

Center for American Progress



Blunting Foreign Interference Efforts by Learning the Lessons of the Past

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Introduction and summary

Russia's interference in America's 2016 election brought a new reality to the shores of the United States. While countries in Europe, especially the former Soviet states and Warsaw Pact members, were used to dealing with Russian interference in their politics, the United States did not anticipate that a hostile foreign power would attempt to interfere in its democracy.

America was caught off guard in 2016, but there are no excuses in future elections. Russia's interference in the 2016 election has been extensively studied, most recently in a bipartisan report from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.¹ The warning signs of ongoing foreign interference are clear. Understanding the entirety of the 2016 interference operation is important for preventing and mitigating the impact of foreign interference in future U.S. electoral processes.

There are concrete lessons that stakeholders can take away from the 2016 experience and specific steps that should be taken between now and any future elections to shield the vote from foreign interference. By better sharing information, increasing transparency for the public, creating deterrence for foreign actors, and—most importantly—being vigilant, the U.S. government, Congress, social media companies, state and local officials, and the public at large can protect itself from the influence of authoritarian leaders.

By learning—though not overlearning—the lessons of 2016, America will be better prepared this time around.

Assessing interference in the 2016 and 2018 elections

While America's adversaries are constantly adapting and developing new interference techniques, there is a very high certainty that they will continue to pursue what has already worked successfully in the past. To accurately assess the current threat and protect upcoming elections, it is critical to understand what happened in the past attacks on American democracy—the full extent of which is often misunderstood.

Much of the public attention given to Russia's influence operation around the 2016 election has focused on digital activity—primarily Russia's online social media operations. Its efforts flooded platforms with disinformation and propaganda meant to influence voters, aiding then-candidate Donald Trump and hurting his opponent, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. But this was only part of a much broader effort that included multiple, often overlapping efforts to influence the election and the U.S. democratic process more broadly.

Online disinformation and propaganda

Russia's 2016 disinformation campaign—most famously, the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA)—represented the culmination of a yearslong effort to influence public discourse in the United States. According to the February 2018 indictment of 13 Russian operatives involved in the effort, the Russian government spent more than \$1 million per month over the final months of the 2016 election creating and pushing online propaganda.² This included not only establishing online networks of bots and trolls but also consulting with outside analysts to increase their reach and efficacy, publishing material in online publications, and paying unaffiliated content producers to push Kremlin talking points. Analysts and academics have estimated that the Kremlin's propaganda efforts reached at least 126 million users on Facebook alone.³

According to the indictment and previous reporting, the Russian government began establishing these networks well before the 2016 election, pushing divisive political content as early as 2014.⁴ According to the intelligence community, however,

by March 2016, the Kremlin had pivoted its online messaging operation toward supporting Trump’s candidacy. It did so not only by pushing pro-Trump messages but also by attacking Hillary Clinton and supporting third-party candidates such as the Green Party’s Jill Stein.⁵ Moreover, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), the Kremlin didn’t end its operations in November 2016 but continued them throughout the 2018 midterms.⁶ Some efforts specifically sought to stoke racial divides and racial conflict in the United States. In fact, this was all part of the same effort, which the IRA codenamed “Project Lakhota.” In other words, the same Russia digital operation to influence Americans began in 2014, ran through the 2016 election, and continued through the 2018 midterms; there is every reason to believe it continues to this day.

Meanwhile, as social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter have improved their monitoring processes since the 2018 midterms, they have also uncovered propaganda and disinformation efforts by countries other than Russia. These include Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.⁷ Though it remains unclear if these efforts were directly aimed at influencing American elections rather than at shaping public opinion more broadly, they indicate that countries other than Russia are also making investments in the kind of online disinformation infrastructure that laid the groundwork for the Kremlin’s interference efforts in 2016.

Weaponizing stolen information

The centerpiece of Russia’s 2016 interference campaign was the theft and release of emails from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and of Clinton campaign Chairman John Podesta. According to a July 2018 indictment of 12 Russian operatives, agents with the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence agency, hacked into DNC servers and stole thousands of emails in September 2015, which they began releasing through WikiLeaks in July 2016 to coincide with the Democratic National Convention.⁸ The email release undermined the convention, contributing to protests outside the convention and prompting the resignation of then-DNC chairwoman, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL).⁹

In April 2016, the GRU hacked into Podesta’s email inbox. WikiLeaks began releasing the Podesta emails on October 7, 2016, just minutes after *The Washington Post* published the “Access Hollywood” tape in which Trump bragged on a hot mic about sexually assaulting women in 2005.¹⁰ The hacked DNC and Podesta emails dominated news cycles during the final month of the election.¹¹

The Kremlin also appears to have stolen—but not released—other data from the servers of the DNC, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and other affiliated organizations. It remains unknown what the Russian government did with the data.¹² Similarly, Republican targets including state committees and old Republican National Committee domains were also penetrated, though it remains unknown what was done with this information.¹³

Infiltrating influential political organizations

The Russian government has run—and in all likelihood, continues to run—infiltration campaigns similar to Cold War-era efforts to subvert politically active organizations that they believe can be influential in shaping U.S. policy. This was the explicit goal of the Russian gun rights activist Maria Butina, who began working in 2015 to cultivate relationships with right-wing operatives and organizations on behalf of the Russian government. This effort appears to have centered largely around Right to Bear Arms, a gun rights advocacy group Butina created in 2012 with the backing of the Kremlin and which is led by Alex Torshin, a close Putin ally.¹⁴ By the end of 2015, Right to Bear Arms had created inroads in conservative politics, including a trip the group planned to Moscow in December 2015, which included top National Rifle Association (NRA) officials and right-wing politicians, most notably Milwaukee Sheriff David Clarke.

Butina's activities began raising alarms as early as November 2016, when ThinkProgress reporter Josh Israel first documented her and her organization's efforts to build relationships with right-wing figures.¹⁵ As Israel and others noted, the Russian government's apparent backing of the effort made little sense on an ideological level: Not only does the Russian government not support gun rights as typically understood in America, but gun control is not a particularly salient domestic issue in Russia.¹⁶

Through her networking with conservative organizations and operatives, Butina was able to gain access to certain Republican politicians such as Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and California Rep. Dana Rohrabacher.¹⁷ Gov. Walker said the meeting was brief and not memorable.¹⁸ Rep. Rohrabacher admitted to having had dinner with Butina but has said that the charges against Butina are “ridiculous” and the work of a “deep state” plot.¹⁹ She also began a romantic relationship with the conservative operative Paul Erickson, who offered the Trump campaign a “Kremlin connection” in 2016.²⁰ Butina was also present at a July 2015 Trump campaign event, where she asked Trump about sanctions on Russia, marking the first of several times he would criticize sanctions on Russia as a 2016 candidate and later as president.²¹ In June 2015,

Butina wrote an op-ed—titled “The Bear and the Elephant”—for *The National Interest*, in which she stated, “It may take the election of a Republican to the White House in 2016 to improve relations between the Russian Federation and the United States.” She went on to cite a number of socially conservative values shared by Republicans and Russia, including, “an aggressive approach to the war against Islamic terrorism,” and a willingness to reassess the value of economic sanctions.²² It’s worth noting that Donald Trump Jr. was at the same table and had dinner with Butina’s handler Torshin at the NRA’s annual convention in May 2016.²³

In July 2018, Butina was indicted by the DOJ for acting as an unregistered agent of a foreign government.²⁴ The indictment reveals the extent of Butina’s coordination with and funding from the Russian government. Butina pleaded guilty in December 2018 and was ultimately deported to Russia.²⁵ Upon her arrival, the Russian state-run propaganda channel RT announced that Butina would be hosting an online video program for the network.²⁶

Channeling political money

On October 9, 2019, the Soviet-born businessmen Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman were arrested at New York’s LaGuardia Airport with one-way tickets to Vienna and indicted by the DOJ.²⁷ (The pair have pleaded not guilty.)²⁸ The indictment alleges that Parnas and Fruman perpetrated multiple schemes that violated U.S. campaign finance law.²⁹ This allegedly included donating hundreds of thousands of dollars to conservative campaigns and super PACs with the direct goal of gaining access to politicians.³⁰ Through these donations, the pair sought to gain access to powerful policymakers, including President Trump, Rep. Pete Sessions (R-TX), and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R).

Parnas and Fruman are a case study in how money in politics, including foreign money, can corrupt the system. Their donations, which, according to the indictment, were made at the behest of and in conjunction with Ukrainian individuals and officials, gained them significant access that they used to help accomplish not only their goals but also the corresponding goals of the foreign individuals and officials funding the effort.³¹ Most notably, Parnas and Fruman appear to have used the access they obtained to successfully agitate for the removal of U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch.³² While Parnas and Fruman appear to have been pursuing Yovanovitch’s removal in part for personal gain, they were also allegedly coordinating the effort with corrupt Ukrainian government officials who funded their efforts, including Yuriy Lutsenko, a former prosecutor general who chafed at Yovanovitch’s anti-corruption stances.³³

While the indictment of Parnas and Fruman does not explicitly identify the sources of their financing, reports suggest that at least some of it may have come from the Ukrainian oligarch Dmitry Firtash.³⁴ If Firtash was funding Parnas and Fruman, which he denies, it would effectively mean that, through them, a corrupt Ukrainian oligarch was able to gain access to and influence within the U.S. government merely by strategically routing a few hundred thousand dollars to the right super PACS.³⁵

In addition, the indictment of Parnas and Fruman alleges that the pair made donations on behalf of an unidentified Ukrainian oligarch who was trying to obtain licensing for a marijuana business in the United States. It remains unclear whether Parnas and Fruman obtained the license.

Parnas and Fruman are not the only individuals to have been indicted in recent years on charges of laundering foreign money into American elections. In December 2019, George Nader, a Lebanese-American businessman and lobbyist with ties to multiple Middle Eastern governments, was indicted for allegedly using straw donors to illegally conceal contributions to the Clinton campaign on behalf of an unidentified Middle Eastern government.³⁶ Through the donations, Nader and at least one accomplice in the scheme, Ahmad Khawaja, were able to gain access to the Clinton campaign, including hosting a campaign fundraiser at his own home. (Nader and Khawaja have pleaded not guilty.³⁷ Nader, who also served as a witness in the Mueller investigation, has separately pleaded guilty to child sex trafficking and possessing child pornography.)³⁸

Nader and Khawaja are also known to have donated to Trump's 2016 campaign and inaugural fund.³⁹ Whether it is related to the donations or not, Nader also appears to have obtained access to the Trump campaign and transition team. In fact, Nader first received public attention for his role in helping Trump transition team adviser (and brother of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos) Erik Prince arrange a meeting with the head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund in the Seychelles in January 2017. According to *The New York Times*, during the 2016 campaign, Nader frequently met with Trump campaign officials, including "Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law, and Michael T. Flynn, who became the president's first national security adviser."⁴⁰ Nader also reportedly helped arrange and attended a meeting between high-ranking then-Trump campaign officials, including Donald Trump Jr., and representatives of the Israeli private intelligence firm Psy Group, which is discussed in greater detail below.

Cyberattacks on election infrastructure

Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 election did not end with disinformation and the theft and release of emails. In September 2017, officials at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security notified officials in 21 states—reportedly including Wisconsin, Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin—that the Russian government had attempted to hack their elections systems.⁴¹ In February 2018, NBC reported that “the U.S. intelligence community developed substantial evidence that state websites or voter registration systems in seven states were compromised by Russian-backed covert operatives prior to the 2016 election—but never told the states involved.”⁴² And in July 2019, the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that Russia had targeted election systems in all 50 states.⁴³

In addition, according to documents leaked by National Security Agency contractor Reality Winner, the Kremlin also attempted to hack into elections service contractor VR Systems.⁴⁴ The documents reveal not only that the Russian government hacked into VR Systems in August 2016 but also that the Kremlin followed up by sending a round of spear-phishing emails to government employees likely “involved in the management of voter registration systems.”⁴⁵ These spear-phishing emails contained malware that, according to *The Intercept*, “could have provided attackers with ‘persistent access’ to the computer or the ability to ‘survey the victims for items of interest.’”⁴⁶

What specifically Russia intended to accomplish by hacking into U.S. election systems remains unknown. However, suggestions that they were simply testing whether it would be possible to do so remain highly specious given the targeted nature of Russia's other election interference efforts, which specifically focused on electing Trump in 2016.

Supporting fringe political groups that have a destabilizing effect

Much of the Russian government's efforts to support political movements in other countries has focused on cultivating far-right parties and politicians. Many far-right political parties—such as France's National Rally, the Alternative for Germany, and the Austrian Freedom Party—have received significant support from the Russian government, ranging from email dumps akin to those that occurred during the 2016 election in the United States to direct financing via loans from Kremlin-linked banks.⁴⁷ This extends to far-right movements in the United States: American neo-Nazis appear to have received significant support from the Russian government in the past few years. And according to reports, as of 2017, the former editor of the neo-Nazi publication *The Daily Stormer*, Andrew Anglin, actually lives in Russia.⁴⁸

This alliance partly reflects Russia's desire to sow chaos in Western democracies. However, the consistency of Russia's support for far-right political movements also suggests an ideological affinity. Across the modern far-right, leaders frequently espouse a version of white nationalism that largely rejects pluralistic democracy as a form of governance and international institutions such as NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations. It is therefore unsurprising that the Kremlin would seek to support them. Far-right movements and the Russian government also frequently share a form of political Christianity that aims to use the state to militantly enforce anti-LGBTQ policies and so-called traditional family values.

Under Putin, the Russian government also has a history of support for secessionist and separatist movements. This includes the Catalan independence movement in Spain and at least four secessionist movements in the United States, most notably in California and Texas.⁴⁹ Russia's support has in the past extended to hosting a conference in Moscow for international secessionist movements as well as amplification of their message through Russia's social media network discussed above.⁵⁰

As *The New York Times* has reported, it is unlikely that the Kremlin, which has long cracked down internally on secessionist and separatist movements, shares a sincere ideological affinity with many of the secessionist groups it supports. Instead, Russia is supporting these movements and their political goals because doing so will help further undermine Western democracies.⁵¹

Questions remain

After almost four years of investigation, there remain several outstanding questions about Russian interference in the 2016 election. These important lines of inquiry have thus far gone unresolved, but understanding these potential gaps will help bring into focus efforts ahead. The following sections outline areas that remain to be fully explored.

Russian money in the 2016 election

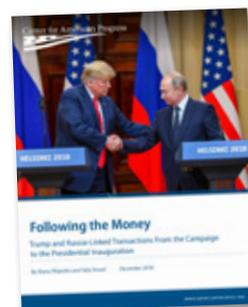
One of the Mueller report's most apparent omissions is its failure to follow the money. Every campaign needs money—especially in American politics, where presidential campaigns now reach the billion-dollar range. Russian operatives know this and use financial support—sometimes illicit and sometimes licit—to cultivate politicians and businesspeople the Kremlin believes will prove useful to its interests.⁵² The most public and well-known example of this was a mysterious loan provided to the French far-right National Rally Party by a Kremlin-linked bank.⁵³

When it comes to Donald Trump, the businessman-turned-2016 presidential candidate, the foundation for such a potential relationship has been laid for decades. The Trump Organization has long relied on money from foreign investors, particularly Russia, to prop up its real estate empire. Trump first described soliciting investment from and partnership with the Russian government in his 1987 book *The Art of the Deal*, meaning his relationship with Russia dates back more than 30 years.

The most famous instance of unusual financial flows during the 2016 election, and the only one discussed in the Mueller report, is the Trump Organization's secret effort to develop a Trump Tower in Moscow during the 2016 campaign.⁵⁴ Reporting from BuzzFeed News and other outlets has also revealed that tens of millions of dollars changed hands between people affiliated with Russia's interference efforts.⁵⁵ This most notably includes several transactions involving the Kremlin-linked Agalarov family and their representatives surrounding a June 9, 2016, meeting in Trump Tower.⁵⁶

One financial relationship in particular that has raised suspicion is Trump's longtime partnership with the German financial giant Deutsche Bank.⁵⁷ For decades following a series of high-profile bankruptcies, Deutsche Bank was the only major financial institution willing to lend to Trump. The firm also has a checkered history of business in the former Soviet space, including paying hundreds of millions of dollars in fines for its involvement in Russian money-laundering schemes.⁵⁸ Additionally, *New York Times* reporter David Enrich, author of *Dark Towers: Deutsche Bank, Donald Trump, and an Epic Trail of Destruction*, has reported that Deutsche Bank "furnished [Trump] with other services that have not previously been reported: providing sophisticated financial instruments that shielded him from risks and outside scrutiny, and making introductions to wealthy Russians who were interested in investing in Western real estate."⁵⁹

It remains unknown why the Mueller report does not discuss in any great detail Trump's finances and the possibility of corrupting Russian money. One possible answer is that the information is contained in Mueller's counterintelligence reports, which as of this writing have not been released to the public or even to Congress.⁶⁰ It is also possible that Mueller failed to conduct a thorough investigation of Trump's finances or was prevented from doing so. Trump repeatedly said that he would consider any effort to investigate his finances to be crossing a red line and constitute a fireable offense. According to the Mueller report, Trump came closest to having Mueller fired in the immediate aftermath of reports that Mueller was investigating Trump's finances.⁶¹ David Ignatius of *The Washington Post* has also reported that a source told him that then-Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who oversaw the Mueller investigation after the recusal of Attorney General Jeff Sessions, "blocked any attempt to compel disclosure of [Deutsche Bank's] Trump file records to avoid getting himself or Mueller fired."⁶²



For more details on the mysterious flows of money surrounding the 2016 election, see ["Following the Money: Trump and Russia-Linked Transactions From the Campaign to the Presidential Inauguration."](#)⁶³

The Trump Organization/Alfa Bank server connection

During the 2016 election, technology reporter Franklin Foer reported on a series of secret contacts between three servers licensed to the Trump Organization, the Russian bank Alfa Bank, and a company owned by the family of Trump adviser Erik Prince and Education Secretary DeVos.⁶⁴ According to reporting by Foer and others, the three servers exchanged copious amounts of data during the election, with large spikes in July and October. The connection shut down in late October, shortly after Foer and other reporters began asking the companies in question for comment on their reporting.⁶⁵ According to Foer, the Trump Organization shut down its end of the server after *The New York Times* reached out to Alfa Bank's representatives, leading one of Foer's sources to say that "the knee was tapped in Moscow and the leg kicked in New York."⁶⁶

It remains unknown what data were shared between the three servers. Though some analysts initially dismissed the connection as likely comprising spam, subsequent reporting, most notably by *The New Yorker* journalist Dexter Filkins, strongly suggested this was not the case.⁶⁷ The Mueller report does not address the connections between the servers, although it does note multiple connections between Alfa Bank chairman Petr Aven and Russia's interference efforts.

Cambridge Analytica

Trump's 2016 presidential campaign employed Cambridge Analytica to run its digital strategy.⁶⁸ Since the election, Cambridge Analytica has been implicated in a number of scandals involving foreign governments. This includes a television news investigation that revealed that Cambridge Analytica pitched itself to foreign political parties by promising to entrap a political opponent with prostitutes. All those concerned deny any wrongdoing.⁶⁹

What role Cambridge Analytica played, if any, in Russia's interference operation remains one of the biggest outstanding questions from the 2016 election. Investigations into the company have uncovered multiple links between Cambridge Analytica and the Russian government. In 2018, a former employee blew the whistle on Cambridge Analytica's meetings with executives from the state-backed Russian company Lukoil, who reportedly asked about tactics they could use to target American consumers.⁷⁰ In addition, Cambridge Analytica appears to have received a large quantity of data improperly harvested from Facebook by Aleksander Kogan, a Russian-American professor who had received a grant from the Russian government.⁷¹

Inauguration scheme

Foreign government-linked actors also appear to have attempted to buy access and influence by donating to Trump's inaugural committee. This most notably includes the Ukrainian oligarch Serhiy Lyovochkin, who appears to have illegally steered \$50,000 into Trump's inaugural fund via Sam Patten, a longtime collaborator with Trump's 2016 campaign Chairman Paul Manafort and alleged Russian intelligence operative Konstantin Kilimnik, in exchange for four tickets to Trump's inauguration.⁷² (Patten pleaded guilty to acting as an unregistered foreign agent and for violating campaign finance law with the donation.)⁷³

Patten's illegal donation scheme is one small piece of the questions regarding potential foreign influence surrounding Trump's inauguration. As with the campaign, large transactions involving Trump's unprecedented \$107 million inauguration fund and foreign actors remain largely unexplained.⁷⁴ For example, reporters have uncovered large donations from a company tied to the Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg as well as one tied to the Soviet-born billionaire Leonard Blavatnik.⁷⁵

Several figures connected to the broader investigation into foreign interference were also present at Trump's inauguration.⁷⁶ This includes Vekselberg, Kazakh mining magnate Alexander Mashkevitch, Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak, and Natalia Veselnitskaya and Rinat Akhmetshin, who attended the June 9 meeting in Trump Tower. The Mueller report and a subsequent DOJ inspector general report on the Russia investigation suggest that the FBI largely failed to investigate or interview any of the relevant figures while they were in Washington, D.C., for the inauguration and allowed many to leave the country, never to return.⁷⁷

These and other questions led to the opening of a federal criminal investigation into Trump's inauguration in December 2018.⁷⁸ This investigation appears to have proceeded at least to the point of subpoenaing Trump's inaugural committee in February 2019; however, the outcome of the investigation, and whether it has even concluded, remains unknown.⁷⁹

Employing private intelligence contractors

In August 2016, Donald Trump Jr. and other high-ranking Trump campaign officials reportedly met with a representative of Psy Group, a private intelligence agency with ties to the Israeli government, to discuss the 2016 election.⁸⁰ According to *The New York Times*, as with Erik Prince's meeting in the Seychelles, this meeting was arranged and attended by George Nader, the Lebanese lobbyist who has since been indicted for a straw-donor scheme in which he funneled money into the 2016 presidential election in exchange for access on behalf of an unidentified Middle Eastern government.⁸¹ (Nader and his alleged co-conspirator Ahmad Khawaja have pleaded not guilty.)⁸² The meeting between representatives of the Trump campaign and Psy Group is not discussed in the DOJ's indictment of Nader and Khawaja, and it remains unclear how it relates to their alleged efforts to buy access to 2016 presidential campaigns.

Rick Gates, Trump's then-deputy campaign chairman, also reportedly contacted representatives of Psy Group to request information on a series of election-related proposals.⁸³ According to *The New York Times*, Gates and Psy Group communicated about opposition research into Clinton and her campaign and a plan to “use bogus personas to target and sway 5,000 delegates to the 2016 Republican National Convention by attacking Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, Mr. Trump’s main opponent at the time.”⁸⁴

Recent reporting suggests that Prince, who met with a high-ranking Russian official in the Seychelles on behalf of the Trump transition team in January 2017, continues to solicit assistance from foreign-based intelligence operatives.⁸⁵ According to *The New York Times*, Prince, in conjunction with the conservative organization Project Veritas, sought out help from former British intelligence operatives to “infiltrate” liberal groups and campaigns in advance of the 2018 midterms.⁸⁶

The extent of these efforts, and whether they involved solicitation of assistance from foreign governments as well as foreign individuals, remains unknown. However, given that such efforts appear to have factored into at least the past two elections, including one presidential election, it is important to be on guard for the possibility that foreign governments could adopt the tactics in future elections.

Recommendations

As this report details, the attack on America's democracy during the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 midterms was multifaceted. There is every reason to believe that similar, and potentially even more robust, efforts are underway for future elections. The good news, however, is that actions can be taken to help secure against and mitigate the impact of foreign interference in U.S. electoral processes.

Pass existing election security legislation in the Senate

Since the 2016 election, the U.S. House of Representatives has passed several pieces of legislation, most notably the SHIELD Act, intended to shore up the security of America's election systems.⁸⁷ However, many of these measures have stalled in the Senate.⁸⁸

While there are practical limits to implementing reforms in the immediate months, there are nonetheless important provisions in existing legislation that can take effect immediately, including:

- Requiring political campaigns to report to the FBI any foreign government offers of assistance
- Specifically prohibiting campaigns and foreign governments from exchanging campaign information
- Eliminating anonymous shell companies that can be exploited to mask campaign spending
- Expanding inauguration fund disclosure and restrictions

Be vigilant, think critically

Perhaps one of the most important recommendations for each and every stakeholder in U.S. election systems is to remain vigilant and to keep a guard up. The United States was caught by surprise in 2016, but people are more aware and conscious of influence efforts today. However, everyone—government officials, political

candidates and campaigns, the media, and voters—needs to be vigilant and think critically about developments as they arise, because perpetrators will most certainly not use the exact same playbook as in 2016.

This is especially true for state and local actors who, in many ways, are on the front lines. County clerks' offices and secretaries of state across the country are charged with overseeing election administration and vote counting. While these offices may not have backgrounds in intelligence and geopolitics, they are the truest experts in the U.S. democratic process, and their keen eyes and vigilance will be critical to recognizing any potential irregularities that may occur.

This, however, cannot mean that everyone should see foreign actors around every corner and behind every development that is inconvenient for any electoral candidate. To the contrary, everyone should be as vigilant and on guard for false accusations of foreign interference as for new and refined tactics. There have already been unprecedented attempts to delegitimize election systems, and it is a simple leap to see how manufactured accusations of an adversary's hand in the U.S. democratic process could be used as a means to cast doubt on the validity of election results. For example, unsubstantiated claims have been made predicting that foreign adversaries will try to produce forged mail-in ballots. There is no basis for this, and these sorts of false claims that also seek to undermine the democratic process must be called out as such.

Social media companies must aggressively combat online disinformation or face consequences

Future elections will be a test of whether social media companies are capable of handling the responsibility of managing their platforms. Congress and other political leaders should make clear that should they fail yet again, dramatic regulatory action will be taken to curtail the power of these companies.

In 2016, social media companies seemed totally unaware of the activity taking place on their platforms. They did not seem to realize that they could be used and manipulated by foreign intelligence agencies. As a result, the Kremlin was able to pull off its bot-and-troll operations largely free from scrutiny, despite operational security slip-ups such as purchasing ads using rubles.⁸⁹ The public's lack of awareness about Russia's influence operation likely contributed to its efficacy. Though the government, press, and social media companies have largely improved at detecting online foreign interference operations in the past three years, there is still significant room for improvement,

especially as foreign governments reportedly take steps to increase the sophistication of their operations. This situation calls for increased cooperation between the intelligence community, the media, and social media companies to both improve capacity to identify and take down foreign disinformation and to ensure the public is aware of foreign influence operations.

Some specific steps that can be taken include:

- **Increasing transparency and exposure by social media companies.** Social media companies should publicly release the full archives of any foreign interference content that they felt confident enough in their determination to remove from their platform. Currently, only Twitter does this.
- **Increasing cooperation between social media companies.** Tech companies are working together to disrupt terrorist activity through a formalized organization called the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). A similar effort modeled after the GIFCT should be created to foster cooperation on foreign interference threats.
- **Increasing coordination with NGOs.** Very often, NGOs and civil society organizations are the targets of coordinated, multifaceted influence campaigns or are the first to notice them in their communities or countries. Improving communication among NGOs; between NGOs and the government; and between NGOs and tech companies would go a long way in helping to identify influence campaigns early on.

Improve interagency and intergovernmental information sharing

Foreign election interference is a topic that touches on many agency responsibilities, including law enforcement, intelligence diplomacy, and elections administration. Relevant agencies monitoring such activity include the Federal Election Commission (FEC), FBI, CIA, and U.S. Department of State, each of which brings its own expertise and tools to the challenge. Agencies at the working level should improve channels of communication and information sharing—especially with the FEC, which does not traditionally work with these other agencies. Improved information sharing could help identify trends, especially in areas such as illicit financial flows to campaigns, where no single agency has the single degree of expertise needed. Similarly, improved information sharing between federal, state, and local officials could prove critical.

Ensure congressional oversight and, where appropriate, public disclosure

Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election succeeded because the Kremlin was able to operate largely in the dark. The U.S. government didn't reveal the existence of Russia's bot-and-troll networks until after the 2016 election. Though the government did make public its conclusion that the Russian government was behind the release of stolen emails through WikiLeaks during the 2016 election, the official announcement occurred on the same day as the release of the "Access Hollywood" tape and the beginning of the Podesta email dumps, so the public hardly noticed.⁹⁰ Moreover, the ongoing, one-sided release of emails was largely covered not as a foreign influence operation intended to support Trump's candidacy but as a political scandal dogging the Clinton campaign.

The flow of information and intelligence will be critically important. Unfortunately, over the past year or so, there has been a concerted effort to exert political pressure on the intelligence community. Earlier this year, after Shelby Pierson, the intelligence community election threats executive and well-respected career civil servant, briefed lawmakers on ongoing Russian efforts to interfere in election processes.⁹¹ The president reportedly became irate that the briefing took place, and a few days later, then-Acting Director of National Intelligence at the time Joseph McGuire and his deputy left their posts to be replaced by Richard Grenell, who was universally seen as unqualified for the position and overly political. The permanent replacement, John Ratcliffe, had been previously nominated but then withdrawn because of similar criticism; however, he has since been confirmed to the post.

Another concerning sign is that the Worldwide Threat Assessment, an annual report prepared by the intelligence community which traditionally has a declassified version that is publicly briefed to Congress at the beginning of each year, has yet to be released in 2020. Some have speculated that it has not been released because the report contains information that is politically inconvenient for this administration.⁹² These developments—combined with the troubling pattern of declassifying documents seen as politically beneficial to the president while blocking the release of information seen as politically damaging—paints a troubling willingness by the Trump administration to control the flow of intelligence for a political agenda.⁹³

Therefore, the Gang of Eight should request regular, biweekly updates on the ongoing foreign threats to election processes. The briefings should be conducted exclusively by career intelligence professionals without political appointees present. The regularized cadence of the briefings will create an easier flow of information. If there

is an issue that requires public disclosure, it should be announced by the bipartisan group of leaders. Research from other countries' experience shows that this bipartisan unity against foreign interference is a critically important tool to prevent and mitigate such malign behavior.⁹⁴

However, congressional leaders should have a plan in place in the event they face a situation like they did in 2016, where one party—in 2016, it was Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY)—refuses to issue a bipartisan condemnation.⁹⁵ Congressional leaders should be thinking now about the threshold level that would trigger them to go public with concerns even if the bipartisan group does not.

Establish deterrence

Any major party candidates should publicly declare their intended policies to respond to foreign interference in elections. These policies should, at a minimum, include sanctions commensurate with the level of interference that takes place. By laying out now that there will be immediate punishments, this could deter aggressive behavior before elections are underway. Making the threat commensurate with the degree of interference has the added benefit of frightening off the most extreme abuses. It is critical for all major party candidates to do so; if an adversary credibly believes they will face consequences regardless of who wins, that is a strong incentive not to engage.

Conduct an after-action review

Above all, the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement communities must begin operating on the assumption that, after the 2016 and 2018 elections, foreign efforts to interfere in American democracy will be the norm rather than the exception. As such, the intelligence community and law enforcement agencies should conduct a comprehensive review of foreign interference attempts and recommendations for future elections. The conclusions of this assessment should be provided to Congress and a declassified version released to the public. This will in turn require the intelligence community and FBI to begin investigating potential foreign interference and any collusion with those interference efforts while electoral processes are ongoing. This will prevent problems similar to those faced by the Office of Special Counsel, which inherited a disorganized, piecemeal effort to investigate interference, including the participation of American citizens, and therefore largely had to reconstruct events after the fact.

Establishing a norm of investigation and potential disclosure during rather than after an election also has the potential to act as a deterrent. First, increasing the likelihood of detection and punishment would likely reduce the incentives for foreign governments to interfere in the first place. The fact that the investigation, exposure, and punishment would take place under the sitting administration or official would strongly counteract the incentive that a candidate newly elected with the help of a hostile foreign power might reward said foreign power or at least shield it from punishment. Moreover, the increased likelihood of exposure would likely reduce the efficacy of foreign interference not only because foreign interference efforts rely on secrecy from the public but also because foreign governments would have to expend more resources and develop more sophisticated tactics to elude a more thorough investigation.

Conclusion

In 2016, through a complex effort, Russia successfully undermined the sanctity of U.S. citizens' ability to choose their own leader free and clear of influence from foreign actors. It is becoming increasingly clear that similar interference efforts may be underway today. While the tools and tactics of the perpetrators have evolved, the fundamental principles remain the same. All Americans—regardless of their political party—have an interest and a duty in not allowing this type of malign activity to be successful. Only by showing that their efforts cannot be effective and that there is a price to pay will authoritarian governments fully understand that it is simply not worth it.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

