ARE WE PREPARED TO COUNTER THE SCALE AND SOPHISTICATION OF RUSSIA'S FOREIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS?

- Russia is undertaking concerted and coordinated efforts across the globe to sow distrust in vote-counting and elections as an estimated 2 billion go to the polls this year, including in the US, India, Mexico and South Africa.
- Russia is weaponizing "influence-laundering techniques" to manipulate public opinion while masking the source of the disinformation.
- Western governments have been proactive in calling out Russian efforts, including through the apparent selective release of intelligence.
- Russia is also seeking to undermine support across the West for Ukraine through disinformation.
- Modern-day "agents of influence" are making malign foreign influence operations easier. Authentic American voices parroting Kremlin talking points that can then be amplified is a gift to the Kremlin.

We, as a society, may be desperate to find ways of tamping down the anger and outrage fueling the polarization blighting our country, but the anger and outrage, and consequent polarization, is not only unlikely to dissipate as Election Day 2024 approaches. In fact, it is likely to get worse. One significant driver of this threat is Vladimir Putin – the Kremlin's weapon of choice is disinformation. As was succinctly described in a recent Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) report, "[i]nfluence operations supported by information warfare and active measures exploited by agents of influence are core components of Russia's unconventional warfare concepts."[1] Moreover, "Russia's special services[2] actively seek to

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[1] In its 2020 report ("Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem"), the State Department's Global Engagement Center ("GEC") described Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem as the collection of official, proxy and unattributed communications channels and platforms used by Russia to create and amplify false and misleading narratives. The GEC cited five channels for the proliferation of pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda:

- official government communications (including Kremlin and Ministry statements, official social media posts, and quotes attributed to Russian officials);
- state-funded global messaging (through both domestic and foreign media and socio-cultural institutions);
- cultivation of proxy sources (Russian aligned-outlets with global reach, local language-specific outlets, and witting and unwitting local proliferators of Russian narratives);
- weaponization of social media (infiltration of domestic conversations, standing campaigns to undermine faith in institutions, and amplification of protests and civil discord); and
- cyber-enabled disinformation (hack and release, site capture, cloned websites, forgeries and disruption of official sources and objective media).

[2] This is a reference to the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (the "GRU"), and its recently established Special Activities Service

expand their capacity in several areas that pose strategic threats to NATO members," and are "using unconventional methods to expand [Russia's] influence, evade containment, and destabilize and disrupt [Russia's] adversaries."

The foreign influence operation landscape has changed significantly from the efforts deployed in 2016; experts are tracking significant shifts, even over recent months. In addition to the weaponization of generative AI, which I have covered in earlier briefing notes (*see* "Countering Deepfakes"), there has been a sea change in Russian tactics as well as objectives.

- In October, the US government reportedly warned close to 100 countries that Russia was unleashing a new hybrid warfare tactic, namely concerted and coordinated efforts to sow distrust in vote-counting and elections ahead of elections across the globe. This represents a shift in tactics away from overt and covert support for its preferred candidates (which, in the case of the 2016 US election, in turn represented a shift from merely seeking to sow distrust for its own sake) to undermining trust in the legitimacy of elections and, therefore, in democracy itself. (*See* AP, *"*US warns of a Russian effort to sow doubt over the election outcome in democracies around the globe.")
- Russia is also shifting to "influence-laundering techniques" to manipulate public opinion while masking the source of the disinformation. These are part of deeper, longer-term efforts intended to cultivate local leaders whom the Kremlin hopes will spread pro-Russian narratives in their local communities, while hiding Russian's hand. (*See* "Russia Pushes Long-Term Influence Operations Aimed at the U.S. and Europe"). In the shorter-term, the effort involves cloning legitimate sites to make the disinformation appear to be local "news" (including posts on social media accounts of supposed journalists who supposedly work for (cloned) outlets), which is then amplified further. One objective of the manipulation of public opinion is in furtherance of undermining support for aid to Ukraine.

(encompassing Unit 29155, Unit 54654 and the 161 Centre). The revitalized effort is overseen by the Kremlin's Deputy Chief of Staff, Sergei Kiriyenko and reflects an institutional reorganization triggered by a series of flawed operations and setbacks. (*See also* The Economist, "Russian spies are back - and more dangerous than ever.")

The Economist article also calls out, as examples of the re-engagement of the Russian intelligence apparatus, Star Blizzard, an elite FSB hacking group whose global spearphishing campaigns were the subject of US and British warnings in December, notification by Microsoft that "Cozy Bear" (APT 29, also referred to as Midnight Blizzard) – tied to Russia's foreign intelligence service, the SVR, had hacked into email accounts of certain Microsoft senior executives, and a sophisticated GRU cyber-attack against Ukraine's power grid. The article notes that the priority is to prepare for conflict with NATO not only by stealing secrets, but by sowing discord within NATO, undermining support for Ukraine in the US and Europe, and eroding the influence of the West in the global south.

A related change is the willingness of the US government to declassify intelligence detailing Russia's new tactics, not unlike the selective release of intelligence about Russian intentions in Ukraine in the period leading up to the February 2022 invasion and thereafter. That information, for example, likely underpins exposure of Russian tactics by the GEC.

The US government is not alone in calling out disinformation. For example,

- the German Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community has a webpage debunking Russian disinformation;
- the unit within the French General Secretariat of Defense and National Security (SGDSN) responsible for protection against foreign digital interference (*Service de vigilance et protection contre les ingérences numérique éstrangères* – VIGINUM) posts reports on the results of its investigations (*see*, *e.g.,* Portal Kombat);
- the Canadian government has a webpage dedicated to countering Russian disinformation about Ukraine and a webpage describing Russian disinformation tactics; and
- NATO has a webpage debunking disinformation relating to NATO's role vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine.

The Threats from a US Perspective

The AP cited US officials who see Russia capitalizing on a global scale on the relatively inexpensive success the Kremlin had in amplifying Trump's Big Lie in 2020. It is noteworthy that, in the immediate aftermath of the 2020 election, the consensus was that the feared repeat of Russia's 2016 interference had not materialized. But what came immediately afterwards had the hallmarks of Russian influence operations and has had lasting consequences.[3]

Fast forward to 2024 and to get a sense of the scale of the threat, GZERO spoke with Cyabra, which tracks bots, to understand the online reaction to the news of the killing of Navalny. Cyabra focused on the condemnations of Navalny's killing posted by President Biden and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Cyabra concluded that approximately 29% of the profiles interacting with Biden's post on X were inauthentic (bots, not humans) and 25% of the profiles interacting with Trudeau were inauthentic. The average percentage of fake accounts

[3] As the AP reported last summer ("Trump's drumbeat of lies about the 2020 election keeps getting louder. Here are the facts"), to shift attention away from the federal felony charges over his attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 election, Trump amped up his claims that the 2020 election was rigged. Trump's incendiary and chaotic speech in Vandalia, Ohio last Saturday – amidst the references to "bloodbath" if he is not re-elected and that if he does not win he is not sure that there will ever be another election in the United States, to the "unbelievable patriots" who are being held "as hostages" for convictions based on the attack on the Capitol, to being persecuted worse than Presidents Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, to the attacks on prosecutors in each of the cases against him and the Manchurian candidate Joe Biden, and to the gang members, drug dealers and murders sent by Venezuela to the United States – are his routinely discredited signature allegations that the 2020 election was stolen from him.

participating in everyday online conversations typically is in the range of 4-8%. The Cyabra representative noted that fake accounts (whether a bot, sock puppet, troll or other) almost invariably are created for malign purposes. \

Immigration

In recent weeks, Russian state media and online accounts tied to Russia have spread, as well as amplified, via media posts, online videos and website stories, disinformation around US border security. As reported by AP ("Russian disinformation is about immigration. The real aim is to undercut Ukraine aid"), these accounts misstate the impact of immigration, elevate stories about crimes committed by immigrants and hype dire consequences if the administration fails to toughen entry by asylum seekers into the United States via Mexico. AP cites evidence provided by Logically that dozens of pro-Russian accounts have been posting about border security issues, with a particular focus on anti-immigration rallies in Texas.

WIRED (*see* "Russia is Boosting Calls for Civil War Over Texas Border Crisis") has characterized the extent of the Russian effort as follows: "A Russian disinformation campaign is deploying everything from high-ranking lawmakers and government officials to lifestyle influences, bloggers and powerful state-run media outlets [*i.e.,* Sputnik and RT] to stoke divisions in the United States around the Texas border crisis." WIRED also cites disinformation research identifying a coordinated Russian effort on X and Telegram to sow discord by warning that the United States is heading for civil war.

Undermining aid to Ukraine

The border is not the only theme, as Russia has broadened its hybrid warfare tactics targeting Ukraine by seeking to erode support in Congress for continuing to provide aid to Ukraine. The attacks are intended to undercut military aid to Ukraine as well as support for, and collaboration with, our NATO allies.[4] As Julian E. Barnes noted in his Washington Post piece ("Putin's Next Target: U.S. Support for Ukraine, Officials Say"), Kremlin efforts to undermine support for candidates who support Ukraine or uplift those who oppose increased aid to Ukraine, may not succeed, but that does not mean that Russian efforts to undermine support through disinformation campaigns aimed at public opinion will not succeed.

This past week, the New York Times ("From Russia, Elaborate Tales of Fake Journalists") highlighted the sophistication of new Russian efforts to discredit Ukraine, which involve groups with ties to Russia floating narratives using fake or altered videos or recordings, and finding or creating new outlets to spread disinformation, including ones purporting to be American news sites. This effort involves the creation not only of the malign content but also the news outlet and social media channels to spread and amplify the content.

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[4] There efforts were highlighted around the first anniversary of the 2022 invasion by, among others, the Alliance for Securing Democracy.

The New York Times article, building on research provided by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue ("ISD"), chronicles the creation and spreading of a false narrative about the purchase of a villa in a resort town in Egypt by the mother-in-law of President Zelensky. The elaborate operation involved the creation of a fake Egyptian investigative journalist, whose story then "caromed through social media and news outlets from Egypt to Nigeria and ultimately to Russia." When the story faded, it was given new life by reports that the (fake) investigative journalist had been beaten to death near the resort town by agents of Ukraine's secret service.

That elaborately constructed and now embellished narrative then reached millions of internet users around the world, ultimately being parroted by House Republicans during the debate over aid to Ukraine. According to the New York Times investigation, variations on the fake journalist's reporting, tailored to resonate with different geographic cohorts, included a mansion in Vero Beach, Florida and a retreat that once was used by the Nazi minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. ISD also reported on three related complex narratives, including one that Zelensky had bought two luxury yachts for $75 million through proxies (the implication being that the source of the funds was US aid), which as noted in a BBC report also was amplified by Republicans in Congress (after being boosted by a Russia-linked website – DC Weekly – pretending to be local).

Last month, the New York Times reported ("Russia's Latest Disinformation Tactic Exploits American Celebrities") that the Kremlin is also deploying fake celebrity cameos. Celebrities making use of the Cameo platform were tricked into unwittingly criticizing the presidents of Ukraine and Moldova. These were early examples of content circulating on Russian social media and then repeated by news outlets owned or controlled by the Kremlin.

A separate operation involved posts on Facebook and X with photographs of more than 75 celebrities and quotes parroting Kremlin talking points. The article cites research by the EU DisinfoLab that attributes this latest cross-platform information operation to a group (a Russian internet complex called Recent Reliable News) that EU researchers have dubbed "Doppelgänger." Doppelgänger uses multiple "clones" of authentic Western media outlets (at least 17 are identified) through which it spreads fake articles, videos and polling results. Starting in May 2022, this operation has depicted Ukraine as a failed, corrupt Nazi state, denied that the Bucha massacre had occurred, and promoted stories of how sanctions would ruin the lives of citizens in Germany, Italy, France, Latvia and the United Kingdom. The operation uses, among other tactics, spoofing domain names, creating videos falsely attributed to legitimate media and smart redirection/geo-blockage.

A Threat with Global Dimensions

Ukraine

For the past two years, Russian information operations have been targeting Ukraine with a mix of coordinated attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure early in the war as well as disinformation campaigns that some have likened to "psyops" intended to degrade the resolve

of Ukrainians at home and abroad. Leaked documents obtained by a European intelligence service and reviewed by the Washington Post expose the extent to which the Kremlin has targeted President Zelensky with the goal of dividing and destabilizing Ukrainian society. Journalist and writer Catherine Belton, writing in the Washington Post ("Kremlin runs disinformation campaign to undermine Zelensky, documents show"), last month noted that while Ukrainians have remained largely united, that unity may be beginning to fray, and in that context there is concern with the three-pronged Russian assault combining pressure on the battlefield, attacks on infrastructure and the psyops.

Western Europe

Western Europe also remains a target rich environment for the Kremlin, given the varying levels of support across the European Union for continued aid to Ukraine and the upcoming elections across the European Union in June of the members of the European Parliament ("MEPs"). Here too the tactic is to launder disinformation through local contacts and to use bots to amplify the articles on social media, cloning legitimate news outlet sites.

France

The Financial Times this past week ("Europe battles 'avalanche of disinformation' from Russia") reported that the European External Action Service ("EEAS") had uncovered 750 disinformation campaigns undertaken in 2023, leading it to categorize foreign influence campaigns as a security threat during this year's elections. The article notes that although the European Union had banned RT and Sputnik, Russia has deployed an estimated 30 "mirror sites" for RT to enable internet users to access RT despite the bans. (A report by ISD (Two Years On: An Analysis of Russian State and Pro-Kremlin Information Warfare in the Context of the Invasion of Ukraine") explains how pro-Kremlin voices nonetheless are able to reach EU audiences.) The EEAS's East StartCom Task Force has established the EUvsDisinfo platform to forecast, address and respond to Russian campaigns across the European Union.

The French foreign-disinformation body VIGINUM detected preparations for a "massive" disinformation campaign tied to the second anniversary of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the upcoming MEP elections in June. VIGINUM has uncovered 193 websites that it has dubbed "Portal Kombat" and which were either created some time ago and have been dormant, or are recently created, and appear primed to be activated. The sites, reportedly all controlled by a single Russian organization, are intended to spread false or deceptive content. VIGINUM has linked this effort to Doppelgänger, and to cloning last June of various French media websites as well as a site of the French foreign ministry. French officials describe Portal Kombat as "the tip of the disinformation iceberg connected to the rise of digital platforms and the surge in social media."

In December, Catherine Belton reported that the leaked Russian documents also show that the Kremlin is directing operatives to promote political discord in France through social media and French political figures, opinion leaders and activists. France, the FT article notes, is a

particular Kremlin target due to its support for Ukraine and the appeal of sowing distrust to benefit Marine Le Pen ahead of the 2027 elections.

Germany

The leaked Russian documents also show that the Kremlin has been seeking to build a coalition against support for Ukraine among the far left (Sahra Wagenknecht of Die Linke) and the far right (AfD) and to support protests by left and right extremists against the German government (*see* "Kremlin tries to build antiwar coalition in Germany, documents show").

Africa and Latin America

The GEC recently called out Russian intelligence services for supporting a new "African Initiative" targeting Africa that seeks to bolster the image of Russia and degrade the image of Western countries. The GEC also called out earlier Russian efforts to undermine global support for Ukraine through disinformation campaigns targeting Latin America. Both efforts involve spreading content through local individuals and groups to make pro-Moscow disinformation appear to be organic to the local communities targeted. As I chronicled in a February 2023 briefing note, the Wagner Group has played a critical role in spreading disinformation in Africa. (*See also*, another recent GEC report, "The Wagner Group's Atrocities in Africa: Lies and Truth.")

The Challenge – Agents of Influence in our Midst

One would have thought that addressing this challenge would be a priority. But that is not completely the case.

During the Cold War, and particularly after the late 1960s, the Soviet Union deployed an array of "active measures" designed to tarnish the reputation of its adversaries while advancing its own image and interests. More specifically, the tactics were intended to destabilize the United States and undermine its relations with its allies, often by weaponizing the freedoms (of speech, of assembly, of the press) that noticeably were absent in the Soviet Union and its satellite states, and often by amplifying existing grievances of more persuadable segments of society. Among the weapons deployed were propaganda (what we today would term "disinformation"), front organizations and "agents of influence." Agents of influence (in KGB-speak, apparently, "useful idiots," initially attributed to Lenin) could be witting or unwitting assets doing the Soviet Union's bidding by seeking to influence lawmakers, government officials, thought leaders and public opinion. (*See, e.g.,* "What's Old Is New Again: Cold War Lessons for Countering Disinformation.")

One feature of Soviet tactics reprised by Putin that remains equally relevant today is the "agent of influence." We now have a vocal fifth column bent on making the Kremlin's job easier, and we seem to have forgotten the lessons of Russian's intervention in the 2016 election, including that Russian intervention was welcomed by some at the highest levels of our government and politics (recall, "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing" – followed on the same day, as set out in the July 2018

indictment of 11 GRU officers, by the launch of a spearphishing attempt to access Secretary Clinton's emails as well as emails of her campaign).

Since 2016, the agents of influence have only become more emboldened. Consider:

- the House Republican investigation of Hunter Biden's ties to Ukraine (including their reliance on Alexander Smirnov, an FBI informant who was indicted in February for making false statements to the FBI[5] (*see also*, Memorandum in Support of Detention) which, in effect, injected Kremlin-manufactured allegations (secret payments to the Bidens) into the MAGA mainstream on the Hill and into the right-wing media (a useful chronology drawing the connection between Rudy Giuliani's efforts to dig up dirt on Joe Biden and then pressure the Ukrainian government to launch an investigation into Biden, through to the impeachment effort helmed by Reps. James Comer and Jim Jordan, with Russian intelligence assets in the background, is available from Mother Jones, "The Smirnov Affair: MAGA Republicans Are Useful Idiots for Russian Intelligence");[6]
- the House Republican investigations into civil society and academic researchers monitoring and analyzing online disinformation (*see* my July 2023 briefing note);
- the House Republican block on aid to Ukraine as Ukrainian forces run dangerously low on ammunition;[7]
- the lawsuits alleging that government conversations with the social media platforms around disinformation are tantamount to "censorship of conversative free speech" (*see* my December 2023 briefing note);
- House Republican sensitivity around all things Russian when it comes to Russian election interference (dating back to the 2016 campaign and the Mueller report);

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[5] Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan, referring to Smirnov's FBI interview form (FD-1023), stated in a Fox News appearance, "The most corroborating evidence we have is the 1023 form from this highly credible confidential human source."

[6] In October 2020, an open letter warning that the Hunter Biden emails had "all the classic earmarks of a Russian information operation" was published by a group of former members of the intelligence community (51 signed and an additional nine who could not be named supported the conclusion). The signers incidentally were branded as "spies who lie" by the New York Post and accused of election interference by MAGA supporters. Some were subpoenaed by the House Judiciary Committee, which published an interim staff report accusing senior intelligence officials of misleading voters. Following the arrest of Smirnov, they feel vindicated (*See* "Former U.S. spies warned in 2020 that the Hunter Biden scandal had Russian fingerprints. They feel vindicated now.")

[7] Some see the filing of a motion to vacate by fierce critic of Ukraine aid Marjorie Taylor Greene (which, incidentally, is not privileged so would not trigger a vote within two legislative days) as a warning to House Speaker Mike Johnson to stand firm on blocking aid to Ukraine, lest he lose his speakership (unless supported by Democrats, which in contrast to the defenestration of Kevin McCarthy, might actually come to pass given the importance of the aid to Democrats).

- Trump's sensitivity around the web of connections between him and those around him, and Putin (recall the conclusions of the US intelligence community around Russian election interference in 2016; the conclusions of the Mueller report and Trump's behavior on stage with Putin at the Helsinki summit);
- Trump's affinity for Putin and the strongman image, manifested most recently by the invitation to Putin to attack NATO members that had not met their defense commitments, and his steadfast unwillingness to criticize Putin (going so far as to have declined to condemn Putin for the killing of Navalny and to have likened the legal cases he faces to Navalny's plight) (incidentally, prompting former Rep. Liz Cheney to warn of the rise of the "Putin wing" of the Republican Party);
- Tucker Carlson's "interview" with Putin (really more of a Putin monologue), allowing himself to be manipulated by Putin (*see* "How Tucker Carlson became Putin's useful idiot" and "Launderers of Putin's lies"), and coming eerily proximate to Trump's incendiary ("do whatever they hell they want") comment about NATO countries not meeting defense spending targets (ISD characterized the Carlson interview as "one of the most significant interventions by Russia to directly influence US support for Ukraine on the US right," and believes that Russian state and pro-Kremlin outlets likely "will aim to further amplify these stances in their English language propaganda");[8]
- former congressman Lee Zeldin and right-wing commentator Jack Posobiec both equating Navalny's death with the criminal charges that Trump faces;
- a Vanderbilt Project on Unity & American Democracy poll (April 2023) showing 52% of MAGA-identifying Republicans (MAGA-identifying Republicans representing 18% of all Americans and 38% of all Republicans) believing Putin is a better president than Joe Biden; and
- praise for Putin's leadership expressed by Senators Tommy Tuberville and Ron Johnson (which, together with Carlson's interview, may have prompted the February 16th post by Senator Thom Tillis ("Navalny laid down his life fighting for the freedom of the country he loved. Putin is a murderous, paranoid dictator. History will not be kind to those in America who make apologies for Putin and praise Russian autocracy. Nor will history be kind to America's leaders who stay silent because they fear backlash from online pundits.")).

[8] Carlson joins other far right voices in promoting baseless claims that benefit Russia or simply uplifting Putin. Recall Erik Prince's Bannon War Room podcast in February 2022 praising Putin and both The Charlie Kirk Show and the War Room, as well as Clarkson, repeating the false claim that the US military had supported the development of biological weapons in labs in Ukraine in close proximity to the Russian border. Recall too Trump's praise for Putin at the outset of the war as "savvy" and a "genius."

Responses

In addition to efforts by governments to call out Russian foreign influence operations, there are proactive steps being taken to counter Russian tactics and there have been a few examples of criminal enforcement actions.

Late last year, the Washington Post reported that the GEC is trialing a new tactic, namely to identify and pre-empt disinformation campaigns before they go viral. The GEC also is reported to be providing support to allies to counter disinformation and developing digital tools to trace disinformation and identify the sources.

This past week, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control ("OFAC") announced sanctions against two individuals and two entities for services provided to the Russian government in connection with a "foreign malign influence campaign" that included impersonating legitimate media outlets. The "designation" follows OFAC action against Russian actors in 2021 and 2022 relating to election interference, as well as against two officers of the Russian Federal Security Service ("FSB") in 2023 who had been indicted by the Department of Justice for conducting global malign influence operations (including election interference). The individuals are accused of establishing over 60 websites to impersonate legitimate news outlet sites and misleading social media accounts to promote the spoofed websites. The two sanctioned entities also were sanctioned last year by the European Union for alleged involvement in Doppelgänger.

Concluding Thoughts

It is fair to question the ultimate impact of foreign influence operations, on society, on governance and on our elections. The impact on the 2016 election, and whether it affected the outcome of that election, remains a highly debated question. It is estimated that 126 million Americans were exposed to Russian-deployed fake news stories via Facebook (representing content shared by 29 million people who were served 80,000 pieces of malign content directly by the Internet Research Agency between January 2015 - August 2017, according to prepared testimony delivered by Facebook's general counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee) and Cambridge Analytica had access to the data of 87 million Facebook users; those figures, however, do not answer the question of how many actually saw the content and how many were influenced by it.

A study by the Comparative National Elections Project at Ohio State University suggests that when voters believe fake news, it will affect their votes. But it is unclear whether the right cohort actually saw the fake news before voting, and as the Center for Information Technology & Society at the University of California, Santa Barbara noted (citing research by WIRED), the Trump campaign may have won the clickbait contest on Facebook for reasons unrelated to fake news, which may have had a greater effect on persuadable voters.

All that being said, a few features of the changed landscape compel concern: the highly polarized state of American society, the sophistication and scale of generative AI tools that

undoubtedly will be harnessed for malign purposes, the fact that not an insignificant proportion of American voters still believe Joe Biden is an illegitimate president and Donald Trump won the 2020 election, and the far more concerted effort the Kremlin will make to accomplish what it failed to do in 2016 given its stake in the outcome.

In January, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab published a research report ("How Ukraine fights Russian disinformation: Beehive vs mammoth") in which they set out lessons from Ukraine's efforts to counter Russian disinformation (including the value of rapid response systems to quickly identify and debunk falsehoods).[9] The last two lessons bear particular mention: the information war is not likely to end soon, and the West needs to take these hybrid threats seriously and actively resist them.

As I have noted before, it is not an accident that key players in the Russian disinformation ecosystem are the GRU, the FSB and the SVR – the military and the intelligence community. The RUSI report confirms what has generally been known in Western intelligence and national security communities, namely that efforts to sow distrust in elections and democratic institutions (which could also tip into incitement of violence), to undermine public support for aid to Ukraine and NATO, and to exacerbate existing political divisions in Western societies are a strategic priority for the Kremlin. The perfect storm may well be the combination of these influence operations and synthetic media (otherwise known as deepfakes).

At the very least, debunking the efforts of agents of influence in this country would be a useful first step.

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Washington, D.C.
March 25, 2024

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No portion of this briefing note was prepared using ChatGPT

[9] *See also*, National Endowment for Democracy, "Shielding Democracy: Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation About Ukraine."