town	0.292*** (0.153)	0.279*** (0.153)	-0.216 (0.135)	-0.296*** (0.138)
Rural area > 10 miles from the closest town	0.619*** (0.216)	0.517*** (0.232)	-0.378*** (0.198)	-0.407*** (0.211)
Small city or town (10,000 to 49,999)	0.303*** (0.124)	0.325*** (0.135)	-0.349*** (0.111)	-0.406*** (0.117)
below -\$49,999	-0.345*** (0.141)	-0.368*** (0.143)	0.066 (0.135)	0.047 (0.140)
\$50,000-\$74,999	-0.261*** (0.150)	-0.282*** (0.151)	0.259*** (0.142)	0.241*** (0.144)
\$75,000-\$99,999	-0.045 (0.151)	-0.078 (0.153)	0.054 (0.144)	-0.014 (0.147)
\$100,000-\$149,999	-0.098 (0.157)	-0.105 (0.156)	0.092 (0.149)	0.080 (0.149)
Twitter Usage Frequency	-0.026 (0.037)	-0.028 (0.039)	0.093*** (0.033)	0.082*** (0.035)
Constant	-1.640***	-1.757***	0.731***	0.777***

	(0.421)	(0.438)	(0.379)	(0.398)
Observations	2,017	2,017	2,017	2,017
r ² _p	0.308	0.296	0.242	0.227

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 9. Probit regression model: predictor of voting for Donald Trump to take part in November 2020 election. Interaction with ideology

The inclusion of fixed controls for days of engagement (over an observed period of 21 days) does not alter our main conclusions (the results are available upon request).

Discussion

Our content analysis of Twitter posts revealed that our respondents rarely engage with pro-Russian media accounts, but they occasionally engage with Russia-aligned accounts that promote narratives pushed by Kremlin proxies. The content of their posts tends to be about divisive political and social issues, and supportive of either the Republican or the Democrats. Such Twitter posts attract and reinforce the ideology of specific groups of Twitter users. The analysis allowed us to identify several individual characteristics among our respondents that predict higher engagement with Russia-aligned content.

First, we find that male gender and lower socioeconomic status of respondents increase the likelihood of engagement with Russia-aligned content. Regarding race, the African-American respondents in our sample were more likely to engage with Russia-aligned content. This is consistent with earlier studies that emphasized that this social group is commonly targeted by Kremlin proxies in an effort to deepen existing social divisions in the United States.

Second, we find the correlation between extreme ideological views on both sides of the political spectrum and higher propensity to engage with Russia-aligned content. This is also consistent with previous studies that also found that partisanship consistently predicts people's willingness to engage with disinformation (Kahan, 2017; Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018).

Our analysis also discovers a link between lower trust in institutions and mainstream media, and higher propensity to engage with Russia-aligned content. We show that individuals with lower levels of institutional trust and lower levels of trust in mainstream media tend to en-

gage with Russia-aligned content more often. This result is consistent with other studies in Europe (Zimmermann and Kohring, 2020) that also find a link between lower trust in news media and politics, and higher belief in online disinformation. This finding implies that being prone to engage with disinformation may be a symptom (rather than a cause in itself) of growing disenchantment of specific social groups in the society with establishment and mainstream institutions. This suggests that solutions to the disinformation problem cannot rely only on measures to combat disinformation (which should still be continued and reinforced). They also need to focus on restoring trust in mainstream institutions among individuals on both sides of the political spectrum.

Ultimately, our analysis has discovered a higher propensity to participate in the 2020 presidential election among the respondents more actively engaged with Russia-aligned content. These results may be explained by the very strong correlation between our measure of Russia-aligned content and more partisan coverage of political events. We also find that engagement with Russia-aligned content correlates negatively with propensity to support the presidential candidates from the opposite political camp among individuals on both sides of the political spectrum. This finding is consistent with an argument that the Kremlin attempts to exacerbate the existing political divisions within the United States.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Systematize the Datasets Pertaining to Russia's Influence Operations
- In recent years, hardly any policy issue has received as much attention from the US policy community as Russia's influence operations. Yet, while working on this report, we faced serious challenges finding a platform integrating multiple data sources and links on Russia's disinformation. Multiple entities in the United States and worldwide track and collect data on

disinformation, fake news sources, and social media influence operations, but many such studies are not up-to-date or publicly available for scholars and thus make little contribution to the general knowledge. We propose that GEC or other specialized agencies create a platform that would systematize the existing open databases so as to facilitate research outreach for scholars working on these topics. This would significantly boost the research on understanding Russia's influence operations. As an example, in Appendix I we provide links to databases identified throughout our work on this report (many turned out to be unusable for the reasons outlined above).

- Deepen Quantitative Research Analysis
- Despite the attention that Russia's influence operations have received in recent years, the bulk of the analysis on these issues remains overwhelmingly qualitative and often repetitive. This prevents analysts from moving forward by tracking the impact of disinformation among specific targeted audiences, which (as we explain above) is the essence of the Kremlin approach and one of the main reasons for its success. The policy community thus needs to adopt quantitative techniques more often or to cooperate with academic scholars to apply them more pro-actively to address more urgent and nuanced questions pertaining to the impact of Russia's influence operations. Our study is one of the ongoing attempts to fill in this gap.
- Avoid Overfocusing on Twitter
- The absolute majority of existing quantitative social media studies focus on Twitter, due to data availability issues. However, this report analysis demonstrates that Russia's influence operations target a variety of social media platforms. The 2016 IRA effort, for example, predominantly focused on Facebook, where it achieved a very large outreach to various US audiences. Given the importance of these questions for US national security, we recommend that social media platforms other than Twitter (including Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, YouTube, Parler, Tumblr, 4chan, 9GAG, and Pinterest) and direct messaging platforms (WhatsApp, Telegram) make their data more accessible for scholarly analysis.

- Punish / Deter the Aggressors
- This section includes a number of measures designed to limit the Kremlin's ability to spread disinformation campaigns online. These might include publicly exposing those who are part of pro-Kremlin operations, either wittingly or unwittingly, and targeting individual Russian operatives through cyberoperations to deter them from spreading engaging in malicious activity (Barnes, 2018; Nakashima, 2019). Western companies should be warned against placing their ads with Kremlin-linked disinformation outlets (Kalensky, 2019: 13). We also recommend continuing the strategy of labelling websites as being funded by or linked to the Kremlin – studies have shown that this approach makes Twitter users less prone to liking and sharing tweets by news outlets labeled as state-affiliated (Schoenmakers and Liu, 2021). We also recommend sanctioning the worst disinformers and disinformation organizations. In particular, the United States should sanction Russia's most active propagandists, such as Dmitry Kiselyov, Vladimir Solovyov, and others.
- Work with Social Media Companies to Highlight and Block Kremlin-Linked Proxies and Malicious Actors in Russia
- Our findings indicate that the countermeasures adopted in recent years to combat Russia's social media operations have been fairly successful. In particular, by 2020, blocking Kremlin-linked accounts and platforms had significantly scaled down the outreach of Kremlin proxies to US audiences. As the fight is far from over, this approach should be continued in the future. Scholars should determine whether labelling Russia-funded websites and pages (Paul, 2020)²⁷⁷ effectively reduces the engagement of US audiences with such content.
- Develop Targeted Media Literacy Training, Build the Resilience of At-Risk Populations
- Media literacy training seeks to improve audiences' ability to access, analyze, and evaluate various forms of media (Bodine-Baron et al., 2018). However, such programs often remain generic and untailored to the needs of specific groups. This contrasts with the Kremlin social media approach, which, as we

277 https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2020/new-labels-for-government-and-state-affiliated-media-accounts.html

have shown above, is often deliberately crafted to target the interests and attitudes of specific social groups. Accordingly, media literacy programs (especially those identified as targets of the Kremlin influence campaigns) should also be developed for specific targeted groups (those of particular Kremlin interest) and adjusted to make them more relatable. Facebook algorithms that develop interest-based targeting may also come in handy when designing such programs.

- Moreover, if lower trust in political institutions is one of the predictors of engagement with disinformation, media literacy programs that these social groups perceive as promoted by the political establishment will not be effective in changing their viewpoints. These groups require more nuanced approaches designed to restore their trust in existing institutions (Silverblatt 2015; Humprecht et al. 2020) before media literacy programs can be successfully implemented.
- Most of the existing media literacy programs lack clear evidence of effectiveness (particularly for adults) and need to be improved (Callahan, 2019).
- Focus on Disinformation by Domestic Groups Susceptible to Disinformation
- The above analysis shows, that, in recent years, the Kremlin's approach has shifted from creating its own fake or misleading content to promoting narratives originated by extremist groups on both (left and right) sides of the political spectrum in the United States, as well as other targeted groups. Russia's collocation strategy that blurs distinctions between the Kremlin proxies and American citizens with extreme partisan views makes monitoring information flows particularly challenging, given the ongoing polarization of US domestic politics. In view of the changing Kremlin disinformation approach, we suggest that scholars and policy analysts pay more attention to the roles the extreme-left and extreme-right groups play in spreading disinformation narratives, and develop strategies to counter them. It can be anticipated that having been barred from major social media platforms, they would move to platforms that include direct messaging services.
- Restore Trust in Traditional Media
- Growing mistrust in traditional media among

Americans and their ongoing polarization constitute significant points of concern. The polarization of traditional media is at least partly driven by their attempts to compete for audiences with social media (Klein, 2020). Our findings suggest that respondents mistrustful of traditional media outlets may be more prone to engage with Russia's disinformation. What seems to be missing in the US context is a credible, quality, trusted public broadcaster with a high audience outreach. As a possible solution, we recommend considering a possibility to increase public funding to US news broadcasters, which would make it a priority to maintain standards of professional and objective fact-based reporting. The funding currently received by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the National Public Radio (NPR) is too small to provide a serious alternative to major news outlets (Kirchick, 2017).

- We recommend basing a strategy on three simultaneous approaches:
 1. Strengthening the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as a regulator broadcasting content through licensing;
 2. Increasing financial support to PBS and NPR; and
 3. Innovating regulations to strengthen the finances of news operations that meet accuracy standards over time—standards set by journalism schools, not government. Meeting standards might qualify for a tax incentive.

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APPENDIX I. RUSSIA'S SOCIAL MEDIA OPERATIONS DATABASES

- **Classification of the Info Sources as Hyper-partisan and Fake News (pp.20-21 and p.36):** https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3118471&download=yes
- **Corpus of QAnon posts known as “Q drops”:** <https://qresearch.ch/q-posts>
- **Datasets with Profile Information, Tweets and Media (E.G., Images and Videos) From Accounts Connected to State-Backed Information Operations:** <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/reports/information-operations.html>
- **Digital Society Project:** <http://digitalsocietyproject.org>
- **EU vs Stratcom:** <https://euvsdisinfo.eu>
- **FakeNewsChallenge:** <https://github.com/FakeNewsChallenge>
- **Fake News Sources:** <https://www.bettycjung.net/Pdfs/FakeNewsSources.pdf>
- **Fake News on Twitter During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election (Grinberg et al., 2016):** https://science.sciencemag.org/content/sci/suppl/2019/01/23/363.6425.374.DC1/aau2706_Grinberg_SM.pdf
- **False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and Satirical “News” Sources”:** <https://d279m997dpfwgl.cloudfront.net/wp/2016/11/Resource-False-Misleading-Clickbait-y-and-Satirical-%E2%80%9CNews%E2%80%9D-Sources-1.pdf>
- **GDEL project:** <https://blog.gdelproject.org/new-gkg-2-0-article-metadata-fields/>
- **Hamilton 68:** <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/>
- **Misinformation Directory:** <https://www.factcheck.org/2017/07/websites-post-fake-satirical-stories>
- **News Guard:** <https://www.newsguardtech.com>
- **Repositories containing IRA datasets:** Grafika Information Operations Archive (2018 Twitter and Reddit IRA datasets), 538 list of IRA tweets (2012–2018), Ushadrons (-2018)
- **StopFake:** <https://www.stopfake.org/en/main/>

APPENDIX II. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std.	Dev.	Min
Media trust	2,078	3.00e-09	1	-2.263854	1.909645
Institutional trust	2,078	-3.78e-09	1	-2.743565	2.206648
Male	2,078	.5409047	.4984439	0	1
Age	2,078	40.21752	15.03124	18	79
Education:					
Bachelor's degree	2,078	.3118383	.4633557	0	1
Degree higher than a master's	2,078	.0322425	.1766861	0	1
Less than a high school diploma	2,078	.0202117	.1407578	0	1
Master's degree	2,078	.1564004	.3633219	0	1
Regular high school diploma	2,078	.1515881	.3587075	0	1
Some college, no degree	2,078	.2853705	.4516994	0	1
Vocational school/ union certificate	2,078	.0423484	.2014313	0	1
Class:					
Lower class	2,048	.1293945	.3357181	0	1
Middle class	2,048	.4448242	.4970677	0	1
Upper class	2,048	.0717773	.2581819	0	1
Working class	2,048	.3540039	.4783271	0	1
Race:					
American Indian or Alaska Native	2,078	.0178056	.1322761	0	1
Asian	2,078	.0615977	.2404813	0	1
Black, or African American	2,078	.1506256	.3577697	0	1
Pacific Islander	2,078	.0009625	.0310161	0	1
Some other race	2,078	.0413859	.1992291	0	1
White	2,078	.7276227	.4452902	0	1
Place of residence:					
A large central city (over 250,000)	2,078	.2954764	.4563664	0	1
A medium size city (50,000 to 249,999)	2,078	.1102021	.3132169	0	1
A suburb of a large central city	2,078	.2285852	.4200225	0	1
A suburb of a medium size city	2,078	.1116458	.315006	0	1
A town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	2,078	.0481232	.214078	0	1
Rural area less than 10 miles from the	2,078	.0611165	.2396015	0	1
Rural area more than 10 miles from the	2,078	.0240616	.1532773	0	1
Small city or town (10,000 to 49,999)	2,078	.1207892	.3259606	0	1
Income:					
\$150,000 or more	2,078	.0890279	.2848526	0	1
\$100,00-\$149,999	2,078	.1179018	.3225695	0	1
\$75,000-\$99,999	2,078	.1366699	.3435812	0	1
\$50,000-\$74,999	2,078	.1857555	.3890029	0	1
below -\$49,999	2,078	.4706449	.4992577	0	1

Ideology:					
Very liberal	2,019	.1872214	.3901858	0	1
Liberal	2,019	.1475978	.3547887	0	1
Somewhat liberal	2,019	.1208519	.3260358	0	1
Middle of the road	2,019	.268945	.4435212	0	1
Somewhat conservative	2,019	.0797424	.2709612	0	1
Conservative	2,019	.1005448	.3007996	0	1
Very conservative	2,019	.0950966	.293421	0	1

Table 10. Descriptive Statistics

APPENDIX III. BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH RUSSIA-ALIGNED CONTENT

	(1) Original sample	(2) Pew-weights ad- justed sample
male	2.044 (1.304)	3.355*** (1.760)
age	-0.349 (0.255)	-0.405 (0.334)
age squared	0.005*** (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)
Bachelor's degree	-1.604 (2.162)	-1.333 (2.094)
Less than a high school diploma	-3.647 (3.011)	-1.390 (2.532)
Master's degree	0.990 (2.210)	1.694 (1.783)
Regular high school diploma	0.948 (3.422)	4.203 (4.825)
Some college, no degree	-0.021 (2.558)	0.365 (2.109)
Vocational school/ union certificate	1.086 (3.524)	1.782 (2.867)
Lower class	5.682*** (2.695)	5.232*** (2.658)
Middle class	2.150 (1.350)	1.909 (1.294)
Working class	2.767 (1.709)	1.981 (1.836)
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.195 (2.890)	1.240 (2.699)
Asian	6.285 (5.693)	9.086 (8.558)
African American	2.811*** (1.589)	1.677 (1.573)
Pacific Islander	2.669 (3.824)	6.122 (6.456)
Some other race	-0.139 (1.369)	-0.486 (1.573)
Medium size city (50,000 to 249,999)	-0.829	-0.811

	(1.302)	(1.267)
Suburb of a large central city	5.122***	6.549***
	(1.844)	(2.483)
Suburb of a medium size city	2.217	1.629
	(1.647)	(1.444)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	3.724	3.675
	(3.077)	(3.112)
Rural area less than 10 miles from the closest town	2.465	2.896
	(2.265)	(2.384)
Rural area more than 10 miles from the closest town	-2.406	-1.006
	(1.894)	(2.206)
Small city or town (10,000 to 49,999)	3.453***	3.321***
	(1.926)	(1.641)
below -\$49,999	0.670	-1.115
	(2.684)	(3.170)
\$50,000-\$74,999	-0.809	-1.719
	(2.429)	(2.409)
\$75,000-\$99,999	1.190	3.115
	(2.844)	(4.012)
\$100,000-\$149,999	-0.594	-0.786
	(1.962)	(1.979)
Twitter Usage Frequency	4.067***	3.675***
	(0.526)	(0.497)
Oct 24	6.961	5.983
	(5.332)	(4.727)
Oct 25	4.642***	4.375***
	(2.683)	(2.294)
Oct 26	6.631***	8.740***
	(2.166)	(4.150)
Oct 27	6.425***	6.363***
	(1.765)	(2.020)
Oct 28	8.642***	8.113***
	(2.178)	(2.220)
Oct 29	4.077***	3.424
	(1.952)	(2.738)
Oct 30	7.543***	5.031
	(4.414)	(5.110)
Oct 31	-3.268	-5.807
	(5.848)	(8.336)
Nov 01	-4.044	-0.471
	(3.275)	(5.331)
Nov 02	4.215	1.798

	(3.280)	(5.022)
Nov 03	3.956***	2.753
	(1.628)	(1.913)
Nov 04	10.589	10.300
	(6.515)	(6.576)
Nov 05	6.795	4.999
	(4.176)	(4.143)
Nov 06	18.218	16.702
	(16.836)	(14.048)
Nov 07	3.611	4.574
	(3.750)	(4.782)
Nov 08	4.985	4.744
	(4.682)	(4.170)
Nov 09	6.789***	5.000
	(2.511)	(3.220)
Nov 10	2.833	1.795
	(1.862)	(2.512)
Nov 11	3.759***	3.179
	(1.545)	(1.960)
Nov 12	2.457	1.841
	(1.668)	(2.162)
Constant	-15.541***	-12.654
	(6.873)	(8.687)
Observations	2,048	2,048
R-squared	0.0452	0.0458

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 11. OLS regression model explaining engagement with Russia-Aligned Accounts (Basic Demographic Characteristics) with day fixed effects

APPENDIX IV. IDEOLOGY AND ENGAGEMENT WITH RUSSIA-ALIGNED CONTENT

	(1) Original sample	(2) Pew-weights adjusted sample
Very liberal	3.817***	4.119***
	(1.812)	(1.827)
Liberal	1.996	4.905
	(2.767)	(5.380)
Somewhat liberal	-0.360	-1.006
	(1.415)	(1.501)
Somewhat conservative	-2.796***	-2.433***
	(1.172)	(1.197)
Conservative	1.735	2.696
	(2.046)	(2.202)
Very conservative	4.585	4.129
	(2.822)	(2.537)
male	2.254***	3.334***
	(1.278)	(1.552)
age	-0.311	-0.380
	(0.258)	(0.344)
age squared	0.005***	0.005
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Bachelor's degree	-0.754	-0.294
	(2.125)	(1.900)
Less than a high school diploma	-0.451	2.292
	(3.339)	(2.841)
Master's degree	0.962	1.748
	(2.216)	(1.799)
Regular high school diploma	2.364	5.724
	(3.678)	(5.323)
Some college, no degree	1.432	1.808
	(2.527)	(2.106)
Vocational school/ union certificate	2.968	3.779
	(3.580)	(3.045)
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.520	1.995
	(2.789)	(2.601)
Asian	6.472	9.629
	(5.959)	(9.034)
African American	2.688***	1.498

	(1.615)	(1.656)
Pacific Islander	0.848	3.074
	(3.991)	(4.522)
Some other race	-0.714	-1.119
	(1.413)	(1.725)
Medium size city (50,000 to 249,999)	-0.360	-0.324
	(1.338)	(1.213)
Suburb of a large central city	5.547***	7.070***
	(1.921)	(2.718)
Suburb of a medium size city	2.461	1.903
	(1.702)	(1.494)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	3.140	3.193
	(3.065)	(3.098)
Rural area < 10 miles from the closest town	2.634	3.136
	(2.390)	(2.505)
Rural area > 10 miles from the closest town	-2.636	-1.117
	(1.965)	(2.337)
Small city or town (10,000 to 49,999)	3.849***	3.986***
	(2.006)	(1.781)
below -\$49,999	2.171	0.110
	(2.762)	(3.648)
\$50,000-\$74,999	0.163	-1.077
	(2.444)	(2.629)
\$75,000-\$99,999	2.259	3.988
	(2.761)	(3.837)
\$100,000-\$149,999	0.026	-0.408
	(1.995)	(2.084)
Twitter Usage Frequency	3.884***	3.541***
	(0.525)	(0.505)
Oct 24	3.703	3.349
	(6.144)	(5.562)
Oct 25	1.602	1.692
	(3.820)	(3.623)
Oct 26	4.122	6.679
	(3.625)	(5.450)
Oct 27	3.812	4.191
	(3.261)	(3.388)
Oct 28	5.987***	5.883***
	(3.532)	(3.562)
Oct 29	1.603	1.418
	(3.255)	(3.487)
Oct 30	4.315	2.305

	(5.286)	(5.648)
Oct 31	-6.179	-8.066
	(5.998)	(7.620)
Nov 01	-6.429	-2.066
	(4.644)	(7.141)
Nov 02	1.944	-0.162
	(4.205)	(5.224)
Nov 03	0.887	0.355
	(3.158)	(3.133)
Nov 04	8.681	9.395
	(7.444)	(7.860)
Nov 05	3.543	1.950
	(5.002)	(4.860)
Nov 06	21.766	19.756
	(22.346)	(18.568)
Nov 07	0.443	0.791
	(5.134)	(6.604)
Nov 08	1.191	-0.346
	(6.105)	(5.399)
Nov 09	3.816	2.399
	(3.724)	(3.947)
Nov 10	-0.040	-0.290
	(3.252)	(3.331)
Nov 11	1.024	0.929
	(3.140)	(3.211)
Nov 12	-0.369	-0.443
	(3.153)	(3.196)
Constant	-13.832***	-11.962
	(6.957)	(8.019)
Observations	2,019	2,019
R-squared	0.050	0.052

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 12. OLS regression model explaining engagement with Russia-Aligned Accounts (Ideology) with day fixed effects

APPENDIX V. IDEOLOGY AND TRUST IN MEDIA AND INSTITUTIONS (OLS MODEL)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Original sample	Pew-weights	Original sample	Pew-weights	Original sample	Pew-weights
Media trust	-1.450*** (0.620)	-1.465*** (0.602)			-0.105 (0.793)	-0.610 (1.002)
Institutional trust			-2.344*** (0.591)	-1.801*** (0.698)	-2.284*** (0.760)	-1.454 (1.086)
Very liberal	4.111*** (1.830)	4.370*** (1.855)	3.667*** (1.820)	4.041*** (1.842)	3.692*** (1.872)	4.161*** (1.940)
Liberal	2.334 (2.802)	5.190 (5.426)	2.212 (2.749)	5.053 (5.351)	2.231 (2.826)	5.143 (5.466)
Somewhat liberal	-0.079 (1.423)	-0.820 (1.495)	-0.413 (1.399)	-1.113 (1.477)	-0.391 (1.413)	-1.015 (1.435)
Somewhat conservative	-3.343*** (1.179)	-2.957*** (1.173)	-2.876*** (1.183)	-2.475*** (1.207)	-2.913*** (1.144)	-2.685*** (1.112)
Conservative	0.866 (1.948)	1.842 (2.071)	1.900 (2.034)	2.904 (2.173)	1.832 (1.919)	2.509 (1.935)
Very conservative	3.675 (2.659)	3.252 (2.361)	4.814*** (2.816)	4.421*** (2.524)	4.742*** (2.681)	3.999*** (2.318)
Male	2.195*** (1.274)	3.273*** (1.542)	2.025 (1.273)	3.162*** (1.580)	2.027 (1.275)	3.170*** (1.587)
Age	-0.297 (0.259)	-0.374 (0.344)	-0.310 (0.258)	-0.387 (0.342)	-0.309 (0.257)	-0.383 (0.339)
Age squared	0.005 (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)
Bachelor's degree	-0.931 (2.105)	-0.585 (1.915)	-0.776 (2.089)	-0.446 (1.867)	-0.788 (2.099)	-0.538 (1.921)
Less than a high school diploma	-1.177 (3.296)	1.474 (2.782)	-0.671 (3.306)	2.033 (2.827)	-0.718 (3.227)	1.743 (2.708)
Master's degree	1.032 (2.190)	1.735 (1.793)	1.499 (2.194)	2.050 (1.805)	1.490 (2.199)	1.986 (1.821)
Regular high school diploma	2.122 (3.656)	5.298 (5.259)	2.230 (3.661)	5.387 (5.404)	2.216 (3.644)	5.274 (5.277)
Some college, no degree	1.040 (2.490)	1.267 (2.080)	1.165 (2.488)	1.392 (2.069)	1.143 (2.484)	1.247 (2.069)
Vocational school/ certificate	2.653 (3.535)	3.246 (2.987)	3.103 (3.545)	3.645 (3.037)	3.077 (3.509)	3.449 (2.936)

American Indian or Alaska Native	1.582 (2.720)	2.048 (2.535)	1.272 (2.721)	1.712 (2.548)	1.283 (2.726)	1.788 (2.564)
Asian	6.356 (5.946)	9.508 (9.011)	6.527 (5.963)	9.640 (9.048)	6.517 (5.932)	9.588 (8.979)
Black, or African American	2.947*** (1.617)	1.774 (1.634)	2.473 (1.594)	1.316 (1.621)	2.498 (1.586)	1.466 (1.540)
Pacific islander	0.636 (4.243)	3.034 (4.762)	0.121 (5.496)	3.019 (5.504)	0.125 (5.482)	3.013 (5.418)
Some other race	-0.882 (1.429)	-1.219 (1.739)	-1.506 (1.439)	-1.641 (1.675)	-1.497 (1.431)	-1.582 (1.635)
Medium size city (50,000 to 249,999)	-0.649 (1.339)	-0.610 (1.228)	-1.076 (1.381)	-0.907 (1.199)	-1.079 (1.378)	-0.913 (1.201)
Suburb of a large central city	5.174*** (1.860)	6.679*** (2.645)	4.892*** (1.929)	6.489*** (2.842)	4.882*** (1.892)	6.438*** (2.780)
Suburb of a medium size city	2.095 (1.701)	1.529 (1.515)	1.817 (1.718)	1.455 (1.478)	1.807 (1.711)	1.385 (1.494)
Town or village (2,500 to 9,999)	2.702 (3.020)	2.820 (3.059)	2.275 (3.028)	2.597 (3.040)	2.265 (3.018)	2.557 (3.035)
Rural area < 10 miles from the closest town	2.052 (2.441)	2.442 (2.564)	2.008 (2.453)	2.531 (2.578)	1.982 (2.452)	2.359 (2.578)
Rural area > 10 miles from the closest town	-3.133 (1.998)	-1.553 (2.338)	-3.316 (2.077)	-1.578 (2.471)	-3.334 (2.041)	-1.671 (2.395)
Small city or town (10,000 to 49,999)	3.545*** (1.998)	3.672*** (1.782)	3.155 (2.045)	3.440*** (1.867)	3.151 (2.038)	3.414*** (1.856)
below -\$49,999	-0.116 (2.449)	-1.289 (2.649)	-0.872 (2.407)	-1.769 (2.524)	-0.865 (2.399)	-1.724 (2.486)
\$50,000-\$74,999	1.886 (2.743)	3.644 (3.794)	1.361 (2.819)	3.386 (3.983)	1.357 (2.811)	3.359 (3.953)
\$75,000-\$99,999	3.973*** (0.534)	3.632*** (0.510)	3.995*** (0.540)	3.626*** (0.521)	3.999*** (0.537)	3.647*** (0.514)
\$100,000-\$149,999	-0.320 (2.023)	-0.761 (2.132)	-0.716 (1.987)	-0.970 (2.038)	-0.722 (1.998)	-1.009 (2.064)
Twitter Usage frequency	1.321 (3.871)	1.347 (3.639)	0.613 (3.821)	1.037 (3.668)	0.618 (3.831)	1.020 (3.678)
Oct 24	3.762 (3.657)	6.286 (5.411)	2.916 (3.701)	5.747 (5.664)	2.921 (3.721)	5.763 (5.692)
Oct 25	3.555	3.954	2.648	3.418	2.659	3.468

	(3.340)	(3.431)	(3.303)	(3.438)	(3.320)	(3.475)
Oct 26	5.616	5.467	4.704	4.940	4.710	4.948
	(3.574)	(3.573)	(3.512)	(3.607)	(3.525)	(3.627)
Oct 27	1.123	0.921	0.378	0.592	0.375	0.544
	(3.322)	(3.535)	(3.259)	(3.415)	(3.265)	(3.446)
Oct 28	4.144	1.982	3.411	1.514	3.422	1.532
	(5.406)	(5.759)	(5.392)	(5.624)	(5.390)	(5.635)
Oct 29	-6.077	-7.883	-5.264	-7.398	-5.281	-7.450
	(6.098)	(7.664)	(6.221)	(7.946)	(6.256)	(7.986)
Oct 30	-6.634	-2.362	-5.928	-1.817	-5.956	-1.988
	(4.662)	(7.103)	(4.560)	(7.041)	(4.495)	(6.865)
Oct 31	1.261	-0.942	0.704	-1.228	0.686	-1.347
	(4.257)	(5.312)	(4.165)	(5.019)	(4.185)	(5.127)
Nov 01	0.527	0.038	-0.258	-0.533	-0.254	-0.494
	(3.225)	(3.180)	(3.176)	(3.127)	(3.184)	(3.149)
Nov 02	8.712	9.425	8.502	9.244	8.509	9.285
	(7.484)	(7.882)	(7.359)	(7.791)	(7.367)	(7.819)
Nov 03	3.132	1.568	2.085	0.998	2.093	1.022
	(4.988)	(4.855)	(4.889)	(4.719)	(4.898)	(4.725)
Nov 04	20.493	18.410	19.593	18.093	19.557	17.853
	(22.575)	(18.731)	(21.988)	(18.383)	(22.124)	(18.514)
Nov 05	0.145	0.296	-0.511	0.098	-0.508	0.025
	(5.300)	(6.996)	(5.574)	(6.913)	(5.574)	(7.023)
Nov 06	0.046	-1.589	-0.204	-1.353	-0.251	-1.677
	(6.191)	(5.413)	(5.940)	(5.250)	(5.963)	(5.316)
Nov 07	3.487	2.042	2.737	1.642	2.741	1.639
	(3.782)	(3.989)	(3.724)	(3.868)	(3.730)	(3.884)
Nov 08	-0.316	-0.560	-1.286	-1.180	-1.274	-1.121
	(3.334)	(3.383)	(3.287)	(3.339)	(3.301)	(3.365)
Nov 09	0.622	0.486	-0.241	-0.034	-0.238	-0.033
	(3.216)	(3.255)	(3.166)	(3.184)	(3.173)	(3.204)
Nov 10	-0.555	-0.615	-0.821	-0.671	-0.823	-0.699
	(3.242)	(3.248)	(3.199)	(3.215)	(3.206)	(3.236)
Nov 11						
	-13.169***	-10.998	-11.120***	-9.662	-11.142***	-9.704
Nov 12	(6.936)	(8.060)	(6.688)	(7.497)	(6.685)	(7.477)
Observations	2,019	2,019	2,019	2,019	2,019	2,019
R-squared	0.052	0.054	0.056	0.055	0.056	0.055

*** p<0.1, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 13. OLS Regression Model Explaining Engagement with Russia-Aligned Accounts (Trust in Media) With Day Fixed Effects

CONCLUSION

By Gregory Feifer

Thirteen years ago, at the height of a summer of escalating tensions with the United States, Russia stunned the West by launching a military invasion of its former Soviet neighbor Georgia. Three weeks after the August 2008 attack, Vladimir Putin took to CNN to broadcast his account of the Kremlin's decision: Blame for Moscow's offensive, he explained, lay squarely with Americans.

"The suspicion would arise that someone in the United States created this conflict on purpose," the Russian president said in animated tones, "to stir up the situation and create an advantage for one of the candidates in the competitive race for the presidency in the United States."

His reference to Senator John McCain in that election year may have been prompted by the Republican candidate's close relationship with Georgia's then-president, the outspoken Putin critic Mikheil Saakashvili. It had infuriated the Kremlin, along with McCain's strident criticism of Moscow's foreign policy. "They needed a small victorious war," Putin concluded.

The Russian leader could hardly have projected his own motives more directly. Prime minister at the time, he had temporarily stepped down from the presidency after reaching his term limit to regain the top job by running again four years later. But he left no doubt who still ran the country: It was Putin who was shown on national television directing his generals near the Georgian border, not his hand-picked stand-in Dmitri Medvedev. And it was Putin, who, in regular barrages, charged Washington with spreading violence and extremism around the world, and with seeking to foment discontent in Russia in order to weaken and even dismember it—then steal its natural resources.

The natural inclination for Western policymakers responding to such outlandish accusations from Putin was to dismiss them. Indeed, after some stern rhetorical condemnations and several shouting matches in the UN Se-

curity Council that recalled some of the darkest moments of the Cold War had died down, the policy response to the Kremlin's first post-Cold War invasion of a sovereign democratic state was substantively negligible.

But to this foreign correspondent at the time covering the conflict from Moscow and South Ossetia—the Georgian breakaway region at the center of the hostilities—it seemed clear that something had changed in Moscow that deserved very serious consideration in Western capitals. The especially strident, sharply confrontational tone of Russia's political and military leaders during the week-long war marked a watershed. From angry news conferences in Moscow and the supercilious conduct of Russian military officers on occupied Georgian territory, one got the impression that the Kremlin's launching of a military attack on a democratizing US ally for the first time since the end of communism came with a decision to risk breaking relations with the West for good.

The perceptive political scientist Ivan Krastev characterized the invasion as Moscow's attempt to "return to the center of European power-politics." The attack signaled "the resurgence of Russia as a born-again 19th-century power," he wrote, "eager to challenge the early 21st-century, post-Cold War European order."²⁷⁸ That the consequences never came to a break with Europe, indeed that no significant response would be forthcoming at all, was taken in Moscow as a major victory.

The conflict may have signaled a new willingness to confront the West, but it represented only a tactical shift to achieve what Putin had long tried to accomplish by more diplomatic means. Although some foreign policy experts believe he genuinely wanted to ally with Washington following September 11, anti-Americanism has been part and parcel of his stance from the beginning. The first foreign leader to phone President George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks, Putin was motivated not by empathy or

278 Ivan Krastev, "Russia and the Georgia war: the great-power trap," European Council on Foreign Relations, August 20, 2008, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_ivan_krastev_on_georgia/.

shared values, but a desire to justify his war in Chechnya as part of the global “war on terror.” His overarching aim was to prevail on the West to accept Russia’s claim of a sphere of influence over the former Soviet Union.

That was still the goal earlier in 2008 even as talk of NATO’s putting Ukraine and Georgia on a roadmap to membership helped speed the war with Tbilisi. That’s when President Medvedev issued a call for a new European security architecture that would have made Moscow the “regional superpower” in the former Soviet space, on a par with the United States and European Union. The proposal was so vague, few Western policymakers took it as anything more than an attempt to undermine NATO and other multinational organizations the Kremlin sees as hostile.

Moscow had already begun reviving in earnest the Soviet-era active measures for which it is well known today, reflecting Putin’s view of foreign policy as a zero-sum game of sabotage and subterfuge right out of the KGB playbook. The previous year, the term “cyberwar” first drew public attention when government and bank internet sites in another Russian neighbor, Estonia, came under a series of attacks. They coincided with a bitter war of words between the former Soviet republic and a Kremlin furious over the relocation of a statue of a Red Army soldier from the center of the capital Tallinn.

Another series of assaults took place during Russia’s invasion of Georgia, with so-called distributed denial-of-service attacks against the presidential administration, various ministries, and private companies that disrupted communications and disabled sites for more than a week. More visible at the time was a new, Soviet-style propaganda blitz. While politicians thumped their chests about Moscow’s international duty to counteract US hegemony, state television news concocted alarmist propaganda about fake Georgian sabotage plots inside Russia.

More than a decade later, the scale of the Kremlin’s subsequent confrontation with the West makes those events seem almost quaint now. Moscow’s military involvement in Syria complicated the West’s most pressing security challenge at the time, exacerbating the European migrant crisis of 2015. The earlier annexation of Crimea in 2014 and fomenting of war in eastern Ukraine, attack on the US presidential election of 2016, and most recent hacking of major US companies and government agencies have made Russia Washington’s most immediate se-

curity challenge—even as Putin’s authoritarian kleptocracy is ultimately eroding his country’s hopes for long-term stability and prosperity.

Now the Biden administration is promising to deter Russia after four years of former President Trump’s idolization of Putin’s authoritarianism. Earlier this year, Washington enacted new sanctions and expelled diplomats for a sophisticated hacking operation called SolarWinds that used new methods to breach at least seven government agencies and hundreds of major companies. More, covert actions would accompany the public US response, part of a strategy of creating “seen and unseen” costs for Moscow, the White House said. Biden declined to respond more strongly saying he “chose to be proportionate” to avoid a “cycle of escalation and conflict.” Nevertheless, the Russian response was more escalation: In May, hackers linked to Russia’s main intelligence agency seized an email system used by USAID to penetrate the computer networks of human rights groups and other organizations that have criticized Putin.

The nature of Russia’s role in the world is well known by now. But with little reason to believe the Kremlin will cease inexorably ratcheting up its aggression, let alone ease its confrontation, Western democracies would be wise to understand the full extent of the threat. The expert studies in this volume are important for that, providing key information and analysis about Russia’s campaign to expand its influence and control in the West. The reports also propose sensible and effective tools for policymakers.

In his study about Moscow’s designs on US critical infrastructure, the Russian opposition leader Vladimir Milov reports that US sanctions have already significantly thwarted the Kremlin’s initial drive, largely blocking it from directly acquiring control over American assets through investments by the country’s leading Putin-linked financial and industrial oligarchs. Now they are taking more surreptitious routes instead, Milov says, including apparently coordinated investments through murky private equity funds, relying on proxies not clearly connected to the Kremlin, and targeting new sectors: no longer traditional infrastructure but tech industry companies such as Uber, as well as WiFi networks and AI technology. “They prefer to invest in forward-looking technologies, which may not dominate or have critical importance today,” Milov writes of the patterns he sees, “but may conquer the markets with new products sometime in the future.”

In a second report, Milov identifies Russians target-

ing the US energy sector, including through sabotage, hacking of energy grids, attempts to acquire important assets and campaigns to influence policy debate and the media over energy policy. Since energy represents “a key instrument in Russia’s current strategy to increase its global geopolitical influence,” he writes, “all Russian intrusion into the US energy sector should be considered as part of strategic game against the United States.” The activity has included investments in the rapidly developing shale gas industry, increasing American dependence on uranium imports by closing down a major US mine, and influencing respected think-tanks to have “willingly or unwillingly engaged in Gazprom’s PR campaign against American LNG,” or liquified natural gas.

In their report on Moscow’s social media influence inside the United States, the scholars Maria Snegovaya and Kohei Watanabe describe a “sprawling” campaign of influence operations whose goal is to deepen societal divisions by reinforcing existing beliefs and fears. Such operations—which grew out of communist-era disinformation strategies—“sow domestic discord, disrupt and discredit democratic governance, undermine US international standing and influence, and weaken the existing international system.” Such campaigns build on propaganda broadcast on the international satellite channel RT and other propaganda outlets. Like other Kremlin activities, they are becoming more difficult to identify and counteract, adapting to evade American countermeasures and changing internet mores, growing ever-more sophisticated since they helped Trump win the presidency in 2016.

In his report on Russian oligarchs’ exploitation of American non-profit organizations, the journalist Casey Michel carefully explains how Putin’s authoritarian kleptocracy relies on its activities in the West to loot the country’s natural resources and move billions abroad not only through money laundering but also by defending its reputation. He identifies a handful of Kremlin-connected oligarchs who have donated hundreds of millions of dollars to the likes of the Brookings Institution, Council on Foreign Relations, Harvard University and New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Such organizations willing to accept dirty money from Russian oligarchs, he writes, have “laundered their reputations and provided them direct access to American policymakers.”

And in another report, Michel examines how Russia has helped stoke secessionist movements in the United States—including among far-right white supremacists,

neo-Confederate movements and those seeking to split off states such as Texas and California—to try to dismember the country. Deftly tracing the history of collaboration between American ethno-nationalists and neo-fascists and such notorious Russian ideologues as Alexander Dugin—efforts that also continue from Soviet days—Michel describes “remarkable success in terms of recruiting separatist leaders, strengthening secessionist groups, and spreading pro-secessionist messages to hundreds of thousands (and potentially more) Americans.” Like the influence efforts detailed in other reports in this volume, members of the Kremlin’s inner circle—many of them the targets of US sanctions—play a central role bankrolling and organizing such activities.

Taken together, the reports paint an alarming big picture of malign activity that is quickly evolving and remains largely undetected. The studies are also striking for the recurring small number of oligarchs they name, people who depend on cultivating favor with Putin and appear to be doing his bidding. With Trump still leading a Republican Party establishment seeking to bury investigations into the January 6 Capitol insurrection, threatening more election-related violence in the future, Russia’s activities attacking institutions and infrastructure, and encouraging extremist forces, pose American democracy a serious threat.

The authors provide sensible policy prescriptions for how to address the Kremlin’s campaigns by making foreign investment more transparent, identifying Russian lobbying networks, conducting due diligence of non-profit donors, and blocking Kremlin-linked social media accounts and platforms. This report should be required reading in Washington and other Western capitals.

The failures of previous US Russia policy have been exacerbated by a general lack of understanding not only about how the Kremlin acts but also why. That’s partly because recognizing the real motives and goals of foreign societies—especially those like Russia’s that depend on bluffing and facades to mislead—requires knowledge of their culture and history, even something of geography.

The world’s largest country by territory stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Far East, Russia is burdened with huge tracts of uninhabitable land and extreme climates. The difficulty of surviving and governing under such adverse conditions has helped shape a culture with a distinctive view of itself and the world. That has helped inform centuries of traditional political culture into which Putin has

deeply tapped, especially the views of the 19th-century “Slavophiles” who insisted Russia first went astray when Peter the Great began openly pushing the country toward the West three hundred years ago, away from the Byzantine roots of its culture.

Putin’s latest iteration of Russian autocracy appears neo-Soviet in many ways, except for one key difference: The KGB’s apparatus always remained under the political control of the Communist Party. That’s no longer the case; Russia is now run by a cabal of Putin’s security service cronies. Although it may have some of the trappings of a modern society, the country under Putinism resembles a feudal one, in some ways—if not yet in the scale of its re-

pression—more regressive than the Soviet Union’s. That’s an especially dangerous departure for the United States: Putin’s foreign adventures are a key pillar of his popularity and legitimacy, necessary for propping up an increasingly authoritarian kleptocracy that has steadily hardened its domestic repression since he took office in the year 2000.

And he’s playing a long game. With the arrest of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny this year amid an unprecedented post-Soviet wave of repression against its critics, the Kremlin will almost certainly increase its confrontation with the West ahead of parliamentary elections in September and beyond. This report is a much-needed wake-up call over what’s to come.

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