

US AUTHORITIES TAKE ACTION AGAINST RUSSIAN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS TARGETING US VOTERS AHEAD OF THE 2024 ELECTION

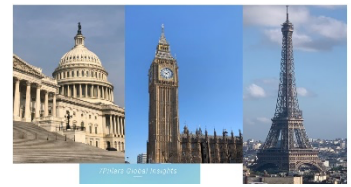
- Two Russian employees of RT (a Russian state-owned media outlet formerly known as Russia Today) are indicted in connection with an alleged scheme to funnel close to \$10 million to a US online content-creation company to influence US public opinion. The money allegedly was used to pay for content provided by American right-wing social media influencers, representing a new Russian tactic of paying Americans to produce content to further the interests of Russia.
- DoJ seizes control of 32 Russian-controlled internet domains that were used to undermine support for Ukraine while Congress was considering the aid package to Ukraine, and in related moves, the State Department and the Treasury Department announced sanctions against individuals and entities accused of disseminating Russian propaganda. The propaganda effort formed part of the so-called Doppelgänger Russian malign influence campaign.
- DoJ unseals a superseding indictment against five members of Unit 29155 of the GRU and a civilian in connection with cyberattacks in advance of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- DoJ unseals an indictment against an American commentator for Russia television (Channel One) and his wife for sanctions violations relating to work for Channel One.
- State Department sanctions RT and various other entities for engaging in information operations, covert influence operations, military procurement and cyber operations.

In marked contrast to 2016, US law enforcement agencies and the US intelligence community now are under no illusion when it comes to Russian interference in the upcoming US elections – the threat is very real. The Russian government’s influence campaigns are far more sophisticated, are better resourced, are better organized and are focused with far greater precision on our elections than they were in 2016, and they have been up and running for some time. Moreover, again in contrast to 2016 and even 2020, these efforts have the benefit of a willing audience and willing dissemination channels with broad social-media reach.

Over the past two weeks, the extent of the threat, as well as the objectives and details of specific Russian influence operations (including what the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) summarized as the use of authentic US voices to launder Russian disinformation and spread divisive narrative through social media and fake media sites masquerading as legitimate US news outlets), were set out in a series of federal indictments and sanctions designations. (*See, e.g.*, reporting from the Washington Post, “[Russia’s election influence efforts show sophistication, officials say.](#)”)

The 2017-2022 Investigations

By way of background, recall that it was not until well after the 2016 election that the US intelligence community, law enforcement and special counsel Robert Mueller concluded that Russia had conducted an extensive campaign to interfere in the 2016 election, including through hacking of email accounts and the dissemination of disinformation. In 2018, as part of the Mueller [investigation](#), a grand jury [indicted](#) 12 Russian military intelligence officers



for allegedly hacking into email accounts of Secretary Clinton’s campaign and the Democratic National Committee. The 12 were agents of the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), a military intelligence agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces. The investigation also found that Russia-linked actors had allegedly carried out social media campaigns to help Donald Trump. A Senate Intelligence Committee [investigation](#) on Russian interference came to a similar conclusion in 2020.

Last October, it was widely reported that the State Department intended to share warnings with up to 100 other democracies detailing efforts by Russia between 2022 and 2022 to undermine the trust in electoral processes in a number of countries. (See “[Russia, shifting tactics, fans doubt in election integrity, U.S. says.](#)”)

Wave of Actions to Counter Russian Influence Operations

Beginning September 4, US authorities announced a series of indictments, and imposed sanctions, against Russian entities and individuals for carrying out foreign influence operations.

Indictment of Two RT Employees

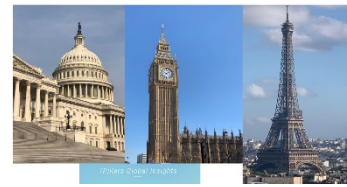
First, the Department of Justice [charged](#) two Russian employees of RT (a Russian state-owned media outlet formerly known as Russia Today) in connection with an alleged scheme to funnel close to \$10 million to a US online content creation company. The objective was to create and post on social media sites, including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and X, nearly 2,000 English-language videos echoing Russian state propaganda intended to influence US public opinion, on topics that included immigration, inflation and other domestic and foreign policy matters. The video content allegedly was provided by six American right-wing social media influencers. The videos on YouTube alone garnered 16 million views.

DoJ noted in its [press release](#) announcing the indictment that, “[w]hile the views expressed in the videos are not uniform, most are directed to the publicly stated goals of the Government of Russia and RT — to amplify domestic divisions in the United States.”

The two Russian media executives, who set up a series of shell companies to funnel money and used fake names to direct content, were charged with conspiracy to violate the Foreign Agents Registration Act and conspiracy to commit money laundering. As RT has been sanctioned since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it could only funnel money into the United States surreptitiously (and illegally).

The US company, 90% of whose bank deposits represented money provided by the Russians and that failed to disclose to its viewers that it was funded and directed by RT, is not named in the indictment, though its identity (Tenet Media) has been widely reported. Tenet Media has been linked to prominent right-wing social media commentators, including those whose names and audiences, according to the indictment, were leveraged as part of the influence operation. Of the two principal commentators, one had 2.4 million YouTube subscribers and the other had 1.3 million YouTube subscribers.

None of Tenet, its two founder-owners (right-wing personalities who, according to the indictment, allegedly were aware money was coming from Russia) or the commentators (who also were not named in the indictment, but whose identities have been widely reported, and



apparently were unaware) were indicted. (See [“Russia Secretly Worms Its Way Into America’s Conservative Media,”](#) [“These Right-Wing Pundits Were Allegedly Funded by Russia—What To Know About DOJ Indictment”](#) and [“What Right-Wing Influencers Actually Said in Those Tenet Media Videos.”](#))

YouTube, the principal platform for the Tenet Media videos, has since taken down the Tenet Media’s channel and four others associated with one of the founders, as part of its efforts to “combat coordinated influence operations. Mother Jones reported that Tenet Media has shut down operations.

Actions Related to Doppelgänger

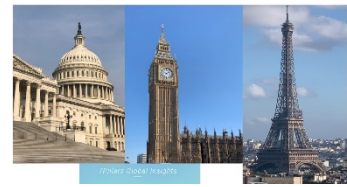
Separately, DoJ [announced](#) that it had seized control of 32 Russian-controlled internet domains that were used to undermine support for Ukraine while Congress was considering the aid package to Ukraine, and in related moves, the State Department and the Treasury Department announced sanctions against individuals and entities accused of disseminating Russian propaganda intended to influence the upcoming election. The seized bots formed part of a Russian state-directed “malign influence campaign” known as Doppelgänger, the code name assigned to the campaign by European authorities (*see* my March 2024 [briefing note](#)).

- The Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [sanctioned](#) ten individuals, including the editor-in-chief of RT and a number of other individuals associated with RT, and two Russian non-profits (ANO Dialog and ANO Dialog Regions) that help run the Doppelgänger network.
- The State Department [sanctioned](#) five Russian state-funded news outlets, including RT and Sputnik.

As set out in comprehensive detail in a 277-page [FBI affidavit](#), the Doppelgänger campaign had two prongs.

The campaign placed content on spoofed websites that promoted specific narratives identified by the Russian government to further the Russian government’s objectives, such as influencing the US electorate by targeting specific audiences within the United States and elsewhere. To evade detection, the campaign created cybersquatted domains that appeared to be the websites of legitimate news outlets such as Fox News, The Washington Post and Forward, among others. To distribute the fake content without attribution to the Russian government, the campaign created social media profiles posing as U.S. (or other non-Russian) citizens. These profiles then posted comments on social media platforms with links to the cybersquatted domains to trick viewers into believing they were visiting legitimate US news outlets.

The second component of the campaign focused on creating original brands to disseminate Russian propaganda. These brands purported to be independent journalists or independent news media organizations, but they actually published content under the direction and control of the Russian government. Individuals associated with Doppelgänger, who are believed to be based in Russia or elsewhere outside the United States, transferred funds from outside the United States to lease most of the bots from US-based domain registrars or registries at the direction and control of, and for the benefit of, the named Russian actors.



The Doppelgänger investigation apparently was based on leaked internal Kremlin documents, including leaked documents that had also been obtained by the Washington Post. These documents set out efforts directed by the Kremlin (and, in particular, the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergei Kiriyenko), as [described](#) by David Nakamura, Catherine Belton and Will Sommer of the Washington Post “to promote American isolationism, stir fear over US border security and attempt to amplify US economic and racial tensions” and “to promote Russia’s preferred outcome in the election.” The FBI Affidavit has attached to it, among other things, two Russian documents presumably that formed part of the leaked cache:

- the Good Old US Project (Exhibit 8), which was to target residents of swing states, residents of red states, Jews, Hispanics and gamers; and
- the Guerrilla Media Campaign in the United States (Exhibit 9), which was to target Republican voters, Trump supporters, supporters of traditional family values and white Americans.

Superseding Indictment Related to the WhisperGate Malware Attacks

Third, DoJ announced the unsealing of a [superseding indictment](#) against five members of Unit 29155 of the GRU, and a civilian in connection with cyberattacks in advance of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine against Ukrainian government computers. The attacks were known in the cyber-defense community as WhisperGate. The [initial indictment](#) charged a single GRU officer in the WhisperGate scheme.

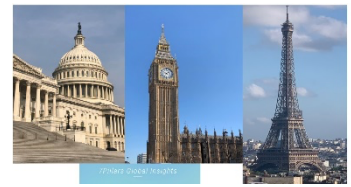
The defendants’ targets included Ukrainian government systems and data with no military or defense-related roles, largely designed to sap the morale of the Ukrainian public. Subsequent targets included computer systems in countries around the world that were providing support to Ukraine, including the United States and 25 other NATO countries. The indictment is for computer intrusion and wire fraud with jurisdiction based on malware sent from the United States as part of the attacks.

Indictment of an American Commentator for Russian Television and his Wife

And capping off that week, the DoJ unsealed [indictments](#) against Dimitri K. Simes, an American commentator for Russia television (Channel One), and his wife. Simes served as an advisor to Trump’s first presidential campaign, and in the 1970s served as an advisor to the Nixon administration. Simes and the think tank with which he is associated, the Center for the National Interest, were cited in the [Mueller report](#). Simes and his wife were charged with violating the economic sanctions provisions of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, by reason of allegedly receiving payments from Channel One, which had been sanctioned following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Separate additional charges against Simes’ wife relate to alleged payments from a sanctioned Russian oligarch.

State Department Sanctions Designations

This past Friday, the State Department released a [Fact Sheet](#) alerting US allies to covert activities being undertaken by RT on a global scale. Among other actions taken, the State Department sanctioned three entities, including the parent company of RT and TV-NOVOSTI, and two individuals in connection with efforts by RT to destabilize target



countries in Europe, Africa, and North and South America (with specific allegations relating to activities in Moldova, Argentina, France and Germany, and African Stream). The State Department characterized RT as having moved beyond the activities of a media outlet to engaging in information operations, covert influence operations and military procurement to aid its war effort in Ukraine. The Fact Sheet also noted that the Russian government had embedded within RT a unit with cyber operational capabilities and ties to Russian intelligence.

The State Department made clear that it was not taking action based on the content of the sanctioned targets' reporting, even if they are creating and spreading disinformation. Rather the designations are based on covert influence, which the State Department distinguishes from journalism. The sanctioned targets remain free to engage in journalism and media operations not covered by the sanctions.

The State Department announced, in addition to the sanctions, that it is engaged in diplomatic efforts to alert allies to Russia's use of RT to conduct covert activities and to encourage actions to limit Russia's ability to influence foreign elections.

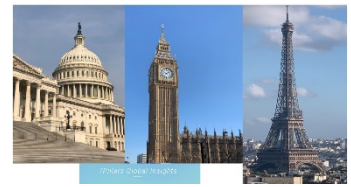
Catherine Belton writing in the Washington Post ("[Blinken says Russian state media outlet runs intelligence operations](#)") cites warning from US officials that recent revelations regarding Russian disinformation operations to influence US public opinion is only a small part of the Kremlin's overall efforts to undermine democracies across the world through RT, which together with the other sanctioned entities, in the words of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, are "functioning like a de facto arm of Russia's intelligence apparatus."

Agents of Influence and Susceptible Target Audiences

It is noteworthy that the targets of the indictments are largely non-American. The one set of indictments of US citizens covered violations of economic sanctions. Otherwise, US citizens have not been charged for spreading Russian talking points or for facilitating the spread of Russian propaganda. DoJ, for example, did not indict Tenet Media (US Company-1) or its six right-wing social media commentators (Commentators-1 through -6). That said, it is clear that US citizens (in fact, two sets of US citizens) were critical to the Russian efforts.

As I outlined in my March [briefing note](#), one of the tactics reprised by the Kremlin that dates back at least to the Cold War is the exploitation of "agent of influence." These agents could be a witting or unwitting asset doing the Kremlin's bidding to influence lawmakers, government officials, thought leaders and/or public opinion. Disinformation expert Renee DiResta (quoted in "[Russia focusing on American social media stars to covertly influence voters](#)" that appeared in Reuters) notes that Russia's efforts to influence the 2024 election are the digital version of Cold War Soviet tactics, and that influencers rather than journalists now appear to be the "useful idiots" of choice.

There is one other angle to this, namely the willingness of intended audiences to be swayed by Russian propaganda. Anne Applebaum, writing in The Atlantic ("[The Americans Who Yearn for Anti-American Propaganda](#)"), identifies two distinguishing factors of the Russian efforts – the first being the use of local (and, therefore, much more convincing) voices, and the second being the fact that the intended audiences may not care that the source of the messaging is Russian. These messages form "part of a larger stream of authoritarian ideas



that are now ubiquitous on the far right” and “are also consistent with the Trump campaign’s interest in amplifying U.S. domestic divisions.” What is new (relative to Cold War propaganda) is that right-wing commentators and their audiences are not swayed by foreign propaganda, but rather “[foreign] influence operations are designed to spread the views of Americans who actively and enthusiastically support the autocratic narrative.”

Tom Nichols, also writing in *The Atlantic* (“[The Russian Propaganda Attack on America](#)”), makes similar observations. The Russians have tapped into a target-rich environment animated by two vulnerabilities – the readiness of a significant proportion of Americans to accept conspiracy theories and “‘news’ meant to generate social conflict so long as the stories are exciting [and] validate their pre-existing worldviews,” and their ability to exploit the influence of social media. Russian intelligence agents no longer need to painstakingly recruit Americans to provide information with significant intelligence value, but instead can funnel cash to influencers pre-disposed to do their bidding of sowing discord.

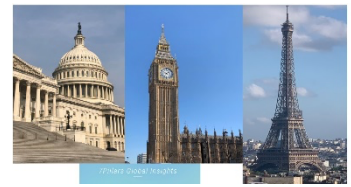
The Reuters [article](#) reports that, in view of Russian efforts targeting American social media commentators as a means to influence US voters and the reality that Americans are more likely to be swayed by the views of other Americans, US intelligence officials are providing “defensive briefings” to warn Americans who may be unwitting pawns in the malign influence operations that Russia has unleashed at scale. The question is, will they care? The indictment strongly suggests that the Tenet Media founders knew they were dealing with Russians.

Concluding Thoughts

How far we have travelled. On October 7, 2016, after the White House bowed to significant pressure from Capitol Hill and national security experts, then DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper issued a [statement](#) accusing the Russians of hacking, and then disseminating on DCLeaks and WikiLeaks, emails from the DNC. Later that day, John Podesta’s hacked emails appeared on WikiLeaks. Between these two events, the Washington Post dropped the *Hollywood Access* video and story.

Questions surrounding the extent to which Russia sought to influence the outcome of the 2016 election, not to mention the affinity that Donald Trump had, and still has, for Vladimir Putin, continue to endure. Those questions spawned a plethora of subsidiary questions that predictably often (but not always) triggered partisan responses. We are unlikely to ever fully understand the complex and multi-layered web of relationships that track back to Moscow or the ultimate impact of those relationships on US politics.

What stands in sharp contrast to prior efforts to highlight those relationships is the willingness of the US authorities, with the election looming, to spell out Russia’s current objectives, and to do so with what appears to be strong evidence. The leaked documents clearly set out the goal of facilitating the victory of Donald Trump (redacted as Political Party A’s candidate) and of ensuring that the views of the Republican Party (redacted as Political Party A) come to dominate public opinion. The ODNI recently issued a [blunt assessment](#) of those objectives: the agents cited in the two DoJ indictments, “among others, are supporting Moscow’s efforts to influence voter preferences in favor of the former President and diminish



the prospects of the Vice President through methods such as targeted online influence operations on social media and websites that portray themselves as legitimate news sites.”

The US authorities should be applauded for their efforts, but, as Tom Nichols questions at the conclusion of his [article](#), is the conduct cited in the indictments only the tip of the iceberg?

One final thought – as noted above there are two sets of US audiences that are critical to the success of Russian propaganda efforts – those paid to create and distribute content and those who receive it. While it may be fanciful to believe that influencers who earn money through content that enrages, social media users, as disinformation and democratization expert Nina Jankowicz just [explained](#), need not try to figure out if Russia is behind content they are seeing or if the content is AI-generated, but rather should consider whether the content has the effect of enraging them. If it does, then it likely is engaging them. And that can be the tell: “The commentators that RT paid recognized this, trafficking in rage bait, weaponizing pre-existing fissures in our society to drive clicks and revenue.” If content triggers an emotional response, stop to consider who might be influencing you and why. It may be foreign actors or it may be domestic actors seeking to boost subscribers and revenue – in either case, Jankowicz concludes, it is not in your interest.

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