

Global Populisms and the International Diffusion
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Putinism and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the worldwide ideological struggle between communism and liberalism – aka, freedom, democracy, capitalism – also ended. For a euphoric period, it seemed as if all countries and societies in the world might embrace the norms of liberal democracy. To be sure, there were outliers back then, be they theocratic autocrats in Iran or Afghanistan; revolutionary, terrorist movements such as Al Qaeda; and a few holdouts from the Cold War ideological contest in Cuba or North Korea. But even in many autocratic regimes, there developed a narrative of convergence towards liberal democracy, even if the path would be slow and jagged in places like China. Most certainly the Russian government back then – and judging by opinion polls, Russian society – believed that they were midstream in a transition from autocracy to democracy.

Thankfully, the ideological contest between Moscow and Washington that shaped much of world politics for several decades in the twentieth century has not re-emerged. However, for at least a decade now, Russian president Vladimir Putin has been waging a new ideological struggle against the West generally, and the United States in particular—a struggle he defines as a contest between the decadent, liberal, multi-lateralism that predominates in the West and his brand of moral, conservative, sovereign values. This new ideological struggle is being waged not between states, but primarily within states.

In the early years of Putin’s normative crusade, few noticed his campaign. More recently, however, Putin has attracted like-minded allies, first in Europe, later in the United States, and subsequently in pockets throughout the world. Some suggest that Putinism has attracted new disciples well beyond the West, including President Xi in China, President Duterte in the Philippines, and even Prime Minister Modi in India. The most significant convert to Putinism, however, is allegedly President Trump.

Whether Putin and Trump share the same worldview is a question beyond the scope of this essay. That Putin tried to help win the 2016 presidential election, however, is certain. To show why, and how, this article proceeds in four parts. Section one defines

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Putinism. Section two catalogues the various instruments that Putin and his government deploy to propagate Putinism abroad – from state-run media companies, to direct financial assistance, to soldiers. Section three then shows how Putin used some of these instruments influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Section four concludes with assessment of Putin’s gains and losses from his 2016 intervention.

I. Defining “Putinism”

Vladimir Putin is an unlikely ideologue. He did not spend his youth poring over philosophy books or debating revolutionary ideas. As a KGB officer, Putin aspired to preserve, not destroy, the status quo in his country, and to keep ruling elites in power, not overthrow them. As those Soviet-era assignments and aspirations became untenable after 1991, Putin began to exhibit attributes of an opportunist, not a populist rebel. When a new ruling elite took power in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he joined them, first as a deputy mayor in St. Petersburg for one of Russia’s most charismatic liberal reformers, Anatoly Sobchak, and later in the mid-1990s as an official in Yeltsin’s government. He became president of Russia almost accidentally, and was most certainly not chosen for the job because of his ideological agenda.² When Yeltsin anointed Putin as his successor and Russian voters ratified that choice in a presidential election in the spring of 2000, few people could articulate Putin’s ideas about the economy, the polity, or the world. Putin himself seemed to struggle.

With time however, Putin began to define his philosophy about politics and ideas regarding international relations, nationalism, social values, and the economy. Some core ideas emerged right away; other evolved with time.

Sovereignty

For the purposes of becoming a global leader in the “illiberal international,” Putin’s most important ideological contributions circle around sovereignty. Long before Steven Bannon began promoting his sovereignty movement, Putin embraced the promotion of sovereignty as a central tenet of Putinism.

Putin posited the necessity of the strong state for Russian resurgence as early as his pre-presidency Millennium Message. Throughout his first terms, his surrogates advanced the importance of reasserting Russian sovereignty regarding domestic politics. Putin went on to argue that foreigners – and Americans in particular (including me!) – had exerted too much influence in Russia’s domestic affairs. In the mid-2000s, his political aide, Vladislav Surkov, coined the term “sovereign democracy” as a euphemism designed to justify growing autocratic practices to suppress Russian domestic challengers as well as greater controls over foreign activity within Russia. With time, most pockets of autonomous political activities were eliminated or severely constrained.³ Likewise, most

² For elaboration, see Michael McFaul “Choosing Autocracy, *Comparative Politics*, April 2018.

³ M. Steven Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University 2005); and Fish, “What Has Russia Become?” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 50, Number 3, April 2018, pp. 327-346(20). Fish defines this regime as a “conservative populist autocracy.”

Western organizations working to promote democracy or civil society were first labeled enemies of the state and then expelled.

Putin later extended his arguments about resurrecting sovereignty to international affairs. These ideas were muddled in the first years of his presidency but crystallized over time. Many cite Putin's speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2007 as the moment he pivoted hard against Western international institutions and American hegemony and towards promoting the sovereignty of countries seeking liberation from the "liberal world order." As Putin lamented in this address,

Unilateral and frequently illegitimate actions [by the United States] have not resolved any problems. Moreover, they have caused new human tragedies and created new centers of tension... plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts... One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural, and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?⁴

Whereas most populists in other countries direct their ire towards ruling elites within their countries or in Brussels, Putin makes a global argument, aiming his attacks at the American ruling elites, who don't just suppress the will of the people inside the United States, but around the world. Putin believes (or at least argues publicly) that the United States seeks to maintain hegemonic control of the globe, that American ruling elites don't seek partners, but "vassals." They established and now enforce the international rules of the game not to produce win-win outcomes for participants, but as a means to deny or infringe upon the sovereignty of other countries. They also use overt and covert power to violate the sovereignty and overthrow (or try to overthrow) regimes that they don't like, be it in the Soviet Union in 1991, Iraq in 2003, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and 2013-14, countries throughout the Arab world in 2011, or Russia again in 2011-2012.⁵

To push back, Putin has sought to mobilize other heads of state as well as populist movements abroad to undermine alleged American imperial oppression. Instead of a world dominated by American ruling elites, Putin seeks the emergence of a multipolar world in which several major powers in the international system – not just one – enjoy autonomy and sovereignty. (Notably, Putin's references only to major powers implies that lesser powers fall into the strategic orbit of the great powers. Putin seems to care little about the sovereignty of smaller states). Putin gives special attention to helping to liberate Europeans from the American-controlled multilateral institution, NATO. In the name of sovereignty, Putin also seeks to weaken the European Union.

⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>

⁵ Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (New York, HMH, 2018) chapters 4, 13, 15, and 23.

Trump's electoral victory in 2016 challenged Putin's theory about American hegemony. The Republican nominee not only supported many foreign policy issues endorsed by Putin, but shared many of Putin's ideological stances. Trump seemed to represent another ideological ally in the transnational movement against globalism, liberalism, and multilateralism.⁶ Self-proclaimed populist and nationalist ideologues on Trump's team such as Steve Bannon perceived even deeper philosophical connections to like-minded Russian thinkers, finding kinship with Eurasianists and ethno-nationalists in Russia.⁷ While their radical stance is not a feature of official Kremlin policy or rhetoric, the alleged defenders of the white, Christian world against Islam and China who worked in or hovered around the Trump campaign have their analogues in the Russian political sphere.⁸ So how could America, with its hegemonic, imperialist behaviors and ideas, elect someone like Trump?

Putin squared the circle by distinguishing between the populist, ideologically like-minded Trump and the "deep state" still firmly ensconced in Washington after Trump's election. Putin and his aides argued that the American elites running the deep state continued to dominate American foreign policy and thwarted Trump's efforts to improve relations with Russia and to withdraw from the oppressive liberal international order. In his latest address to parliament in February 2019, Putin directly criticized the American elite, "who have excessive faith in their exceptionalism and supremacy over the rest of the world," but never criticized Trump personally.⁹ Similarly this year, Vladislav Surkov, a longtime aide to Putin and political ideologist in his own right, explicitly underscored the power of the "deep state" in Western countries (though he obviously had the United States, first and foremost, in mind) – "a harsh, absolutely non-democratic organization of real power of defense and law enforcement agencies" that hides behind the façade of democratic institutions.¹⁰

Conservative Values

Putin did not invent the fight for sovereignty against Western or American imperialism. For most of the Cold War, national liberation movements in Africa and Asia waged that battle in the name of decolonization and independence. Back then, the Soviet Union also sided with these champions of sovereignty in the colonial world, and leftist, socialist ideas provided the ideological tissue connecting Moscow and these promoters of

⁶ Franklin Foer, "It's Putin's World," *Atlantic*, March 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/its-putins-world/513848/?utm_source=atltw.

⁷ Owen Matthews, "Alexander Dugin and Steve Bannon's Ideological Ties to Vladimir Putin's Russia," *Newsweek*, April 17, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/steve-bannon-donald-trump-jared-kushner-vladimir-putin-russia-fbi-mafia-584962>.

⁸ Steve Reilly and Brad Heath, "Steve Bannon's Own Words Show Sharp Break on Security Issues," *USA Today*, January 31, 2017, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/01/31/bannon-odds-islam-china-decades-us-foreign-policy-doctrine/97292068/>.

⁹ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/59863>

¹⁰ Vladislav Surkov, "The Long-lasting State of Putin," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 11, 2019.

sovereignty. Today, it's the reverse.¹¹ Putin seeks to appeal to those abroad who share not only his notion of sovereignty, but also the set of conservative values that he so tightly connects to Russia's state identity. This rhetoric positions Russia as the last remaining sovereign country in the world defending traditional, conservative values regarding social issues. Again, Putin's thinking on this set of ideas has evolved over time, but the evolution in his thinking has moved in one clear direction.¹²

As an example, at a meeting with Russian Orthodox leaders, Putin underscored the centrality of Russian Orthodox values (and religious values in general) to Russia's national identity:

But we are well aware that in order to reach new heights, it is important to preserve our identity, unity and solidarity, which rely on values that have been cherished at all times by Orthodoxy and other traditional religions of Russia, such as compassion, honesty and justice, caring for your neighbor and family, respect for parents and children and, of course, love for the Motherland. Neglecting these values can lead to the most destructive consequences, to the depersonalization and degradation of the individual, and make people victims of the most vile and base manipulations.... the common duty of cooperation and responsibility of the state, the Church, religious leaders, and society lies in preserving and strengthening our spiritual, moral and ethical foundation, passing it on to the young, to future generations, so as not to lose ourselves in an era of turbulent global change.¹³

Putin went on to warn, "without the values embedded in Christianity people will inevitably lose their human dignity." Therefore, "We consider it natural and right to defend these values."¹⁴

Putin has assumed the role of defender against challenges to these conservative values. He has devoted particular attention to protecting the Motherland from assaults from decadent Western homosexuals, tying "deviant" sexual behavior to political decay (the widespread use of the term *Gayropa*, gay + Europe, signifies the moral and political valence given to critiques of the West). At the same event, he stated:

We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities:

¹¹ On Russian state-controlled media channels aimed at foreign audiences, the messaging however is dichotomous. Some programs promote old-fashioned anti-imperial ideas aimed at mobilizing the developing world, while other programs try to appeal to conservative nationalist in the West. More study of the bifurcated strategy is needed.

¹² Whether this evolution is genuine or just instrumental is hotly debated in Russian circles. I tend to believe that it is not just instrumental.

¹³ Gathering in honor of the 10th anniversary of the Russian Orthodox Church Local Council and the Patriarch's enthronement. Kremlin.ru. 01/31/2019 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59757>

¹⁴ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>

national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.¹⁵

On these social issues, Putin has become increasingly unapologetic in his conservative militancy.

Nationalism

Putin is more cautious regarding the promotion of ethnicity-based nationalist issues. On the one hand, Putin invoked ethno-nationalist themes to justify launching the second Chechen war in 1999. He made clear ethnic allusions to the non-Russian Chechens terrorists who allegedly attacked Russian apartment buildings in the fall of 1999.¹⁶ In more recent years, however, ethnicity has been less prominent in official rhetoric; instead, a brand of nationalism resting on shared loss, national pride, and distrust of external enemies has predominated. Rhetoric related to the conflict in Ukraine exemplifies this trend. State media and Putin himself framed the 2014 war in Ukraine in ideological, even existential terms, claiming that Ukrainian leaders embodied fascist ideals. This framework evoked, with great emotional resonance for most Russians, the Nazis who supported Hitler against the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War (WWII).¹⁷ For instance, in October 2014, Putin called the leaders of the Ukrainian Revolution of 2014 “nationalists” and “radicals”, saying,

Regrettably, in some European countries the Nazi virus ‘vaccine’ created at the Nuremberg Tribunal is losing its effect. This is clearly demonstrated by open manifestations of neo-Nazism that have already become commonplace in Latvia and other Baltic states. The situation in Ukraine, where nationalists and other radical groups provoked an anti-constitutional coup d’état in February, causes particular concern in this respect.¹⁸

Since invading Ukraine, Putin has talked increasingly about the “the attempts of some countries to glorify Nazism” and “rewrite history,” lamenting that the “line that some countries now follow, and which elevates Nazism to heroic status and justifies the Nazis’ accomplices, is particularly dangerous. Not only does it insult the memory of the victims of Nazi crimes, but it feeds nationalist, xenophobic and radical forces.”¹⁹ Putin’s

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ John Dunlop, *The Moscow Bombings of September 1999: Examinations of Russian Terrorist Attacks at the Onset of Vladimir Putin's Rule* (2014)

¹⁷ Elizaveta Gaufman. “Memory, Media, and Securitization: Russian Media Framing of the Ukrainian Crisis.” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1.1 (2015). Special issue: Russian Media and the War in Ukraine (pp. 141-73).

¹⁸ Interview to Politika newspaper. Kremlin.ru, October 15, 2014; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46806>

¹⁹ Meeting of the Pobeda (Victory) Organizing Committee. Kremlin.ru, April 20, 2017; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54347>

emphasis on Nazi atrocities and Russian suffering in the Great Patriotic War promotes a version of nationalism rooted not in ethnicity, but in shared trauma and more importantly, immense victory in which Russia essentially saved the entire world from the Nazi threat.

In addition, Putin has embraced an expansive definition of Russian civilization, which in his view, stretches well beyond the territorial borders of the Russian Federation. More than once, Putin has called for unity among all ethnic Russians and even Russian speakers living beyond Russian borders, referencing a unifying Russian World (*ruskii mir*) based on shared cultural, linguistic, and civilizational foundations.²⁰ In Putin's view, all Russians living abroad in the countries to emerge from the former Soviet Union must be reunited, whether through a perception of shared civilization or actual national borders; even the distinctions between ethnic Russians and other Orthodox, Slavic nationalities must be erased. Putin, for instance, does not believe in a separate Ukrainian nation, and has devoted new attention to unifying Belarus and Russia.²¹ And at times, Putin even makes the claim that all those ethnicities living in what used to be the Russian empire are still part of a global Russian civilization:

The great mission of the ethnic Russians is to unite and bond civilization. To bond Russian Armenians, Russian Azerbaijanians, Russian Germans, Russian Tatars through language, culture, and 'universal kind-heartedness' as Fyodor Dostoevsky defined it. To bond them in a type of a civilization-state that has no 'ethnic minorities,' and in which the principle of defining friends vs. foes is based on a common culture and common values. This civilizational identity is based on maintaining cultural dominance, which is carried by not only ethnic Russians, but also by all those who carry this identity, regardless of their ethnicity. This a cultural code that has been seriously challenged in recent years and that [some forces] have been trying to hack. However, undoubtedly, this code survived. And we need to nurture, strengthen, and safeguard it.²²

At the same time, Putin has not fully embraced ethnically based ideas regarding politics inside Russia. Because fifteen to twenty percent of Russia's population are non-ethnic Russian Muslims, Putin has courted, not berated, the leaders of this community. In the 2018 presidential election, Putin won shocking majorities in regions with Muslim majorities: 87% in Ingushetia, 91.44% in Chechnya, 90.76% in Dagestan, 87.64% in Karachay-Cherkessia, and 93.38% in Kabardino-Balkaria. These same regions also

²⁰ Marlene Laruelle, "The 'Russian World': Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination." Center on Global Interests, 2015.

²¹ Condoleezza Rice, *Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom* (NY: Twelver, 2017) chapter four; and <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-belarus-unite-absorb-union-vladimir-putin-alexander-lukashenko-1333800>

²² Vladimir Putin, "Russia: The Question of Ethnicities," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 23, 2012, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html

ranked in the top ten for voter turnout.²³ Likewise, Putin could not be considered anti-Semitic. He has nurtured ties with Jewish religious communities in Russia, even if at times subtly criticizing Jewish business leaders.²⁴

Putin's complex positions regarding ethnic nationalism at times have positioned him at odds with other nationalist leaders in Russia. Several Russian nationalist leaders and movements have even labeled Putin a traitor. For instance, Vladimir Tor, the leader of the National-Democratic Party, joined the liberal opposition protests in 2011–2012, yelling bluntly at one rally, “a crook and a thief must be put in Jail. Jail is the right place for Putin”.²⁵ Nationalist demonstrators at the annual Russian March (*ruskii*, not *rossiiskii*) have called for Putin's resignation.²⁶ Some commanders in the war in Ukraine, including most prominently Igor Strelkov, have returned to Russia, expressing disdain for Putin's caution.²⁷ Within Russia's nationalist movement, some support expansion of the empire, while others want to shed the empire, even including parts of the Russian Federation, in order to create a more ethnically pure Russian nation.²⁸

These nuanced positions regarding Muslim and Jewish communities inside Russia also do not square easily with the more racially focused, ethnically based ideas championed by European and American nationalists. Those nativist populists who seek a global alliance of white people against the Chinese and the Muslim world do not find a kindred spirit in Putin. On the contrary, Putin enjoys a close relationship with President Xi, and seeks to expand Russia's influence in the Muslim world, both with Arabs and Persians. And while some in the worldwide Alt-Right movement champion anti-Jewish positions, Putin has been cultivating closer ties with Prime Minister Netanyahu for years.²⁹

Economic Populism

²³ Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation: Elections, Referendums and other forms of direct vote. http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100084849066&vrn=100100084849062®ion=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vibid=100100084849066&type=227

²⁴ Greetings to Jewish community of Russia on Salvation and Liberation Day. Kremlin.ru 05/10/2018 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57446>; and Congratulations on the 5th anniversary of Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre. Kremlin.ru. 11/10/2017 <http://en.kremlin.ru/misc/56042>

²⁵ Vladimir Tor, speech at a protest organized by Yabloko, December 17, 2011, 12/17/2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TouxXMc5RFo>; and <https://ria.ru/20111223/524105613.html>

²⁶ Dmitry Demushkin Speech. YouTube. 02/26/2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJsGZxCU8Xw>; and Nationalists in Lyublino. YouTube. 11/05/2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Em972-XIOUA>

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/05/russias-valiant-hero-in-ukraine-turns-his-fire-on-vladimir-putin>

²⁸ Why Russian nationalists fight against each other in Donbass? MK.ru 07/23/2015 <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2015/07/23/dva-lica-russkogo-nacionalizma-oba-s-travmoy.html>

²⁹ Netanyahu Off to Moscow For 9th Meeting With Putin In Three Years. *Jerusalem Post*, July 11, 2018 <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Netanyahu-off-to-Moscow-for-9th-meeting-with-Putin-in-three-years-562207>

Putin's populist positions on economic issues have also evolved. Early in his tenure as president, Putin enacted many reforms that most would label "neoliberal" or "conservative," but not populist. He signed into a law a flat income tax of thirteen percent, and dramatically reduced the corporate tax. Investors and international financial institutions revered his tough fiscal and monetary policies—the same austerity policies that have sparked populist movements in several European countries. Over time, however, Putin has gravitated toward greater social spending, or at least promises of state transfers, to the poorest Russians. In his last two election campaigns in 2012 and 2018, Putin trumpeted populist economic ideas, even without following through on them. His 2019 address to the Federation Assembly was packed with new pledges for welfare spending.

Regarding Russia's economic woes, Putin does deploy familiar populist slogans in blaming oligarchs and siding with the neglected working class. Like many other populists in Europe, Putin also invokes the goodness of people in the countryside and the corruptness of urban elites. Putin also claims to champion the fight against corruption. Although difficult to measure accurately given the constraining conditions of an autocratic regime, national surveys and social science experiments do suggest that Putin's brand of populism is popular.³⁰

Raging against the ruling elites, however, has limits as a mobilizing strategy for a leader who has been in power for twenty years and has enriched the very oligarchs he claims to despise.³¹ Putin is most vulnerable on the issue of corruption. Russian opposition figure Boris Nemtsov and his allies published several reports exposing the Kremlin's and Putin's corruption – work that some argue prompted Nemtsov's assassination in February 2015. Today, Putin's most successful political opponent – Alexey Navalny – has focused his investigative efforts on exposing corruption within Russia's ruling elite.

To distract attention from domestic corruption and economic inequality, Putin instead internationalizes the populist struggle, blaming the United States first and foremost for Russia's economic woes. Again, it's the American deep state that has enacted draconian sanctions against Russia and pressured others in Europe to follow suit. These powerful shadowy forces within the American government and ruling elite more broadly have thwarted Trump's efforts to lift sanctions. Moreover, as Putin explains it, these Western sanctions against Russia are not punishment for belligerent Russian behavior in Ukraine, Syria, or the United States, but designed consciously to weaken Russia and ultimately foment regime change. Survey data suggest that this demonization of the American deep state as the cause for Russian economic woes worked initially in the wake of economic sanctions first imposed in 2014, but is now fading. Dramatic drops

³⁰ Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter, "Is Putin's Popularity Real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 33 (2017): 1-15; and Samuel Greene and Graeme Robertson, *Putin v. People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

³¹ Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2015).

in Putin's favorability ratings in the first months of 2019, his lowest in a decade, have the Kremlin worried that the "blame America" narrative might have a finite shelf life.³²

Conclusion

Putin can be considered a populist if the corrupt ruling elites are defined as the American deep state—a distinction that separates his brand of populism from the specifics of Russian politics and economy, but does root his views among globally recognizable trends. Moreover, Putin is certainly a leader in the global sovereignty movement. On the ideological cleavage issue, he shares the most commonalities with populists in Europe and the United States. On ethnic nationalist and economic issues, Putinism is not perfectly in synch with other populists in the West. But Putin and his instruments of propaganda carefully craft those ethnic and economic messages that do align with the stances of allies in the West, and carefully retain at home those more complicated messages needed to placate a multi-ethnic society and justify the rule of a single leader for two decades.

II. Instruments for Exporting Putinism

As Putin developed his set of illiberal, conservative ideas for ruling Russia and disrupting the international liberal order, he also created a suite of instruments for propagating his ideology abroad. Today, Putin and his entourage proudly claim that Putinism has appeal beyond Russia's borders. As Putin aide Vladislav Surkov wrote earlier this year, Putinism is "an ideology of the future" ... a "political system created in Russia [which] is suitable not only for the national future, but it has a significant export potential; there is already demand on it and on some of its components; its experience is already being examined and adopted; both people in power and opposition groups in many countries imitate it."³³ To export these ideas, Putin has deployed several strategies.

First, Putin and his government invested heavily in international media. In the Russian-speaking world in those countries to gain independence after the Soviet collapse, the Kremlin devoted massive resources to maintain and extend the reach of Kremlin-controlled television networks, radio, and other media. To propagate Putinism throughout the rest of the world, the Kremlin created the media company Russia Today in 2005, later renamed RT. With an annual budget of over \$300 million,³⁴ RT now broadcasts in six

³² A VTsIOM poll released in January 2019 measured the level of trust in Putin as thirty three percent. The independent Levada Center also captured a major decline in his approval ratings over the last several months. See <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/>.

³³ Surkov, "The Long-lasting State of Putin."

³⁴ "RT's 2016 budget announced, down from 2015, MSM too stumped to spin?", <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/318181-rt-budget-down-msm/>

languages and claims to be the most-watched media company on YouTube with nearly 3 billion views (1.5 billion of which is from its flagship English-language channel).³⁵ In the United States, RT claims to reach 85 million households through cable bundles.³⁶ In 2014, the Kremlin also fused together Voice of Russia Moscow and Ria Novosti to create Sputnik International, a multimedia platform operating around the world to provide “alternative news” to Western sources.³⁷

Second, Putin and his proxies set up organizations, fake identities, and bots to influence public opinion on non-Russian social media platforms around the world, but especially in the West. The aim of these actors is sometimes to advance the ideas of Putinism, but also to exacerbate disputes, disruptions, and polarization within countries considered hostile to Putin. The most notorious of these parastatal entities is the Internet Research Agency (IRA). Created in 2013 by Putin’s close associate, Leonid Prigozhin, the IRA engages in political and electoral interference operations by creating thousands of fake accounts on various social networks and promoting its agenda and interests through these accounts. As documented in Robert Mueller’s indictment of 13 Russians and 3 companies involved in interfering in the 2016 presidential election:

Defendants, posing as U.S. persons and creating false U.S. personas, operated social media pages and groups designed to attract U.S. audiences. These groups and pages, which addressed divisive U.S. political and social issues, falsely claimed to be controlled by U.S. activists when, in fact, they were controlled by Defendants. Defendants also used the stolen identities of real U.S. persons to post on ORGANIZATION-controlled social media accounts. Over time, these social media accounts became Defendants’ means to reach significant numbers of Americans for purposes of interfering with the U.S. political system, including the presidential election of 2016.”³⁸

According to this same indictment, “The ORGANIZATION employed hundreds of individuals for its online operations, ranging from creators of fictitious personas to technical and administrative support. The ORGANIZATION’s annual budget totaled the equivalent of millions of U.S. dollars.”³⁹ The goal of the IRA “troll factory”, according to the indictment, was to sow discord in the U.S. political system, including during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. But the mandate of IRA, as well as similar entities that are less well-known, extends well beyond the United States.⁴⁰

Third, the Kremlin has cultivated direct contacts and ongoing relationships with non-government organizations, political parties, religious groups, and individual

³⁵ <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/318181-rt-budget-down-msm/>

³⁶ <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/318181-rt-budget-down-msm/>

³⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/05/562058208/how-russia-weaponized-social-media-with-social-bots>

³⁸ Indictment, Case 1:18-cr-00032-DLF Document 1 Filed 02/16/18, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

politicians sympathetic to Putinism. Sometimes, these operations of influence focus on engagement, including invitations and scholarships to Russia, the creation of Russia Houses in other countries, and the organization of conferences. More aggressive forms of influence peddling include direct financial contributions to like-minded politicians, be it Yanukovich in Ukraine (before his ouster in 2014), Le Pen in France during her last election, or Salvini in Italy to underwrite the participation of like-minded politicians in the upcoming European elections.⁴¹ Putin personally has invested in nurturing personal relationships with many European sympathizers, including Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Marine Le Pen in France, Brexit champion Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Andrzej Duda in Poland, Andrej Babis in the Czech Republic, and Deputy Prime Minister Salvini in Italy.⁴² The rise of these populist leaders throughout Europe has fostered a perception of a growing, coordinated, populist, nativist, global movement – an illiberal international – with Putin as its spiritual anchor. This perception in turn has helped Putin win new allies in other countries, including the United States.

Fourth and most rarely, Putin has mobilized soldiers – regular conscripts as well as “volunteers” – to export Putinism by force. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and military support for separatists in the Donbass are the most dramatic use of this instrument of ideological transnationalism. Public opinion polling is highly constrained in these occupied territories, but most residents in Crimea do appear to have embraced Putinism; results in the Donbass seem to be more mixed.⁴³

III. Russian intervention in the 2016 US Presidential Election

Years before the 2016 presidential election, Putin already had devoted significant resources to courting ideological allies in the United States, be it through engagement with evangelical religious organizations, the National Rifle Association, or alt-right polemicists. RT and Sputnik also established large operations in the United States and devoted major resources towards increasing their presence on American social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. RT head Margarita Simonyan was particularly proud of how their algorithm experts had managed to move RT content into the top echelons of Google and YouTube searches.

In the run-up to the 2016 presidential vote, however, Putin greenlighted a much more aggressive campaign to influence and disrupt the electoral outcome.⁴⁴ Revenge –

⁴¹ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/an-italian-expose-documents-moscow-money-allegedly-funding-italys-far-right-salvini>

⁴² Franklin Foer, “It’s Putin’s World,” *The Atlantic*, March 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/its-putins-world/513848/?utm_source=atltw

⁴³ Get cites

⁴⁴ Evidence revealing Putin’s direct involvement in green lighting this campaign has not been discovered. It is my assessment of Russian decisionmaking today that such as decision to violate American sovereignty so blatantly could not have been made without Putin’s approval.

not just missionary zeal for his ideology – motivated Putin. He and his allies believed that the United States had been interfering in Russian elections for decades. In February 2018, the Federation Council – the upper house of Russia’s parliament – published a report on “the protection of state sovereignty and prevention of the interference in the internal affairs of the Russian Federation”. The report asserted that the United States had provided funding to Russian civil society organizations, think tanks, NGOs, journalists, and individual activists as a means to divide Russian society and undermine Russian sovereignty from inside.⁴⁵ Putin was most upset with alleged American intervention in Russia’s 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential election. Putin blamed Hillary Clinton personally for sending a signal to demonstrators to come to the streets to protest the falsification uncovered in the December 2012 parliamentary elections.⁴⁶ Putin also seemed to harbor personal animosity towards the former American Secretary of State. As Clinton wrote in her latest memoir, “Our relationship has been sour for a long time.”⁴⁷ And most certainly, Clinton was Putin’s ideological foe: Clinton espoused the exact brand of liberal internationalism that Putin despised. When Clinton emerged as a candidate in the 2012 presidential election, Putin seized the opportunity to try to help defeat her.

In addition, Putin also saw an ideological soulmate in the Republican candidate, Donald Trump. On foreign policy issues, candidate Trump expressed many policy positions that Putin also endorsed. For instance, candidate Trump pledged to look into lifting sanctions and recognizing Crimea as part of the Russian Federation.⁴⁸ Trump campaign representatives tried to change the Republican Party platform to eliminate support for lethal weapons for Ukraine. Candidate Trump frequently criticized the NATO alliance, while never uttering a word about democracy and human rights. Trump also praised Putin personally.⁴⁹ No American leader of national stature had ever spoken so glowingly about Putin or so brazenly supported his agenda. More generally, Trump also attacked many tenets of the liberal international also criticized by Putin. Trump’s embrace of sovereignty – America first – echoed Putin’s themes on the same. Trump also championed many social conservative ideas in the 2016 campaign espoused by Putin. And Trump’s autocratic proclivities also must have appealed to Putin.

Two years after the election, when asked directly if he wanted Trump to win in 2016, Putin said “Yes. I wanted him to win”.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ http://council.gov.ru/structure/commissions/iccf_def/#plans

⁴⁶ McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, chapter thirteen.

⁴⁷ Hillary Clinton, *What Happened*, p. 327.

⁴⁸ Tyler Pager, “Trump to look at recognizing Crimea as Russian territory, lifting sanctions,” *Politico*, July 27, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/trump-crimea-sanctions-russia-226292>

⁴⁹ Jeremy Diamond, “Timeline: Donald Trump's praise for Vladimir Putin”, *CNN*, July 29, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/28/politics/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-quotes/index.html> and Andrew Kaczynski, “80 Times Trump Talked about Putin,” *CNN*, March 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2017/03/politics/trump-putin-russia-timeline/>

⁵⁰ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58017>

Doxing

Putin did more than cheer from the sidelines for his ideological favorite in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The Russian president and his government deployed a multi-pronged strategy, which included intelligence collection, infiltration of critical election infrastructure, covert action, overt and covert information operations, agents of influence, and potentially blackmail as well, all to help Trump. Their most powerful instrument of influence was illegal doxing.

All countries with the capacity to do so gather human intelligence (HUMINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT). Russia is one of those countries. Regarding HUMINT collection, the Kremlin ran an aggressive campaign to build personal relationships with Trump campaign officials. For Moscow, Clinton and her team were considered a known entity. They knew a lot less about Trump, and therefore actively cultivated contacts to learn more about the candidate and his advisors. As a good diplomat should, Russia's Ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak, reached out and succeeded in meeting several key Trump advisors, including future National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, future Attorney General Jeffrey Sessions, and future White House senior advisor Jared Kushner. The Russian ambassador attended candidate Trump's one major address devoted to foreign policy, mingling with VIPs at the event. Kislyak skipped the Democratic National Convention, but attended the Republican National Convention. Other Russian actors with close ties to the Russian government cultivated relationships with Trump campaign advisors George Papadopoulos and Carter Page.

Parallel to these human efforts, the Kremlin also collected data on the American presidential elections by electronic means. Russian intelligence cyber agents APT29 and APT28 – code-named Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear – compromised cybersecurity systems and stole data from both the Republican and Democratic parties.⁵¹ The Kremlin also obtained private information from Clinton's campaign chair, John Podesta, and may have penetrated several email accounts of those working for the Clinton campaign.⁵²

Although unnerving, there is nothing unusual about either human or electronic data collection by the Russian government during the 2016 presidential election. The publication of this stolen data, however, was extraordinary and unprecedented. Most audaciously, Russian military intelligence agents (the GRU) stole data from the Democratic National Committee and John Podesta and then used third-party digital organizations, including WikiLeaks, Guccifer 2.0, and DCLeaks, to publish this information. The American intelligence community discovered that Russian agents also obtained data from the Republican Party, but decided not to publish it.⁵³

⁵¹ Dmitri Alperovich, "Bears in the Midst: Intrusion into the Democratic National Committee," *Crowdstrike*, June 15, 2016, <https://www.crowdstrike.com/blog/bears-midst-intrusion-democratic-national-committee/>

⁵² Raphael Satter, "Russia hackers pursued Putin foes, not just US Democrats," *AP*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/3bca5267d4544508bb523fa0db462cb2>

⁵³ Director of National Intelligence, Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions on Recent US Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution, January 6, 2017. p. ii. https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

Russian intermediaries informed Trump campaign advisor George Papadopoulos about these stolen emails in the spring of 2016.⁵⁴ But to achieve maximum disruptive effect on the Clinton campaign, WikiLeaks timed the publication of these emails and documents to coincide with the start of the Democratic Party's National Convention. The stolen emails, amplified by conservative commentary, generated a narrative of unfair treatment of presidential candidate Bernie Sanders by the DNC. Sanders' supporters were outraged. They booed Hillary during the DNC convention opening ceremony and occasionally even echoed Trump's "lock her up" slogan during their protests.⁵⁵ This scandal – generated entirely by Russian covert intelligence operations – forced DNC chairwoman Debbie Wasserman-Shultz to resign even before opening the party's convention.

In addition to sparking allegations of unfair treatment of Sanders, the publication of these emails fueled the general story of Clinton as corrupt and insincere. Most troubling for the Clinton campaign was the perception fueled by this doxing effort that Clinton said one thing in private and another in public. For instance, a segment of a private speech to a Brazilian bank suggested that Clinton supported "open borders." Trump and conservative commentators seized on this snippet, taken out of context, to portray Clinton as indifferent to the drug dealers and criminals crossing the southern border. More generally, content stolen and published by Russian government actors caused constant negative media coverage of candidate Clinton, crowding out other messaging that the Clinton campaign hoped to advance. These emails even influenced the questions and answers in the presidential debates.⁵⁶

Trump encouraged the WikiLeaks operation, declaring "I love WikiLeaks" while on the campaign trail. He challenged this foreign organization to publish additional private communications from Clinton, and often lamented that the media was not giving enough attention to the information published by Wikileaks.⁵⁷ By one count, Trump mentioned WikiLeaks over 160 times in the last month of the campaign.⁵⁸

Russian Media Campaigns

⁵⁴ Sharon LaFraniere, Mark Mazzetti, and Matt Appuzzo, "How the Russia Inquiry Began: A Campaign Aide, Drinks and Talk of Political Dirt," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/us/politics/how-fbi-russia-investigation-began-george-papadopoulos.html>

⁵⁵ Sabrina Siddiqui, Lauren Gambino and Dan Roberts, "DNC apologizes to Bernie Sanders amid convention chaos in wake of email leak," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/25/debbie-wasserman-schultz-booed-dnc-fbi-email-hack>

⁵⁶ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyber-War: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chapter nine.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁵⁸ <https://thinkprogress.org/trump-mentioned-wikileaks-164-times-in-last-month-of-election-now-claims-it-didnt-impact-one-40aa62ea5002/>

In parallel to publishing stolen data, the Kremlin orchestrated a multi-pronged media campaign within the United States designed to help Trump, hurt Clinton, and foster division within American society more generally.

First, Russian state-controlled media produced pro-Trump and anti-Clinton content targeted at American voters. For YouTube, RT produced several anti-Clinton clips, claiming for instance that the Clinton Foundation paid for Chelsea Clinton's wedding; that Clinton created ISIS; that Clinton and ISIS were funded by the same money; or that 100% of Clinton's charity donations went to the Clinton family.⁵⁹ Sputnik also produced anti-Clinton, pro-Trump content, and then circulated these messages on multiple platforms, including Facebook and Twitter. When tweeting out #CrookedHillary, Sputnik made clear Kremlin preferences.

Russian-operated Twitter and Facebook accounts then amplified the anti-Clinton, pro-Trump messaging. On Twitter, automated accounts, or bots, aided the cause.⁶⁰ Some Russian microbloggers even posed as politically engaged Americans, news outlets, and members of activist organizations. Having been mentioned by many news outlets, these sources gathered more than half a million followers.⁶¹ On Twitter, Russian bots retweeted Trump more than 470,000 times during the final months of the campaign, while Russian-linked accounts constantly retweeted WikiLeaks' tweets during the same time period.⁶²

Russian actors on social media also sought to fuel polarization and division within American society more generally. Russians used Facebook to organize protests in the United States, and succeeded in getting tens of thousands of Americans to RSVP for their political events on Facebook and then show up in person.⁶³ Some analysts have taken comfort in arguing that Russian efforts to sow division represent a different, more benign objective than backing Trump. But increased social division helps the disrupter and undermines the incumbent. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson has concluded, "Not only are fomenting discord and defeating Clinton compatible activities, but one facilitates the other."⁶⁴

Providing Kompromat

⁵⁹ See "What does it take to bring Hillary Clinton to justice?" *RT*, November 3, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/365204-clinton-us-investigation-justice/>; Hillary Clinton, "What Happened," p. 359.

⁶⁰ Scott Shane, "To Sway Vote, Russia Used Army of Fake Americans," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2017, p. 1; and Clint Watts, "Disinformation: A Primer In Russian Active Measures And Influence Campaigns," *Statement Prepared for the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/os-cwatts-033017.pdf>

⁶¹ Gerrit de Vynck, Selina Wang, "Twitter Says Russian Bots Retweeted Trump 470,000 Times," *Bloomberg Politics*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-26/twitter-says-russian-linked-bots-retweeted-trump-470-000-times>

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ <http://thehill.com/policy/technology/358025-thousands-attended-protest-organized-by-russians-on-facebook>

⁶⁴ Jamieson, *Cyber-War*, p. 86

In addition to publishing stolen data and implementing an extensive media campaign to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, the Russian government and its surrogates also reached out directly to the Trump campaign to offer assistance. On June 9, 2016, Donald Trump Jr., together with campaign chairman Paul Manafort and senior campaign advisor Jared Kushner, met in Trump Tower with a visiting Russian delegation, headed by the Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya. Robert Goldstone, the British publicist who set up the meeting, suggested in an email to Donald Trump Jr. that Veselnitskaya was bringing compromising information on Clinton and her campaign as part of the Russian government effort to assist Trump's election.⁶⁵ In response, Donald Trump Jr. wrote back, "If it's what you say, I love it." Before traveling to New York, Veselnitskaya coordinated her talking points with Russia's Prosecutor general, Yuri Chaika, a close associate of President Putin. What actually was discussed and exchanged in this meeting remains unknown, but the Russian delegation seemed to have wanted to swap compromising materials on Clinton in return for a pledge from Trump to lift sanctions on Russia if he were elected.⁶⁶

One day after this meeting, candidate Trump teased that he planned to give a major speech that would reveal very damaging information about Hillary Clinton and the Clinton Foundation. He never gave the speech.

Russian officials held numerous meetings with senior Trump advisors throughout the campaign and during the transition.⁶⁷ By one count, Russians met with twelve Trump campaign officials and associates during the campaign and transition, held nineteen in-person meetings, and had over fifty communications altogether.⁶⁸ Assessing the extent of collaboration, cooperation, collusion, or conspiracy between the Trump campaign and the Russian government will have to await the publication of the Mueller report. That Putin and his government was prepared to use all means necessary to help Trump win, however, seems clear.

Financial Incentives

Rather than consensual collaboration between the Trump campaign and the Russian government, some have suggested a much more coercive relationship between the two parties. One hypothesis posits that several Trump campaign officials were indebted to the Kremlin and therefore were eager for Trump to speak positively about

⁶⁵ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/us/politics/donald-trump-jr-russia-email-candidacy.html?_r=0

⁶⁶ For more information, see Natasha Bertrand "New memo suggests Russian lawyer at Trump Tower meeting was acting 'as an agent' of the Kremlin," *Business Insider*, October 16, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/veselnitskaya-memo-trump-tower-russia-meeting-2017-10> and Eli Watkins, "Russian lawyer: Trump Jr. suggested review of sanctions law in Trump Tower meeting," *CNN*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/06/politics/natalia-veselnitskaya-donald-trump-jr-russia/index.html>

⁶⁷ For details, see Seth Abramson, *Proof of Collusion: How Trump Betrayed America* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2018) especially chapter seven.

⁶⁸ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/21/politics/trump-russia-by-the-numbers/index.html>

Putin during the campaign and then pursue pro-Russian policies after reelection.⁶⁹ Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort had long-standing ties to several Russian businessmen closely tied to the Kremlin. General Michael Flynn, Trump's main foreign policy advisor during the campaign and first National Security Advisor, also had business relationships with Russian entities tied to the Kremlin. Trump's son-in-law and White House senior advisor, Jared Kushner, met with the head of VEB, one of the three biggest state-owned banks in Russia, during the transition, for reasons that still remain mysterious.⁷⁰ Most notoriously, the Trump Organization continued during the campaign to negotiate with Russian officials to build a Trump Tower in Moscow. Trump therefore may have had financial incentives to praise Putin and later lift sanctions.

Hacking the Electoral Infrastructure

Most audaciously, Russian cyber agents closely tied to the Russian government probed the infrastructure used to conduct the U.S. presidential election. In June 2017, Samuel Liles, DHS' acting director of the Office of Intelligence and Analysis Cyber Division, testified to the Senate intelligence committee that "Internet-connected election-related networks, including websites, in 21 states were potentially targeted by Russian government cyber actors."⁷¹ He also testified, however, that there was no evidence of any vote tally manipulation. Although they had the capabilities, Putin and his agents decided not to try to disrupt the voting process on Election Day. That they had these capabilities, and most likely still do, gives them the opportunity to challenge the validity of future elections, especially in 2020. Even the smallest alteration of vote tabulations will undermine American confidence in the outcome.

Measuring the Impact of the Russian Intervention

Multiple factors contributed to Trump's victory.⁷² In the vast sea of variables determining voter preferences, precisely measuring the independent causal influence of

⁶⁹ Craig Unger, "Trump's Russian Laundromat," *New Republic*, July 13, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/143586/trumps-russian-laundromat-trump-tower-luxury-high-rises-dirty-money-international-crime-syndicate>. See also Malcolm Nance, *The Plot to Hack America*, (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016), chapter four.

⁷⁰ See Matthew Rosenberg, Mark Mazzetti, and Maggie Haberman, "Investigation Turns to Kushner's Motives in Meeting With a Putin Ally," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/29/us/politics/jared-kushner-russia-investigation.html>; and Rosalind Helderman, Carol Leonnig and Tom Hamburger, "Top Trump Organization executive asked Putin aide for help on business deal," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/top-trump-organization-executive-reached-out-to-putin-aide-for-help-on-business-deal/2017/08/28/095aebac-8c16-11e7-84c0-02cc069f2c37_story.html?utm_term=.cf491edf7346

⁷¹ <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2017/06/21/written-testimony-ia-cyber-division-acting-director-dr-samuel-liles-and-nppd-acting>

⁷² For an assessment, see chapters ten and eleven of Morris Fiorina, *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting & Political Stalemate* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2017).

Russia's efforts during the 2016 presidential election is impossible.⁷³ Several Russian actions, after all, amplified the campaign activities of the Trump team and his surrogates, making the task of isolating a Russian causal role even harder. In the margins, however, Russia most likely influenced a marginal number of voter preferences. And this election was won in the margins – 78,000 votes in only three states: Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Some correlations seem probative. Putin made his biggest impact on the 2016 campaign by stealing and then publishing DNC and Podesta emails, an operation that sparked a major rift between Sanders and Clinton supporters. In postelection surveys, twelve percent of Sanders's supporters in the Democratic primaries reported that they voted for Trump in the general election.⁷⁴ Large chunks of Sanders' supporters also stayed home. Approval ratings of Clinton as a qualified candidate decreased significantly after the WikiLeaks publication of Podesta emails in October 2016.⁷⁵ Russian disinformation operations also sought to suppress voter turnout.⁷⁶ In some swing states, especially among the African-American population, turnout among Democratic voters was significantly lower in 2016 (59.6%) than 2012 (66.2%). Obviously, Obama not being on the ballot was the major driver of these declining numbers, but other campaigns of voter suppression and deception must have played some role as well. Russian efforts also promoted third-party candidates.⁷⁷ Votes cast for third-party candidates were significantly higher in 2016 than in 2012, including in several swing states.⁷⁸ Green Party candidate Jill Stein won 31,072 votes in Wisconsin (four times as many votes as she garnered in 2012), ten thousand more votes than Clinton lost to Trump (22,748) in that state. Michigan was the same – Stein won 51,463 votes; Clinton lost to Trump by 10,704. In Pennsylvania, Stein won 49,463 votes; Clinton trailed Trump there by 44,292. Again, it is impossible to say for certain that Russian actions played a tipping role in any of these outcomes. But to suggest that Russian interventions played no role seems implausible.

IV. Putin's Gains and Losses after the 2016 Election

⁷³ For a most careful treatment of this difficult social science question, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyber-War: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁷⁴ Cooperative Congressional Election Study, as quoted in Danielle Kurtzleben, "Here's How Many Bernie Sanders Supporters Ultimately Voted for Trump," August 24, 2017, NPR.org, http://www.npr.org/2017/08/24/545812242/1-in-10-sanders-primary-voters-ended-up-supporting-trump-survey-finds?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=politics&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=20170824.

⁷⁵ Jamieson, *Cyber-War*, appendix one.

⁷⁶ "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," *Computational Propaganda Research Project*, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/ira-political-polarization/>

⁷⁷ "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," *New Knowledge*, <https://www.newknowledge.com/disinfoport>

⁷⁸ Mirren Gidda, "Third Party Votes Could Have Cost Hillary Clinton the Presidency," *Newsweek*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/susan-sarandon-third-party-candidates-jill-stein-gary-johnson-hillary-clinton-519032>.

Since becoming president, Trump has disappointed Putin on many foreign policy issues. Rather than disrupt the confrontational trajectory of US policy towards Russia started by the Obama administration in 2014, the Trump team has maintained many of the main tenants of the previous policy. Trump has not withdrawn the United States from NATO (yet). Instead, the Trump administration continued to strengthen NATO, including deployments of NATO soldiers closer to the Russian border. Trump did not end support for Kyiv or recognize Crimea as a part of Russia. Instead, the Trump administration continued to provide political, economic, and military assistance to Ukraine, and went even one step beyond the Obama administration by providing lethal assistance to the Ukrainian military. Trump did not lift sanctions on Russian companies and individuals. Instead, the Trump administration has maintained Obama-era sanctions and then implemented new sanctions, in compliance with the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). The Trump administration also has reduced by several hundred the number of Russian diplomats serving in the United States, and closed two consulates.⁷⁹ Before his departure, Secretary of Defense James Mattis also called out new Russian efforts in 2018 to interfere in congressional elections, asserting that Putin “tried again to muck around in our elections this last month [November 2018], and we are seeing a continued effort along those lines.”⁸⁰

Trump himself, however, has continued to defend and praise Putin. The American president continues to deny Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. He repeatedly claimed that the story of Russian interference was a hoax, which, as he tweeted, was invented by the Democrats to come up with “a story as to why they lost the election, and so badly (306), so they made up a story—RUSSIA. Fake news!”⁸¹ When standing next to Putin at their press conference after the Helsinki summit in July 2017, Trump shockingly asserted that he disagreed with his own intelligence community’s assessment of Russian interference in the 2016 election. Trump’s loyalty to Putin is why Putin and his associates continue to distinguish between Trump and the American “deep state” when criticizing American foreign policy. It appears that Putin still holds out some hope that Trump might someday obtain more independence from the foreign policy elite holding him back and pursue closer collaboration with the Kremlin.

Yet, even without a breakthrough on sanctions relief or recognition of Crimea as part of Russia, the first years of the Trump presidency did serve Putin’s interests and indirectly the advance of Putinism globally. Most importantly, America’s image as a democracy has been damaged. Trump’s incessant labeling of the media as “enemies of the state” have confirmed Putin’s claims about American media. Trump’s disrespect for

⁷⁹ “U.S. Expels 60 Russian Officials, Closes Consulate In Seattle,” *NPR*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/26/596966272/us-expels-dozens-of-russian-diplomats-closes-consulate-in-seattle>

⁸⁰ Connor O’Brien, “Mattis: Putin a 'slow learner' who tried to 'muck around' in midterms,” *Politico*, December 1, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/01/mattis-putin-midterms-russia-1037145>

⁸¹ Donald J. Trump on Twitter: “The Democrats had to come up with a story as to why they lost the election, and so badly (306), so they made up a story - RUSSIA. Fake news!” *Twitter*, February 16, 2017, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/832238070460186625?lang=en>

the rule of law and obsession with a “deep state” have underscored the Russian government’s themes about the façade of American democracy that has been championed on Russian state-controlled media outlets for years. Few abroad, including Russian democratic activists or government officials, are inspired by American democracy today. Some American commentators even expressed worries that the United States was becoming an autocratic regime. This shift in perceptions has created more permissive conditions internationally for Putinism to expand.

American leadership in the world also has diminished in the first two years of the Trump era. This also serves Putin’s interests. Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris Climate Accords (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), the nuclear agreement with Iran (the JCPOA) and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) has undercut America’s global stature, and therefore expanded Putin’s influence. Trump’s clashes with allies in Europe and Asia has provided Putin with new opportunities for developing closer bilateral ties with Putin-leaning governments, especially in Hungary, Italy, and Greece. Trump’s embrace of autocrats and silence on democracy and human rights has further diminished the United States as the leader of the free world—yet another international trend that creates greater opportunities for Putin. Globally, trust in the American president has declined dramatically, on average by three times, between the last year of the Obama administration and Trump’s first year in office.⁸² Among twenty-five nations surveyed by Pew Research Center, an average of 27% of respondents trust in Trump’s handling of international affairs, while 70% do not have confidence in him.⁸³ In the same survey, confidence in Putin is also low, but higher than in Trump. A repeat of this poll two years later showed that citizens in France and Germany trust Putin significantly more than Trump to do the right thing in international affairs.⁸⁴

Even in the United States, Putin’s reputation as a respected leader improved within some segments of the population in the last two years. Within the Republican Party, support for Putin has increased significantly since Trump’s election.⁸⁵ Conservative commentators who once berated Obama for being too soft on Russia now admire Putin. Alt-Right conservative thinkers increasingly have embraced Putin as an ally to their movement. A majority of Americans have grown more suspicious of Putin, his ideas, and his actions since Russia’s meddling in the 2016 presidential election and other Russian belligerent actions. The U.S. Congress has locked in sanctions, probably for a long time, while also proposing new bills to punish Putin even further. Mueller’s investigation has exposed many new revelations about Russian violations of American sovereignty in 2016. But which of these two sides – the growing minority in support of Putinism or the majority against Putin – will win out in the long run remains to be seen. The results of the

⁸² Margaret Vice, “Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia,” Pew Research Center, August 16, 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/16/publics-worldwide-unfavorable-toward-putin-russia/>.

⁸³ Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver, , Janell Fetterolf, and Kat Devlin, “Faith in the U.S. president remains low,” *Pew Research Center*, October 1, 2018, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/10/01/2-faith-in-the-u-s-president-remains-low/>

⁸⁴ [file:///Users/michaelmcfaul/Downloads/MunichSecurityReport2019%20\(2\).pdf](file:///Users/michaelmcfaul/Downloads/MunichSecurityReport2019%20(2).pdf)

⁸⁵ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/poll-republican-favorability-of-putin-spiked-after-election>

2020 U.S. presidential election will play a most pivotal role.