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Washington And The World

Russia Is Already Winning

If you understand what the Kremlin is up to, the news is grim. But it also gives us a clear path to fight back.

by Molly K. McKew

The whirlwind of Russian spy news over the past few weeks has forced Americans to confront questions that previously would only have seemed possible in fiction: Did a foreign power influence the American elections? Do the Russians really have dirt on the incoming president, or a hidden relationship with him? Did the Kremlin want Donald Trump to win? *Why?*

We aren't even certain that these are the right questions, and the data points in this tangled story—the meetings, the scandalous dossier, the tweets—don't make much sense on their own. Together, though, they reveal a methodical campaign that closely resembles what we've seen Russia try elsewhere before. For the past eight years, since just after Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008, I have worked in nations around the Russian periphery, and watched the Kremlin systematically chip away at former captive nations that are viewed as threats to the Kremlin's internal narrative of control and its corrosive worldview. What Russia has attempted in the United States is not an isolated action but one case study in the evolving, expansive [hybrid war being waged by the Kremlin against the West](#).

What's happening isn't about hacking, or cybersecurity, or fake news. It isn't about BuzzFeed, or everyone's new favorite buzzword, *kompromat*. In the most important sense, it isn't really even about Donald Trump. The leaders in the Kremlin don't care about any individual American winning or losing. They care about America [as a nation](#) losing.

On the fields of this new hybrid war, few want to accept that Russia is already winning. The Kremlin's campaign of disruption has succeeded in deepening divides in our society, tarnishing a considerable cross-section of our leadership, eroding faith in our institutions and propelling Russia to the center of our political life. It has helped turn us against each other and our allies, and made us distrust the very tools and institutions that can give us clarity on the threats we face.

Russia has won a series of small but cascading victories against us, the cumulative effect of which is absolutely crushing.

But the Kremlin's aggressive campaign against the American people has also, in many ways, exposed its vulnerabilities. The Kremlin's power is primarily in the shadows—in the difficulty of identifying and exposing the tactics it uses, and the money it uses to fund them; in the creeping narratives it propagates to erode our values and our certainty; in the loose network of advocates and causes it has captured into its campaigns to act indirectly and from a hundred different directions.

After statements and hearings, news conferences and tweets, breaking news and steamy leaks, we are lost in the noise—which is right where the Kremlin wants us. What we need to do now is focus on what we actually know. And rather than try to evaluate this from our own perspectives, we must understand the Kremlin's tactics and objectives—and what these expose about Russian weakness.

What the Kremlin Wants

Russian leaders spend a lot of time inflating their personality differences with their American counterparts in order to deflect from the fundamental ideological differences between our societies. The Kremlin fears the examples set by American democracy and American society: If Russia had either, the criminal, kleptocratic reign of the modern Russia security state would be done.

The Kremlin's global objectives remain to dismantle NATO, erode the values of the liberal democratic world order, and weaken the reach of American power. So what did they really hope to gain from their interference in the U.S. election? The specific goals of Putin's campaign were, in real and narrative terms, to portray America as fractured and flawed; to erode trust in our system, our values and our institutions at home and discredit them abroad; to deepen divides within our society; to take away our ability to evaluate fact from fiction and make decisions in our own best interests; and to ensure that whatever America emerged from the election, it was one less interested in countering the Kremlin's global imperialist insurgency.

Understanding how the Kremlin has tried to achieve this is absolutely essential. The much-discussed hacks and the leaks represent the least sophisticated aspect, psychologically and technologically, of the campaign. The Kremlin, along with its agents and proxies, constructed and deployed an elaborate information architecture to use against the American public. While this architecture did, at times, amplify disinformation, its primary purposes were larger: active measures, reflexive control and psychological warfare.

These three concepts are related and overlapping. Psychological warfare, in this context, refers to information and disinformation that targets our values and beliefs. "Active measures" is a Soviet term for manipulation or political warfare—psychological or informational tactics that aim to achieve specific outcomes. Reflexive control is a type of information warfare that aims to condition us to react to certain types of information in specific ways, in particular by shaping our perceptions so we voluntarily make decisions favorable to our enemy.

These are complicated concepts that military and intelligence experts spend careers trying to learn and identify. This is not “fake news,” although our increasing tolerance of disinformation gives them power. This is an elaborate, sophisticated operation constructed within American society and media that we still do not see clearly. It is designed to inject ideas into our information environment in ways we can’t control, and to undermine the idea that there is objective truth.

As [the declassified intelligence report](#) noted, the perceived goal of the Kremlin’s influence campaign during the election shifted many times based on its evaluation of public opinion. This is, perhaps, one of the most important and least discussed points from the report. What it means is that—although it clearly supported him at times—the Kremlin could never have been sure that Trump would win, and may not have cared whether he did. In a sense, it doesn't matter whether the Kremlin wanted Trump as president, and it doesn't matter whether Russia loved or feared Hillary Clinton. What matters is that Russian leaders believed they could change the way we as Americans think without us knowing about their efforts to do so—and that by doing so, the next American government could be constrained in its choices toward Russia.

What Russia Achieved

Perhaps the hardest thing for all of us to wrap our heads around: No matter what is true or not, and no matter what information may eventually be confirmed or completely discredited, the Kremlin has successfully created the perception that it has direct influence on the president-elect of the United States, and that he is making decisions in Russia’s best interest. This is an impression that will be enormously hard for Trump to free himself from, absent a coherent policy that is clear on the Russian threat to our country.

Russia has suddenly assumed a position of primacy in all of our political conversations. When [C-SPAN starts broadcasting RT](#) and the [lights go out](#) during a confirmation hearing, we see a Russian boogeyman waiting in the wings. This inflates perceptions of Russian power tremendously.

[Ideologues](#) with views [sympathetic to the Kremlin](#) now occupy positions close to the president-elect, and their views have been propelled into the mainstream. Elements of the Kremlin’s narrative were absorbed, sometimes unwittingly, by [the right](#) and by [the left](#). Elements of this narrative were injected into our media through online leaks and through repetition by representatives and surrogates of political campaigns.

Both at home and abroad, there are questions about the legitimacy of our elections, of our electoral process, and of the incoming American president. Russian state media readily transmit these questions to their audience at home. Our European allies are [on edge](#). An isolated, nationalist America helps the Kremlin achieve its objectives. An isolated, nationalist American president accelerates this process.

The president-elect is, at times, seen as trapped within his own echo chamber, surrounded by family and a select few advisers, with even his [Cabinet picks vague on his actual views](#). This remains particularly true of views on Russia, which does little to take the air out of suspicions of

collusion with Kremlin sponsors. The president-elect is now in open conflict with his intelligence agencies—the very institutions he, and our country, will need to unravel the nature of the Russian tool kit used against us.

And it's not just Trump: Our sitting president and our intelligence community seem to have been so slow, opaque and vague in official evaluations of Russian interference in the election that they have weakened their ability to help the American people understand the tools being used against them. In some way, every aspect of our leadership has been accused of failing to see this threat to our democracy, or of failing to provide vital information to the American public.

It's a deep hole of fracture and distrust, and a cultivated information environment helped to dig it. For example, the Kremlin used its information campaign during the U.S. elections to empower far-right, far-left and other extremist elements, as it has done [in many other places](#), in order to amplify anti-establishment political views. In some cases, this included presenting fringe groups and views—the new "white nationalists," hard-line environmentalists, many more—as far more powerful and expansive in American society than they really are.

This was done to advance specific narratives that are important domestically in Russia and for Kremlin propaganda around the world. At home and abroad, it aims to create moral equivalency—not that Russia is better, but that America is just as flawed. [America has Nazis](#) too. American elections [are also rigged](#). [American society](#) is not inclusive. [America is a police state](#), maybe worse than Russia's own. [American oligarchs](#) have tremendous power and can do whatever they want. America's [supposed free press](#) is corrupt, biased and feckless, as evidenced, ironically, by its willingness to echo information from the Kremlin when it is put into its hands.

All of this was readily trumpeted by Russian state media during the campaign—as was every instance in which Trump praised Putin as a great, smart or powerful leader, or in which his advisers heralded the death of the party of Reagan. In turn, [Russians laughed](#) at Trump's recent news conference, alternatively mocking Trump's inability to control his own press corps and marveling at the irony—having long lived in a world in which American machinations are blamed for every ill in Russian society—of listening to an American media unilaterally focused on Russian manipulations of the United States.

Which brings us to these latest revelations: the Trump dossier, the 35 pages of leaked opposition research compiled about Trump's alleged ties to Russia. Its real importance isn't really what we think. Is it real but unverified information? Was it deliberate disinformation from opponents of Trump? Was it deliberate disinformation provided by the Russian Federal Security Service to those collecting tips for their report? In the current information environment, *it doesn't matter*. The point is not the information, but what the act of introducing the information aimed to achieve.

Based on what we know about [the former MI6 agent](#) responsible for the leaked memorandum, either he believed in the veracity of his reporting or he was captured in a massive disinformation effort led by Russian counterintelligence. It certainly wouldn't be the first time the Kremlin made sure something that can be discredited is given to opponents. That way, when it is released, it can be taken apart; this deconstruction provides a kind of immunity for the target against future

allegations, and can sometimes be used to mask much worse information that could otherwise be revealed. It's certainly plausible that Russian intelligence knew about this effort and attempted to disrupt it. The only thing we can be certain of is that the Kremlin wants us to believe it has something on Trump. Trump isn't doing much, as of yet, to erase that impression.

As we try to game out what any of this means, the motivations of other information will feel murkier. For example: Did [an Israeli intelligence official](#) share that U.S. intelligence officials had told them not to give information to the Trump administration as a legitimate warning—or is it deliberate disinformation planted to further inflame the divide between Trump and his intelligence community, which will benefit Russia most of all? It's headache-inducing stuff, and nothing can be taken at face value. This was, in total, a remarkably successful campaign against the American people.

This is what subversion looks like. We don't really understand what happened. We are unable to know who was acting where and how, or what they wanted to achieve with any specific act or move. We don't know whether there is more to come, or whether it is over. We don't know who is compromised and who is not.

Right now, the only one who can end the cycle is Donald Trump.

What it Cost Russia

The Kremlin's offensive may have worked so far, but Russia also got ahead of its supply lines, in many ways. Now the exposure of Russia's manipulations has, and will, and must, exact a cost.

First and foremost: We now have a more clear-eyed view of the very real threat that Russia presents—for us and our allies. Views on Russia may have become a twisted litmus test for support of the president-elect, but a new acceptance that the Kremlin is aggressively attempting to undermine our interests has been evident in the confirmation hearings of Trump's Cabinet nominees. President Barack Obama had succeeded in softening and silencing much of the Democratic Party's position on Russia: loyalists heralded the successes of the "reset" long after it made any tangible sense. Obama has also spent eight years convincing Americans that Russia was a weak regional power lashing out to deflect its own flaws. This diminishment of the greatest threat to our nation took away our most important defense to it.

Had Putin succeeded in keeping his information operations and subversion tactics a secret, either a Clinton or a Trump presidency would likely have continued much of the existing policy drift, and the continuation of the idea that it is possible to work with Russia in some ways. But the revelations of Russian interference mean a Democratic Caucus that is no longer divided on members' views of Russia but is hardened against Putin and his manipulations. The hardest-line Republicans are also fortifying themselves for a fight. The intelligence community and State Department are galvanized on many issues in ways they have not been for years. Our military

speaks clearly of the multidimensional threat we face. It will be more difficult for Trump to continue on with a soft, new approach toward a “partner” Russia, and he will be questioned at every step if he attempts to do so.

This has a trickle-down effect on other aspects of policy that Russia overshadows: on the need to stand with, and provide for the defense of, Ukraine; on the importance of the new NATO deployments to the Baltics and the new U.S.-led contingent in Poland, and the need to pre-deploy strategic assets to the region to build resilience against potential Russian incursions; on the need to renew the NATO alliance, overall; on the need to see clearly what Russia is doing in Syria and the Middle East, and that Russia cannot be a real partner for eliminating ISIS.

There is also more awareness now of how Russia has cultivated allies and advocates in the West, particularly via financial and business interests, and via other interest groups. These are deep and expansive, as evidenced by the fact that advisers close to both major campaigns could be connected to Kremlin-backed interests.

One more casualty is the Kremlin’s long-cultivated network of so-called “whistleblowers,” like WikiLeaks, which has been exposed as a front for Russian intelligence. Attempts to establish future such networks will be met with more scrutiny, which should make it harder to inject the information gained by intelligence services into our information streams. How our media chooses to deal with such information, though, remains to be seen.

Most importantly, the Kremlin has exposed how deeply it desires our failure, and how significant a threat its disruption and subversion tactics can be. Any operation is, in part, a failure if the web they weave is exposed. Future campaigns against us will hopefully face more scrutiny and more resistance—and hopefully the American experience will be a strong warning for French and German societies, as well as other allied nations whose elections are on the Kremlin’s target list this year.

Breaking Out of the Trap

In the current landscape of the shadow war, the Kremlin just notched a significant victory. Not because Trump won, but because it advanced Russia’s strategic objective of weakening our belief in our democracy and our values, and deepening the information divide that rends our nation. Surely, not all of this was because of the Kremlin. Nonetheless—as we hear in echoes from Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and beyond—this is what it looks like when Russia gains the upper hand. This is what subversion does: We see enemies among our neighbors more than we see them in the assets of foreign intelligence operations.

But in winning this battle, the Kremlin has also exposed itself. And that means it hasn’t won the war.

Whether Trump acknowledges the Kremlin's support for his campaign narrative or not, the information architecture the Russians built remains in place. There is no guarantee it will continue to act for Trump's benefit; it is as much a danger to him, and to every American lawmaker and official, as it is to American society. There is no way of knowing what the next target will be in this insidious information war.

The KGB/FSB playbook excels in constructing what it wants us to believe are inescapable traps. They are working hard now to convince us that Trump is already inside one. No matter what is true, and no matter whether Trump is compromised, he has been weakened by their attempted manipulations. In reaction, by failing to see this as an existential threat and not a political one, much of the political elite plays the part that has been scripted for them. Our nation looks weaker and more exposed in the world, our political decision-making will become more divided and obstructionist, and our relationships with our allies will be less open—unless the president-elect acts.

Ironically, coming out of the most divisive election any of us can remember, Trump has an idea to unify us behind, against an enemy that has made it clear it wants to erase what we stand for from history. If Trump were to come out of his defensive crouch and accept the obvious offensive strategy—standing against the Kremlin's belief that it has free rein to meddle in our society and politics—he could be the architect of a bipartisan consensus on foreign policy that could start bridging the many divides in our politics and in our people. This would be a positive example, reminding the world and our critics that our system is better, and stronger, and lasting, because it adapts and thrives in the face of nightmares. This would reinvigorate our leadership in our alliances, and the values that they are founded upon.

Trump has the tools to aid him in this fight if he chooses to call upon them. He can have no better warrior for this fight than his nominee for secretary of defense, retired General James Mattis. And Rep. Mike Pompeo, in his confirmation hearing to become the next director of the CIA, laid out the beginnings of a vision of the “complex threat environment” against our country and how our intelligence-gathering must adapt to those threats. Trump would also have the support of the strongest voices on the Hill—allies and critics alike—on this issue.

All of this requires a clear policy to confront, rather than empower, Russia's worst instincts. That is Trump's way out of the inescapable trap, and America's first step forward.

Putin's mistake—and, perhaps, Donald Trump's—is in underestimating Americans, and how much we believe that our sacrifice has forged a better world, and how much we believe in the values we represent. We are under attack, and now we are beginning to understand that.

Putin's attack wasn't on Hillary Clinton: it was on American society. We, as citizens, are also the first line of defense, and the core of the coming resistance. The worst element of Obama's foreign policy—and, ironically, the continuity that Trump sometimes seems to provide on these views—is the embrace of the idea that we are sometimes powerless to do anything, which is used to salve the stinging moral fecklessness of saying it shouldn't always have to be us. While we engage in this kabuki theater of powerlessness, we allow the environment where Putin acts with

a free hand to shape the world to Kremlin interests—and continue erasing the legacy of American power and sacrifice in the world.

Molly K. McKew (@MollyMcKew) advises governments and political parties on foreign policy and strategic communications. She was an adviser to Georgian President Saakashvili's government from 2009-2013, and to former Moldovan Prime Minister Filat in 2014-2015.

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