



PROCEEDINGS

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS AND ALLIED RELATIONS

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Russian Influence Operations and Allied Relations” hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on November 10, 2021. The symposium focused on how best to counter Russian efforts to spread disinformation, sow division, conduct cyber attacks on critical infrastructure, and propagate false narratives that seek to undermine Western democracy and generate support for Russian policies and perspectives.

Michaela Dodge

Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy.

My upcoming publication on Russia influence operations stemmed from research of Russia’s activities in the Czech Republic during the radar debate. During that debate, the Russians were extremely active (and successful) in trying to influence the public opinion against the radar. That made me wonder whether missile defense cooperation was a factor in Russia’s influence operations in Poland and Romania. Each country agreed to host an Aegis Ashore site. The site in Romania became operational in 2016. We are looking at 2022 for Poland. While Russia’s influence operations were not a significant factor in these countries’ missile defense cooperation, research nevertheless uncovered interesting differences and similarities in how the Russian Federation approaches influence operations in these countries.

Two factors appear to be most significant for determining which approach to influencing audiences Russia will take. One, the level of permissiveness with which Russia can operate in a society of a target country. Two, the access that Russia’s agents are able to obtain within different influential communities (policy, business, economic, journalist, and academia). Russia’s goals, however, remain the same across each of the examined countries. The most important goal is undermining people’s faith in democratic institutions. That goal is both an internal and external goal to the Putin regime. Internally it allows President Putin to contrast desirability of his own authoritarian regime to the messiness of the democratic process. Externally, it allows him to weaken NATO from within. Putin wants to disrupt the U.S. alliance system in Europe. That would have repercussions for U.S. credibility and alliances beyond Europe. Not a bad side benefit for Putin.

In conducting influence operations, Russia takes advantage of pre-existing societal cleavages and polarization within the society. This is its preferred method of operations in Poland, and to some degree in Romania, where directly-linked Russian operations would not be successful. It is likely becoming Russia’s preferred method of operation in the Czech Republic, where Russia’s public image suffered as a consequence of recently revealed Russia’s terrorist attack on a Czech munitions depot in 2014 during which two Czechs died. One can only imagine how happy Russia must be about continuing polarization in the United States. For each of the countries, and for Poland and Romania in particular, Russia’s activities



will be more successful if they are not directly tied to Russia. This is a consequence of their respective strategic cultures and historical experience with Russia's belligerence.

In each of the cases, personal connections between Russia's agents and a Czech, Polish, or Romanian person of power or influence played an extremely important role in terms of Russia's ability to execute its active measures/influence operations campaigns. These can be connections between politicians and Russian agents (like has been often the case in the Czech Republic) or between businessmen and Russia's agents (as appears to be the case in Poland or Romania). Personal connections and corruption culture are Romania's Achilles heel when it comes to providing opportunities for Russia's influence operations.

Influence operations are an old tool of statecraft. Russia (and the Soviet Union and Russian Empire before) has been employing them for over a hundred years. Especially during the Cold War, the Soviet Union revived this indirect asymmetric approach because it was aware of its own weakness vis-à-vis the United States. The United States, a dominant ruler of its surroundings for a better part of its existence, has not had to spend as much time thinking about manipulating its adversaries. Deception isn't a part of our strategic culture. If anything, we confuse our opponents by making any and all information available publicly. And think about all the different oversight and legal bodies that check our own influence (and intelligence) operations. Admittedly, for good reasons.

There is a big difference between today and Russia's first large-scale influence operation in the Czech Republic during the radar debate. Influence operations can be carried out cheaper than before due to the use of modern technologies. While the United States carefully analyzes audiences and figures out how to tailor its messaging, the Russians attempt to use modern technologies get in our heads. They manipulate our sensory inputs to create a perception of reality that would make us decide according to Russia's preferred course of action—without us even realizing it. This is an extremely important point of departure in U.S. and Russia's approach to influence operations. And since deterrence is in minds of an opponent, implications of Russia's approach likely go beyond just information operations.

How to counter Russia's influence operations?

Here I would like to recommend our esteemed co-panelist Mr. Kent's book "Striking Back Overt and Covert Options to Combat Russian Disinformation." It really is a fantastic book. My favorite part of it were recommendations: actionable and realistic. They did not require unicorn tears and performative dances in Congress to be enacted.

I think that transparency is one of our strongest counters to Russia's activities on our and allied territories. Fight the darkness with light. It is clear that Russia's influence operations tend to lose potency when exposed for what they are: a ruthless manipulation preying on politics, people's greed, insecurities, and pre-conceived notions; all with a purpose of advancing Mr. Putin's goals. We should be using our tremendous advantage in resources and technologies to publicize Russia's shady connections and help allied government highlight potentially problematic sources of funding in politics, local newspaper, and think tanks.

Countering Russia's influence operations begins with us. It is never too late to hone critical thinking skills – and teaching them to our children. Our education ought to have a digital literacy component to it. It is easier to recognize influence operations for what they are when one is familiar with adversaries' methods. Our population has access to incredible amount of information, but that does not necessarily mean that it is better informed.

Conclusion

Alliances and transparency are the most important advantage that the United States and allies have in their efforts to counter Russia's activities. Alliances enable us to cooperate on a much deeper level than would be the case among non-allies. Russia has an advantage vis-à-vis each the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania when it comes to intelligence and information operations resources. But allies cooperating together can mitigate it to some degree. Making our cooperation more effective will continue to be a critical element of any future efforts to counter Russia's malign activities on NATO member states' territories.

Otakar Foltýn

*Otakar Foltýn is an expert on hybrid warfare with combat experience in the Balkans and Afghanistan.*¹

What Is Happening to Democracies in the U.S. and in Europe?

We cannot help but notice that Western civilization is threatened by a combination of external and internal negative developments, even though the West is economically, and in the case of the United States militarily, strongest. Internal divisions within democratic societies are made worse by the ever-stronger radicalization of increasingly larger segments of the population. The reasons for this radicalization do not have to do with competitors' and de facto adversarial states' actions per se, but in a surprising abuse of Western inventions, primarily the new media environment and social networks.

In our quest for using modern technologies to better our conditions, we did not realize how dangerous Western inventions in the mass communications field can be. For tens of

¹ The author of this text is a soldier; his views are his own and do not necessarily reflect the official positions or policies of the Czech Army. These comments are partially based on previously published work. See Otakar Foltýn, "Právo na zveřejnění vlastního názoru na soukromé internetové platformě není a být nesmí" (There Is No Right Nor Should There Be to Have One's Opinion Published on a Private Internet Platform), *CEVRO Arena*, February 2, 2021, available at https://www.cevroarena.cz/post/pr%C3%A1vo-na-zve%C5%99ejn%C4%9Bn%C3%AD-vlastn%C3%ADho-n%C3%A1zoru-na-soukrom%C3%A9-internetov%C3%A9-platform%C4%9B-nen%C3%AD-a-b%C3%BDt-nesm%C3%AD?fbclid=IwAR00NdMliNaHdZzOJCbmqW_DUgEvL1krW9CA4mmLTNH_oDQ-mHqLnhZZv94; and Otakar Foltýn, "Autocenzura sociálních sítí: nejméně špatné řešení z těch, které aktuálně máme" (Self-Censorship of Social Networks: the Least Bad Option in the Universe of Currently Available Options), *CEVRO Arena*, February 10, 2021, available at <https://www.cevroarena.cz/post/autocenzura-soci%C3%A1ln%C3%ADch-s%C3%ADt%C3%AD-nejm%C3%A9n%C4%9B-%C5%A1patn%C3%A9-%C5%99e%C5%A1en%C3%AD-z-t%C4%9Bch-kter%C3%A9-aktu%C3%A1ln%C4%9B-m%C3%A1me>. The author is grateful to *CEVRO Arena* for its permission to draw on this work in this article.

thousands of years, evolution has wired our brains for communication in small primitive groups. Our brains managed previous information revolutions, like the invention of a printing press or the internet. But social media, especially Facebook and search engine algorithms, return us to a tribal way of thinking.

Evolution wired our brains in relatively simple ways. For example, from an evolutionary perspective, it is better to be wrong in a group than to be right alone, and that is a logical consequence of the fact that for a better part of human history the survival outside of one's tribe was not possible. And it is this simplistic notion of "US" versus "THEM" that our brain goes to most often to make sense of increasingly complex social interactions. To make matters worse, Russia and China are excellent in using the knowledge generated by advances in social psychology, understanding of biochemical aspects of cognitive processes, and big data analysis against us. This new knowledge is a product of Western innovation—and innovation, traditionally an area of the West's comparative advantage, is now being used by our adversaries against us with a minimal expenditure of energy and resources on their part.

We must succeed in regulating cyberspace, not only because it is becoming a hybrid warfare battlefield. We are threatened by authoritarian states that do not care about freedom of speech. Each one of their successes in the hybrid warfare domain threatens our liberty, including our freedom of speech.

Russia's New Generation Warfare

Russia's new strategic objective is not a victory in conflict, but a regime change in democratic countries. Such an objective can be achieved by multiple means. The Russian Federation follows a complex process and uses every useful phenomenon to its advantage, including the fragility of the democratic system itself. Russia employs a "judo approach" that uses democratic countries' strengths, like open society and freedom of speech, against them. This approach is not unique in Russia's history, but Russia now uses new instruments to achieve its objectives: reflexive control and elite capture boosted by Russia's operations in cyberspace; advanced knowledge of social psychology; and intelligence operations. Russia's goals are increased polarization of society, undermining citizens' faith in democratic rule of law and democratic institutions, and growth in the population's support of foreign interests, particularly Russia's.

While we love soccer with its straightforward tactics and simple counting, we should think about countering influence operations as akin to playing tennis. In tennis, the match is a process and if a player wins the right games, he can win the whole match even if he lost more exchanges than his opponent.

A Right to Have One's Personal Opinion Published on a Private Internet Platform Does Not Exist

There is a substantive confusion regarding the question of what constitutes freedom of speech. Freedom of speech does not mean that somebody else (including administrators of

social media networks) has an obligation to publish one's opinions. There is no such right. Everyone is entitled to promote his own opinions through his own means, including with help from someone who has the potential to promote them with a larger impact. But one cannot coerce other people to do so. He can either pay to have one's opinions published or convince others to promote his opinions by the quality of content or their attractiveness (the two can be quite distinct).

Because the relationship between one who wishes to have his opinion published and one who has means to publish it is private, the former has to take into consideration that the latter may not wish to publish the former's opinion in its entirety, if at all. This is where censorship (in a wider sense) comes in. Here we have that ugly word that everyone is using these days. Under some circumstances, censorship is completely normal and appropriate in a private sphere. Self-censorship is common. For example, some of us do not tell our spouses exactly what we think. We also have a right to prohibit a street artist from using our house as a canvas for projecting his legitimate opinion that a leader of this or that political party is dumb. We must understand the concept of freedom of speech in the context of a state's coercive powers. A democratic state cannot abuse its powers to silence weaker participants, citizens or non-governmental organizations in a public debate. That is why a state is prohibited from censorship, but this prohibition is not absolute. States can interfere in cases of hate speech, libel, slander, and the sharing of classified information, for example.

Another good reason for not mandating that everyone's opinions be shared by privately owned internet platforms is that the quality of a non-regulated discussion will inevitably decrease. A public discussion is bound by written and unwritten rules; a thin thread of customs, norms, and traditions that moderate what we post and how we share. Nobody expects a nation-wide media to publish an essay on the utility of tin foil hats in preventing brain damage from 5G networks. We generally do not let the world know about our most private activities.

Why States Should Not Mandate that Everyone's Opinion Be Promoted on Private Platforms

According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, lies spread about 70 percent faster than the truth on Twitter (in retweeting cascades it means spreading 10-20 times faster than the truth).² Sometimes they can be much more impactful than the truth. Emotions stirred by lies are more likely to attract our brain. "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story," as a saying attributed to Mark Twain goes. At first glance, lies appear to be more original, surprising, exciting—even when the dominating emotion is disgust. A cocktail of chemicals released when reading such content is just what our brain craves.

There is another way in which social media makes the situation worse today. While a person's social bubble changed only rarely in the past and served to a degree as a quality

² Peter Dizikes, "Study: On Twitter, false news travels faster than true stories," *MIT News Office*, March 8, 2018, available at <https://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>.

check on members' opinions, today one can change his social bubble instantly with a click of a mouse. He can surround himself with an environment predisposed to agree with his point of view. Conspiracy theory victims assure each other of their own "truth," which then becomes their norm. Additional problems arise when they act upon these "norms," for example by ramming a car through Christmas parade attendees.

Social media networks brought a mass and extremely cheap way to mislead and lie to many people. Past social mechanisms designed to regulate relatively slow opinion sharing are inadequate for the speed with which disinformation spreads. An unprecedented number of people are publishing their opinions without regard for relevance, expertise, or logic.

Social network algorithms set to the maximum level of polarization have a business purpose: to target advertising campaigns to make them more effective. But their inadvertent effect is polarization and diminishment of a society's ability to be tolerant of other points of view. In the process of getting the advertisement that may be most useful to us, we radicalize. Additionally, social media companies like Facebook use tools to trick our brains to remain on the Facebook web page as long as possible, because that is what generates its revenue. Facebook pries on people's desire to get "likes" and achieve popularity through posting emotive content. People expect their content to be posted regardless of the fact that such a right cannot exist on a privately owned platform and has never existed.

The Way Forward

Looking for a solution to the problem of social media sharing will be difficult and compromise will be inevitable. For example, because humans cannot possibly monitor the large quantity of shared information, they will have to rely on technologies that make different kinds of errors than humans. This involvement of technologies will give a new dimension to questions about which opinions are publishable and which are not. The perennial question about who will guard the guardians will remain. A related problem is the current monopoly of the internet giants, which might require stricter anti-monopoly legislation. Freedom of speech means that a state cannot punish us for what we think, speak, or write. It does not mean that private social media platforms have an obligation to publish every stupid opinion out there. But what is much more important: they must not artificially give stronger preference to content that evokes powerful but dangerous emotions. Let us limit the society dividing algorithms as soon as possible. There are at least two lethal threats for democracy. The first one is totalitarianism, as we well know. Stupidity is the second one.

Thomas Kent

Thomas Kent is a consultant on disinformation issues and Adjunct Associate Professor at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University. He is also a former president of RFE/RL.

The other speakers have provided very impressive examples of Russian influence successes. I can only agree that Russia presents substantial challenges. At the same time, I think it's important, for our own mental health and to spur ourselves to action, to remember that Russia is not always successful, and has some pretty important weaknesses.

The Putin government failed for years to build a decent, good-neighborly relationship with Ukraine. It hasn't obtained any significant recognition of its annexation of Crimea. It has not been able to roll back Western sanctions imposed in 2014. It was unable to block the independence of Kosovo. Recently it has suffered a series of reverses at the ballot box – in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Moldova and elsewhere. It snatched defeat from the jaws of victory with its Sputnik COVID vaccine by putting geopolitical grandstanding over the scientific process. Its society and economy are envied by almost no one in the world.

Col. Foltyn pointed out its very limited economic strength. It also has almost no military allies, or respectable civil society organizations campaigning to advance its agenda. Its international cultural influence is miniscule. It is a country whose strategy is often to attach itself to dictatorial regimes for political or economic advantage, with that advantage disappearing when those regimes ultimately collapse. Dictatorial governments these days are much more likely to be supported by Russia than the West—which is an interesting switch from the Cold War period, when the West was usually viewed as the force propping up all sorts of dictators while the Soviet Union was the friend of genuine popular revolutions.

Now the Russians do have very professional information operators and intelligence services. They punch way above their weight. They have their victories in Europe, Africa and elsewhere. They will do anything to advance their interests, including brutal, kinetic force. Ruthlessness has its benefits.

But the Kremlin is particularly spectacular at creating an image that its influence always works. Moscow is also expert at stoking the insecurities of Western societies. They want us to think—and some in the West do—that we need to correct all the ills of our societies before we have the moral authority to counter their aggression. In my view, one can improve our own societies and counter Russian aggression at the same time.

So what strategies work best in countering Russian influence? Since my focus is information influence, I'll talk about that.

First, we need to lose our fear of conducting aggressive, pro-democracy communication. I've been at various government tabletop exercises that all seemed to involve the Russians doing awful things in the information environment, and us having to scramble to counteract them. I'd like to see some exercises where we start the action with true information and the projection of our values, and they're the ones who then have to scramble to counter us.

A lot of Westerners are frightened at the idea of our doing anything that smacks of “propaganda.” They think that any kind of vigorous information activity would descend into our spreading disinformation. In my view, there is nothing wrong with the assertive promotion of our beliefs, grounded in true facts. For example, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, where I worked, has been projecting democratic values for seven decades, and has always stuck to accurate reporting. It isn’t lies from RFE/RL that dictators fear; lies can be proven to be wrong. What they fear is the truth about how they run their countries.

Western countries do need new and improved channels for messaging. RFE/RL and other international broadcasters are highly effective. They deserve additional support. But they are independent news organizations, not public diplomacy bureaus, as Jamie Fly mentioned. No one in the U.S. government can tell Jamie what RFE/RL needs to say.

So I would propose two things in addition to companies like RFE/RL. First, that Western governments create, alongside the independent broadcasters, their own official communication channels that they can precisely calibrate to their messaging needs. And second, I would propose a sharp increase in support to local non-government actors, who have a native authenticity that no organization based abroad can match.

Non-government civil society groups—and the independent media outlets that Jamie mentioned—can be very powerful. Dictators wouldn’t be cracking down on them so vigorously if they didn’t recognize how powerful they are. These actors do need more scale, and better training, which we are perfectly capable of providing if we’d actually focus on it. In particular these groups have to learn to use audience segmentation and targeting as well as our adversaries do.

Western organizations and local actors also need to talk to target audiences with the words and idioms and references that resonate with them. A lot of the content that gets presented to audiences in at-risk countries is produced by pro-Western elites, and it sounds like it. Much is concerned with inside political and economic wrangling that goes far beyond the ordinary person’s interests. All of this to say, we need to create material more compelling than what gets produced now.

Content that produces the kinds of outcomes we want can be done in so many attractive ways ... through humor, video games, rap and soap operas. Outlets that we fund shouldn’t always be about politics; it’s not degrading to put in the mix some sports, fashion and recipes to build audiences. We might include religious content, too. In Russia and East Europe, religion is often used by right-wing, pro-Moscow interests to advance their positions. Most of the human rights advocates I run into aren’t very religious themselves, and don’t feel comfortable using religious references and imagery. But maybe we ought to take back Jesus ... he believed in a lot of things that could serve our cause.

We spend a lot of time mourning internet blockages. Russia, and other oppressive regimes, block pro-democracy websites. They slow down the internet. Call me Pollyanna, but my feeling is that compelling content will always make its way through to an audience that wants it. I covered the Iranian revolution in 1979 for the Associated Press. That was powered by tape cassettes of Ayatollah Khomeini, painstakingly duplicated by his supporters and

passed around hand-to-hand. The American revolution was powered by committees of correspondence that delivered letters on horseback.

If you think about it big-picture, there are still so many ways now to distribute content these days even without internet sites ... from email attachments, to smuggling flash drives, to transmitting text and photos by radio. When the first VCRs reached Russia, a whole underground industry appeared overnight to smuggle in tapes and distribute them nationwide. People figured it out. So beyond devising ways to counter Russia's internet blockages—which we certainly should do—the challenge for us and our allies is to create content so compelling that we can count on the excitement and ingenuity of the audience to do the redistribution.

I'll stop here, and will be glad to expand on these points or address other issues in the discussion.

