ISSF Policy Roundtable 1-7: Russia and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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Introduction by Joshua Rovner, SMU

No one is sure what effect Russia had on the 2016 presidential election. The U.S. intelligence community and private sector cybersecurity firms are confident that Russian intelligence agencies sponsored efforts to steal and release information from the Democratic National Committee, and from Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta. The stolen emails were mostly banal, but the Trump campaign used them as evidence that Clinton and her party were corrupt and untrustworthy. This may have had the effect of increasing support for Trump, or at least depressing the turnout among would-be Clinton voters. Even small shifts might have changed the result, given the razor-thin margins in key states. But the election was so peculiar in so many ways that it is difficult to attribute the outcome to a single cause. Alleged Russian 'doxing'–the term for stealing and revealing private information–may or may not have been terribly important compared to other factors in a historically strange campaign.

Still, Russian activities demand scrutiny. As the contributors to this roundtable point out, this is certainly not the first time Moscow has tried to influence U.S. elections. The Soviet Union engaged in so-called 'active measures' for decades, using various means to undermine certain candidates and prop up others. These efforts were usually dismal failures. The idea that this one might have succeeded suggests that Russian 'influence operations' have become more sophisticated; or that the

United States has become more vulnerable; or both. The controversy is especially troubling because it follows decades of declining public faith in U.S. institutions. While the United States enjoys extraordinary advantages in relative economic and military power over rivals like Russia, its main weakness may lie within. Getting to the bottom of the Russia hack is thus a story about understanding what is happening to American politics–and how other states might exploit it. Little wonder that the controversy is currently the subject of multiple and overlapping congressional, law enforcement, and intelligence investigations.

This roundtable brings together three scholars to provide much-needed context as the official inquiries continue. Kimberly Marten, a leading scholar of Russian politics and security affairs, describes the history of Soviet active measures. No one should be surprised by Russia's effort last year, given its long experience in influence operations. But Marten also makes a counterintuitive argument about the effects of the election hack. Rather than a stunning success for Moscow, it may actually leave it more isolated. The publicity surrounding Trump and Russia, she argues, is also likely to make future efforts less successful, now that the west is on guard against meddling.

Lindsey O'Rourke puts the controversy in historical context by comparing it to U.S. efforts at covert regime change during the Cold War. O'Rourke, the author of a comprehensive study of the causes and consequences of such efforts, agrees that Americans should not be shocked simply because they were the victims in this case. While the overall U.S. record is mixed, it was much more successful when it targeted democracies. Russian officials probably know this as well. Moreover, O'Rourke points out that from Russia's perspective, U.S. democracy promotion efforts seem like thinly veiled efforts to undermine pro-Russia regimes. Thus U.S policymakers should expect further Russian interest in electoral meddling, and they should start thinking about how to deter them.

Finally, Jon Lindsay, a specialist in cybersecurity and international politics, notes that the controversy throws cold water on one piece of conventional wisdom. Observers have long warned that attributing cyber attacks is particularly difficult, and that attackers find it relatively easy to hide their tracks. This was not the case here, as Lindsay points out. Elaborate political influence operations require a great deal of planning, organization, and resources. The more ambitious the objectives, the easier it is for intelligence agencies and private sector analysts to spot the culprit. Indeed, Russian culpability was clear for months before the election itself. The trickier attribution problem has less to do with the technical details of doxing than the methodological challenge of estimating its political effect. That challenge will occupy scholars and policymakers long after the current investigations are complete.

Participants:

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Kimberly Marten is the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University, and Director of the Program on U.S.-Russia Relations at Columbia's Harriman Institute. Her most recent book was *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States* (Cornell, 2012). Her current work focuses on Russian security policy and relations with NATO.

Lindsay O'Rourke is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Boston College. Her current research project focuses on covert regime change, while her broader research interests include U.S. foreign policy, international relations theory, military strategy, and the Cold War. Her work has appeared in *Security Studies* and *International Security,* and a book manuscript on U.S.-backed covert regime changes during the Cold War is currently under review.

Essay by Jon R. Lindsay, University of Toronto

The Other Attribution Problem

The attribution problem that everyone worries about in cybersecurity—whodunit?—was not much of a mystery in this case. Russian intelligence had ample means, motive, and opportunity, and no credible alibi. Internet technology makes anonymity possible, but the ability to hide one's tracks depends the nature of the attack, the skill of the defender, the value of the target, and the expected consequences if the truth is revealed.[1] One irony is that the actors who have the best technical tools for evading detection end up simplifying the attribution problem for cyber detectives. Sophisticated malware toolkits take so long to develop that they tend to be reused, which enables patient defenders to build up a profile to link targets and capabilities to motives. A known modus operandi speeds attribution in subsequent incidents.

As in most breaches, attribution in this case rests on a constellation of circumstantial evidence rather than any one smoking gun.[2] The FBI suspected that a Russian hacker group known as "The Dukes" (a.k.a. Cozy Bear or APT29) had penetrated the Democratic National Committee (DNC) as early as fall 2015. The private firm Crowdstrike identified tale-tell evidence of Russian hacking almost immediately upon investigating DNC networks in spring 2016, and its commercial competitors (who thus had reason to dissent) corroborated its assessment and identified more evidence of Russian involvement. The FBI and CIA judgement of "high confidence" in the January 2017 assessment of "Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections" is all the more remarkable in light of the intelligence community's tightening of analytic standards following the Iraq debacle in 2002-2003.[3] The contrasting NSA judgment of "moderate confidence" suggests that persuasive evidence in the joint assessment was not limited to signals intelligence; indeed, *New York Times* sources later

"confirmed that human sources in Russia did play a crucial role in proving who was responsible."[4]

Although attribution was not technically difficult, it was a political bombshell. The prospect of Russian retaliation, together with the Obama administration's desire to avoid the appearance of partisanship in national security, precluded a forceful and immediate response by the United States. Attribution may have even helped Russia insofar as it aimed to undermine faith in American democratic institutions. Indeed, the public attribution of Moscow has given the operation far more lasting influence through American public outrage, official investigations, President Donald Trump's perplexing denials, the growing rift between the intelligence community and the Trump administration, and the dismissal of National Security Adviser Michael Flynn. Moscow got luckier than it possibly could have dreamed.

The 'other' attribution problem that we should be worried about is the inference of political effectiveness of a technical operation. A brazen attack with some sophisticated features (and some quotidian ones) does not necessarily result in decisive effects. Just as we should look beyond intrinsic characteristics to extrinsic circumstances to explain human behavior, the internal features of an intelligence operation depend on external political context to accomplish anything at all. Everything about the 2016 presidential election was so strange that we should be careful not to attribute too much influence to Russian influence operations.

This episode may go down as the most consequential cyber campaign we have witnessed, even though it caused no physical damage. Most scholars and policymakers who are concerned with cybersecurity have focused on threats to critical infrastructure and the erosion of competitive effectiveness. Psychological operations and hacktivism are often treated like lesser irritants akin to computer theft and fraud (i.e., a public policy problem but not a major national security concern). The information war always seemed like a sideshow compared to the drama of cyberwar. Given that this was not the cyber-attack everyone worried about, future cybersecurity research would do well to focus more on deceptive statecraft than warfighting novelty. So did we finally have our cyber Pearl Harbor?

Whether the DNC hack made the difference in a controversial election is impossible to answer right now. Some people think it did. The *New York Times* described it as a "low-cost, high-impact weapon that Russia had test-fired in elections from Ukraine to Europe was trained on the United States, with devastating effectiveness."[5] This story is still actively developing and investigations are ongoing, with potentially dramatic implications for the Trump administration and the United States. A lot of relevant data remains classified or unknown, and historians will be untangling timelines and arguments for decades to come. Yet already there is reason to be skeptical that Russian operations were in any way decisive.

The conditions that made Russian network intrusion and influence possible also made a lot of other things possible. Social media echo chambers inflamed passions and inhibited rational discourse in a remarkably polarized political climate. A reality show celebrity kept the media off-balance and mobilized a populist base with Tweetstorms of invective. Fake news, not just of Russian provenance, was easy to produce and circulate to credulous readers. Leaking has become de rigueur in politics, enabled by outlets like Wikileaks and *The Intercept*. Opposition research thrives. More important than any of these factors, the same globalization and automation that gave us the information age

also generated economic displacement and rural resentment that a change candidate could exploit. After two Democratic terms in office, it was a Republican election to lose. More contingent factors fed into the mix, too. The Hillary Clinton campaign, fighting an uphill battle against its establishment credentials, made mistakes in battleground states. Some Democrats tried to unfairly undermine Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and manipulate the media, producing the embarrassing raw material that Russia stole and released. FBI Director James Comey's suggestive letter to Congress, just eleven days before the election, reenergized the controversy over Clinton's use of private email. And the list goes on. Did Russian activities sway any voters for Trump or encourage Clinton voters to stay home, or did blaming Russia encourage patriotic indignation with the opposite effects? The chaotic froth of the 2016 election season might have been nudged slightly by Russian hacking or it might have swamped Russian influence completely.

There is a lot of historical precedent for Russian[6] and American[7] active measures and election meddling. Russian intelligence has been penetrating U.S. networks for years, reusing familiar methods and malware.[8] The U.S. intelligence assessment suggests that the Russians, who were preparing to discredit a Clinton presidency, were as surprised as everyone else by the Trump victory. How did active measures get such a lucky break this time? We should not explain a variable (a bizarre election) with a constant (Russian skullduggery). For explanations we should look to the context, not 'the cyber;' the demand for muckraking, not the supply; and the get-rich-quick dreams of the marks, not the conmen.

Essay by Kimberly Marten, Barnard College, Columbia University

Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Moscow's attempts to sway 2017 elections across Europe are nothing new. Recent Russian activities are just an amplified version of old Soviet KGB techniques. The only thing that makes many of these new efforts different is the power of the web (and websites like Wikileaks) to massively accelerate and widen their effects and the vulnerabilities created by the web, which allow real emails and other documents to be easily stolen and propagated.

A number of Soviet KGB "active measures" against the United States are described in a 1999 book that emerged from the so-called Mitrokhin Archive in London.[9] Vasili Mitrokhin, a Soviet foreign intelligence officer who never accepted his own regime's crackdowns against dissent at home and in the Warsaw Pact, was punished for his outspokenness by being assigned to what was considered "boring" work in the archives. In 1972, while supervising the relocation of the foreign intelligence archives to a more spacious vault in the new KGB headquarters, Mitrokhin began copying by hand the 30,000 top-secret Soviet files he was responsible for cataloging and sealing for the move. For two decades he apparently stored those illegal copies under his mattress at home in Moscow. In 1992, years after retiring and when the Soviet collapse made foreign travel possible for him, Mitrokhin contacted British authorities and offered to defect. Eventually he moved both his family and his copies to London, where he lived until his death in 2004.

Since Russia never chose to undergo lustration or to open the KGB archives, it is impossible to verify the published Mitrokhin Archive's contents.[10] Some of Mitrokhin's materials remain classified by the

UK. But the books drawn from the Archive are frequently cited by Western scholars, and are generally considered reliable.[11]

Mitrokhin's materials describe many KGB attempts to influence U.S. and West European politics.[12] Some involved the publication of 'disinformation' designed to undermine trust in the U.S. political system and create disorder, much like more recent Russian attempts to circulate 'fake news.' U.S. citizens then, just as now, eagerly (if unwittingly) assisted these efforts by spreading irresistible conspiracy theories.

For example, Moscow provided financing and research assistance to several U.S. authors who wrote books claiming that Lee Harvey Oswald, the 1963 assassin of President John F. Kennedy, was actually working on FBI or CIA orders. The KGB distributed forged letters, supposedly from Oswald to Watergate co-conspirator and former CIA officer E. Howard Hunt, asking for his 'instructions' to do the deed.

In the turbulent U.S. civil rights era, the Soviets sought to incite 'race hatred' in the U.S. and undermine the successes of peaceful protestors. The KGB planted articles in the African press (sometimes picked up in U.S. media) that accused Martin Luther King, Jr. of being too conciliatory; distributed pamphlets and fliers (written by KGB officers) intended to aggravate already existing anger against the U.S. police for using violent methods; created a fake document alleging that the John Birch Society was plotting with the Minuteman militia to assassinate leading civil rights movement leaders; and sent to 30 militant Black groups in New York fake pamphlets purporting to be from the extremist Jewish Defense League (and credible because they seemed to parrot the real thing), and using racist epithets to blame African-Americans for crimes against Jewish-owned shops.

Then in the 1980s the KGB led a multifaceted operation to convince people throughout the world that the AIDS virus had been manufactured by U.S. Army biological weapons specialists at Fort Detrick, Maryland. (This campaign was eventually explicitly ended by reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987.) These historical Soviet efforts were potentially much more inflammatory than what we have seen from Russia more recently. Today's 'fake news' seems almost tame by comparison.

Beyond these general destabilizing efforts, the Soviets also tried to influence U.S. political opinion against particular leaders whom they found threatening. For example, the KGB tried to undermine the reelection of U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1984 by popularizing the slogan "Reagan Means War!," distributing a series of talking points against his policies, and cultivating contacts "on the staffs of all possible presidential candidates and in both party headquarters."[13] The apparent 2016 Russian efforts to reach out to the Trump campaign are old hat.

Earlier the KGB had created an operation (code-named POROK, or 'vice') during the 1976 election primaries, claiming (with no evidence) that U.S. Senator Henry ('Scoop') Jackson was gay, at a time when homosexuality was considered scandalous and potentially career-ending in U.S. popular opinion. The Soviets mailed a forged (supposedly 'leaked') FBI report concerning Jackson's behavior to three newspapers, as well as to Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign headquarters. (Two years earlier Jackson had spearheaded the Jackson-Vanik Amendment that tied U.S. trade with Moscow to freedom of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union.) That 1976 operation against Jackson is eerily

reflected in similar claims launched by Russian media in 2017 about a secret gay life, this time against French presidential contender (and strong European Union supporter) Emmanuel Macron.[14]

Two things are striking about current Russian efforts, beyond the fact that the internet is a powerful new 'information warfare' vehicle. The first is that they have been so surprising. Many people in the West saw the Cold War as a historical relic. The West had at one time gotten used to Soviet information warfare campaigns, but was shocked that the Kremlin would use them now. While these campaigns may have made a difference in 2016 and 2017 (a claim that remains to be empirically demonstrated), such efforts will likely lose their effectiveness quickly. Powerful people on all sides now know to be on the lookout for Russian hacking and meddling, and are likely to call it out for what it is, rather than fall for it in the future.

The second is that this time around, the release of secret documents was not necessary to figure out what was happening. The U.S. did not have proactive threat-detection measures in place to protect the Democratic National Committee (DNC) from cyber attacks, and the FBI moved excruciatingly slowly once an attack was suspected. But the Kremlin was caught out first not by the controversial and sanitized U.S. government report published in December 2016, but by information released by the private security firm CrowdStrike on its own website in June 2016.[15] The DNC had hired CrowdStrike to investigate its data breach, and its findings were confirmed by two other private cyber security firms, Mandiant/FireEye and Fidelis.[16] The Kremlin is not just playing against the slow-moving and often politically constrained U.S. bureaucracy; it has taken on the vibrant global corporate security sector.

As a result, Russian interests have suffered. The Kremlin lost what otherwise might have been a good chance to have U.S. and European sanctions eased and petroleum trade expanded when President Donald Trump took office, and now may have more sanctions heaped on it by angry U.S. senators of both parties. The fact that the Kremlin's dealings with the Trump administration are under constant scrutiny may leave U.S.-Russian relations in an even worse situation than they might have been with a Hillary Clinton victory, which Putin seemed to fear so greatly. (During the campaign there seems to have been a concerted Russian effort to portray Clinton as the "war candidate,"[17] and, after Trump's victory, Putin aide Sergey Glazev said U.S. voters had chosen against the "world war" that Clinton symbolized.[18]) Perhaps most damaging for Russia, talented Russian hackers may join the Western brain drain at an even greater clip, attracted by the success of famous émigrés like CrowdStrike's Dmitri Alperovitch.

Essay by Lindsey A. O'Rourke, Boston College

As Americans grapple with the news that Russia covertly interfered in the 2016 Presidential election to help elect Donald Trump, one place we can turn to evaluate the consequences of such actions is the United States' own rich history of meddling in the domestic affairs of other states. During the Cold War, for instance, the United States launched 66 covert regime changes to replace foreign political leaders. Twenty-six of those operations succeeded in that task, while the remaining forty failed to replace their targets.[19] Some of these operations are well known—such as U.S. interventions in Iran (1952-1953), Guatemala (1952-1954), or Chile (1964-1973)—while others—such as those in Portugal (1974-1975) or South Yemen (1979-1980)—have come to light more recently. And while

covert regime change is often viewed as a Cold War phenomenon, it remains a staple of U.S. foreign policy to this day, as evidenced by Washington's covert interventions in Libya (2011) and Syria (2012).

What can these operations tell us about the Russian operation? To begin, they reveal how vulnerable democracies are to such attacks. On 16 occasions during the Cold War, Washington pursued covert interventions similar to what Russia is now accused of by providing aid and propaganda to help tip foreign elections. Some of these operations were relatively small: $200,000, for example, to help elect pro-Western candidates in Somalia's 1964 parliamentary elections.[20] Other covert missions, however, were rather substantial: that same year, the U.S. spent at least $20 million to help elect Chilean President Eduardo Frei. This amounted to $8 per voter and over 50% of Frei's total campaign costs.[21]

Taken as a whole, these interventions appear to have been quite successful: U.S.-backed parties won their elections more than 75% of the time and most leaders stayed in power for more than one election cycle thanks to continued covert support from the United States. As with Russia's interference today, however, it is impossible to say whether Washington's meddling had a decisive impact on the election results. Nevertheless, the examples help to highlight the weaknesses of democracies in the face of such tactics. Compared to other forms of covert regime change, meddling in foreign elections involves tactics that are relatively easy to conceal, such as transferring money or planting propaganda, and while authoritarian leaders often take steps to insulate their regimes from such attacks, democratic leaders frequently do not.

The 2016 election was particularly vulnerable to covert meddling due to a confluence of factors. For one, technological advances have made this type of covert interference easier to orchestrate. The internet has lowered barriers to entry for news outlets, allowing foreign agents to generate 'fake news' with ease, while social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, has accelerated the spread of this disinformation to sympathetic audiences. WikiLeaks has enabled clandestine data dumps on a previously unimaginable scale, and anyone with a few hundred dollars can now establish an off-shore shell corporation to quickly and anonymously launder money.[22]

Compounding these factors, Hillary Clinton made an easy target for a covert character assassination campaign: she began her campaign with historically high unfavorability ratings, was bedeviled throughout the Democratic primary by a popular challenger, and was trailed by a long history of real and imagined political scandals for opponents to draw from. Consequently, a significant portion of the U.S. public appeared primed to believe false stories about her—as evidenced, for instance, by a December 2016 *Economist*/YouGov poll that found that 53% of Republicans believed the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory that her campaign ran a child sexual abuse rink out a Washington pizzeria.[23] Conversely, from the Kremlin's perspective, Donald Trump offered Russia a rare opportunity to back a U.S. presidential candidate whose views deviated from the prevailing foreign policy consensus on Russia within Washington.

That Russia would be willing to reprise the dirty tricks of the Cold War to bolster Trump's chances may come as a surprise to many Americans. From the Russian perspective, however, its covert confrontation with Washington never ended. The Kremlin has long viewed American efforts to promote democracy within Russia and former Soviet states as an affront to its interests, particularly after pro-Russian governments were removed from power during the 'color revolutions' in Georgia

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(2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005). In a 2014 speech, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu warned that these uprisings were "used as an excuse to replace nationally oriented governments with regimes controlled from abroad."[24] Whether it is fair of Moscow to construe Washington's democracy promotion initiatives in Eastern Europe as covert interference is debatable. In Ukraine, for example, Assistant Secretary of State for Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland estimated that the United States invested over $5 billion to help Ukrainians build "democratic skills and institutions" between 1991 and 2013.[25] In 2015 alone, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) spent $3.4 million funding 66 democracy assistance programs in Ukraine and $4.7 million on 74 programs in Russia.[26] While Americans view these democracy promotion programs as the legitimate behavior of a non-governmental organization, Moscow sees these actions as covert meddling by the U.S. government—noting that more than 99% of NED's annual budget comes from the U.S. Congress—and banned the nonprofit from operating within its borders in July 2015.[27]

Looking forward, how much attention should policymakers devote to preventing covert interference into U.S. elections in the future? My research shows that states targeted for covert regime change missions tended to become less democratic, but were more likely to experience civil war, adverse regime changes, and mass killings in the years following intervention. Although these extreme examples are unlikely to occur in the United States, the direction of the effect is obvious. Even if Russia's actions were not decisive in Trump's victory, its covert meddling has likely undermined confidence in the integrity of the United States' political institutions and mass media.

From the Kremlin's perspective, its intervention in the 2016 election appears to have been a win-win proposition: If Trump was elected, Moscow's reward would be an unabashedly pro-Russian candidate in the White House. Indeed, Trump repeatedly praised Russian President Vladimir Putin on the campaign trail, expressed reservations about coming to the aid of America's NATO allies in the Baltic in the event of a Russian invasion, applauded Russian strategy in Syria, and said that he "would be looking into" recognizing Crimea as Russian territory.[28] If Clinton was elected, Russia's covert smear campaign would still have tarnished her public approval and potentially undermined Americans' faith in democracy.

Given this cost-benefit calculation, if U.S. policymakers want to deter Russia and other states from launching similar covert missions in the future, they will have to impose significant costs on such behavior. In late December 2016, President Barack Obama took one step to doing so, bolstering America's existing sanctions on Russia and expelling 35 Russian diplomats suspected of spying.[29] Since taking office, however, President Trump has shown little willingness to follow up on these actions and has reiterated his willingness to work with Putin.[30]

Still, there is reason to doubt that Trump's attitude towards Russia will lead to dramatic shifts in U.S. foreign policy. For one, as the Congressional investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 election continues, the White House may find it politically expedient to distance itself from Putin. Moreover, few in Washington share the President's desire to revise relations with Moscow. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster are both firmly committed to taking a harder line on Russia, and while Putin's favorability rating amongst Republican voters increased 20% since 2015, it still tops out at 32%.[31] For his part, there are signs that Putin may be cooling on Trump as well. After only 50 days in office, *Politico* reports that Russian-backed news

outlets are already returning to their anti-American roots and "reveling in the chaos and division of his early presidency."[32]

Notes

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