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of the United States  
STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

**Alliance for Securing Democracy**

2018 | No.23

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# RUSSIA AS SPOILER

## Projecting Division in Transatlantic Societies

BRITTANY BEAULIEU AND STEVEN KEIL

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### SUMMARY:

The Kremlin's political and military aggressions over recent years have put Putin's rejection of the international liberal order and post-Cold War balance of power on full display. Increasingly paranoid about regime survival — which it directly links to its waning influence in the post-Soviet space — Russia has gone on the offensive to undermine the democratic institutions and societies that underpin the system it sees incongruent with its own interests. Russia's incursions in Georgia and Ukraine are one particularly violent manifestation of this reality, while its influence operations and meddling in various democratic societies across Europe and the Americas indicate just how far Moscow is going to undermine the current international system and disrupt transatlantic cohesion.

Given this, it is critical for both Europe and the United States to examine the various drivers of Russian foreign policy, as well as the unconventional toolkit that Russia is relying upon to understand how best to combat the Kremlin's efforts. As such, this paper looks at Russia's influence operations and activities in 2016 and 2017 to demonstrate just how the Putin regime and its operatives are advancing anti-democratic efforts. Then, the paper turns to a three-country case study analysis of Sweden, Latvia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, specifically looking at efforts to influence various issues that will likely be in-play during the elections each of these countries will face later this year. Fitting with the Kremlin's operationally opportunist approach, each of these countries has a distinct context and set of issues that the Russia continuously exploits. Whether the Kremlin will choose to turn up the volume on these issues and realities prior or during the election remains to be seen. However, understanding and countering these vulnerabilities is a first step in creating resilience that can weather Moscow's efforts.

#### About the Authors

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*The views expressed in GMF publications are the views of the authors alone.*

Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine ruptured its relations with countries across the transatlantic space. Since then, it has increased its provocative overt political tactics as well as asymmetric and unconventional activities. But the intervention in Ukraine was not the start of Russia's belligerence. Rather, this followed provocations over several years, ranging from coercive energy politics in Eastern Europe, to cyber-attacks in Estonia, to the Russo-Georgian conflict in 2008. Since 2014, Russia has also interfered in elections and societies across the transatlantic space in order to undermine liberal democratic institutions, destabilize countries, and erode transatlantic cohesion. Given the expanded scope of its activities and its aims to disrupt the liberal international order, it is critical to examine the internal and external drivers as well as the tactics of Russia's undermining of democratic societies.

It is impossible to separate Russian foreign policy from President Vladimir Putin's domestic desire to perpetuate his kleptocratic regime at home, which has become increasingly at odds with the liberal international system. In addition, Russia is operating from an increasingly weak position. The enlargement of NATO and the European Union highlighted the limits of the Kremlin's global and regional influence. Both of these realities influence and drive Russia's preferred tactics and ultimate aims, and Moscow has opted to opportunistically push back against the current international consensus and balance of power. At the same time, as divisions have grown among transatlantic partners and within societies, democratic institutions have become a prime target in Putin's Russia's broader strategy, with elections as being one focal point for its operations. It has deployed a comprehensive toolkit to carry out these its activities, as evidenced by its efforts to influence and delegitimize democratic elections in both 2016 and 2017.

Russia's targeting of elections is only one component in its attack on democratic societies, which aims to challenge the status quo and exploit existing and potential political and social divisions among them over the long term. Elections are ideal targets for its opportunistic tactics in that they provide an open window through which to influence public debates at a time when citizens are most politically engaged.

Thus, safeguarding electoral processes is one critical aspect of bolstering a long-term defense against the challenge.

This paper first examines the interests that drive Russia's foreign policy. Second, it examines how Russia has influenced political environments across the transatlantic space during and beyond elections. The analysis then turns to an examination of the cases of Sweden, Latvia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, identifying Russia's ongoing interference activities there, the social and political vulnerabilities that it seeks to exploit, and the lessons learned and best practices from these countries for responding to interference. Each of these countries will face elections later this year, which provide added impetus to understand properly Russia's efforts there. By understanding Russia's interests, its ultimate foreign policy aims, and its preferred tactics, it is possible to shed light on its long-term efforts to pry at the seams of transatlantic societies and erode the liberal international order.

## Russia's Rejection of the Liberal International Order

In 2007, Putin famously decried the American-driven international system: "I am convinced that we have reached that decisive moment when we must seriously think about the architecture of global security."<sup>1</sup> Shortly thereafter, Russian forces attacked Georgia. Six years later, Russia invaded Ukraine. The first action followed a verbal commitment by NATO to Georgia's eventual membership, the second followed Ukraine's revolution over the country signing an Association Agreement with the EU. Both aimed to interrupt these countries' further integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Last year, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reiterated forcefully Russia's denouncement of the current global system and its push for a "post-West world order."<sup>2</sup>

1 Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," Munich, February 10, 2007, President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

2 Sergey Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's address and answers to questions at the 53rd Munich Security Conference" Munich, February 18, 2017, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [http://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/70vQR5KJWmR/content/id/2648249](http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/70vQR5KJWmR/content/id/2648249).

The Putin regime is motivated by its survival as well as by ensuring Russia's regional dominance. It has rejected the international system as it exists today given its inability to gain parity with the United States or to use the system in a way that guarantees its regional hegemony or halts the spread of liberal democratic regimes in neighboring countries. Russia is increasingly going on the offensive to challenge to American leadership and the international order. It has expanded its footprint globally; for example, by deploying troops to Syria to save the regime of President Bashar al Assad, by negotiating new military agreements in the Asia Pacific,<sup>3</sup> and by politically and economically engaging actors in Latin America.<sup>4</sup> But Russia growing global actions principally aim to "achieve its interests closer to home."<sup>5</sup>

Russia's challenge has taken on various forms but for several years it has honed in on what it sees as the inherent weaknesses in open, free and democratic societies. Prying at their seams through propaganda operations, malign financial influence, and malicious cyber efforts has provided one pathway to chip away at the international system. Russia's former foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, recently exemplified this view, arguing that "Western societies are split and polarized" and that their "policies are inconsistent and fickle."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as the Russian analyst Dmitri Trenin puts it, Russia has switched "to offense in

“ ***Prying at their seams through propaganda operations, malign financial influence, and malicious cyber efforts has provided one pathway to chip away at the international system.*** ”

the information spaces" with the ultimate aim of "undermining confidence of Western people's in democracy and U.S. leadership."<sup>7</sup>

Given Russia's position of relative weakness, an opportunistic and asymmetric approach provides it with the best avenue to do so. The chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, has argued that "the very 'rules of war' have changed" and "the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness."<sup>8</sup> This tracks with the types of tactics employed by

Russia in recent years. Looking at the increased activities of its civilian and military intelligence units<sup>9</sup> as well as those of Putin's own loyalists,<sup>10</sup> it is clear that the Kremlin is looking to use tactics from the traditional toolkit as well as new ones. Russia has recycled old Soviet tactics, such as the use of coercion, perpetuation of corruption, propaganda, and support for political and social groups, while combining them with new ones like cyber-attacks and social-media-driven disinformation, and employing them all pervasively. The inherent attributes of open democratic societies as well as the modern media and technology environment provide ample space for Russia to employ these tactics.

Russia has stood increasingly against the international status quo, particularly as political will and leadership in the United States to defend it has waned. As a result, where vacuums of power exist, Russia finds opportunities. Where they do not, it

3 "Russia and Myanmar to Implement Large-Scale Bilateral Military Cooperation Plan," Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, January 20, 2018, [http://eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12158837@egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12158837@egNews)

4 Simon Shuster, "Exclusive: Russia Secretly Helped Venezuela Launch a Cryptocurrency to Evade U.S. Sanctions," TIME Magazine, March 20, 2018.

5 Steven Keil, "Interview with Chris Miller: Putin's Post-election Policy Priorities," GMF Blog, April 3, 2018, <http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2018/04/03/putins-post-election-policy-priorities>.

6 Igor Ivanov, "This is What Russia's Foreign Policy Should Look Like," *The Moscow Times*, March 27, 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russias-post-election-foreign-policy-igor-ivanov-opinion-60953>.

7 Dmitri Trenin, "Here's a Breakdown of Russia's Foreign Policy Goals," *The Moscow Times*, August 16, 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/heres-a-breakdown-of-russias-foreign-policy-goals-op-ed-58677>.

8 Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science is Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," *Military Review*, January-February 2016.

9 Thomas Rid, "Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns," Hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, March 30, 2017, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/os-trid-033017.pdf>.

10 Zack Beauchamp, "Meet the shady Putin Crony Funding Russia's Troll Farm and Mercenary Army," *Vox*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/2/26/17044930/jevgheny-prigozhin-putin-mueller-troll-farm>.

feeds discord or impedes international consensus and action. On the surface, it appears that this approach is largely working. Putin's grip on power has seemingly strengthened. The deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies in Moscow, Aleksei Makarkin, recently stated that the Russian people "want to know that we [Russia] are a superpower,"<sup>11</sup> and there is a perception among the public that Russia's belligerent foray into international politics over recent years has vaulted it to a predominant role on the global stage. Compared to 1999 when Putin came to power, a poll in late 2017 showed an increase of 41 percentage points among respondents who said that Russia was a great power.<sup>12</sup> Polls also indicate higher approval ratings for the president among younger parts of the population.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the intervention in Ukraine raised Putin's favorability rating by double-digits.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in Ukraine and Georgia, Russia forced a changed territorial situation on sovereign countries through military and other means. This buttressed the Kremlin's goal of regime survival, while militarily claiming a regional foothold that impedes any integration of Ukraine and Georgia into Euroatlantic institutions.

In short, Russia has become an anti-status quo power seeking to disrupt the current international order, to sustain its domestic regime, and to assert its regional dominance. However, its weakened geopolitical position forces it to play the role of spoiler to assert its interests. While, they form only one component of its broader strategy, Russia's unconventional, asymmetric activities pose a particularly troubling challenge to democratic societies. As the political scientist Larry Diamond

**“ Russia was able to use social media effectively to inject divisive threads into American discourse that spread throughout the information ecosystem and were eventually picked up by mainstream media outlets.”**

put it, “Putin has reembraced an opportunistic but sophisticated campaign to sabotage democracy.”<sup>15</sup> The next sections look at these efforts in greater detail, particularly those to influence democratic societies and delegitimize democratic processes, with a particular focus on elections.

## Russia's Toolkit to Undermine Democracies

On August 27, 2016, an anti-immigration rally was held in Twin Falls, Idaho, which, with a population of 45,000 has taken in nearly 2,500 refugees in recent years.<sup>16</sup> The event notice promoted on Facebook read “Due to the town of Twin Falls, Idaho, becoming a center of refugee resettlement, which led to the huge upsurge of violence towards American citizens, it is crucial to draw society's attention to this problem.”<sup>17</sup> The group promoting the event, SecuredBorders, whose virulently anti-immigrant positions garnered a Facebook following of 133,000, has since been identified as part of an operation run by the Internet Research Agency, a Russian ‘troll farm’ that has since been indicted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller. This is one typical example of Russian-sponsored disinformation fanning the flames of socially divisive issues in the United States in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Other activities include Russians masquerading as Black Lives Matter activists to escalate

the debate about police brutality and civil rights, as supporters of gun rights to increase the divide over gun control, and as anti-immigration activists who painted a picture of undocumented immigrants

11 Neil MacFarquhar and David Sanger, “Putin's ‘Invincible’ Missile Is Aimed at U.S. Vulnerabilities,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/world/europe/russia-putin-speech.html>.

12 “To the Brink — and Back: Munich Security Report,” Stiftung Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz, February 2018, <https://www.securityconference.de/en/discussion/munich-security-report/munich-security-report-2018/>.

13 Anton Troianovski, “The Putin Generation,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/03/09/feature/russias-young-people-are-putins-biggest-fans/?utm\\_term=.56c4ae4b9cc0](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/03/09/feature/russias-young-people-are-putins-biggest-fans/?utm_term=.56c4ae4b9cc0).

14 “From Opinions to Understanding — Putin's Approval Rating” Levada-Center, accessed May 24, 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/>.

15 Larry Diamond, Russia and the Threat to Liberal Democracy, *The Atlantic*, December 9, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/russia-liberal-democracy/510011/>.

16 Caitlin Dikerson, “How Fake News Turned a Small Town Upside Down,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/magazine/how-fake-news-turned-a-small-town-upside-down.html>.

17 Ben Collins, Kevin Poulsen, Spencer Ackerman, “Exclusive: Russia Used Facebook Events to Organize Anti-Immigrant Rallies on U.S. Soil,” *Daily Beast*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/exclusive-russia-used-facebook-events-to-organize-anti-immigrant-rallies-on-us-soil>.

threatening the fabric of society.<sup>18</sup> Because Russia was keenly aware of the fissures in the United States, it was able to use social media effectively to inject divisive threads into American discourse that spread throughout the information ecosystem and were eventually picked up by mainstream media outlets.

Such activities amplified debates around social issues in which Americans were already engaged during the presidential election. This reflects tactics Russia has deployed throughout the transatlantic community: inflame preexisting social and political debates in order to increase polarization, discredit certain political factions, and question the entire international system's legitimacy, which is underpinned by democratic values. This approach was described in 2017 in the U.S. intelligence community's unclassified assessment of Russia's activities, which also predicted the country would "apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the U.S. presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against U.S. allies and their election processes."

Recent political campaigns in the transatlantic space expanded the voice of populists in the United States, France, Germany, and Italy; saw the rise of pro-Russian nationalist parties in Germany and Austria; and led the United Kingdom to vote for leaving the EU. Given Russia's capitalizing on the kinds of divisions that were seen in these campaigns, it is critical to examine its efforts to influence political discourse, particularly in advance of and during election cycles. This will also help in developing a framework for understanding how Russia sows discord in transatlantic societies and institutions.

**“ Russia has invested heavily in the Internet Research Agency to help carry out this disinformation strategy in elections across the transatlantic space.”**

## **Weaponizing Information, Technology, Political Parties, and Money**

While much attention has focused on Russia's manipulation of the American social media environment, this is only one element of the toolkit it uses to undermine democracies and democratic processes. It uses several tactics to exploit democratic weaknesses, including a mix of disinformation, cyberattacks, support for social and political groups, and coercive financial incentives, combining these to maximize its influence on a target election.

### *Disinformation*

Over the past decade, Russia has exploited 21st century technology to revolutionize Soviet-style propaganda and disinformation, attempting to sow chaos and to exacerbate social and political divisions so as to weaken democracies. Social media has extended the reach of its disinformation as it floods platforms with narratives that undermine social

cohesion and the legitimacy of democratic institutions in other countries. The disinformation that it employs around elections, while also attacking or promoting individual parties or candidates, follows this pattern.

Russia unleashes disinformation narratives across its state-sponsored RT and Sputnik, local Russian news outlets, and media outlets owned by Russian-

proxies, which are amplified on social media platforms by Russian-aligned groups, individuals, trolls, and automated bots. These various actors often work together. For example, RT and Sputnik often provide a veneer of authenticity for narratives that are injected into the social media ecosystem.<sup>19</sup> This strategy involves posting disinformation on a website or social media platform that is then shared by more credible users while hiding the identity of the original source of the content. Once this content gains traction online, real social media

<sup>18</sup> Dylan Byers, "Exclusive: Russian-bought Black Lives Matter ad on Facebook targeted Baltimore and Ferguson," CNN, September 28, 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/09/27/media/facebook-black-lives-matter-targeting/index.html>.

<sup>19</sup> For more on this, see Kirill Meleshevich and Bret Schafer in "Online Information Laundering: The Role of Social Media."

users or credible news sources share the content even more broadly, injecting it into the mainstream media.<sup>20</sup>

Russia has invested heavily in the Internet Research Agency to help carry out this disinformation strategy in elections across the transatlantic space.<sup>21</sup> Special Counsel Mueller's indictment describes how, dating back to 2014, it had a monthly budget of \$1.25 million to purchase ads on social media and to fund an army of bots, trolls, and fake personas to conduct its activities in advance of the 2016 presidential election, a strategy that reached 126 million Americans on Facebook and generated 300 million views on Twitter.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum on EU membership, one study uncovered that 419 Russian-backed Twitter accounts that were active during the U.S. presidential election were also active during that campaign.<sup>23</sup> In Spain, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has claimed that half of the Twitter accounts that amplified the issue of Catalan independence were registered in Russia,<sup>24</sup> and one study found that the speed of Twitter traffic that promoted pro-Kremlin actors' tweets, including Julian Assange's, indicated the "intervention of bots" during the independence referendum called by the region's government in 2017.<sup>25</sup>

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20 Kirill Meleshevich and Bret Schafer, "Online Information Laundering: The Role of Social Media," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 9, 2018, <http://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/publications/online-information-laundering-role-social-media>.

21 Adrian Chen, "The Agency," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>

22 "United States of America v. Internet Research Agency LLC," U.S. Department of Justice, February 16, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>; Matt Burgess, "Here's the First Evidence Russia used Twitter to Influence Brexit," *Wired*, November 10, 2017, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/brexit-russia-influence-twitter-bots-internet-research-agency>; Peter Economy, "Facebook Reveals Shocking Reach of Russia-Linked Digital Ads and Posts," Inc., November 2, 2017, <https://www.inc.com/peter-economy/facebook-reveals-shocking-reach-of-russia-linked-digital-ads-posts.html>.

23 Robert Booth, Matthew Weaver, Alex Hern, Stacey Smith, Shaun Walker, "Russia used hundreds of fake accounts to tweet about Brexit, data shows," *The Guardian*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/how-400-russia-run-fake-accounts-posted-bogus-brexit-tweets>

24 William Booth, Michael Birnbaum, "British and Spanish Leaders say Russian Trolls Meddled in Their Elections," *The Washington Post*, November 14, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/britain-and-spanish-leaders-say-russian-trolls-meddled-in-their-elections/2017/11/14/51ffb64a-c950-11e7-b506-8a10ed11ecf5\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d5c4e0273e24](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/britain-and-spanish-leaders-say-russian-trolls-meddled-in-their-elections/2017/11/14/51ffb64a-c950-11e7-b506-8a10ed11ecf5_story.html?utm_term=.d5c4e0273e24).

25 DFRLab, "#ElectionWatch: Russia and Referendums in Catalonia?" *Medium*, September 28, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-russia-and-referendums-in-catalonia-192743efcd76>.

Russia also uses its aligned political and social groups, such as France's National Front (now renamed the National Rally),<sup>26</sup> to act as proxies and cut-outs to hide the original source of disinformation, much as money launderers employ proxies and cut-outs to hide the real source of wealth. It also taps into the international social media networks of nationalist "alt-right" movements<sup>27</sup> and conspiracy theorists. Russia recognizes the anti-establishment narratives that resonate with these audiences and benefits from their willingness to circulate its disinformation widely, knowingly or unwittingly.

## Cyber

Another part of Russia's strategy in advance of elections is the use of cyber capabilities to hack political parties, organizations, and government institutions in search of potentially compromising information that it can then weaponize. Kremlin-linked groups also use cyber capabilities to attack elections systems as well as critical infrastructure in order to undermine citizens' long-term faith in government and institutions.

In the United States, the Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear groups, which are connected to Russia military intelligence service, hacked the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the email account of John Podesta, the campaign chairman for Hillary Clinton, to secure damaging information about the operations of the DNC during the election, which it fed to the Russian proxy Wikileaks. This hacked information influenced the media and the public debate, attempting to paint the DNC and Clinton as colluding and corrupt in the critical months leading up to election day.

In France, Fancy Bear also hacked the presidential campaign of Emmanuel Macron and released 9 gigabytes of data online just 36 hours before the second round between him and the National

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26 Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, New York: Routledge, 2018, 193-96; DFRLab, "Macron Antoinette: Alt-Right Targets France," *Medium*, April 29, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/macron-antoinette-alt-right-targets-france-f5e5dcee5cfe>.

27 DFRLab, "Macron Antoinette: Alt-Right Targets France."

Front's Marine Le Pen.<sup>28</sup> Russia also deployed cyber intelligence operatives to spy on the Macron campaign, creating close to two dozen Facebook accounts that posed as "friends" of the candidate in an attempt to gather compromising information.<sup>29</sup>

Russian cyber actors target critical infrastructure as well. The U.S. government accused Russia in March 2018 of infiltrating American and European water and electric systems as well as nuclear power plants in late 2015.<sup>30</sup> Although the hackers did not disrupt the functioning of these, the infiltration of critical infrastructure systems creates ongoing uncertainty regarding the potential for disruption, including in advance of elections.

Kremlin-backed hackers also probed the voting systems of 21 American states. While there is no evidence that this changed any votes, they were able to learn lessons from probing weak points and to sow doubt about the integrity of the process, which may have been the objective. While the U.S. government is investing in greater cyber security for its voting machines in advance of the midterm elections later this year, vulnerabilities persist. Following the last U.S. presidential election, the Netherlands decided to use paper ballots, recognizing the vulnerabilities in electronic voting infrastructure that hackers can exploit

## *Support for Political and Social Groups*

Russia supports far-right and far-left political and social groups in order to foster allies that will attack mainstream political parties and their platforms, influencing the electorate in a long-term bid to undermine liberal democratic ideals and institutions. While these parties are responding to specific social and political grievances in their countries and there is some variance among them, the National

Rally in France; the Alternative for Germany; the 5 Star Movement and the League in Italy; the U.K. Independence Party; Greece's Golden Dawn, and Austria's Freedom Party are all pro-Russia. The League and the Freedom Party have signed cooperation agreements with the United Russia party, and members of these parties frequently travel to Russia and to Crimea and support each other's agendas. Russia has also re-activated Soviet-era ties with communist and socialist parties to take advantage of their anti-establishment and anti-EU platforms, including Greece's Syriza, Spain's Podemos, and Germany's The Left.

Russia provides platforms for these groups on RT and Sputnik, and it also offers them access to political networks through forums and conferences that develop and coordinate policies and agendas in advance of elections.<sup>31</sup> All this exacerbates sensitive social and political issues that tear at EU and Western cohesion. In the words of the American analyst Alina Polyakova, "these parties advocate Russian interests, vote against common EU foreign policies, and undermine establishment parties to engender chaos and instability from within Europe."<sup>32</sup> All of these parties, whether they realize it or not, act as proxies and cut-outs for Russia by polarizing discourse and promoting its worldview.

Russia has also invested in the development of a network of friendly experts, journalists, and organizations throughout the transatlantic space, all of which act as proxies promoting pro-Russian ideologies to their respective electorates. Prominent Russian figures often lead such organizations, such as Vladimir Yakunin, who founded and funds the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute in Germany and heads France's Dialogue Franco-Russe.<sup>33</sup> Some of these organizations promote Russian business interests while others pursue religious, cultural, and historical connections.

Russia also coopts former European politicians to lend credibility to some of these organizations, such as the German-Russian Forum, which organizes the

28 Max de Haldevang, "Russia's Meddling in the French Election has Backfired Spectacularly," Quartz, May 8, 2017, <https://qz.com/978011/russias-intervention-in-emmanuel-macrons-election-campaign-was-a-foreign-policy-screw-up-of-astronomic-proportions/>; Bethania Palma, "Was the French Election Hacked by Russia?" Snopes, May 10, 2017, <https://www.snopes.com/news/2017/05/10/french-election-russian-hack/>.

29 Tom Regan, "Facebook Helped Blunt Russian Meddling in French Elections," Engadget, July, 27, 2017, <https://www.engadget.com/2017/07/27/facebook-helped-blunt-russian-meddling-in-french-elections/>.

30 Nicole Perloth, David E. Sanger, "Cyberattacks Put Russian Fingers on the Switch at Power Plants, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/15/us/politics/russia-cyberattacks.html>.

31 Kristin Archick et al., "Russian Influence on Politics and Elections in Europe," Congressional Research Service, March 23, 2017.

32 Alina Polyakova et al., "Kremlin's Trojan Horses 2," The Atlantic Council, November 2017, [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/The\\_Kremlins\\_Trojan\\_Horses\\_2\\_web\\_1121.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/The_Kremlins_Trojan_Horses_2_web_1121.pdf).

33 Polyakova et al., "Kremlin's Trojan Horses."



Petersburg Dialog, a civil society platform founded by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and President Putin in 2001.<sup>34</sup> Schröder was appointed chairman of Russia's state-controlled oil producer Rosneft and of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in 2017.

## *Malign Financial Incentives*

Malign financial incentives also play a role in Russia's efforts to influence and cement its cooperation with political and social groups and organizations abroad to lay the groundwork for its influence activities. While it is widely known that the Kremlin, through the First Czech Russian Bank, provided a loan of €11 million to France's National Front in 2014, other Russian government-linked financial support for parties and organizations is difficult to identify. This is by design. As Mark Galeotti argues,

Under Putin, Russia has become a toxic mix of a pragmatic kleptocracy and a nationalistic 'mobilization state.' At home, kleptocracy tends to trump state interests; abroad, kleptocracy is mobilized for the state. It is not just that corrupt Russians rig deals, covertly buy assets, and launder their dirty cash in global markets ... The Kremlin also uses these methods and connections, and the power and influence they generate, to advance its agenda abroad.<sup>35</sup>

Money-laundering activities allow Russia to hide its connections to and support for aligned parties and organizations that promote its worldview and carry out activities abroad at its behest. The lack of direct financial links with Russia makes their claims more credible to voters. It would be a much less effective strategy if the Kremlin were identified as directly funneling funds to those facilitating its agenda in Europe and the United States.<sup>36</sup>

## *Reacting to Russia's Toolkit*

Russia uses the toolkit described above to probe weaknesses in democratic systems and societies across the transatlantic space. While its use is

34 "The 'Lisa Case': Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation," NATO, 2016, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/lisa-case-germany-target-russian-disinformation/EN/index.htm>.

35 "The Big Question: Kleptocracy and Russia's Foreign Policy," National Endowment for Democracy, October 12, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/the-big-question-kleptocracy-and-russias-foreign-policy/>.

36 Polyakova et al., "Kremlin's Trojan Horses."

tailored to exploit specific domestic vulnerabilities, the same tactics are employed to varying degrees to maximize influence within a particular country and over a target election. Although some of this activity is directly attributable to Russia, proxies and cut-outs often do its bidding, working together to promote a pro-Russian narrative and ideology in a long-term effort to ply the electorate into embracing Russia's view of the international system.

Transatlantic actors must coalesce around long-term strategies and best practices to protect their countries. While targeting elections is only one part of its strategy, it is critical to realize that they provide a particularly significant opportunity for Russia to deploy its tactics. Given this, identifying social, political, and institutional vulnerabilities is key to implementing defensive and deterrent strategies. Below, an examination of the cases of Sweden, Latvia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina sheds light on susceptibilities and responses to Russia's influence efforts, and they highlight vulnerabilities as these countries head to elections later this year.

## **Russia's Asymmetric Offensive Against Sweden, Latvia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Sweden, Latvia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have varied domestic contexts and international linkages. Their respective characteristics determine the vulnerabilities Russia exploits and the mix of tools it employs in each. Sweden, a non-NATO EU member with strong democratic institutions and a public that does not hold pro-Russian views, has different vulnerabilities than Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has weak institutions and strong historical, cultural, and religious ties to Russia. Russia employs disinformation to impact Sweden's domestic debates regarding NATO and immigration. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it promotes pro-Russian sympathies at the same time as it exacerbates institutional divisions to keep the country from integrating with the Euro-Atlantic community. Latvia, a member of the EU and NATO, poses another type of opportunity as it has generally strong institutions but a porous financial sector and a sizeable Russian-speaking minority that Russia tries to influence through proxies and

narratives. Assessing its interference in these three countries highlights vulnerabilities and context-specific tactics it can employ, which can assist policymakers, civil society, and the private sector in the development of strategies to combat its foreign interference.

These countries hold elections later this year. While the analysis here exposes the extent of Russia's long-running interference campaigns, and while the Kremlin's strategy is about constant and general disruption, elections are key potential inflection points for these countries. They are also a particular moment of opportunity for Russia to sow discord while the population is more focused on political debates.

## Sweden: Russia's Tactics Meet Resistance

In January, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven labeled Russia as the primary actor engaged in influence operations in Sweden and warned the public of possible interference efforts from foreign adversaries. He warned: "To those thinking about trying to influence the outcome of the elections in our country: Stay away!"<sup>37</sup>

There is little sympathy for the Putin regime among Swedes; in one 2017 poll 87 percent of respondents said they had no confidence that President Putin would do the right thing regarding world affairs.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Sweden is a prime target for Russian operations given its strategic location on the Baltic Sea, its domestic debate regarding immigration, and growing support for NATO membership since Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine.

**“ Sweden is a prime target for Russian operations given its strategic location on the Baltic Sea, its domestic debate regarding immigration, and growing support for NATO membership.”**

In a poll conducted in January, support for NATO membership rose in 12 months from 37 percent to 43 percent, and four mainstream parties — the Center Party, the Christian Democrats, the Moderate Party and the Liberal Party — are in favor of joining the alliance.<sup>39</sup> This is putting pressure on the center-left government with regard to maintaining Sweden's traditional neutrality. With the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation growing, Russia has unleashed disinformation attacks on it and increased provocative military activities in Swedish waters and airspace.<sup>40</sup> It has injected forged

documents and disinformation into Sweden's media ecosystem in the service of its agenda; one analysis has identified 26 likely Russian forgeries.<sup>41</sup> While some of these documents sought to undermine international institutions, such as one that claimed NATO opposed the UN, others directly targeted Swedish politicians with conspiracies involving NATO, Ukraine, and terrorist organizations.<sup>42</sup> One forgery purported to be a letter signed by the head of the International Public Prosecution Office confirming a Ukrainian investigation into war crimes committed by a Swedish citizen in Ukraine. The document was uploaded by a social media user to CNN's Istory website and broadcast on Russian television.<sup>43</sup> Russian disinformation has also sought to undermine the signing of the Swedish-NATO host agreement in 2016 with narratives that falsely claimed the alliance would be able to place nuclear weapons on the country's military bases and other false assertions regarding the legality of the agreement.<sup>44</sup>

37 Andrew Rettman, Lisbeth Kirk, "Sweden Raises Alarm on Election Meddling," EUobserver, January, 15, 2018, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/140542>.

38 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/>.

39 Charlie Duxbury, "Under Threat, Sweden Rediscovered its Viking Spirit," Politico, January 30, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/under-threat-sweden-rediscovered-its-viking-spirit-nato-russia/>.

40 Paul Adams, "Russian Menace Pushes Sweden Towards NATO," BBC, February 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35456535>.

41 Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, "Russia's Strategy for Influence through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: the Swedish Case," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40, no. 6, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1273830>.

42 Kragh and Åsberg, "Russia's Strategy for Influence," 791.

43 Kragh and Åsberg, "Russia's Strategy for Influence," 793.

44 Kragh and Åsberg, "Russia's Strategy for Influence," 798.

Immigration has become a contentious issue in Sweden, which took in more refugees per capita than any other European country at the height of the 2015 refugee crisis.<sup>45</sup> Approximately 12 percent of the population is foreign-born, with a significant number from the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and a lower number from Iraq and Iran.<sup>46</sup> In a recent poll, the share of respondents who said immigration was bad for the country rose from 13 to 31 percent.<sup>47</sup> In another, 29 percent said they were concerned about rising crime.<sup>48</sup> The far-right Sweden Democrats party blames crime on the country's liberal immigration policies,<sup>49</sup> a connection that Russia exploits along with its disinformation.<sup>50</sup>

The far-right fringe conspiracy collective has actively spread narratives that Swedish society is degenerating due to immigration, which aids and abets Russia's disinformation operations in the country. In 2017, DFR Lab uncovered a social media campaign led by the hashtag #SwedenSOS that portrayed "Sweden as a society destroyed by migrants," which was shared between far-right social media users in Europe and the United States. The hashtag was included in a letter published by the nationalist newspaper *Nya Dagbladet* with the title "Open letter to President Trump from Sweden," in which the authors asked President Trump to "arrest George Soros on behalf of the world so that his international crime syndicate can finally be exposed," echoing a common narrative in international far-right circles. Following the publication of the

“ **Swedish peace and anti-NATO movements include members with views sympathetic to Russia.** ”

45 "Europe's Refugee Crisis Is Now Destroying Sweden," Centre for Research on Globalization, July 3, 2017, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/europes-refugee-crisis-is-now-destroying-sweden/5597450>.

46 Charles Westin, "Sweden: Restrictive Immigration Policy and Multiculturalism," Migration Policy Institute, June 1, 2006, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sweden-restrictive-immigration-policy-and-multiculturalism>.

47 "Six Out of Ten Voters in Sweden Want Fewer Refugees: Poll," *The Local*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.thelocal.se/20180421/six-out-of-ten-voters-in-sweden-want-fewer-refugees-poll>.

48 Lee Roden, "Swedes Increasingly Concerned About Crime: Survey," *The Local*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.thelocal.se/20180116/swedes-increasingly-concerned-about-crime-survey>.

49 Ellen Barry, Christina Anderson, "Hand Grenades and Gang Violence Rattle Sweden's Middle Class," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/03/world/europe/sweden-crime-immigration-hand-grenades.html>.

50 Jon Henley, "Russia Waging Information War against Sweden, Study Finds," *The Guardian*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/11/russia-waging-information-war-in-sweden-study-finds>.

letter, videos attached to the #SwedenSOS hashtag appeared in which a woman accuses migrants as changing Sweden for the worse. Underscoring the connection between the international far-right and Russia, the woman in the videos "is open about her sympathies towards Russia, as she 'was born of Russian-American ancestry.'"<sup>51</sup>

There is also a history of Russian attacks against Sweden's civilian cyber infrastructure. In October 2017, hackers brought to a halt the country's transportation infrastructure, the Sweden Transport Administration, the Sweden Transport Agency, and the public transport operator Västtrafik a week after Russia conducted its latest Zapad military exercise, part of which sought to probe cyber systems and simulate an attack on the Baltic countries.<sup>52</sup> Although the government has not formally attributed the attack

to Russia, Russian-backed hackers are considered as potentially responsible.<sup>53</sup> In 2015, Sweden's air-traffic control system was similarly crippled by a cyber-attack that the authorities attributed to the Fancy Bear group.<sup>54</sup> Swedish authorities were

reported to have sent urgent messages to NATO about the attack, some of which identified the power company Vattenfall as another possible target.<sup>55</sup> Recognizing critical infrastructure as a target of Russian activities, Sweden has increased funding for its intelligence and cyber-defense services.<sup>56</sup>

Pro-Kremlin groups operating in Sweden include the fascist organization Nordic Resistance, which cooperates with Russia's Rodina party and the Russian Imperial Movement through the World

51 DFR Lab, "The International Far Right Tags Sweden," *Medium*, April 7, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/the-international-far-right-tags-sweden-3d4034d55812>.

52 Pierluigi Paganini, "Swedish Transport Agencies Targeted in DDoS Cyber-Attacks," *Security Affairs*, October 15, 2017, <http://securityaffairs.co/wordpress/64317/cyber-warfare-2/swedish-transport-agencies-ddos.html>.

53 Roman Šulc, "Swedish Transport Sector Targeted By Cyber-Attacks," *European Security Journal*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.esjnews.com/sweden-transport-cyber-attacks>.

54 Kjetil Stormark, "Sweden Issued Cyber Attack Alert," *AldriMer.no*, December 4, 2016, <https://www.aldrimer.no/sweden-issued-cyber-attack-alert-as-its-air-traffic-reeled/>.

55 Kjetil Stormark, "Vattenfall Possible Cyber Target," *AldriMer.no*, December 4, 2016, <https://www.aldrimer.no/vattenfall-possible-cyber-target/>.

56 Andrew Rettman, Lisbeth Kirk, "Sweden Raises Alarm on Election Meddling," *EUobserver*, January 15, 2018, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/140542>.

National-Conservative Movement, which is tied to Russian political activist Alexander Dugin. The latter group is reported to have donated money to Nordic Resistance.<sup>57</sup> Swedish peace and anti-NATO movements also include members with views sympathetic to Russia.<sup>58</sup> While not formally tied to the Kremlin, these sympathizers present a potential avenue for meddling.

Sweden has taken several steps to shore up resilience before its election, taking a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach to protecting its civil space, which is overseen by the Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB). The agency is convening across bureaucratic stovepipes in order to monitor and to understand the full spectrum of hybrid threats as well as to develop and coordinate solutions. In the case of disinformation, the MSB has invested in media literacy education and media monitoring, including training local media outlets on the threat and working proactively with social media platforms to warn them of disinformation campaigns.<sup>59</sup> It is also overseeing the development of a handbook that includes a diagnostic tool to identify disinformation, which will be available online in English and Swedish. The MSB has also trained all Sweden's election workers to identify potential interference.<sup>60</sup>

While Swedish public opinion is strongly critical of Russia, the Kremlin still has an incentive to interfere and is already exploiting hot-button political issues through its use of disinformation and aligned social groups. This is particularly true in its bid to influence the long-term foreign policy trajectory of

57 Kragh and Åsberg, "Russia's Strategy for Influence," 802.

58 Kragh and Åsberg, "Russia's Strategy for Influence," 805.

59 "A Practical Approach on How to Cope With Disinformation," Government Offices of Sweden, October 6, 2017, doi:<http://www.government.se/articles/2017/10/a-practical-approach-on-how-to-cope-with-disinformation/>.

60 Michael Birnbaum, "Sweden is Taking on Russian Meddling ahead of Fall Elections. The White House Might Take Note.," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/sweden-looks-at-russias-electoral-interference-in-the-us-and-takes-steps-not-to-be-another-victim/2018/02/21/9e58ee48-0768-11e8-aa61-f3391373867e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.4047463b95b8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/sweden-looks-at-russias-electoral-interference-in-the-us-and-takes-steps-not-to-be-another-victim/2018/02/21/9e58ee48-0768-11e8-aa61-f3391373867e_story.html?utm_term=.4047463b95b8).

the country. The head of Sweden's security service counterintelligence bureau, Daniel Stenling, stated earlier this year: "We see that Russia has an intention to influence individual issues that are of strategic importance. If these issues [NATO membership and Baltic Sea security] become central in the election campaign, we can expect attempts at Russian influence."<sup>61</sup> With these anticipated to be part of the electoral debates, Sweden is preparing to meet Russia's challenge.

## *Latvia: Division Creates Fertile Ground for Influence Operations*

Latvia is no stranger to Russia's efforts at interference. As a Baltic state that is a member of the EU and NATO, it typifies the Kremlin's fear of losing influence and of its power declining. If Russia is to be a "pole" in a multipolar world, the loss of hegemony over the

Baltic states is a difficult reminder of how limited its position is. Nevertheless, this geopolitical reality has not stopped the Kremlin from attempting to weaken the political cohesion of these countries. Latvia—as well as other states in the Nordic-Baltic region—has become a testing ground

for its asymmetric activities seeking to disrupt the status quo.<sup>62</sup>

Latvia's large Russian-speaking community, its significant ethnic Russian minority, and the fact that it neighbors Russia all provide opportunities for the Kremlin to exploit. Recognizing this, Latvia has confronted the challenge head on. This includes efforts to educate the population about the challenge and to improve the integration of its Russian minority in society.<sup>63</sup> With Latvia holding parliamentary elections in October, Russia is ramping up its attempts to sow distrust toward the

61 Johan Ahlander, "Sweden Braced for Possible Russian Election Meddling: Security Service," Reuters, February 22, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sweden-security/sweden-braced-for-possible-russian-election-meddling-security-service-idUSKCN1G626P>.

62 Reid Standish, "Russia's Neighbors Respond to Putin's 'Hybrid War,'" *Foreign Policy*, October 12, 2017 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/12/russias-neighbors-respond-to-putins-hybrid-warlatvia-estonia-lithuania-finland/>.

63 Standish, Russia's Neighbors Respond.

government among the ethnic Russian population and to undermine the gains made toward greater social cohesion.

Infighting and fracturing among the country's pro-EU, pro-Western, and ethnic Latvian parties have weakened their position and this could impact their ability to enter parliament. For example, the pro-Western Unity party, which won 21 percent of votes in the last elections, was polling at only 4.9 percent in April,<sup>64</sup> having suffered from an influx of new Western-oriented parties that, however, have yet to consolidate their bases.

Given this, Russia could benefit from its support for the Russia-accommodating policies of the Harmony party, the largest one in parliament, which until last fall had a cooperation agreement with United Russia that prevented it from joining the governing coalition. Chaired by the mayor of Riga, Nils Ušakovs, the party represents the largest pro-Russian constituency in Latvia. In ending its eight-year agreement with United Russia, its leaders made the case that the Harmony was increasingly incompatible with its counterpart's platform. This may remove any barriers to it joining a governing coalition after the elections. However, this does not mean that the party's relations with Russia have deteriorated. Ušakovs recently stated that Harmony's "position has not changed. For both Latvia and the European Union establishing good relations with Russia is beneficial."<sup>65</sup>

Increasing Russian control of various Russian-language media also provides a platform for the Kremlin to promote its views. Last year, *Re:Baltica* exposed a connection between Baltic Russian-language news sites and Russian state-owned news services; for example, *Baltnews*, which regularly publishes pro-Russian content, including by Vladimir Linderman, a dual national who is a member of Russia's banned National Bolshevik Party.

64 LTV, "30 Percent of Voters Undecided in Polls," Public Broadcasting of Latvia, April 6, 2018.

65 "Saskaņa Quietly Ditches Putin Party agreement," Public Broadcasting of Latvia, October 9, 2017, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/saskana-quietly-ditches-putin-party-agreement.a252983/>.

<sup>66</sup>These outlets frequently deploy disinformation to exploit social and ethnic divisions as well as the different perceptions of Russia that the population holds.

A 2017 Pew poll showed that 64 percent of the ethnic Russian population in Latvia – which makes up 31 percent of the overall population (self-identified)<sup>67</sup> — agreed with the idea that a strong Russia was required "to balance Western influence."<sup>68</sup> Only 3 percent said Russia poses a military threat to Latvia.<sup>69</sup> There is a feeling across the overall population that the country must have equally strong ties with the European Union and Russia,<sup>70</sup> but a majority sees the latter as a military threat.<sup>71</sup> Russia employs disinformation to amplify this divergent threat perception between ethnic Russians and the rest of the population. Pro-Russian media often claim there is widespread ultra-nationalism in Latvia and active discrimination against Russian speakers and ethnic minority groups. In April, *Sputnik News* and *Zvezda* published the false claim that *Mein Kampf* was more popular in Latvia than the *Harry Potter* books.<sup>72</sup> This not only asserted an ultra-nationalist narrative, but also linked it to the often used conflation of current discussions with the difficult history of the Second World War. Another example occurred in 2016 when the Russian TV channel Rossiya 24 falsely suggested that the Latvian government was suppressing Victory Day celebrations, discriminating against war veterans, and acting with indifference toward the historical legacy of the victims of Nazism.<sup>73</sup>

66 "Re: Baltica: Baltic Russian-language News sites Baltnews Linked to Kremlin's Global Propaganda Network," *The Baltic Times*, April 7, 2018, [https://www.baltictimes.com/re\\_\\_baltica\\_\\_baltic\\_russian-language\\_news\\_sites\\_baltnews\\_linked\\_to\\_kremlin\\_\\_s\\_global\\_propaganda\\_network/](https://www.baltictimes.com/re__baltica__baltic_russian-language_news_sites_baltnews_linked_to_kremlin__s_global_propaganda_network/).

67 Nika Aleksejeva "Lash Out Over Language in Latvia," DFRLab, October 30, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/lash-out-over-language-in-latvia-7991825c7563>.

68 Jeff Diamant, "Ethnic Russians in Some former Soviet Republics Feel a Close Connection to Russia," Pew Research Center, July 24, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/24/ethnic-russians-in-some-former-soviet-republics-feel-a-close-connection-to-russia/>.

69 Diamant, Ethnic Russians.

70 "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," Pew Research Center, May 10, 2017, 130.

71 Religious Belief and National Belonging, 131.

72 "Sputnik and Zvezda Falsely Claim Hitler's Mein Kampf is More Popular than Harry Potter in Latvia," Polygraph.info, April 13, 2018, <https://www.polygraph.info/a/factcheck-harry-potter-hitler-latvia/29166375.html>.

73 Mārtiņš Kaprāns and Donald Jensen, "LATVIA - 9-16 MAY 2016," CEPA StratCom Program, CEPA, May 13, 2016, <http://infowar.cepa.org/Briefs/Lv-16may-16>.

In the Pew poll mentioned above, 70 percent of Latvia's ethnic Russians also said that "Russia is obliged to protect ethnic Russians outside its border." Russia often uses this 'nationalism versus Russian ethnic minority' narrative to exacerbate tensions in countries with Russian minority populations, to stoke up their fears. As countries like Latvia seek to counter this through media literacy and other efforts aimed at improving social cohesion, Russia also attacks these efforts with disinformation campaigns.<sup>74</sup>

Russia deploys disinformation to influence Latvians' attitudes towards Euro-Atlantic institutions. Following the deployment of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, Russian media and pro-Russian news sources inside Latvia propagated the narrative that NATO's presence in the Baltic states – particularly in Latvia – was to create

“ **Another vehicle for Russia to wield influence is the financial sector.** ”

a base for launching attacks against Russia.<sup>75</sup> Such false claims by pro-Kremlin sources proliferate. So does disinformation that moves into the realm of the absurd; for example, stories claiming NATO forces are conducting psychological testing on ethnic Russians,<sup>76</sup> that U.S. soldiers in Latvia have been poisoned by mustard gas,<sup>77</sup> that Canadian soldiers stationed in the country lived in luxury condos at Canadian taxpayers' expense, or that NATO soldiers were littering the countryside.<sup>78</sup>

Russia also promotes social and political groups and movements to agitate Latvia's Russian speakers. In 2015, a new entity was announced on the Internet — the People's Republic of Latgale, which declared independence from Latvia "on behalf of the country's Russian-speaking eastern enclave."

Coming soon after the annexation of Crimea, journalists and those with ties to the intelligence community accused Russian provocateurs of stoking the independence agenda.<sup>79</sup> The Kremlin also courts pro-Russian political parties. In addition to its ties to Harmony, it has an ally in the Latvian Union of Russians, which signed a cooperation agreement with the Russian Unity party of Crimea in 2014. The Latvian Union of Russians supports the Catalan independence movement and calls Catalanian ministers and parliamentarians "political prisoners,"<sup>80</sup> underscoring the deep connections and support among Russia-aligned groups and separatist movements across Europe. Russia has also established pseudo-academic organizations, such as the Russian Association of Baltic Studies and Kaliningradskiy blogpost, that espouse a pro-Russia narrative to shape the perceptions of Latvia's Russian speakers.

The cyber domain is another vulnerability for Latvia. According to the Constitution Protection Bureau, one of three state security institutions, "The number of cyber-attacks conducted by foreign intelligence and security services against Latvia have increased almost twofold in the last three to four years."<sup>81</sup> These attacks typically target state institutions through spear-phishing. The bureau said Russia's foreign intelligence and security services attempt to gain valuable intelligence in order to "implement active measures with the aim to influence decision making process [sic] of Latvian, EU and NATO institutions as well as public opinion."<sup>82</sup>

74 Mārtiņš Kaprāns, "Disinformation Campaign Targets Media Literacy Efforts in Latvia," CEPA StratCom Program, CEPA, April 12, 2017, [http://infowar.cepa.org/Briefs/Lv\\_12\\_April17](http://infowar.cepa.org/Briefs/Lv_12_April17).

75 Gatis Kristovskis "Russian News Site Spreads Misinformation about Multinational Military Exercise Taking Place in Latvia," Latvian Information Agency, April 25, 2017, [http://www.leta.lv/eng/defence\\_matters\\_eng/defence\\_matters\\_eng/news/ODF75D28-2E47-4EE6-95A2-FE69B88CD563/](http://www.leta.lv/eng/defence_matters_eng/defence_matters_eng/news/ODF75D28-2E47-4EE6-95A2-FE69B88CD563/).

76 Kristovskis, 2017.

77 Kristovskis, 2017.

78 Tom Blackwell, "Russian Fake-News Campaign against Canadian Troops in Latvia includes Propaganda about Litter, Luxury Apartments," *National Post*, November 17, 2017, <http://nationalpost.com/news/canada/russian-fake-news-campaign-against-canadian-troops-in-latvia-includes-propaganda-about-litter-luxury-apartments>.

79 Carol Williams, "Latvia, with a Large Minority of Russians, Worries about Putin's Goals," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-latvia-russia-next-20150502-story.html>.

80 "Pro Russia Party Signs Major Deal with Crimea Group," *The Baltic Times*, August, 13, 2014, <https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/35355/#.VA97mRbgJHU>; "A meeting of solidarity with Catalanian political prisoners took place in Riga," Latvian Russian Union, November 12, 2017, <http://www.rusojuz.lv/en/ouerevents/26193-A-meeting-of-solidarity-with-Catalonian-political-prisoners-took-place-in-Riga/>.

81 "Annual Public Report," The Constitution Protection Bureau of the Republic of Latvia, accessed on May 25, 2018, [http://www.sab.gov.lv/files/Public\\_report\\_2017.pdf](http://www.sab.gov.lv/files/Public_report_2017.pdf).

82 Annual Public Report, The Constitution Protection Bureau.

Another vehicle for Russia to wield influence is the financial sector. Between 2010 and 2014, several Latvian banks participated in the global money-laundering scheme known as the Russian Laundromat, in which billions of dollars from Russia were moved through Latvian and Moldovan banks.<sup>83</sup> In 2016, the European Central Bank revoked Latvia's Trasta Komerbanka's license after it participated in this and other money-laundering schemes. This was not an isolated case. In 2005, the United States cut off two Latvian banks, VEF and Multibanka, from its financial market for engaging in money-laundering operations, some of which tied to Russia.<sup>84</sup> In 2012, six Latvian banks were accused of laundering illicit funds associated with the Magnitsky case.<sup>85</sup> In 2017, the United Kingdom's Financial Conduct Authority reported that a portion of the proceeds of the 2011–2015 Deutsche Bank “mirror trading” money-laundering scheme was moved through Latvia.<sup>86</sup> And in 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department targeted Latvia's largest non-resident bank, ABLV Bank, claiming that it had “institutionalized money laundering as a pillar of the bank's business practices.”<sup>87</sup> Days later, the governor of Latvia's central bank was detained on corruption charges, reportedly stemming from bribes he received from Trasta.<sup>88</sup> Such financial dealings allow Russian money to flow freely into Latvia as well as throughout Europe, and farther afield. Russia uses them to hide its connections to and influence over political and social groups and individuals, and they

provide it with opportunities to fund covertly its influence campaigns against Latvia's elections and society.

Latvia's language laws have been targeted too, particularly the 2018 law for transitioning the secondary-education system to a Latvian language program over the next three years.<sup>89</sup> Russia has condemned this and threatened sanctions.<sup>90</sup> Pro-Russian news sources inflated the number of first-language Russian speakers in Latvia up to half of the population, and they also inflated the number of Latvians protesting against the law.<sup>91</sup> As the elections draw closer, this issue at the core of Latvia's social and political identity could be further targeted by Russia's disinformation.

While Russia's omnipresent tactics are designed to influence Latvia's domestic context, it is clear that the latter understands the ultimate aims of this meddling. In March, Foreign Minister Edgar Rinkēvičs commented that “The goal of (Russia's) meddling is not to help one side or the other but to get extreme opinions clashing to undermine the fabric of Western society and institutions”<sup>92</sup> and that “by weakening this democratic community of nations, that's actually the way of survival for the Russian regime.”<sup>93</sup> As Russia continues to target Latvia's ethnic Russian population, the government must do all it can to dispel false stories, and confront its own challenges in integrating ethnic minorities, while respecting their rights. Ultimately, as Speaker of Parliament Ināra Mūrniece has said, the greatest responsibility is the strengthening of Latvia's

83 “Latvia: European Central Bank Revokes Trasta Komerbanka License,” Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, March 5, 2016, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/5017-latvia-european-central-bank-revokes-trasta-komerbanka-license>.

84 “Treasury Wields PATRIOT Act Powers to Isolate Two Latvian Banks Financial Institutions Identified as Primary Money Laundering Concerns,” Press Center, U.S. Department of the Treasury, April 21, 2005, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js2401.aspx>.

85 “Latvia: Bank Fined For Role in Magnitsky Money Laundering Case,” OCCRP, June 19, 2013, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/1992-latvia-bank-fined-for-role-in-magnitsky-money-laundering-case>.

86 “Final Notice,” Financial Conduct Authority, January 30, 2017 <https://www.fca.org.uk/publication/final-notices/deutsche-bank-2017.pdf>.

87 “FinCEN Names ABLV Bank of Latvia an Institution of Primary Money Laundering Concern and Proposes Section 311 Special Measure,” Financial Crime Enforcement Network, United States Department of the Treasury, February 13, 2018, <https://www.fincen.gov/news/news-releases/fincen-names-ablv-bank-latvia-institution-primary-money-laundering-concern-and>.

88 “Rimšēvičs claims bribe was from Trasta komercbanka, and Martinsons worked as mediator,” *Baltic News Network*, February 26, 2018, <http://bnn-news.com/rimsevics-claims-bribe-was-from-trasta-komerbanka-and-martinsons-worked-as-mediator-180558>.

89 “From the 2020/2021 Academic Year Onwards, Schools will Teach General Subjects in Latvian, while Still Giving Minority Pupils the Opportunity to Learn Minority Languages, Literature and Culture, and Historical Subjects (modules) in their Preferred Language.” For more, see Aleksejeva, Lash Out Over Language in Latvia, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/lash-out-over-language-in-latvia-7991825c7563>.

90 “Russia Threatens Sanctions over Latvian Language in Schools,” BBC, April 3, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43626368>.

91 Aleksejeva, Lash Out Over Language in Latvia.

92 Oren Dorell, “Tiny Latvia Can Teach the U.S. a Lesson or Two about Russian Meddling,” *USA Today*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/03/07/tiny-latvia-can-teach-u-s-lesson-two-russian-meddling/405330002/>.

93 Michele Kelemen, “Baltic Countries On Countering Russian Disinformation,” NPR, March 10, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/10/592566026/baltic-countries-on-countering-russian-disinformation>.

independence and security” and recognizing that “those seeking to divide the world into zones of influence by military force have not disappeared.”<sup>94</sup>

## *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Trying to Force an Open Door Closed*

Bosnia and Herzegovina has had a challenging evolution since the break-up of Yugoslavia. Partly as a consequence of the 1995 U.S.-brokered Dayton Accords, it remains in many ways stuck in this difficult past. Bosnia’s constitution, which was part of the peace deal, includes a power-sharing structure among the country’s Croat, Bosniak, and Serb ethnic groups, and stipulates that there are two semi-autonomous regions within the state.<sup>95</sup> This was never meant to be a permanent arrangement, yet over time it has been invoked to preserve a broken status quo because several nationalist politicians “stand to gain from furthering ethno-national divisions.”<sup>96</sup> This untenable political situation has become a roadblock for Bosnia’s Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as its ability to be governed effectively. With parliamentary elections due in October, the annulment of elections laws in 2016 and the inability to agree on new ones may preclude the formation of any government, regardless of the elections’ outcome.<sup>97</sup>

Bosnia’s political divisions are stopping the activation of its NATO Membership Action Plan, particularly because the government of the Serbian-majority entity, Republika Srpska, which is broadly pro-Russia and against NATO accession, is blocking the key next step by failing to register its military

assets with the central government.<sup>98</sup> Without this, Bosnia’s relationship with NATO cannot move forward.

Bosnia formally applied for membership to the EU in 2016; however, its internal divisions continue to plague the process. In January, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker told Bosnians that “this is a political project and for this we need you to unify forces in this country.”<sup>99</sup> He added: “We cannot import instability ... democracy does not exist without compromise.” Russia’s campaign to bolster its influence in the Western Balkans and prevent the region’s further integration into the Euro-Atlantic community is clearly on display in Bosnia. It is capitalizing on overt divisions among the country’s ethnic communities to keep the EU’s “open-door” policy effectively shut for Bosnia. Unfortunately, inter-communal disputes and structural political challenges provide ample space for Russia to gain leverage in the country. Russia created none of these realities, but it manipulates them to encourage a favorable outcome for it in the shape of Bosnia’s stagnation in an intractable status quo.

One key avenue for influence has been Russia’s close association with Republika Srpska. There is a warm relationship between its president, Milorad Dodik, and Putin. The Russian leader has supported Dodik’s presidency and the two have met at least eight times in the past four years. Dodik has stoked ethnic tensions and undermined Bosnia’s national government. In 2017, the U.S. government imposed sanctions him because of his violation of a Constitutional Court ruling that discriminated against non-Serbs and his frequent calls for the independence of the Republika Srpska.<sup>100</sup> There have also been reports that Dodik’s recently created paramilitary force, Serbian Honor, was trained at the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian center in the

94 “Ināra Mūrniece: Upcoming Elections will be Decisive for the Continuity of Latvia’s Foreign Policy,” Latvijas Republikas Saeima, Press Release, January 25, 2018, <http://www.saeima.lv/en/news/saeima-news/26535-inara-murniece-upcoming-elections-will-be-decisive-for-the-continuity-of-latvia-s-foreign-policy>.

95 “Annex 4: Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina,” University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, December 1, 1995, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/icty/dayton/daytonannex4.html>.

96 Emily Tamkin, “Bosnia Is Teetering on the Precipice of a Political Crisis,” *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/21/bosnia-is-teetering-on-the-precipice-of-a-political-crisis-balkans-election-law-dodik/>.

97 Daria Sito-Sucic, “Ethnically Tinged Row Over Voting Rules Threatens Governance in Bosnia,” Reuters, February 23, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-election-law/ethnically-tinged-row-over-voting-rules-threatens-governance-in-bosnia-idUSKCN1G72DC>.

98 “Bosnia Making Military Progress in NATO Bid – Alliance General,” Reuters, November 14, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-nato/bosnia-making-military-progress-in-nato-bid-alliance-general-idUSKBN1DE246>.

99 Maja Zuvela and Daria Sito-Sucic, “Juncker Tells Squabbling Bosnians: Unite If You Want to Join EU,” Reuters, February 28, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-balkans-bosnia/juncker-tells-squabbling-bosnians-unite-if-you-want-to-join-eu-idUSKCN1GC21V>.

100 “U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Bosnian Serb Nationalist Leader Dodik,” Reuters, January 17, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-sanctions-bosnia-dodik/u-s-treasury-imposes-sanctions-on-serbian-nationalist-leader-dodik-idUSKBN1512WI>.



Serbian city of Niš.<sup>101</sup> The force was purportedly assembled in case of armed opposition to Dodik during the coming elections. Reportedly, Republika Srpska has “brought in thousands of rifles [over the past two years], and there are currently 78 Russian-allied nationalist organizations in the region.”<sup>102</sup> Work will soon begin on the construction of a new Russian-Serbian Religious and Cultural Centre in Republika Srpska, which will include a Russian Orthodox Church dedicated to the Romanov dynasty, part of the Kremlin’s efforts to capitalize on cultural and religious ties.<sup>103</sup>

Russia’s attempt to divide the country by utilizing social and political groups is not limited to the Bosnian Serbs. It has also looked to make inroads among Bosnian Croats by supporting the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its leader Dragan Čović. He supports further decentralization in the country and in the last election called for the creation of a Croat entity within Bosnia, a position that the Russian ambassador publicly supported.<sup>104</sup>

To exacerbate Bosnia’s internal tensions through disinformation, Russia uses three primary media outlets — *RT*, *Sputnik Srbija*, and *Russia Beyond the Headlines* — that play up the region’s Slavic and Orthodox ties to Russia while painting Putin as the region’s true ally.<sup>105</sup> Local media and social media outlets amplify the reach of their content. An increase in activity by Twitter accounts that promote a pro-Russian narrative in Bosnia was

reported in January.<sup>106</sup> Narratives promoted by Russian-linked media and social media accounts also malign NATO over its bombing of Belgrade in 1999, “promote conspiracy theories about Western plots to destroy Serb national identity,” and “deify Serb war criminals.”<sup>107</sup>

Coercive financial transactions also play a role in Russia’s influence efforts. In 2015, the leadership of Republika Srpska received a \$300 million loan from a fund based in the United States, following a visit by Dodik to Russia. It was uncovered that the fund was managed by a Russian citizen, Alexander Vaisliev.<sup>108</sup> In 2017, with the Republika Srpska government struggling to repay its debts, Russia cancelled \$125 million of Soviet-era debt to Bosnia.<sup>109</sup>

With a weak governing structure amplifying pre-existing social and political divisions, Russia-aligned groups vying for power, and media outlets promoting a pro-Russia narrative, Bosnia represent in many ways a ‘perfect storm’ for the Kremlin’s ability to sow discord and to pose serious challenges to the country’s Euro-Atlantic ambitions. There is little reason to believe that Russia’s efforts will abate in the run-up to the October elections.

## Conclusion

Russia simultaneous drive for regime survival and regional dominance has led it to contest the American-led liberal democratic order. As part of this, it has made sustained efforts to reject and undermine democratic institutions and countries. The cases of Sweden, Latvia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina allow an in-depth look at its efforts to create division in these countries as their elections approach.

101 “UZ POMOĆ RUSKIH I SRBIJANSKIH SPECIJALACA: Milorad Dodik Formira Paravojne Jedinice u Republici Srpskoj” *Zurnal*, January 12, 2018, <http://www.zurnal.info/novost/20914/milorad-dodik-formira-paravojne-jedinice-u-republici-srpskoj>.

102 Emily Tamkin, “Bosnia Is Teetering on the Precipice of a Political Crisis,” *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/21/bosnia-is-teetering-on-the-precipice-of-a-political-crisis-balkans-election-law-dodik/>.

103 Danijel Kovacevic, “Russia Builds Cultural Centre to Boost Influence in Bosnia,” *Balkan Insight*, March 7, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russia-builds-cultural-centre-to-boost-influence-in-bosnia-03-06-2018>.

104 Petar Ivancov, “Ruski Ambasador: Treba Riješiti Hrvatsko Pitanje u FBiH,” *Vijesti*, August 24, 2017, <http://vijesti.ba/clanak/372361/ruski-ambasador-treba-rijesiti-hrvatsko-pitanje-u-fbih>.

105 David Salvo and Stephanie De Leon, “Russia’s Efforts to Destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, April 25, 2018, <http://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/publications/russias-efforts-destabilize-bosnia-and-herzegovina>.

106 Dijedon Imeri, “Recent Twitter Activity Indicates Russian Plan to Destabilise Bosnia Ahead of General Election in October,” *Jane’s 360*, January 24, 2018, <http://www.janes.com/article/77311/recent-twitter-activity-indicates-russian-plan-to-destabilise-bosnia-ahead-of-general-election-in-october>.

107 Salvo and De Leon, “Russia’s Efforts to Destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

108 Srečko Latal, “Bosnian Serb Leaders Under Fire Over Loan,” *Balkan Insight*, October 16, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/new-loan-for-bosnian-serb-entity-triggers-controversy-10-16-2015>.

109 Jasmin Mujanovic, “Russia’s Bosnia Gambit,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bosnia-herzegovina/2017-09-06/russias-bosnia-gambit>.

Sweden, in particular, is taking key steps to prepare for any attempted Russian influence operations. Its whole-of-society, whole-of-government approach and its investment in the Civil Contingencies Agency – which seeks to inoculate society far in advance of election day – is a model for other countries to follow. Latvia has also taken steps to defend itself. Most notably are the efforts to purge its banking sector of Russia’s illicit financial activity, which allows the latter to exert control over social and political actors that support its objectives.

Nevertheless, vulnerabilities persist. The fracturing of the pro-Western parties in Latvia could impact their ability to form a governing coalition, something the Kremlin seeks to exploit by cultivating the ethnic Russian minority. In Bosnia, structural and ethnic divides, as well as historic and cultural connections, play into Russia’s hand and stymie integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. In Sweden, Russia is influencing domestic debates regarding immigration and NATO membership with its disinformation, which serves to divide society.

The community of democratic countries must be better attuned to Russia’s tactics to influence their elections and the longer-term geopolitical views of their citizens. They must also recognize that, due to its weakened global and regional position, Russia will continue to act opportunistically to exacerbate divisions within democratic societies in order to erode the status quo and that elections are a prime opportunity to meddle. In doing so, Russia has found a way to push back against the current international consensus and global balance of power, which it sees as incongruent with its long-term goals.

While Russia’s efforts around elections are only one part of its broader strategy to sow discord in democratic societies, it is clear that it has the ability to assert itself in the three cases examined here given the groundwork it has already laid. It is also clear that it will continue to use its asymmetric toolkit against transatlantic countries in an effort to exacerbate weaknesses and discredit electoral processes and democratic institutions. Knowing Russia’s interests, aims, and tools is half of the battle. The other half is being aware of and addressing the domestic elements it is trying to influence. Its approach exploits existing divisions; it does not create them.

While countries must defend their elections, they must also turn to ongoing domestic concerns and societal divisions that can be leveraged by external influence.

How democratic societies respond to this challenge by Russia matters. As Robert Kagan has put it, “the future of the international order will be shaped by those who have the power and the collective will to shape it.”<sup>110</sup> Russia’s is a challenge to the durability of the liberal democratic system. Pushing back against it must be a collective endeavor that starts by clarifying the danger it poses and building resilience against it at home.

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<sup>110</sup> Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, New York: Vintage Books, 2009, 105.

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