

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE AND THREATS TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Over the past four years, despite better coordination among these actors, the US under President Trump has been more exposed to foreign interference than in 2016. This threat continues to evolve and find new vectors of influence as more foreign actors engage in these campaigns. This article sheds light on how foreign actors and US institutions adapted to the increasingly conducive environment in advance of the 2020 US presidential election, and what the election's results mean for efforts to combat future foreign interference campaigns.

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On 9 November 2016 Americans awoke to the news that Donald Trump had defeated Secretary Hillary Clinton to win the US presidency. Pundits and statisticians dissected the data. Clinton had consistently polled ahead of Trump in the lead up to the 2016 election, yet President Trump, despite losing the popular vote, had won enough coveted swing states to win the Electoral College—304 votes to Clinton’s 227. As these pundits and statisticians licked their wounds, media reports surfaced of the Russian Federation’s efforts to influence the election. The Kremlin had deployed to the same ends on US soil the asymmetric tactics it has used for decades to create chaos, undermine democratic institutions, and weaken post-Soviet and European states.

While the impact the Kremlin’s efforts had on the outcome of the election is difficult to quantify, the Kremlin’s intent and activities are not. Both the US intelligence community and the US Select Committee on Intelligence have published reports on the Kremlin’s campaign. The intelligence community called the Russian government’s efforts “a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations.”¹ Similarly, SSCI deemed the campaign an “aggressive, multifaceted effort to influence, or attempt to influence, the outcome of the 2016 presidential election.”²

Once exposed, US government agencies, social media companies, and civil society responded with piecemeal responses. Over the past four years, despite better coordination among these actors, the US under President Trump has been more exposed to foreign interference than in 2016. The Trump administration has not only neglected to outline a coherent policy that would protect the US from malign influence, but it has purged the non-partisan leadership at US agencies that would implement the policy while openly inviting foreign actors to meddle.³ This threat continues to evolve and find new vectors of influence as more foreign actors engage in these campaigns. How have foreign actors and US institutions adapted to this increasingly more conducive environment in advance of the 2020 US presidential election, and what could the election’s results mean for efforts to combat future foreign interference campaigns?

Foreign Interference and the Evolution of Tactics

In the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election, the GRU-connected Internet

¹ Director of National Intelligence, “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections,” 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

² Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, “Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 Election, Volume 5: Counterintelligence Threats and Vulnerabilities (Report 116-xx),” 2020, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/report_volume5.pdf

³ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Statement by NCSC Director William Evanina: Election Threat Update for the American Public [Press Release],” 2 August 2020, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/2139-statement-by-ncsc-director-william-evanina-election-threat-update-for-the-american-public>

Research Agency (IRA) indicted by US Special Counsel Mueller invested 1.25 million dollars monthly in social media advertisements, bots, trolls, and fake personas to fan the flames of division.⁴ It created fictitious personas that purported to support the Black Lives Matter movement, secessionist movements, gun rights, and other divisive social issues, pitting supporters of these groups against each other. These accounts entered the political fray as well. They denigrated candidate Hillary Clinton while supporting Senator Sanders and then-candidate Trump.⁵ By targeting both sides of the political spectrum and social issues, the IRA sought to further polarize US society and ultimately influence the outcome of the election.

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The Russian Federation still conducts these operations, now aimed at influencing the 2020 election and its aftermath. Social media companies frequently take down networks of coordinated inauthentic behavior emanating from Russia, which comprise the same type of bots and trolls used in 2016. And according to FBI Director Wray, these accounts are again overtly attacking Democratic candidates, primarily former Vice President Biden.⁶ However, other tactics have become more sophisticated and difficult to attribute. New operations seek to launder information in the same way organized crime syndicates launder money to obscure its origins. The recently exposed Newsroom for American and European Based Citizens (NAEBC) and PeaceData are Kremlin-directed news sites that posed as independent media outlets to launder information for an American and British audience. Both were able to hire unwitting Americans to develop content intended to ignite the far-right and the far-left while obscuring their Kremlin connections.⁷

⁴ US Department of Justice, “United States of America v. Internet Research Agency LLC,” 16 February 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>

⁵ US Department of Justice, “Internet Research Agency LLC.”

⁶ Worldwide Threats to the Homeland, Hearings before the Committee on Homeland Security, House, 116th Cong. 2, 17 September 2020, <https://homeland.house.gov/activities/hearings/08/25/2020/worldwide-threats-to-the-homeland>

⁷ Jack Stubbs, “Exclusive: Russian operation masqueraded as right-wing news site to target U.S. voters – sources,” *Reuters*, 1 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-election-russia-disinformation-idUSKBN26M5OP>; Graphika Team, “Step into my Parler Suspected Russian Operation Targeted Far-Right American Users on Platforms Including Gab and Parler, Resembled Recent IRA-Linked Operation that Targeted Progressives,” https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_step_into_my_parler.pdf; Facebook; “August 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report,” 1 September 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/09/august-2020-cib-report/>; “Russian internet trolls hired U.S. journalists to push their news website, Facebook says,” *NBC News*, 1 September 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/russian-internet-trolls-hired-u-s-journalists-push-their-news-n1239000>; Jacob Silverman, “A Russian Disinformation Operation Tried to Recruit Me,” *Slate*, 7 September 2020, <https://slate.com/technology/2020/09/peace-data-russia-disinformation-facebook.html>

And it is not just bots, trolls, and phony news outlets laundering information. In 2016, Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort traded inside campaign information with Kremlin intelligence and Trump advisor Roger Stone discussed Kremlin hack and leak operations with WikiLeaks.⁸ Now in 2020, the Kremlin has prominent members of both political parties repeating its talking points. In the Democratic primary, Democratic Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard referred to the “rigging” of the 2020 US Presidential election.⁹ Russian state-controlled media RT and Sputnik promoted this and other comments by Gabbard, lavishing her with more favorable than unfavorable mentions, the only Democratic candidate to receive such a rating.¹⁰ Republicans are also repeating and benefiting from Kremlin-backed disinformation. US Senator Ron Johnson, Republican Chairman of the US Senate Homeland Security Committee, took information on an unfounded conspiracy theory about Biden’s son Hunter from Andrii Derkach, a member of the Ukrainian Parliament who the US Treasury Department recently sanctioned for being an active Kremlin agent.¹¹ Chairman Johnson used his committee to conduct an investigation based on this information intended to undermine Biden’s candidacy.

There are also fears that the GRU, which hacked the Democratic National Committee in 2016 and stole emails that it weaponized via proxies to damage candidate Clinton, will again engage in hack and leak campaigns. Facebook recently took down three networks linked to Russian intelligence and the IRA that it deemed potential threats for leaking hacked information, and Microsoft Corporation announced that the Russian Federation, China, and Iran are probing the personal emails of 2020 political campaign staffers and consultants, as well as the networks of prominent US think tanks.¹² However, this time hackers are using new techniques to cover their tracks, such as rerouting attacks through Tor, a service that conceals an attacker’s location and identity.¹³

⁸ Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, “Counterintelligence Threats and Vulnerabilities (Report 116-xx).”

⁹ “What, Exactly, Is Tulsi Gabbard Up To?” *New York Times*, 12 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/12/us/politics/tulsi-gabbard.html>; “Opinion: Tulsi Gabbard may not be a Russian asset. But she sure talks like one,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 October 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-10-25/tulsi-gabbard-russian-asset-republican>

¹⁰ Rachel Chernaskey, “November and December 2019 – Russia’s Media Mentions of 2020 Presidential Candidates (Update 1),” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2 January 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/ie/november-and-december-2019-russias-media-mentions-of-2020-presidential-candidates-update-1/>

¹¹ US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Russia-Linked Election Interference Actors,” 10 September 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1118>

¹² Jack Stubbs, “Facebook suspends fake Russian accounts, warns of U.S. election hack-and-leak threat,” *Reuters*, 24 September 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-facebook-russia-idUSKCN26F3BY>; Nathaniel Gleicher, “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior” *Facebook Blog*, 24 September 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/09/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-russia/>

¹³ David E. Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, “Russian Intelligence Hackers Are Back, Microsoft Warns, Aiming at Officials of Both Parties,” *New York Times*, 10 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/us/politics/russian-hacking-microsoft-biden-trump.html>

The Russian Federation and other foreign actors also target voting infrastructure with cyber-attacks, although none of these attacks have had an “identified impact on election systems,” according to Christopher Krebs, Director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency at the US Department of Homeland Security.¹⁴ More concerning to officials is the threat of foreign actors spreading disinformation regarding the results of the 2020 election.¹⁵ Efforts to broadly spread disinformation about the hacking of election infrastructure, voter suppression, and voting fraud on Election Day 2020 could affect voter turnout and citizens’ confidence in the results.

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These coordinated interference campaigns by the Kremlin and other foreign actors to affect the 2020 election have tapped into growing political and social polarization in the US and exploited institutional vulnerabilities. However, the biggest vulnerability to these efforts is President Trump. The President continually casts doubt on the outcome of the election when he claims vote-by-mail is fraudulent, which foreign actors need only amplify to sow doubt about the election.¹⁶ He said that he believes Putin’s denials of 2016 interference rather than the assessment of the US intelligence community.¹⁷ The President also openly welcomes foreign interference. President Trump was impeached by the US House of Representatives on 18 December 2019 for covertly soliciting foreign interference in the 2020 election from Ukraine, and openly called on China to engage in these same activities.¹⁸

¹⁴ Sanger and Perlroth, “Microsoft Warns.”

¹⁵ US Department of Justice, “Foreign Actors and Cybercriminals Likely to Spread Disinformation Regarding 2020 Election Results,” 22 September 2020, <https://www.ic3.gov/media/2020/200922.aspx>

¹⁶ Nicholas Riccardi, “AP Fact Check: Trump’s big distortions on mail-in voting,” *Associated Press*, 17 September 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-election-2020-ap-fact-check-elections-voting-fraud-and-irregularities-8c5db90960815f91f39fe115579570b4>

¹⁷ “Trump sides with Russia against FBI at Helsinki summit,” *BBC*, 16 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44852812>

¹⁸ “Trump gives apparent invitation to interfere in 2020 election,” *CBS News*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/trump-gives-apparent-invitation-to-interfere-in-2020-election/>; “Amid impeachment, Trump and Giuliani are still coordinating on anti-Biden dirt,” *Vox*, 13 December 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/12/13/21020584/trump-impeachment-articles-rudy-giuliani-ukraine>; “Trump Just Did It Out in the Open,” *The Atlantic*, 3 October 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/trump-out-open/611875/>

What We Have Learned

American Society is Polarized and Vulnerable to Foreign Interference

Affective polarization measures how much members of a political party dislike and distrust those from another party.¹⁹ In 1980, affective polarization in the US was 25 percent. Today, it is 47 percent.²⁰ While political polarization has been rising in the US since 1987, with the partisan gap nearly doubling from 10 percentage points in 1987 to 18 percentage points in 2012, Trump set a new standard for political polarization. According to a 2020 Gallup poll, there is an 82 percent gap separating Democrats' and Republicans' views of Trump's job performance in his third year 2019-2020.²¹ American society is also polarized on social justice issues. Spring 2020 saw the largest mass demonstrations in the US in support of civil rights since the 1960s, which led to violent clashes between the right and the left. In 2020, this increasing polarization has made society more vulnerable to malign foreign actors who inflame its divisions than it was in 2016.

Social Media Encourages Polarization

In 2016, more Americans got their news from print newspapers than social media. In 2020, the relationship is inverse. 20 percent of users get their news from social media, versus 16 percent from print newspapers.²² This switch has encouraged echo chambers and reinforced confirmation biases.²³ Social media platforms, driven by financial incentives, employ proprietary algorithms that present users with views that further support, not challenge, those views.²⁴ When users "like", "retweet", and "share", they provide algorithms with information that is used to refine content delivery based on their preferences. Political actors, conspiracy theorists, and foreign actors understand these dynamics and use them to their advantage. These actors exploit confirmation bias and game algorithms to spread disinformation and narratives that increase polarization and undermine social cohesion.

Social media companies have invested in investigation and content moderation capabilities in the wake of 2016. Dedicated teams increasingly work with law

¹⁹ Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 22 (May 2019), p. 129.

²⁰ Ezra Klein, "What polarization data from 9 countries reveals about the US," *Vox*, 24 January 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/1/24/21076232/polarization-america-international-party-political>

²¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Trump Third Year Sets New Standard for Party Polarization," *Gallup*, 21 January 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/283910/trump-third-year-sets-new-standard-party-polarization.aspx>

²² A. W. Geiger, "Key findings about the online news landscape in America," *Pew Research Center*, 11 September 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/11/key-findings-about-the-online-news-landscape-in-america/>

²³ Christopher Seneca, "How to Break Out of Your Social Media Echo Chamber," *Wired*, 17 September 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-twitter-echo-chamber-confirmation-bias/>

²⁴ Seneca, "Social Media Echo Chamber."

enforcement to identify and remove coordinated inauthentic behavior emanating from foreign actors.²⁵ However, they are limited in their ability to moderate domestic actors and groups, including President Trump, that amplify foreign narratives. Unless the content violates the platforms' rules or community standards, such as those prohibiting hate speech, the platforms have deferred to its protection under the First Amendment.

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President Trump Actively Undermines Deterrence

US government agencies have publicly exposed the Kremlin’s interference campaigns and implemented deterrent policies to raise the costs to Putin and his regime. The US Treasury Department has sanctioned Kremlin-aligned individuals and entities.²⁶ The US Department of Justice has indicted domestic and foreign actors implicated in Special Counsel Mueller’s investigation, including Paul Manafort, Roger Stone, and the IRA.²⁷ The US Department of Homeland Security recognized the Russian Federation as the primary foreign actor waging interference campaigns.²⁸ And the US Department of Defense has employed offensive cyber capabilities to deter future conflict in cyberspace.²⁹

However, President Trump increasingly undercuts these efforts. Not only has he not put forth a coherent foreign interference policy from the White House, he has been empowered to silence those who expose his involvement in foreign interference efforts. President Trump has replaced non-partisan agency heads with partisan allies throughout government who have systematically halted intelligence briefings to Congress on the foreign threat, withheld information from the American people,

²⁵ “Russian Intelligence Hackers Are Back, Microsoft Warns, Aiming at Officials of Both Parties,” *New York Times*, 10 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/us/politics/russian-hacking-microsoft-biden-trump.html>

²⁶ US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Russia-Linked Election Interference Actors,” 20 September 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1118>

²⁷ US Department of Justice, “Internet Research Agency LLC”; Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, “Counterintelligence Threats and Vulnerabilities (Report 116-xx).”

²⁸ US Department of Homeland Security, “Homeland Threat Assessment,” October 2020, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020_10_06_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf

²⁹ David E. Sagner and Nicole Perlroth, “U.S. Escalates Online Attacks on Russia’s Power Grid,” *New York Times*, 15 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/15/us/politics/trump-cyber-russia-grid.html>

and declassified unverified Russian intelligence.³⁰ He has fired individuals, such as Alexander Vindman and Gordon Sondland, both witnesses during Trump's impeachment hearings, who testified about Trump's efforts to extort damaging information from Ukraine.³¹ The Republican Party could be a powerful check on the President; instead, they enable Trump by sanctioning his politicization of agencies and attacks on civil servants. The Trump administration's handling of this national threat has not only exposed the weaknesses in executive decision-making that foreign actors can exploit; it has invited them to do so.

Congressional Gridlock Stymies Congress' Ability to Reign in the Executive Branch

Congress could play a constructive role in mandating a coherent policy, but it is gridlocked with Democrats controlling the House and Republicans controlling the Senate. This affects Congress' ability to perform oversight of the Executive Branch and pass legislation to impose even greater costs on malign foreign actors.

The House impeached President Trump after a series of hearings with administration officials and is performing its oversight responsibilities with public hearings on administration activities. It has passed critical election security and financial legislation that would close financial loopholes that foreign actors exploit.³² However, these actions have been overturned by or stalled in the Senate. In February, without calling witnesses, the Senate voted to acquit President Trump of the two impeachment articles he faced. Senate Republican Leader McConnell refuses to vote on election security and financial legislation passed by the House. Most concerning, some Senate Republicans, such as Chairman Johnson, have used their committees to promote unfounded conspiracy theories peddled by foreign operatives, not to perform meaningful oversight of the administration's policies.

³⁰ Emma Newburger, "Director of National Intelligence will no longer brief Congress in person on foreign election interference," *CNBC*, 29 August 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/29/national-intel-director-will-no-longer-give-congress-in-person-briefings-on-election-interference.html>; Shane Harris, Nick Miroff, and Ellen Nakashima, "Senior DHS official alleges in whistleblower complaint that he was told to stop providing intelligence analysis on threat of Russian interference," *Washington Post*, 9 September 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/senior-dhs-official-alleges-in-whistleblower-complaint-that-he-was-told-to-stop-providing-intelligence-analysis-on-threat-of-russian-interference/2020/09/09/9d0661c4-f2b6-11ea-b796-2dd09962649c_story.html; Evan Perez, Jeremy Herb, and Zachary Cohen, "Trump's spy chief declassified unverified Russian intelligence despite concerns raised by CIA and NSA," *CNN*, 30 September 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/30/politics/ratcliffe-unverified-intelligence-concerns/index.html>

³¹ Baker et al., "Trump Fires Impeachment Witnesses Gordon Sondland and Alexander Vindman in Post-Acquittal Purge," *New York Times*, 8 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/us/politics/alexander-vindman-gordon-sondland-fired.html>

³² Carla A. Fornariz, Marina Olman-Pal, and Anthony J. Fernandez, "U.S. House Passes Bill That Would Require Disclosure of Beneficial Owners of U.S. Corporations and Limited Liability Companies," *The National Law Review*, 29 October 2019, <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/us-house-passes-bill-would-require-disclosure-beneficial-owners-us-corporations-and>

The bipartisan bright spot in Congress is the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Its bipartisan investigation into Kremlin interference produced five volumes of actionable information on the Kremlin's activities and the domestic actors that enabled it, validating the findings and punitive actions of Special Counsel Mueller and government agencies.³³ However, the President and Republican leadership stymie further activity by continuing to contradict and undermine the findings.

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The Next Great Disruptor

Much of the element of surprise that aided Putin in 2016 is gone. Government agencies, social media companies, and civil society have taken steps to better prepare for interference in 2020. And Americans are more aware of foreign attempts to influence them. 75 percent of Americans believe “it is likely that Russia or other foreign governments will attempt to influence the November election.”³⁴ Neither these measures nor the exposure of foreign interference have sufficiently raised the costs to deter foreign actors. Conversely, President Trump and his enablers are aiding and abetting foreign interference by inviting foreign interference and mainstreaming Kremlin narratives. Not only are foreign actors making their tactics more difficult to attribute, domestic actors are increasingly doing the work for them.

The director of the US National Security Agency, General Paul Nakasone recently identified foreign interference as the “the next great disruptor” that will threaten democratic and diplomatic processes, sow civil distrust, and impact how warfare is waged throughout democratic societies.³⁵ As more actors enter the fray, they do so not to influence the outcome of a single election, but the long term stability of democracies, democratic institutions, and alliances. The question is whether the US can repair its institutional capacity to adequately address this threat. Without the guardrails of a functioning media and Congress, Trump has had free reign to

³³ Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, “Counterintelligence Threats and Vulnerabilities (Report 116-xx).”

³⁴ “75% of Americans say it’s likely that Russia or other governments will try to influence 2020 election,” *Pew Research Center*, 18 August 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/18/75-of-americans-say-its-likely-that-russia-or-other-governments-will-try-to-influence-2020-election/>

³⁵ Shannon Vavra, “NSA director ranks influence operations as a top concern,” *CyberScoop*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.cyberscoop.com/nsa-director-nakasone-influence-operations/>

degrade the institutions that protect US national security and social cohesion. These institutions still exist, but they need a president that is willing to overcome partisan divides, do the hard work of rebuilding confidence in US leadership at home and abroad, and signal to foreign actors that there will be even greater costs for interference. The stakes in 2020 could not be higher.