

## The Two-Sided Sword of Russian Propaganda

Global Populisms Conference

March 1-2, 2019

Julia Davis, M.S.

Russian Media Monitor, Featured Expert with the Atlantic Council's Disinformation Portal

Russia is wielding a robust panoply of weapons in its hybrid war against the West, targeting democratic ideals and propagating populist, illiberal points of view. The Kremlin is most interested in promoting populist parties and agendas in the West, in hopes they will boost the spread of nativist ideology, focusing inward and abandoning democratic values. At the same time, Putin's Russia is looking outward, seeking to regain control over the post-Soviet space, while using economic incentives and business interests to exercise the undue influence over much of Europe. Western democracies present a challenge to Putin's regime, since they oppose the Kremlin's revanchist expansion, counteract its corruption and challenge the diminishing personal liberties in Russian society. Therefore, undermining Western values and disrupting democratic processes remain high on the list of the Kremlin's most pressing priorities.

The bifurcation of the Russian state-controlled media is quite telling in terms of its intent and designed impact. English-speaking media (RT, Sputnik) operates as the weapon of external information warfare against the West, while domestic coverage is designed to convince the local population that such conflict is in Russia's national interests and is entirely unavoidable. At the intersection between the two paradigms lies the path to understanding the Kremlin's domestic and foreign objectives.

Russian politicians, government officials, the heads of state-controlled media organizations and influential experts openly admit that RT (formerly known as "Russia Today") was created for the purpose of engaging in information warfare against the West. RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan, acknowledged the same during her interviews in the Russian media, describing the outlet as an unofficial, "soft power" branch of the Russian Defense Ministry, waging info-wars against Western democracies<sup>1</sup>.

Appearing on Russian state media television program "60 Minutes," Andrei Kokoshin, former State Secretary, former First Deputy Defense Minister of the Russian Federation (RF), former Secretary of the RF Security Council, former Secretary of the RF Defense Council, said that RT plays a part in Russia's info-wars, penetrating the wall of Western defensive measures<sup>2</sup>.

During her appearance on Russian state media television program "60 Minutes," Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova asserted that Washington, DC and the U.S. establishment realize they can't keep up with – much less to combat – "info-victories" by the Russian state media.<sup>3</sup>

Vladislav Surkov, a former First Deputy Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration and Putin's current Ukraine adviser, boasted: "Foreign politicians ascribe to Russia interference in elections and referendums across the globe. In fact, the matter is even more serious - Russia interferes in their brains, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness<sup>4</sup>."

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandr Gabuyev, "There is no such thing as objectivity" – interview with RT's Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan, "Kommersant" newspaper, April 7, 2012, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1911336>.

<sup>2</sup> Russian state TV show "60 Minutes," April 19, 2018 – "Sanction wars: who is winning and who is losing?" <https://youtu.be/qnp7qbyj4HQ?t=337>.

<sup>3</sup> Russian state TV show "60 Minutes," November 9, 2017 – "The U.S. will spend \$5 billion to contain Russia," <https://youtu.be/isWtSPVEw3M?t=732>.

<sup>4</sup> Vladislav Surkov, February 2, 2019 – "Vladislav Surkov: Putin's Long State," [http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5\\_7503\\_surkov.html](http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html)

RT's coverage is designed to malign and undermine democratic societies, with special focus on discrediting the United States. RT's coverage routinely includes protests, anti-government grievances and claims of undemocratic election processes in the United States and other Western countries (similar issues pertaining to Russia itself are a taboo for the Russian state media).

RT also airs reports aimed at stoking international fears against the United States—for example, claiming that the U.S. may be responsible for the international outbreaks of Ebola<sup>5</sup>.

During live broadcast of the Russian state media television program “60 Minutes,” Margarita Simonyan was twice asked to provide at least one example of RT positively covering any event taking place in the United States. RT's editor-in-chief was visibly stumped and couldn't come up with even one such instance.<sup>6</sup>

RT's mission abroad is to foment discontent and disappointment with Western democracies, to sow doubt in democratic processes and to discredit the free press, leading the audiences to believe that the truth is being concealed and can be found only via the Russian state media outlets, such as RT and Sputnik. Meanwhile, domestic audiences are being openly told that Russia is in the midst of an undeclared war with the West – the Cold War 2.0 – a war with no rules<sup>7</sup>, including an ongoing confrontation in the sphere of media and information. Any negative disclosures about Russia and its government, reported by the Western media or Russia's own opposition politicians, are immediately discounted as a part of the information offensive<sup>8</sup>. Debunking of disinformation disseminated by the Russian state media is immediately excused as a part of a weaponized info-war, where anything goes. The Russians are brainwashed to deny and outright dismiss the evidence of the Kremlin's wrongdoings, from Skripal poisonings to the downed Malaysia jet, Russia's armed intervention in Ukraine or its interference in the U.S. elections. Regardless of how convincing the evidence might be, admitting Russia's complicity would be tantamount to taking the wrong side in an ongoing war against the Motherland.

As a kleptocracy lacking conventional means of international power and influence, Putin's Russia is increasingly reliant upon hybrid warfare operations to undermine its opponents. These nonlinear methods include elaborate influence operations, designed to manipulate public opinion, sow chaos and undermine the trust in democratic institutions. This ability was highly coveted by the Soviet Union, but for various reasons could not be achieved during the Cold War. Modern Russia developed a disinformation toolkit, allowing hostile actors to blend in with legitimate news sources and opinion-makers.

The Russian Academy of Military Sciences held its annual defense conference on March 2, 2019. The keynote address was given by the chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, who reported on the main developments in military strategy and the tasks facing the Russian military<sup>9</sup>. General Gerasimov said: “Information technologies are becoming one of the most promising types of weapons. The information sphere, without having clearly defined national borders, provides opportunities for remote, covert influence not only on critical information infrastructures, but also on the population of the country, directly affecting the state's national security. That is why the study of issues of preparation and conduct of informational actions is the most important task of military science... Information technologies are becoming one of the most promising types of weapons... That is why the study of issues of preparation and conduct of informational actions is the most important task of military science.”

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<sup>5</sup> RT, August 7, 2014 – “Is the U.S. Biological Research Center in Fort Detrick behind the Ebola outbreak?”

<https://actualidad.rt.com/opinion/karen-mendez/view/136298-centro-investigacion-biologica-eeuu-fort-detrick-brote-ebola>.

<sup>6</sup> Russian state TV show “60 Minutes,” November 9, 2017 – “The U.S. will spend \$5 billion to contain Russia,”

<https://youtu.be/isWtSPVEw3M?t=2539>.

<sup>7</sup> Russian state TV show “Evening with Vladimir Soloviev,” February 3, 2019, <https://youtu.be/6keiysR8Q3A?t=1891>

<sup>8</sup> Russian state TV show “Evening with Vladimir Soloviev,” December 19, 2018, <https://youtu.be/yG9J99z4Ges?t=10881>

<sup>9</sup> “Krasnaya Zvezda” newspaper, March 4, 2019 – “Vectors of military strategy development,” <http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/#content>.

In light of this approach to hybrid warfare, it should come as no surprise that General Gerasimov attends high-level military meetings alongside none other than Yevgeny Prigozhin<sup>10</sup>, a close associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Prigozhin's company, Concord Management, was indicted in February 2017 along with other Russian organizations and individuals who facilitated the Russian social media trolling in the 2016 election<sup>11</sup>.

The openness and the free press of the democratic societies is being used for nefarious purposes and the challenge includes combating this threat without sacrificing democratic values in the process. Part of the quest for the democratic societies consists of educating the most vulnerable elements of the population about the dangers posed by the Kremlin's propaganda. There is no perfect formula that would make a society invincible to disinformation and malign influence, but one surefire way of inoculating the population is through media literacy and general education. The Kremlin's most potent weapons are not trolls and bots, but real people who end up disseminating Russian agitprop – either wittingly or unwittingly. Organic traffic, polluted and amplified by trolls and bots, produces a mixed bag of propaganda that is more difficult to detect and counteract.

RT's Editor-in-Chief, Margarita Simonyan, summed up the outlet's strategy by stating that RT is striving to reach everyday people who can sway public opinion – including major influencers, like Pink Floyd's Roger Waters.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of propaganda can be greatly diminished, when its source and motivation are publicly unmasked. According to a new analysis, published in January of 2019 by researchers at New York and Princeton Universities<sup>13</sup>, older Americans are disproportionately more likely to share fake news.

The same study revealed that conservative users were more likely to share disinformation than those who identified as liberal: 18 percent of Republicans shared links to fake news sites, compared to less than 4 percent of Democrats. A successful approach to this issue would include not only media exposure targeting these groups, but also multi-generational efforts on a personal level. Informational echo-chambers don't exist in a vacuum. They can and should be penetrated by delivering factual information in a non-partisan way, both in the media and via the interpersonal exchanges.

The efforts to deprogram unwitting “useful idiots” should include digital media literacy, media exposure that methodically exposes and explains the Kremlin's motives and *modus operandi*, and the efforts of everyday citizens, striving to educate and inform their friends, acquaintances and relatives. Western societies are in the crosshairs of Russian disinformation efforts and the society-wide response is key to defeating the Kremlin's agenda. Methods of counteracting Russian disinformation used in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe<sup>14</sup> should be studied and adopted in the West. Continuous identification of websites and sources that spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion should be implemented as part of a systemic effort to identify deceptive, bad-faith actors on a global stage.

It should be noted that Trump voters and supporters are defiantly resistant to recognizing the impact of Russian influence operations. They reject outright any information that appears to question the legitimacy of the most recent presidential election, taking such implications very personally.

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<sup>10</sup> Julia Davis, Russian Media Monitor, November 10, 2018 –Yevgeny Prigozhin attends a meeting alongside Russia's top military officials, Sergei Shoigu and General Valery Gerasimov, <https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1061271612211847175>, Novaya Gazeta, November 9, 2018 – “Something's cooking in this kitchen,” <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/11/09/78517-na-etoy-kuhne-cto-to-gotovitsya>

<sup>11</sup> United States of America vs. Internet Research Agency et al. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1035562/download>

<sup>12</sup> Russian state TV show “60 Minutes,” April 19, 2018 – “Sanction wars: who is winning and who is losing?” <https://youtu.be/qnp7qbyj4HQ?t=494>.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler and Joshua Tucker, January 9, 2019 – “Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook” <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/1/eaau4586>

<sup>14</sup> Terry Thompson, “Salon,” January 12, 2019 – “Countering Russian disinformation the Baltic nations' way” [https://www.salon.com/2019/01/12/countering-russian-disinformation-the-baltic-nations-way\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2019/01/12/countering-russian-disinformation-the-baltic-nations-way_partner/)

Attempts to convince them are tantamount to telling proud parents that their child is ugly. Instead, these efforts should be presented outside of the context of any particular presidencies or politicians. The focus should be on educating the public as to the Kremlin's agenda to undermine the United States and to rewrite the rules by creating the new world order, with Russia in the lead. The larger perspective is bound to be more successful in promoting society-wide resistance to Russia's disinformation toolkit.

Too often, the poisoned well of Putin's propaganda networks is seen as a vital source of news and information. Those who choose to ingest and disseminate the said agitprop do so, because they are convinced that the Kremlin's point of view is in perfect alignment with their own system of beliefs. That is, of course, a dangerous misapprehension that is exacerbated by lack of knowledge about Russia and history in general.

Putin's bullhorns often promote contradictory points of view, designed to cause or widen the societal divisions. These contradictions should be methodically exposed in order to minimize the impact of the Kremlin's propaganda. Statements routinely made by government officials, politicians, pundits and experts for internal consumption in the Russian state media are extremely revealing as to the real intentions of Putin's regime. Russian power brokers and opinion-makers openly pine for civil war and another Great Depression in the West, while ridiculing Western politicians and describing Americans as gullible, stupid and uneducated. Real and perceived vulnerabilities are being used to inflict tangible damage.

Using the façade of legitimate news-reporting, the Kremlin's state-controlled mouthpieces claim that the U.S. is spreading Ebola and AIDS throughout the world, testing dangerous drugs and bio-weapons on unwitting civilians and endangering children through vaccination<sup>15</sup>.

The impact of these efforts is bearing poisoned fruit in a developing global health crisis. Scientific researchers are now gauging the impact that Russian disinformation campaigns have had on the spread of diseases by distributing medical misinformation that raised public doubts about vaccinations<sup>16</sup>.

Exposing the Kremlin's hypocrisy and revealing its ulterior motives is vital to converting willing consumers and disseminators of Russian disinformation and propaganda.

For example, in playing to the religious elements of society, Kremlin's trolls and propagandists portray Putin as the defender of Christianity and the protector of traditional values. The Russian state's recognition of the political influence of religion was demonstrated by the "Jesus vs. Satan" imagery used by the IRA troll factory to meddle in U.S. presidential elections of 2016. The media and public education professionals should devote concerted efforts to clarifying that the Kremlin promotes and supports certain religious organizations only insofar as their beliefs are considered beneficial to Putin's authoritarian rule.

The Orthodox church has flourished under Vladimir Putin, because it operates in perfect alignment with his regime and promotes total, unquestionable submission to the state. The Kremlin has relied on the Orthodox Church as the key promoter of the concept of a "Russian world" that supposedly stretches far beyond Russia's current borders. The influence of the Orthodox church on the Russian population is enormous. Polls reflect that approximately seventy-one percent of Russians consider themselves Christian Orthodox.

Christian values notwithstanding, the Kremlin doesn't frown upon witchcraft, provided the spells are spoken in favor of Putin. A gathering of witches on February 5, 2019 received positive coverage by the Russian state media and wasn't disrupted by the authorities. RT reported that the coven "used their magic powers to instill new strength in Russia and help Putin cope with international problems."

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<sup>15</sup> RT, September 16, 2018 – Deadly experiments: Georgian ex-minister claims US-funded facility may be bioweapons lab, <https://www.rt.com/news/438543-georgia-us-laboratory-bio-weapons/>

<sup>16</sup> American Journal of Public Health, May 22, 2018 – "Weaponized Health Communication: Twitter Bots and Russian Trolls Amplify the Vaccine Debate," <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2018.304567>.

Just one day later, on February 6, 2019, a Danish Jehovah's Witness was sentenced to six years in a Russian prison for organizing prayer meetings and Bible studies. Russian authorities have been targeting minority religions with suspected pro-Western leanings as "extremists." Escalating persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, declared "an extremist organization" in 2017, demonstrates the Russian government's perception of any independent religious organizations as a potential threat to Putin's regime. Religious beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses require them to abstain from any political activity or military service. In Putin's Russia, placing God above the government is considered a dangerous demonstration of independence. Any allegiances outside of the Russian government are considered a threat to Putin's personal power.

The real religion in Putin's Russia is "Putinism" – the absolute trust of everyday citizens in their supreme leader – a term used by Vladislav Surkov in his recent manifesto<sup>17</sup>. Surkov, a former First Deputy Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration and Putin's current Ukraine adviser, boasted about the absolute trust between Putin and the Russian people, as opposed to the ability to criticize and question the authorities, common in Western democracies.

Meant as a self-fulfilling mantra, Surkov's writings lay bare the Kremlin's fears, as the trust in Putin and his government is rapidly fraying.

Surveys conducted in 2019 show that for the first time since 2006, more Russians believe that "Putin's state" is on the wrong course rather than the right one<sup>18</sup>. The unspoken deal of renewed "greatness" on the international stage, in exchange for temporary hardships on the home front, is wearing thin on the Russians. In January of 2019, a state pollster reported that the public's trust in Putin had fallen to its lowest level in 13 years amid dismay over the rising cost of living, declining incomes and a deeply unpopular government move to raise the retirement age<sup>19</sup>.

In 2014, state media propagandists laughed at Western sanctions and claimed they were beneficial for the Russian economy. The Kremlin-controlled state media routinely boasted of the Russian president's control over the White House, repeatedly claiming that the sanctions would soon be lifted. Five years later, the Russian economy is reporting noticeable losses and propagandists are forced to admit that the sanctions are here to stay. By late 2018, sanctions cost Russia \$6.3 billion. The Russian state media is no longer scoffing at the sanctions, admitting that they are causing tangible damage.

Polls reveal that the Russians don't trust the State Duma, bureaucracy, local governments or the Prime Minister of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev. The stability of the entire system rests upon the concept of "a good Tsar and bad Boyars." Detrimental effects of Putin's belligerent foreign policy are eroding the perception of him as the masterful tactician or an omnipotent politician on the world stage, since the Kremlin's miscalculations are causing significant losses for the average Russian.

Russian propaganda tactics can be held up as a mirror, revealing not only the Kremlin's tools of power, but also its weaknesses and trepidations. The sword of Russian propaganda cuts both ways. While the Kremlin managed to cause some damage to the trust in Western democratic institutions and did its best to erode the transatlantic unity, it severely undermined Russia's standing in the world, as well as its economic and political potential. The chickens are coming home to roost. A growing sentiment of hopelessness, political repressions, diminishing freedoms and a weakening economy are causing a massive "brain drain."

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<sup>17</sup> Vladislav Surkov, February 2, 2019 – "Vladislav Surkov: Putin's Long State," [http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5\\_7503\\_surkov.html](http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html)

<sup>18</sup> Levada-Center poll, February 20, 2019, <http://fedpress.ru/news/77/policy/2194778>

<sup>19</sup> RFERL, February 1, 2019 – "Poll: Growing Number Of Russians Believe Country 'On The Wrong Course'" <https://www.rferl.org/a/poll-growing-number-of-russians-believe-country-on-the-wrong-course-/29746044.html>

Some of the most educated and talented Russians are fleeing Russia, contributing to the already serious demographic decline. Since President Vladimir Putin's ascent to the presidency, between 1.6 and 2 million Russians have left Russia for Western democracies<sup>20</sup>.

Putin's annual address to parliament revealed that the Kremlin is re-evaluating its priorities, heavily concentrating on internal issues. The Russian President promised Russians better living conditions "within this year" and offered various measures designed to help Russian families. The same principles have been recently applied to the state-sponsored news shows, with mandatory focus on domestic affairs. While attempting to sweeten the pot domestically, the Kremlin continues to stir the pot abroad. The upcoming 2020 elections are already facing the barrage of foreign influence operations.

Fearing reciprocal efforts that would further undermine his already faltering popularity, Putin is pushing the idea of a "sovereign Internet" — and the possibility of cutting Russia off from global networks. The legislation was described as a measure designed to defend Russia from outside cyberattacks, but in reality it is meant to give Russian authorities an enhanced ability to intercept communications and to seize complete control of the Internet in case of political unrest or an uprising.

In order to consolidate society, the Kremlin-controlled state media is promoting a baseless assertion that Russia is facing the possibility of a nuclear attack by the West and its sovereignty can be defended only through nuclear deterrence. Russian politicians, government officials and pundits cite North Korea as a great example of standing up to the United States by threatening nuclear strikes to ward off any attempts of a regime change.

The narrative of Russia as a "besieged fortress" attempts to justify the Kremlin's investments in other regimes hostile to the United States and its allies. While over three thousand Russian schools don't have indoor bathrooms<sup>21</sup> and millions of citizens live without hot water, heating or plumbing, the Russian state media dutifully defends the country's loans and "investments" into Venezuela, Syria, Vietnam and Cuba, along with ongoing, costly intervention in neighboring Ukraine. The justification for the continued outflow of funds is the alleged need to establish Russian military bases "within spitting distance" of the United States<sup>22</sup>.

Contrary to statements in the Russian state media, the United States is not threatening Russia with nuclear strikes and such allegations are nothing more than fear tactics, designed to unite the population in the face of an alleged external threat. Putin's regime continues to place its self-preservation above the interests of the Russian people. Malign influence, toxic propaganda and hybrid warfare is being perpetrated by the Kremlin not only against other sovereign nations, but also against its own people. These activities serve to ensure the preservation and expansion of Putin's authoritarian kleptocracy at the expense of undermining democratic societies, while intentionally misleading average Russian citizens to think they are facing the threat of nuclear extermination by the West.

In August of 2018, a number of pro-Kremlin talking heads voiced a series of proposals Russia should implement in retaliation for the U.S. sanctions, such as "start arresting Americans," shut down American businesses operating in Russia, form an anti-American front with the enemies of the United States, steal Western technologies and confiscate funds from Russia's *nouveaux riche* to compensate for the losses caused by the sanctions<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Atlantic Council, Eurasia Center – The Putin Exodus: "The New Russian Brain Drain," <http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/putin-exodus/>

<sup>21</sup> Radio Svoboda, January 6, 2019 – "It couldn't be any worse: Three thousand Russian schools don't have heated [indoor] toilets," <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29675365.html>

<sup>22</sup> Russian state TV show "60 Minutes," November 7, 2017, "America starts the new arms race," <https://youtu.be/gQ8ou9G89qA?t=260>

<sup>23</sup> Julia Davis, The Daily Beast, August 16, 2018 – "Trump Is Ours': Kremlin Media Fear Democratic Victory in November Midterm Elections," <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-is-ours-kremlin-media-fears-democratic-victory-in-november-midterm-elections>

Arrests of Paul Whelan and Michael Calvey seemed to follow these dubious recommendations, with Calvey's arrest serving as a deterrent for potential foreign investors. It comes at a time when foreign investments are especially important for Russia, in order to demonstrate that the country isn't isolated. The Russian state media relishes every opportunity to showcase the meetings between representatives of the Kremlin and the foreign heads of state, mockingly pointing out: "Just look at our international isolation!"

Mockery and ridicule are among the most cherished tools in the arsenal of the Kremlin's propagandists. Russian state media shamelessly mocks valid allegations – even once they're proven – with callous disregard as to their severity. After the Skripal poisoning, RT started to sell T-shirts that read: 'Do you serve in GRU?' and sent out chocolate models of the Salisbury cathedral as holiday gifts. Other RT merchandise includes car stickers that ask: "Where can I park my tank?" and say: "I'll show you soft power!" Russian comedian infamously joked that Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 fell down, "because it was heavier than air."

Russian interference into the U.S. elections is a topic of countless sarcastic boasts on state television. This propaganda tactic is a reflection of Putin's fear of mockery.

When turned inward, the most potent tools of Russian info-warfare are also the most revealing in terms of the Kremlin's own strategies, fears and weaknesses. The Russian satire program "Kukly" that depicted Putin as an evil gnome became one of the first victims in his quest to assume control of the media<sup>24</sup>. Nowadays, no one laughs at Putin on Russian state television. The Kremlin wants to be feared, domestically and internationally.

The Russian state media is constantly claiming that Putin's speeches cause "panic" and "fear" in the West, misrepresenting even the most subdued reactions.

To counteract the impact of Russian propaganda, Western democracies should demonstrate the opposite reaction: refusal to react to the messages of fear or panic, calm consideration of the claims that provoke a visceral reaction or aim to further divide our societies.

A wide-ranging disinformation campaign aimed at 2020 candidates is already underway, with signs that foreign state actors are driving at least some of the activity. Counteracting it will require placing country above party, rejecting hacked or stolen materials, researching and verifying information before sharing it to avoid amplifying foreign disinformation. Politicians, media and voters should avoid aiding and abetting foreign election interference, even if the malign efforts benefit their political side for a season. Defending democracy is of paramount importance and should override all other interests, to ensure that the Kremlin doesn't get a vote in our elections and doesn't imperil our future.

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<sup>24</sup> Marc Bennetts, Newsweek, May 2, 2016 – "Satire Is Thriving in Russia, While Many Russians Aren't" <https://www.newsweek.com/2016/05/13/russia-political-satire-vladimir-putin-ntv-454525.html>