Covert Foreign Money

Financial loopholes exploited by authoritarians to fund political interference in democracies

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Alliance for Securing Democracy

The Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD), a bipartisan initiative housed at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, develops comprehensive strategies to deter, defend against, and raise the costs on authoritarian efforts to undermine and interfere in democratic institutions. ASD brings together experts on disinformation, malign finance, emerging technologies, elections integrity, economic coercion, and cybersecurity, as well as regional experts, to collaborate across traditional stovepipes and develop cross-cutting frameworks.

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Executive Summary

In addition to more widely studied tools like cyberattacks and disinformation, authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China have spent more than $300 million interfering in democratic processes more than 100 times spanning 33 countries over the past decade. The frequency of these financial attacks has accelerated aggressively from two or three annually before 2014 to 15 to 30 in each year since 2016.

We call this tool of foreign interference “malign finance,” defined as “the funding of foreign political parties, candidates, campaigns, well-connected elites, or politically influential groups, often through non-transparent structures designed to obfuscate ties to a nation state or its proxies.” A typical case involves a regime-connected operative funneling $1 million to a favored political party, although buying influence in a major national election costs more like $3 million to $15 million.

Rather than start our analysis by focusing on any given policy area, we review open-source reporting in 16 languages to identify malign finance cases credibly attributed to foreign governments. Finding that approximately 83 percent of the activity was enabled by legal loopholes, we catalogue the resulting caseload into the seven most exploited policy gaps.

Broader than just money flowing through straw donors, shell companies, non-profits, and other conduits, malign finance includes a range of support mechanisms innovated by authoritarian regimes to interfere in democracies, from intangible gifts to media assistance. As such, policy strategies to address these vulnerabilities are not limited to campaign finance reforms, but also include greater transparency requirements around media funding, corporate ownership, campaign contacts with foreign powers, and other issues.

In addition to identifying loopholes, our case study informs the scope of our recommended policy solutions, which are meant close off channels for foreign financial interference without infringing upon the speech rights of domestic political spenders or jeopardizing bipartisan support. Each of our recommendations balances these trade-offs differently based on empirical, legal, political, and administrative considerations vetted in consultation with more than 90 current and former executive branch officials, Congressional staffers from both parties, constitutional law scholars, and civil society experts.

This report is organized around each of the seven U.S. legal loopholes that need to be closed, starting with the most urgent priorities, plus an eighth chapter on the need for stronger governmental coordination.

1. Broaden the definition of in-kind contributions

Legal definitions of political donations are too narrowly scoped in many countries, effectively legalizing some foreign in-kind contributions. Examples include loans to Marine Le Pen’s party from banks controlled by Russian leader Vladimir Putin and his proxies, luxurious gifts and trips paid for by Russian oligarchs in Europe and Chinese United Front operatives in Australia, and black-market services provided by Kremlin instrumentalities. U.S. President Donald Trump invited foreign support in two consecutive presidential elections, enabled by a narrow reading of the U.S. prohibition against foreign nationals contributing anything of value.

The term “thing of value” should be more broadly defined, interpreted, and enforced, such that it unambiguously includes intangible, difficult-to-value, uncertain, or perceived benefits. The most robust form this change could take would be new legislation, although a similar result could be achieved by the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Federal Election Commission (FEC) enforcing existing law more broadly.

2. Report campaign contacts with agents of foreign powers

Authoritarian regimes send intermediaries on secret missions to enrich favored donors, politicians, or parties, as demonstrated by operations on four different continents. Nine elite Russian expatriates who donated to the U.K. Tories are named in the classified annex of a parliamentary report on Russian threats to British democracy. Zhang Yikun, a leader in China’s United Front work, is implicated in multiple cases of funneling money to New Zealand political parties and candidates. Yevgeny Prigozhin,
Putin’s go-to oligarch for deniable hybrid warfare operations, offers package deals—including backpacks of cash, tailor-made news outlets, troll farms, and armed forces—to help the Kremlin’s preferred African leaders and presidential candidates obtain and hold on to power. 5 The U.S. Department of Justice indicted George Nader, an American advisor to the ruler of the United Arab Emirates, for allegedly funneling more than $3.5 million to the 2016 campaign of Hillary Clinton in order to gain access to and influence with the candidate and then use that to gain favor with, and potential financial support from, the U.A.E. 6

U.S. campaigns should have to report to law enforcement offers of assistance from foreign powers. Legislation like the SHIELD Act would require that type of reporting, although Congress should consider removing the exemption for contacts with foreign election observers, clarifying a broad definition of agents, covering big donors, and more narrowly scoping it toward non-allied countries to avoid closing off space for benign foreign relations. 7

3. Outlaw anonymous shell companies and restrict subsidiaries of foreign parent companies

Foreign governments and their operatives use corporate entities, similar to their usage of human straw donors, as footholds to establish a legal presence—and thus the ability to donate—within target countries. This problem is most pervasive in the Anglo-American financial system, which offers deep asset markets, secure property rights, and the ability to incorporate without identifying owners. For example, Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman used an anonymous Delaware shell company to hide contributions funded by elite Russian businessmen, while a web of London-based entities tied to Kremlin-connected oligarch Dmytro Firtash have donated to numerous British politicians. 8

Legislation like the Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2020 would outlaw anonymous shell companies by forcing U.S. firms to report their true (beneficial) owners to the Treasury Department. 9 This information would be held securely and confidentially, disclosed only to support law enforcement investigations. While shell companies are by far the most important corporate vulnerability, Congress should also take targeted steps to tighten restrictions on political activity by U.S. subsidiaries of foreign parent companies, such as making CEOs certify compliance or blocking donations by firms substantially owned by nationals of adversarial countries. However, this subsidiary loophole has mostly been exploited for corrupt commercial motives rather than geopolitical operations meant to weaken target societies.

4. Disclose foreign donors to non-profits

Foundations, associations, charities, religious organizations, and other non-profits are handy vehicles for malign finance because Western legal systems treat them as third parties permitted to spend on politics without meaningfully disclosing the identities of their donors. For example, far-right parties in Europe such as Alternative for Germany, the Freedom Party in Austria, and the League in Italy each have non-profit conduits that can channel foreign money into elections. 10 Russia secretly funds non-profits serving as bespoke fronts to execute specific mandates, like a Dutch think tank campaigning against a Ukrainian trade deal with the European Union, a Delaware “adoptions” foundation lobbying against sanctions on Russia, environmental groups opposing U.S. hydraulic fracking, and a Ghanaian nonprofit employing trolls pretending to be African Americans. 11 Lastly, non-profits have been used as vehicles for elite capture, such as bribery run through CEFC China Energy, Firtash’s use of his British Ukrainian Society to influence elites in London, and Russian secret agents and money launderers working to cultivate top U.S. politicians through the National Rifle Association. 12

Legislation like the DISCLOSE Act would require U.S. non-profits that advocate for a clearly identified political candidate to publicly disclose the identities of their donors, whether they are foreign or domestic. 13 We also propose legislation more targeted toward malign finance, avoiding public disclosure requirements for domestic “dark money” groups. It would require all U.S. non-profits—whether they spend on politics or not—to report the identities of all their funders to law enforcement, while only having to publicly reveal their foreign funders. Compared to the DISCLOSE Act, this proposal would include 501(c)(3) charitable organizations, exclude corporations, identify beneficial owners, include forms of income beyond just donations, and require reporting of financial audits.

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6 Indictment, United States v. Andy Khawaja, George Nader, et al., No. 1:19-cr-00374 (D.D.C., November 7, 2019), Doc. 1, pp. 6 (“Khawaja—Nader Indictment”); David D. Kirkpatrick and Kenneth P. Vogel, “Indictment Details How Emirats Sought Influence in 2016 Campaign,” The New York Times, December 5, 2018; Nader and his straw donors conspired to cause four political committees supporting Clinton “to unwittingly file false campaign finance reports concealing these unlawful campaign contributions from the FEC and the public by falsely stating that the contributions were made by [the straw donors] when in reality they were funded by Nader.”


9 United States Congress, S.Amdt.2198 to S.4049 - AML Act, submitted June 25, 2020. An earlier version of this legislation was called the ILLICIT CASH Act.


13 United States Congress, S.1147 - DISCLOSE Act, introduced April 11, 2019. The DISCLOSE Act would apply to corporations, LLCs, labor unions, 527 organizations, and tax-exempt entities organized under section 501(c) of the tax code, except for 501(c)(3) charities because they are prohibited from spending on elections.
5. Disclose online political ad buyers and ban foreign purchases

Russia, China, Iran, and other foreign powers continue to buy political ads on social media platforms in order to covertly influence elections and public opinion in democratic societies. These secret ad campaigns are often legal because online ads are not subject to the same disclosure rules and foreign restrictions applicable to print and broadcast media.

A bill like the Honest Ads Act would require public disclosure of the sources of payment for online political ads, similar to rules that have long applied to traditional ad mediums. Legislation like the PAID AD Act would expand the foreign source ban to apply to ad purchases at any time, not just the period when U.S. buyers are regulated a month or two before elections. It would further prohibit foreign governments from buying issue ads in election years to influence the election. Those types of rules around ad purchases should extend to beneficial owners, while prohibitions like the PAID AD Act could be limited to adversarial countries.

6. Disclose foreign funding of media outlets

The cutting edge of Russian interference appears to be the intersection of malign finance and information manipulation, including covert funding of online media outlets. European intelligence services see the Kremlin’s hand behind financial and content support for at least six far-right “junk websites” in Ukraine, and purportedly independent local news outlets based in Berlin and the Baltics. Investigative journalists have scrutinized U.S.-based fringe internet news sites suspected of receiving foreign funding, but have not found definitive answers because their finances are well-kept secrets and no disclosure is required.

U.S. technology companies should have to maintain publicly accessible “outlet libraries,” similar to the “ad libraries” required by Honest Ads except that they would mandate disclosure of the beneficial owners who fund online media outlets using internet services provided by U.S. technology companies. Similar to how U.S. banks are employed to enforce sanctions and are responsible for collecting and verifying beneficial ownership information, the legal obligation to operate these proposed outlet libraries should fall to U.S. web hosting providers, domain registrars, search engines, advertising technology firms, and social network platforms. Online media outlets wanting to use these services would need to provide tech companies with the identities of their funders—including equity owners, advertisers, and donors—for inclusion in the library. Covered outlets should include news organizations whose websites receive more than 100,000 unique monthly visitors or social media engagements while excluding publicly traded companies and other outlets already required to disclose ownership. The scope could be further limited to outlets receiving at least 10 percent of their financial support from abroad and require disclosure only of those foreign funders.

For traditional media outlets, Congress should require the FCC to again prohibit foreign-owned companies from acquiring more than 25 percent of U.S. broadcast licenses or at least give Congress a chance to overrule allowances. Lawmakers should require public disclosure when foreign agents like Sputnik and RT seek time on U.S. airwaves and clarify on-air disclaimers so that listeners know when they are hearing propaganda sponsored by the Russian government rather than just receiving an hourly attribution to some parent corporation that most Americans have never heard of.

7. Ban crypto-donations and report small donor identities to the FEC

In order to conceal financial flows into Western politics, authoritarian regimes have shown an intent to exploit two emerging technologies offering anonymity. First is the threat of political spending in the form of cryptocurrencies, a medium of exchange that Russian military intelligence mined, acquired, laundered, and spent on its 2016 hack-and-dump infrastructure because it is easier to keep off the radar of U.S. authorities. Second is the risk of donor bots capable of automating thousands of political contributions in the names of stolen identities, keeping such operations under wraps by capping donations at the $200 disclosure threshold.

Donations and political ad purchases in the form of cryptocurrencies should be completely prohibited. Small donor disclosures require more nuanced handling. Campaigns, parties, and super PACs should have to report small donor identities to the FEC, which should make the information publicly accessible through a secure, limited, and conditional gating process. Any member of the public requesting access to the data should have to complete a security check and commit to not publicly disseminate or misuse personal information. This would deter stalkers, snoops, and other bad actors from abusing the data while enabling investigative journalists, watchdogs, and academics to analyze it for patterns of possible straw donor schemes.

8. Coordinate across the executive branch and reform the FEC and Treasury

A particularly aggressive 17 percent of malign finance cases do not operate primarily through legal loopholes. Examples include Russian oil profits earmarked to fund the League in Italy and

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various United Front bribery and straw donor schemes. When authoritarian regimes are caught breaking the law in ways that involve large sums of money, that boldness is often reflective of broader regional strategic influence campaigns authorized at the highest levels. One reason we are confident that malign financial activity has truly accelerated since 2014 rather than the West simply paying more attention is detailed reporting on multi-vector regional campaigns approved by heads of state. Putin authorized campaigns against Europe in 2014, the United States in 2016, and Africa in 2018. Chinese leader Xi Jinping elevated United Front work in 2014 and 2015, which has primarily targeted the Asia-Pacific but also extended to support the Belt and Road Initiative as far west as the Czech Republic and Africa. 23

The United States has failed to fortify its financial defenses since malign finance and other tools of election interference became top national security threats in 2016.

U.S. administrative responses to foreign interference campaigns need to be similarly supported by the president and coordinated “in a sweeping and systematic fashion.” 24 The Alliance for Securing Democracy has recommended appointing a foreign interference coordinator at the National Security Council, creating a Hybrid Threat Center at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and establishing other avenues for coordination. 25 We explain how economic departments and agencies should feed into these coordinating bodies, how the FEC needs structural reform to overcome partisan gridlock, and how Treasury should reorganize to dedicate as much administrative priority to fighting authoritarian influence as it does to combatting terrorist financing.

Groundwork for sweeping policy overhaul

The last time the United States faced an emerging threat of civil infrastructure converted into asymmetric weaponry, the adversary’s arsenal did not include dirt on opponents, straw donors, shell companies, non-profits, ads, media outlets, or emerging technologies. Rather, it was airplanes flying into buildings.

Over the seven weeks following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, among other responses, the U.S. government enacted the most sweeping overhaul in a generation to its anti-money laundering laws, started reorganizing executive branch agencies and functions around combatting terrorist financing, and persuaded 30 countries to impose similar financial security protections. One reason why U.S. policymakers were ready to hit the ground running was that Congress—having seen the Russia mafia laundering billions through New York—spent the previous two years investigating how foreign financial institutions were exploiting loopholes in the U.S. financial security architecture in order to formulate bipartisan policy solutions. 27

The United States has failed to similarly fortify its financial defenses since malign finance and other tools of election interference became top national security threats in 2016, although some preliminary policy development work has begun. About half of the reforms we recommend mirror or build upon legislation already introduced in Congress, like the SHIELD Act, AML Act, DISCLOSE Act, Honest Ads Act, PAID AD Act, and FEC structural reforms in H.R. 1, even if in some cases we propose modifications to bills like these to ensure their scope targets the malign activity observed in our survey. 28 The other half of our recommendations are split among executive branch coordination, some straightforward statutory amendments, and five newly developed proposals: broadening the definition of a “thing of value,” requiring all non-profits to publicly disclose foreign funders, creating “outlet libraries” to identify beneficial owners, improving rules for traditional media, and mandating small donor reporting. These proposals would require some public debate and drafting work that should begin now in order to be ready when a political window opens. At the same time as we work to put our own financial security house in order, the United States should lead the democracies of the world to promote an open, transparent, and secure arena for political finance.

Our hope is that the comprehensive empirical research provided in this report on financial loopholes exploited by authoritarian regimes to fund political interference in democracies will jump-start a policy reform initiative to build resilience against this threat. There is no time to lose. Just like airplanes in the summer of 2001 and cyberattacks in the summer of 2016, the system is currently blinking red about incoming rubles and yuan.


Introduction and Methodology

U.S. public awareness of the tools deployed by Russia and other authoritarian regimes to undermine Western democracies has evolved in recent years.

In 2016 the primary focus was on cyberattacks: hack-and-dump campaigns and the probing of U.S. state election systems during the 2016 election season. More details came out in the years after, but by late 2016 the perception was that Russia “hacked” the U.S. election.29

During the 18 months that followed the 2016 election, the U.S. government and American public learned more about information manipulation on social media run in large part out of a troll farm based in St. Petersburg.30

The sense that foreign interference is mainly just an online activity was reinforced in 2019, when the Mueller investigation concluded that Russia’s two principal operations against the United States involved disinformation and cyberattacks, with the investigation not seeming to have exhaustively followed the money.31 Similarly, just a couple years ago, the U.S. intelligence community still viewed covert Russian funding of political parties as mainly a danger for Europe, not the United States.32

U.S. officials appear to have changed their view by 2020, now seeing malign finance as another leading tool used by foreign powers to undermine U.S. democracy. In February 2020, U.S. intelligence officials warned Congress that the Russian government is interfering in the 2020 election and knows it needs a new playbook of as-yet-undetectable methods.33 At the time, public reports did not reveal what those new methods might be. But it turned out that one week before that briefing, U.S. officials warned states of three offline methods not seen in 2016—tactics we broadly include within malign finance: funding support to candidates or parties, covert advice to political candidates and campaigns, and the usage of economic or business levers to influence a campaign or administration.34 U.S. officials warned that “Russia has sought to take advantage of countries that have perceived loopholes in laws preventing foreign campaign assistance.”35 They pointed to specific cases that will be discussed at length in this report.36

Authoritarian governments and their proxies find it relatively cheap, easy, and oftentimes legal to spend money tilting democratic institutions or processes—starting with but not limited to elections—in favor of perceived agents of chaos and division in democracies.

As with online and information-based tools of authoritarian interference, malign finance undermines democracies by manipulating the freedoms of open societies into vulnerabilities. It exploits rights to immigrate, conduct international business, fund independent media, donate to and interact with political campaigns, and otherwise move about and participate in the private sector and civil society. It is vitally important that efforts to build resilience do not sacrifice these values.

Sustainable reforms require a bipartisan focus on the national security threat associated with foreign efforts to undermine democracy. This will be particularly challenging for a tool like malign finance that operates through political actors and touches upon controversial policy areas such as campaign finance, counterespionage, financial transparency, and media funding.

Recognizing the political sensitivities surrounding some of the issues our recommendations address, we have chosen to begin our investigation into malign finance with an evaluation of the evidence and let that be the basis for our proposed policy reforms. This paper will carefully define malign finance, survey the cases, classify them into the top policy loopholes, and recommend targeted reforms. We commence with a brief review of some relevant literature.

Policy-driven literature

Most comparative studies of national legal frameworks around foreign political spending begin with a survey of existing campaign finance laws and regulations, noting policy gaps that could allow foreign donations.

The most widely cited study of this kind is a database compiled by International IDEA.37 The first question they ask—whether foreign donations are outlawed—finds that they are indeed prohibited in two thirds of the 180 countries surveyed.38 Our colleagues have referenced this data to warn that roughly half of E.U. member states do not fully ban foreign donations.39

A similar approach was taken by the U.S. Law Library of Congress in its 2019 comparative study of the laws and policies in

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32 See Peter Foster and Matthew Holthouse, “Russia accused of clandestine funding of European parties as US conducts major review of Vladimir Putin’s strategy,” The Telegraph, January 16, 2016.
34 See Eric Tucker, “US: Russia could try to covertly advise candidates in 2020,” AP News, May 4, 2020. This categorization into three tactics that we would include within “malign finance” seems to be an evolution in the DOJ’s framework since July 2018, when the DOJ identified two types of cyber operations, covert and overt information operations, and a fifth tactic called “covert influence operations to assist or harm political organizations, campaigns, and public officials,” which includes violations of the foreign-source ban and “might involve covert offers of financial, logistical, or other campaign support to, or covert attempts to influence the policies or positions of, unwitting politicians, party leaders, campaign officials, or even the public.” U.S. Department of Justice, Report of the Attorney General’s Cyber Digital Task Force, Washington, July 2, 2018, pp. 4-5.
36 See excerpt from the memo from the FBI and DHS to the states about how Russian strategists believed to be working for Prigozhin “were involved in political campaigning in approximately twenty African countries during 2019.” Tucker, AP News, 2020.
38 Ibid.
13 major democracies. They came to the reassuring conclusion that “most … countries surveyed in this report … have laws prohibiting foreign donations … defined broadly to include all forms of support having monetary value.”

While these legal surveys provide a valuable starting point for analysis, they do not always focus on the gaps being exploited by foreign powers. This leads to results that we find problematic in both directions.

On the one hand, the reason why the International IDEA survey finds that several countries only partially restrict or do not ban foreign donations is that their foreign-source rules have explicit carve-outs. For example, in Germany and Austria, foreign nationals may make small donations, while Finland allows parties to take money from international groups that share its ideology. While these loopholes should be closed, we could not find major cases of them being used by foreign regimes.

At the same time, two major countries classified as fully banning foreign donations are the United States and the United Kingdom. While statutorily true, our research finds that one of these two countries is targeted in about a quarter of all the cases of foreign powers and their proxies funneling money into democratic politics through the seven loopholes, especially companies and individuals serving as straw donors or foreign agents.

Similar surveys of legal gaps within the United States draw attention to the fact that only three states—North Dakota, New Hampshire, and Montana—have statutes outlawing foreign campaign contributions. These state laws merely replicate the federal foreign-source ban, which already covers federal, state, and local elections throughout the United States. The reason these states copied the federal law into their own books is because first-time candidates sometimes do not check FEC requirements, instead relying solely on state statutes for guidance.

One genuine sub-national gap in the federal foreign-source law is that it covers “elections” but not state and local ballot initiatives or referendums. As with the partial restrictions in several European countries, closing this loophole would be a simple and worthy endeavor and indeed this reform is included in many recent election integrity bills such as the SHIELD Act. Russia has targeted local referendums like the Catalan and Scottish independence votes through information manipulation campaigns,

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41 Ibid.
42 See International IDEA, “Political finance database.”
43 Ibid.
44 Germany allows foreign nationals to donate up to €1,000. Austria allows up to €2,500. Finland allows parties to receive foreign contributions from individuals and international associations and foundations that represent the party’s ideological attitude See National Conference of State Legislatures, “State Limits on Contributions to Candidates, 2019-2020 Election Cycle,” June 2019.
47 No court has definitively ruled on the issue since the foreign-source ban was amended in 2002, but the FEC has only treated ballot measures as elections in cases when they are linked with the election of a candidate. In all other cases, enforcement of the foreign-source ban around ballot measures has been precluded by FEC gridlock (coming to a split 3-3 vote on MUR 6678 in 2015). The FEC has the legal authority to change this with a rulemaking, but it seems more likely and more permanent to enact the reform through legislation, as the SHIELD Act would do. See Statement of Reasons of Commissioner Ellen L. Weintraub before the Federal Election Commission, In the matter of Mindgeek USA, Inc., et al., MUR 6678, April 23, 2015; Statement of Reasons of Vice Chairman Matthew S. Petersen and Commissioners Caroline C. Hunter and Lee E. Goodman before the Federal Election Commission, In the matter of Mindgeek USA, Inc., et al., MUR 6678, April 30, 2015.
48 SHIELD Act.
as well as a Dutch referendum via malign finance.\textsuperscript{49} However, we did not uncover examples of foreign government interference in the United States through this gap in the federal foreign-source law.\textsuperscript{50}

A more politized manifestation of this policy-driven approach involves focusing on the risk of foreign money flowing through domestically controversial legal channels, such as corporate political spending. When the U.S. Supreme Court decided in 	extit{Citizens United vs. FEC} that companies can make unlimited political donations, then-U.S. President Barack Obama warned that this would include spending by foreign-owned corporations.\textsuperscript{51} A decade later, this is still the most hotly debated policy issue on the topic of foreign financial influence, despite the absence of evidence that foreign powers have used donations by corporate subsidiaries to harm the United States.\textsuperscript{52}

**Case-driven analysis starts by defining malign finance**

Our evidence-based investigation will start by defining the foreign activity about which we are concerned: malign financial influence operations conducted by authoritarian states and their proxies to undermine Western democracies.

Because research around the malign finance threat is still developing, there has yet to emerge a clear and broadly agreed academic or professional consensus around its definition. However, our own thought process has been helpfully influenced by seven key concepts framed in recent literature.

First, the FBI defines “malign foreign influence” as “subversive, undeclared, criminal, or coercive attempts to sway our government’s policies, distort our country’s public discourse, and undermine confidence in our democratic processes and values.”\textsuperscript{53}

Second, the U.S. intelligence community defines Russian “malign influence” as “a myriad of … covert, coercive, corrupting, or counterfactual activities that typically exceed the limits of normal statecraft and diplomacy and typically involve covertly funding and manipulating foreign organizations and using agents of influence, propaganda, disinformation, and cyber influence activities.”\textsuperscript{54}

Third, in 	extit{The Kremlin Playbook}, the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Center for the Study of Democracy describe an “unvirtuous cycle” of Russian malign influence that begins with either political or economic penetration, expands and evolves through corrupt patronage networks, and sometimes develops into state capture.\textsuperscript{55} 	extit{The Kremlin Playbook} 2 detailed enabling hubs in six European financial centers.\textsuperscript{56}

Fourth, the Center for International Private Enterprise uses the term “corrosive capital” to describe financing that lacks transparency, accountability, and market orientation flowing from authoritarian regimes into new and transitioning democracies.\textsuperscript{57} Unlike pure corruption, corrosive capital is backed by governments with goals that are political rather than economic or with an authoritarian agenda that is inseparably political and economic.

Fifth, in 	extit{Democracy in the Crosshairs}, Neil Barnett and Alastair Sloan coin the term “political money laundering.”\textsuperscript{58} Whereas traditional money laundering conceals ties to criminal origins, political money laundering hides links to a hostile state.\textsuperscript{59} 	extit{In Collapsing the Russian Tripod}, Barnett and Andrew Foxall build on this by framing “finance” as one of three legs of Russia’s political warfare weaponry, which typically involves covert and deniable funding of large-scale international political influence operations.\textsuperscript{60}

Sixth, an Atlantic Council series called 	extit{The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses} describes Russian networks of political influence spanning ten European countries.\textsuperscript{61} It explains how Moscow cultivates relationships with political parties, individuals, and other

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\textsuperscript{49} See Marco Giuanangeli, “Russia’s meddling in Scottish politics ‘discovered by accident,’” The Express, November 5, 2017; Zembla and De Nieuws BTV, 2020.

\textsuperscript{50} The closest example we could find appears to be driven solely by profit motives, which as we will discuss in the next section, is not included in our review of operations meant to weaken target societies. The case involves a real estate firm owned by the richest person in Asia (a Chinese national closely linked to Xi Jinping and other Beijing elites) funding a Beverly Hills ballot initiative to oppose the building of Hilton Hotel across the street from (and thus competing with) a hotel the Chinese national owns. See Mark Shonkwiler to The Wanda Group, “BE. MUR 7741, The Wanda Group,” MUR 7741, Federal Election Commission, November 9, 2017 (“Shonkwiler/Wanda Group Correspondence”).

\textsuperscript{51} See White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address,” U.S. National Archives, January 27, 2010.


\textsuperscript{53} Christopher Wray, “The Threat Posed by the Chinese Government and the Chinese Communist Party to the Economic and National Security of the United States,” remarks given at the Hudson Institute, Video Event: China’s Attempt to Influence U.S. Institutions, Federal Bureau of Investigation, July 7, 2020. In a speech about the Chinese threat, FBI director Christopher Wray added that “China is engaged in a highly sophisticated malign foreign influence campaign, and its methods include bribery, blackmail, and covert deals.” Wray, 2020. The DOJ similarly defined the same term in 2019 as “covert actions by foreign governments intended to affect U.S. political sentiment and public discourse, sow divisions in our society, or undermine confidence in our democratic institutions to achieve strategic objectives.” United States House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, 	extit{Securing America’s Elections Part II: Oversight of Government Agencies, Testimony of Deputy Assistant Attorney General Adam S. Hickey}, October 22, 2019 (“Hickey Testimony”). In addition to cyber and information operations, the DOJ warns of “covert influence operations to assist or harm political organizations, campaigns, and public officials.” Hickey Testimony.

\textsuperscript{54} National Intelligence Council, 	extit{Lexicon for Russian Influence Efforts}, June 15, 2017.


\textsuperscript{57} John Morrell, et al., 	extit{Channeling the Tide: Protecting Democracies Amid a Flood of Corrosive Capital}, Washington: CIPE, September 18, 2018, pp. 5.


\textsuperscript{59} Barnett and Sloan suggest that political money laundering uses similar illicit methods of layering to obscure the source of funds. That is true in some cases, when malign finance flows through the traditional banking system, such as the Russian loan to Marine Le Pen’s party. But as we will see as we evaluate the evidence, malign finance also includes an important final step of getting the money into the accounts of a political party or campaign, which usually involves licit activities enabled by legal loopholes in campaign finance (e.g., France defines in-kind contributions so narrowly that Le Pen was allowed to borrow from a foreign bank), corporate ownership, media funding, or counter-espionage laws. See Barnett and Sloan, 2018.


groups in order to infiltrate politics and influence policy. To stay powerful, these financial networks often remain hidden.62

Seventh, a seminal piece on Chinese malign influence is Magic Weapons by Professor Anne-Marie Brady at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand.63 Alongside interference through hacking and social media, Brady highlights “donations to political parties from foreign governments or entities.”64

We drew upon these perspectives when developing our own definition shown in the box on the previous page.

Similar to the U.S. intelligence community, we use the term “malign” to underscore the nefarious intent to weaken democracies by undermining political processes and institutions. As with other tools of foreign interference, this is a form of geopolitical hostility that involves surreptitiously influencing political debate, decision-making, electoral outcomes, and societal cohesion in order to harm a country.

Whereas existing comparative studies of foreign political spending focus legalistically on donations by any foreign national, our definition takes a geopolitical dimension by limiting its scope to “a nation state or its proxies.” At the same time, the scope is broad in that our cases studies will examine the wide range of intermediaries and methods of moving money from authoritarian regimes to democratic “political parties, candidates, campaigns, well-connected elites, or politically influential groups.”

Malign finance “often” includes “non-transparent structures,” but it is not a necessary condition. Similarly, we intentionally do not limit the definition to either legal or illegal cases alone, as our evidence reveals that foreign actors take advantage of both licit and illicit means.

Finally, it is important to distinguish malign finance from the closely related challenge of international corruption, which has a different motive. Whereas malign finance involves government-linked operations meant to weaken target societies, corruption is driven by personal or commercial profits. Politics is closer to the means of corruption and the ends of malign finance, with the ultimate aim to inflict societal damage as a form of political warfare.

As such, we will not automatically include every case of foreign-funded political donations, money laundering, and bribery. Even though corruption leads to collateral damage that hurts societies by undermining essential institutions of democracy, capitalism, and the rule of law, we use “malign” to refer to operations designed with an objective of directly weakening societies.

This is not to say that corruption is an unrelated or lesser evil. In addition to societal and equity considerations, corruption has replaced ideology as the glue that holds together kleptocratic authoritarian regimes, making it an important tool for deterring aggression.65 Corruption also paves the road for (and is worsened by) “corrosive capital,” lubricates the “unvirtuous cycle” of malign Russian influence, and intersects with many cases of malign interference analyzed in this report.66 For these reasons, anti-corruption will play an essential role in ending foreign interference.

We think those reasons for tackling corruption stand strongly on their own without also equating it—an always and everywhere without proof—to foreign interference as a form of geopolitical hostility. We have seen that form of argumentation too often, particularly since foreign interference became a clear and present danger in 2016. This is not the case with research cited in our literature review, but rather with some advocates for repealing Citizens United or regulating gun control implying that Beijing or Moscow is pulling the strings behind every foreign-entangled business or dark money group when in fact they appear to be driven by private interests. Using the apparent corruption of opposing political interests to casually suggest they are funded by foreign adversaries inadvertently does those adversaries’ work for them by sowing distrust and otherwise muddying the democratic process. We only catalogue cases when authoritarian regimes are credibly shown to be funding political elements in order to weaken the target country.

**Identifying and categorizing the cases**

The work of identifying cases started in mid-2017 and was initially released by the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) in late 2018 as the Authoritarian Interference Tracker.67 This proprietary database exposes the Russian government’s foreign interference activities in more than 40 transatlantic countries from 2000 to the present.68 ASD culled data from open-source reporting, research, and legal documents in 16 languages to document activity across five tools, including malign finance, cyber operations, information manipulation, civil society subversion, and economic coercion.69

The often-covert nature of authoritarian interference activities complicates the process of identifying clear and direct evidence of malign activity attributable to authoritarian regimes. Our data set and Appendix A only include incidents where there has been credible public evidence, assessed on the extent and reliability of the sources and outlets. In a few instances, we explicitly highlight cases that have been publicly reported but do not fully meet our standard for proven attribution (e.g. Andy Khawaja’s allegations of Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. funneling hundreds of millions of dollars into the 2016 election through anonymous small donors), not to imply wrongdoing but instead to draw pol-

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62 Lead author Aliya Polyakova notes that “[f]inancial links would inevitably make Moscow’s enterprise less effective: when ostensibly independent political figures call for closer relations with Russia, the removal of sanctions, or criticize the E.U. and NATO, it legitimizes the Kremlin’s worldview. It is far less effective, from the Kremlin’s point of view, to have such statements come from individuals or organizations known to be on the Kremlin’s payroll.” Polyakova, et al., Trojan Horses, pp. 4.

63 Brady, 2017. The term “magic weapons” was used by Xi Jinping in 2014 when he gave a speech about the importance of the United Front Work Department, the wing of the Chinese Communist Party that promotes its interests through subversive means.


68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.
icy lessons from clear loopholes revealed by the reporting.  

While the ASD Tracker provides an essential base of activity to begin our analysis, its caseload does not match one-for-one with the cases tallied and described in this paper, all of which are included in Appendix A. This is for a couple reasons.

First, tracking all five tools enables ASD to highlight the interconnectivity between different parts of the amorphous toolkit, such as cases that are primarily information operations but secondarily involve covert foreign government funding. As this paper focuses on the financial tool, we removed most cases for which money only plays a secondary or supporting role.

Second, the initial iteration of the ASD Tracker only included incidents perpetrated by actors linked to the Russian government. As ASD is in the process of adding Chinese government operations to the ASD Tracker, we determined that including cases of Chinese activity in this paper strengthens our ability to identify loopholes and derive policy recommendations from them. However, we maintained the same threshold for inclusion, which is that the activity fits the definition of the tool along with credible public attribution to an authoritarian regime. Our intention was to provide a sample of cases illustrating the methods used by these foreign powers, not to catalog every allegation of malign finance.

Therefore, we compiled a list of 115 of the most relevant malign finance cases, assessed the main financial channel in each instance, and categorized them by the legal loophole that was exploited, if any.

We tabulated the amount of money flowing in each case, if known, finding that the median value is about $1 million. Major national elections cost considerably more, such as the $3.5 million U.A.E. operates spent trying to influence with the 2016 campaign of Hillary Clinton, $11 million Marine Le Pen's party borrowed from Russian banks in 2014, or roughly €16 million Montenegrin prosecutors believe Oleg Deripaska and another Russian oligarch spent bankrolling the anti-NATO bloc in 2016. The total value of known malign financial activity over the past decade adds up to more than $300 million.  

Another notable finding is that many cases span multiple financial channels and exploit various legal loopholes while also breaking some laws. We describe different strands of those multifaceted cases at various points throughout this paper.

For example, the primary reason why Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman were able to use political donations to buy potential influence with President Donald Trump and those in his orbit is that it is their legal right to do so as American citizens. They were indicted because they allegedly named fictitious straw donors on FEC forms and because the money ultimately came from a Russian national. They also used a Delaware-incorporated anonymous shell company to obscure their own role while they received financial support from an infamous Ukrainian oligarch named Dmytro Firtash and the family of Yandex CFO Greg Abovsky. That operation also intersected with the case of Trump soliciting interference in the 2020 election by pressuring Ukraine to announce investigations of his opponent, which the DOJ treated as falling within a campaign finance loophole concerning in-kind contributions. Because that story exploits four different loopholes, it is interspersed throughout the paper, although it is mainly told in the context of citizen straw donors.

Similarly, the extent to which oligarchs in the upper echelon of the Russian and the Chinese power structures wield the full range of malign financial tools to undermine democracies can be seen from the United Kingdom to Australia. Separately from his dealings with Parnas and Ukraine, Firtash has spent at least 15 years trying to launder his reputation and buy political power in London through donations made through his British employees, shell companies, and charitable foundations. Chinese billionaire Huang Xiangmo funded an influence operation in Australia involving in-kind gifts, straw donor schemes, casinos and real estate companies, and non-profits tied to Beijing. While their malign financial tactics are largely legal, the two men are being pursued by authorities on charges of bribery and unpaid taxes, respectively. While Australia has taken the national security threat seriously, the United Kingdom has not, as will be discussed in the chapter on straw donors and agents supported by foreign powers.

mate relies upon the assumption that the unquantified half of cases involves similar values, scaling up the total amount accordingly. This figure excludes the most sizable but difficult-to-value cases, such as Russian government illicit financial and fiscal support for breakaway regions in Ukraine and Georgia. It excludes the case with the single highest value—$130 million worth of oil profits Matteo Salvini and his associates reportedly negotiated for with Russian government officials—because it seems the deal became public before it was completed. For all these reasons, we believe our $300 million estimate is conservative and the true amount of malign financial flows is considerably larger, an assessment shared by illicit finance experts we have consulted.

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72 Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, rich Russians have stashed $800 billion offshore, including $195 billion to $235 billion owned by Kremlin cronies, with half that presumably belonging to Putin. See Thomas Piketty, et al., “From Soviets to Oligarchs: Inequality and Property in Russia, 1905-2010,” NBER Working Paper No. 23712, The National Bureau of Economic Research, August 2017, pp. 23, figure 5c; Anders Åslund, Russia’s Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy, New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2019, pp. 174. The Russian government andPutin’s custodians launder money to offshore pools partly to create parallel black-cash budgets for the Kremlin’s strategic purposes. See Catherine Belton, Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020, pp. 404, 418. However, our estimate of more than $300 million spent carrying out political interference only includes flows from authoritarian regimes that have been specifically shown to have ended up in the coffers of political actors within our definition of malign finance. For example, out of the tens or even hundreds of billions of dollars that flowed through the Dnabse Bank, Mol- dovan, Azerbaijani, Deutsche Bank (mirror trades), and Magnitsky money laundering schemes, most of the ultimate destinations remain unknown. The only Laundromat transactions proven to have reached political actors are $270,000 for a top donor to Latvia’s pro-Russian political party and $21,000 for a Polish think tank associated with pro-Kremlin political activity in Europe. See Harry Holmes, “Donor to Latvia’s Biggest Party Linked to Laundromat,” OCCRP, March 21, 2019; OCCRP, “European Center for Geopolitical Analysis (ECGA),” August 22, 2014. We could only identify quantifiable values—either financial or in-kind benefits—for about half of the 115 cases in our dataset, with the other half involving substantial credibly reported details but no publicly known monetary values. Our $300 million esti-
Notably, the main thrust of these financial operations appears to be legal in 83 percent of cases (including those in which laws were broken in some incidental activity connected to the scheme). This underscores the amount of policy reform that needs to be implemented, which we organize around the top seven loopholes (each a slice in the pie chart):

**Breakdown of loopholes through which authoritarian regimes secretly funnel money into democratic politics**

![Pie chart showing the breakdown of loopholes]

1. **In-kind contributions from foreign nationals**: Foreign governments and their proxies have been able to provide—and in some cases politicians able to solicit or accept—inangible or difficult-to-value benefits for political campaigns.

2. **Straw donors and agents supported by foreign powers**: Proxies holding citizenship in target countries and undeclared foreign agents have been used by governments aiming to curry favor with or funnel money to political campaigns and candidates.

3. **Companies with foreign funders**: Shell companies and businesses with foreign funding are used as hidden channels for illegal foreign donations.

4. **Non-profits with foreign donors**: Non-profits are not required to publicly disclose the identities of their donors or their accounting and control systems, leading them to be used as conduits to funnel foreign money into politics.

5. **Online political ads bought by foreign nationals**: Political advertisements that appear online are not subject to the same disclosure rules and foreign restrictions which print and broadcast media must comply with, enabling foreign powers to secretly buy online political ads.

6. **Media outlets with foreign funding**: Foreign powers and their proxies sometimes fund or otherwise support ostensibly domestic media enterprises, making them potential tools for subversive foreign influence and information operations.

7. **Emerging technologies offering anonymity**: Cryptocurrencies and cashless payment cards offer donors anonymity, while autocrats toy with the idea of funneling covert support through small donors whose identities go undisclosed.

Coordination between government agencies and improvements in enforcement are also vital for stopping both legal and illegal activities.

**Developing targeted U.S. policy solutions**

While the cases and loopholes describe activity targeting 33 democracies, our policy recommendations are tailored specifically to the American legal and political context.

About half of the loopholes involve campaign finance rules. The other half could be addressed with greater transparency around media funding, corporate ownership, campaign contacts with proxies of foreign powers, or other policy areas.

Separately, about half already have legislative solutions drafted in Congress, including the SHIELD Act for foreign powers and their proxies interacting with political campaigns, the AML Act and certain provisions in H.R. 1 and other bills for FEC structural reforms and foreign-owned companies, the DISCLOSE Act for non-profit disclosures, and the Honest Ads and PAID AD acts for online political ads.

But while most of these bills have attracted bipartisan sponsorship, none have yet been passed by the Senate. In some cases (AMLI and Honest Ads), we see no defensible reason for this. For others (SHIELD and PAID AD), while the bills as drafted would be very important improvements, this report proposes minor modifications that could make them more politically palatable or substantively focused.

Our evaluation of how 115 malign finance cases operated provides critical information about how reform proposals should be scoped.

In some cases, policy changes should be narrowly focused on ways that target foreign interference without getting crosswise with powerful domestic political spenders. With roughly half of our proposals (e.g., a new complement to DISCLOSE), we recommend limiting the new requirements to dealings with foreign money or nationals. In some cases, we would suggest further narrowing the scope to countries that are not NATO members or major non-NATO allies to avoid closing off space for benign commercial and diplomatic ties with friendly countries. In other
cases (such as AML and Honest Ads), foreign powers can be seen exploiting domestic U.S. financial infrastructure to conduct foreign interference, so we recommend sticking with a broader (including domestic) scope.

We also found it notable how varied and creative Russia and other authoritarian regimes are in finding new and different financial channels through which to funnel money. As such, the disclosure requirements we recommend often involve expanding existing reform proposals to include a broader sweep of potential flows. As one example, disclosures of foreign funding should apply to all forms of foreign remuneration (e.g., not only charitable contributions to non-profits and equity ownership of media outlets, but also those entities’ membership fees, sponsorships, advertising revenues, and any other forms of foreign payments). As another example, reporting should not be limited to the immediate person who sent the money but should look through to the ultimate beneficial owner and any intermediaries who may have touched the flow of funds.

We also applied these same principles of proper targeting to new proposals we recommend for the five loopholes unaddressed by draft legislation: broadening the definition of a “thing of value,” requiring all non-profits to publicly disclose foreign funders, creating “outlet libraries” to identify beneficial owners, improving rules for traditional media, and mandating small donor reporting.

Altogether, our empirical analysis informs our policy recommendations in ways that give them a surgical focus on malign financial activity. We consulted more than 90 current and former executive branch officials, Congressional staffers from both parties, political party and campaign staffers, national security law specialists, media and campaign finance lawyers, constitutional scholars, policy researchers, transparency advocates, and various other experts. We incorporated their substantial input to craft our policy recommendations to be achievable from political, administrative, and legal perspectives.

This paper will proceed with a chapter discussing each of the seven loopholes, starting with the most urgent challenges. In each case, we will describe the activity identified in our survey of cases before outlining our policy proposals. We will end with a chapter on enforcement and coordination priorities and then a conclusion.
1. In-kind Contributions from Foreign Nationals

We broadly found three different sub-categories of foreign in-kind contributions to campaigns, candidates, and elected officials: (1) tangible benefits such as financial loans or expensive gifts, (2) media services like tailor-made social media manipulation, and (3) valuable information like opposition research.

Loans and gifts

This problem is as old, basic, and obvious as bribery itself. Unfortunately, several countries fail to broadly regulate the provision of tangible contributions, let alone intangibles.

The leading example involves €11 million of loans that French politician Marine Le Pen’s National Front party and its fundraising association borrowed from Russian banks tied to the Kremlin, which wanted to “thank” Le Pen for recognizing Russia’s annexation of Crimea.81 The payments took advantage of a loophole in French electoral law that allows foreign entities to provide loans—just not donations per se—to political parties.82 While the Russian loan was controversial when it was first uncovered and President Emmanuel Macron called for a ban on all foreign funding of European political parties, the loophole persists to this day.83

Another major example is Australian then-Senator Sam Dastyari, who accepted gifts from entities and individuals linked to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).84 The in-kind contributions included repayment of debt incurred by the senator’s office, donated bottles of wine, fancy tea catering, and full funding of a 15-day trip to China.85 While these in-kind contributions were legal and publicly reported, Dastyari was evasive about what the foreign supporters got in return.86 He resigned after revelations that he stood next to one of the CCP-linked donors and took China’s side in a dispute with Australia about the South China Sea.87

Appendix A includes other cases of tangible gifts such as a Russian state-owned enterprise paying the debts of a top adviser to Czech President Miloš Zeman, a Russian convict with ties to the Kremlin selling a house at half price to a Sweden Democratic party official, and a Russian oligarch funding lavish trips for a top Swiss law enforcement official to lobby against corruption and money-laundering prosecutions.88 As with the Le Pen and Dastyari cases, we only include cases in which we have some credible reporting around the ties to a foreign power and what they might be seeking in return. We have not included cases that have not been similarly established, such as alleged violations of the foreign emoluments clause or seemingly favorable real estate transactions involving U.S. politicians.89

Media services

An increasingly common form of in-kind foreign support for political campaigns involves black-market media services. These are closely related to friendly political ads or media outlets (loopholes #5 and #6) or non-financial information operations (such as the Internet Research Agency run by Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin). In these cases, the media support is not just paid for and run by a foreign power, but it is also offered to the campaign as a service. In that sense, it is not just an unrelated third party but more like an unpaid foreign vendor providing an in-kind contribution that would be prohibited under a comprehensive campaign finance legal system.

Four cases demonstrate how political campaigns on different continents have received Russian media support from four very different components of the Kremlin’s decentralized state apparatus.

First is Putin’s preferred oligarch for plausibly deniable hybrid warfare missions of a sensitive and unsavory nature, whose operations are closely coordinated with top Kremlin officials and tightly integrated within the Russian military.89 Yevgeny Prigozhin offers African leaders and presidential candidates a full suite of services to hold on to power, enrich themselves, and repress civil society.90 In Madagascar, Prigozhin’s operatives skirted electoral laws by presenting themselves as merely interested individuals buying billboards and airtime on television stations.91 They also produce and distribute the island’s biggest newspaper to advocate for Kremlin-funded candidates (including the current president of Madagascar).91 In the Central African Republic, Prigozhin launched a radio station, owns a free newspaper, and bribes media figures to write favorable stories.92 In Libya, Russia

87 Ibid.
88 See The Local.se, “Russian Sweden Democrat aide resigns over suspect deal,” September 24, 2016.
91 See MacFarquhar, 2018. While Mueller’s findings on Prigozhin’s ties to the Russian government remain redacted, Bellenguez has documented the connection by revealing hundreds of phone calls between Prigozhin and top Kremlin officials, while also showing Wagner mercenaries to be tightly integrated with the Russian Defense Ministry and its intelligence arm, the GRU, operating in a chain of command under central Kremlin control. See Bellenguez, 2020. Bellenguez concludes, “Prigozhin’s private infrastructure—along with that of other government-dependent entrepreneurs, like Kostantin Malofeev—it appears serves as a deniable veneer and a round-tripping money laundering channel for government-mandated overseas operations.” Bellenguez, 2020.
92 See BuchDESTVEnsky et al., 2019.
supports both militia commander Khalifa Haftar and his opponent Saif Gaddafi (son of the late dictator), both of whom plan to run in the next presidential election. In one case, Prigozhin’s men pitched their services in a professional format, with a slide show entitled “Saif Gaddafi. Revival of Libya. Strategy.” Prigozhin’s company has supported both candidates by recapitalizing the old pro-Haftar propaganda channel, creating a new pro-Haftar newspaper, and consulting for a pro-Haftar TV station. Alongside the valuable content and perceived credibility of local media services, information manipulation for these regimes and five others in Africa is also supported by Prigozhin’s troll farms, which Facebook executives warn have taken to joining forces with local actors.

Political campaigns on different continents have received Russian media services from four very different components of the Kremlin’s decentralized state apparatus.

Second, Russian state-owned enterprises have implemented election interference. Rosatom learned the hard way that it needs to create what they call “a favorable information field” in foreign countries. Rosatom got caught up in a corruption scandal that would have enriched the son and financial backers of South African President Jacob Zuma to entice him to let Rosatom build a very expensive power plant, only to see the revelations take President Zuma to entice him to let Rosatom build a very expensive power plant, only to see the revelations take down Zuma in 2018, along with Russia’s image and Rosatom’s contract in the country. As a result, in 2019, Rosatom took a broader political approach to similarly support a favored incumbent in Bolivia, sending La Paz 10 social media spin doctors to support the incumbent’s messaging platform and run “black PR campaigns” against his critics. Scandal also brought down then-President Evo Morales, but it was because he also rigged the actual vote count, separate from Russia’s covert media services. If anything, the domestic electoral fraud created so much public furor that the public did not even notice the credible reports of Russian interference.

Third, some operations—such as the election of a useful idiot to the German parliament—are initiated and run by various and sundry chaos agents formally positioned as Russian spies, diplomats, criminals, lawmakers, consultants, and commentators. Opportunities that look promising and may be sensitive to cross-cutting are pitched Putin’s presidential administration for approval. Five months before the German election in 2017, the Kremlin received such a proposal to support Markus Froschmaier from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. An internal Russian strategy memo said Froschmaier’s chances of winning were “high” and the result would be that “we will have our own absolutely controlled MP in the Bundestag.” A week later, Froschmaier’s campaign appears to have followed up through a chain of journalists and PR consultants, advising the Kremlin: “Besides material support we would need media support as well […] any type of interviews, reports and opportunities to appear in the Russian media is helpful for us.” Froschmaier promised to advocate for Russian interests and “immediately start operating in the foreign policy field” after being elected, which he continues to do today.

Fourth, another tool used by Russian military intelligence (GRU) is WikiLeaks. Over the past decade, the Russian government has repeatedly supported WikiLeaks (with funding, a visa for Julian Assange, and a supply of hacked materials) while uniquely benefiting from the timing and content of the organization’s revelations, as well as its public positions. In order to coordinate a more impactful distribution of hacked emails ahead of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, GRU officers contacted WikiLeaks in June of that year and transferred files in July and September that were then released by WikiLeaks to denigrate Trump’s opponent, Hillary Clinton. Trump received regular updates about upcoming WikiLeaks releases from Roger Stone (who claimed to be in contact with Assange through intermediaries in London) and the Trump campaign planned a press strategy, communications campaign, and messaging based on possible releases. Treating Stone as their connection to WikiLeaks, senior campaign officials pressed Stone for explanations when expected releases were apparently delayed and congratulated him after releases were timed in ways apparently sought by the campaign.

109 When Julian Assange started WikiLeaks in 2006, he wrote, “Our primary targets are those highly oppressive regimes in China, Russia and Central Eurasia.” In 2010, as he became famous for publishing U.S. war logs and diplomatic cables, Assange claimed to have negative information about Russia’s government and businesses. But he never made good on the promise to hold Russia accountable, potentially because of his escalating legal battle with the United States and need for external support. In late 2010, Assange was arrested by London police for questioning by Sweden about sexual assault allegations while the United States opened an investigation into WikiLeaks. In January 2011, the Russian government issued him a visa and suggested he be given a Nobel Peace Prize. The U.S. government pressured Visa and MasterCard to stop processing donations to WikiLeaks and the non-profit’s funding started drying up. In April 2012, Russia threw WikiLeaks a financial lifeline by paying an undisclosed amount of money for Assange to host a show. In the years since, WikiLeaks has taken public positions that seem Russian interests (opposing NATO and Western support for Ukraine, support for Trump and Brexit, whatever the Kremlin is promoting). But even if Russia is promoting, Russia benefits from the Russia-United States tensions created by WikiLeaks, which Russia knew about and was happy to exploit.
112 See Badanin, et al., 2019.
114 See Badanin, et al., 2019.
As will be discussed in the next chapter, this intangible form of assistance may have exploited the same legal loophole as the June 2016 “first Trump Tower meeting.”

Of course, countries other than Russia also appear to have offered media services to campaigns. At the “second Trump Tower meeting,” George Nader told senior Trump campaign officials that the crown princes of Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. wanted to help Trump win in 2016. Also in attendance was Joel Zamel, the head of an Israeli private security company called Psy-Group that employed several former Mossad officers. Zamel had drawn up a multimillion-dollar proposal to deploy social media manipulation to shape U.S. public opinion in favor of Trump. While the Trump campaign officials insist they turned down the offer, Zamel later provided a presentation about how social media helped Trump win and Nader paid Zamel up to $2 million.

**Thing of value**

The Mueller report made this loophole apparent in April 2019. The report included a three-part section covering foreign “efforts or offers” to “provide” (Trump Tower meeting) or “distribute” (WikiLeaks) negative information about Hillary Clinton in order to help Trump. In both cases, Mueller determined that the evidence was not sufficient to press charges.

Mueller first introduced the governing law by citing the constitutional grounding described by then-Judge Brett Kavanaugh in Bluman v. FEC (2011): “[T]he United States has a compelling interest … in limiting the participation of foreign citizens in activities of American democratic self-government, and in thereby preventing foreign influence over the U.S. political process.” Mueller explains that “federal campaign-finance law broadly prohibits foreign nationals from making … ‘a contribution or donation of money or other thing of value’ … and prohibits anyone from soliciting, accepting, or receiving such contributions … [which] ‘includes’ ‘any gift, subscription, loan, advance, or deposit of money or anything of value’ made by any person for the purpose of influencing any election”.

Within days of the Mueller report becoming public, lawyers for Trump started arguing that it says dirt on an opponent cannot be a “thing of value.” In reality, Mueller says the law supports the view that information could be a thing of value before going on to note some possible constitutional issues and cautioning that “it is uncertain how courts would resolve those issues.”

Mueller concludes “There are reasonable arguments that the offered information would constitute a ‘thing of value’ within the meaning of these provisions, but the Office determined that the government would not be likely to obtain and sustain a conviction for two other reasons …”. Those two seemingly more prohibitive reasons involve empirical facts of knowledge and valuation: that Mueller could not prove beyond a reasonable doubt both that campaign officials acted willfully and that the value of the information exceeded the statutory maximum.

Unfortunately, even though Mueller’s hesitation had more to do with how much these particular individuals knew about campaign finance law and the specific words used to present the information to them, the impression that information cannot be a thing of value has taken on a life of its own over the past year, fueled by personal and political motives.

When asked in a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing whether a president should report foreign information to law enforcement, Attorney General Bill Barr hesitated before seeming to say yes but only if it comes from a foreign intelligence service. When asked the same question in an interview, Trump said “I think I’d take it.”

The Democratic FEC chair publicly rebuked Trump, saying the FEC “has recognized the ‘broad scope’ of the foreign national contribution prohibition and found that even where the value of a good or service ‘may be nominal or difficult to ascertain,’ such contributions are nevertheless banned.” Unfortunately though, as will be discussed in the chapter on enforcement weaknesses, partisan division makes the views of individual FEC commissioners toothless.

On July 25, 2019, Trump asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky for a “favor” of two investigations that might influence

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114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
117 Unlike the considerations around the Trump Tower meeting, the facts and analysis about the declaration to prosecute the U.S. side of the WikiLeaks case are redacted in the Mueller report, so we do not know the extent to which that case involves the thing-of-value issue. Mueller Report, Vol. I, pp. 183-191.
120 Ibid.
122 See Mueller Report, Vol. I, pp. 187. Mueller presents both sides of the issue: "[The governing law and FEC regulations] support the view that candidate-related opposition research given to a campaign for the purpose of influencing an election could constitute a contribution to which the foreign-source ban could apply. A campaign can be assisted not only by the provision of funds, but also by the provision of derogatory information about an opponent. Political campaigns frequently conduct and pay for opposition research. A foreign entity that engaged in such research and provided resulting information to a campaign could exert a greater effect on an election, and a greater tendency to ingratiate the donor to the candidate, than a gift of money or tangible things of value. At the same time, no judicial decision has treated the voluntary provision of uncompensated opposition research or similar information as a thing of value that could amount to a contribution under campaign-finance law. Such an interpretation could have implications beyond the foreign-source ban ... and raise First Amendment questions. Those questions could be especially difficult where the information consisted simply of the recounting of historically accurate facts." Mueller Report, Vol. I, pp. 197.
124 Mueller Report, Vol. I, pp. 187-188. On the question of whether the meeting participants knew they were breaking the law, Mueller cautioned that “Trump Jr. could mount a factual defense that he did not believe his response to the offer and the June 9 meeting itself violated the law. Given his less direct involvement in arranging the June 9 meeting, Kushner could likely mount a similar defense. And, while Manafort is experienced with political campaigns, the Office has not developed evidence showing that he had relevant knowledge of these legal issues.” As for proof that the value of the information exceeded $2,000 to be a misdemeanor or $25,000 for a felony, Mueller said market pricing “would likely be unavailable or ineffective in this factual setting. Although damaging opposition research is surely valuable to a campaign, it appears that the information ultimately delivered in the meeting was not valuable. And while value in a conspiracy may well be measured by what the participants expected to receive at the time of the agreement, ... Goldstone’s description of the offered material here was quite general. His suggestion of the information’s value — i.e., that it would ‘incriminate Hillary’ and ‘would be very useful to [Trump Jr.’s] father’ — was non-specific and may have been understood as being of uncertain worth or reliability, given Goldstone’s lack of direct access to the original source. The uncertainty over what would be delivered could be reflected in Trump Jr.’s response (‘if it’s what you say I love it’) (emphasis added)." Mueller Report, Vol. I, pp. 187-188.
125 See Li Zhou, "William Barr’s pause on a question about 2020 and foreign adversaries is incredibly telling," Vox, May 1, 2019.
126 Lucien Bruggeman, “’I think I’d take it!’ In exclusive interview, Trump says he would listen if foreigners offered dirt on opponents;” ABC News, June 13, 2019.
127 Ellen Weintraub, Twitter post, September 26, 2019, 5:32 PM.
voter perceptions in the 2020 election. The DOJ subsequently determined that the request did not constitute a campaign finance violation because "help with a government investigation could not be quantified as a ‘thing of value’ under the law." At the Senate impeachment trial, Trump’s lawyers said, “It’s not campaign interference for credible information about wrongdoing to be brought to light.”

U.S. Recommendation:

“Thing of value” should be broadly defined, interpreted, and enforced to unambiguously include intangible, difficult-to-value, uncertain, or perceived benefits.

Correcting this notion that hostile foreign powers can legally give U.S. campaigns dirt on their opponents or other intangible assistance is the single most urgent reform that we recommend, as this vulnerability has been exploited in two consecutive presidential elections. Loans and gifts have not been a major problem in the United States because they are unambiguously covered by statute. Media services have been used to interfere in U.S. politics without major consequences, as U.S. prosecutors have not yet pressed charges in either the cases of WikiLeaks or the second Trump Tower meeting. Broadening the definition of a thing of value should help deter both that type of activity and any other forms of intangible assistance, so that will be our focus.

At least three governmental actors could help broaden the definition or clarify the scope of a “thing of value:” Congress, the DOJ, and the FEC. The fact that the legal scope of a “thing of value” is debatable on the margin opens up opportunities for various governmental actors to move the needle toward a broader definition. That is, whichever branch of government manages to overcome partisanship and act assertively will have authorities to move the goalposts in a stricter direction through legislation, rulemaking, or prosecutorial discretion.

Some reform advocates argue that the statutory definition is already broad enough, so all that is needed is stronger interpretation and enforcement by the FEC and the DOJ. While this point may be legally correct and morally compelling, in our view it is politically insufficient. We agree that administrative authorities should act regardless of what Congress does, but that does not mean lawmakers should wait for them.

In fact, legislation would be the single most preferred course of action (which is why we order it first in the discussion below), because legal statutes are harder than some other authorities to reverse or ignore. The next-most effective response would be more aggressive DOJ enforcement, followed by FEC issuance of additional regulations.

Congress

The legal hurdles cited by Mueller can be a helpful guide to legislation, not to re-litigate the 2016 election but to prevent foreign assistance from being similarly welcomed and used in the future. Lawmakers should clarify campaign finance law in accordance with the three specific elements described in Mueller’s declination to prosecute the Trump Tower meeting.

First, a “thing of value” should include intangible, difficult-to-value, uncertain, or merely perceived benefits, including but not limited to any form of opposition research, politically motivated investigations (or assistance with such investigations), or any other type of negative information about perceived political opponents.

Second, all campaign workers should receive a brief web-based training on these rules and have to certify their understanding, which would both build resilience and limit the extent to which any transgressions can be defended later as not having been knowing and willing.

Third, legislation should clarify that the statutory thresholds of prosecution (≥$2,000 for a misdemeanor; ≥$25,000 for a felony) can be met not only by the value of goods or services offered (e.g., dirt on a rival) but also the costs of transmission incurred by any foreign national (e.g., travel, accommodations, stipends, etc.).


130 Bobby Allyn and Brian Naylor, “Democrats Decry ‘Dangerous’ Foreign Interference Argument Made By Trump Lawyers,” NPR, January 29, 2020; CNN Live Event, “The Impeachment Trial of Donald Trump Continues: A Day Full Of Questions From The Senate,” CNN, January 30, 2020, 5:00pm. This comment was widely condemned as condoning foreign interference. The next day, the same lawyer clarified in a way that echoed a point Mueller made about difficult “First Amendment questions” regarding “historically accurate facts” (even though Mueller only cited that as one consideration leading to judicial uncertainty, not as one of his two reasons not to prosecute, supporting our point that this conflation has been advanced by lawyers defending Trump over the past year and taken on a life of its own unintended by Mueller). Specifically, Trump’s lawyer said: “If it comes from overseas, a thing of value is a prohibited campaign contribution, it’s not allowed. If it comes from within the country it has to be reported. So that would mean that anyone a campaign got information from within the country about an opponent or about something else that maybe would be useful in the campaign, they’ll have to report that information as a thing of value under the campaign finance laws. That is not how the laws work and there would be tremendous First Amendment implications if someone attempted to enforce the laws that way. So that is simply the point that I wanted to make. Here information that is credible information is not something that is prohibited from being received under the campaign finance laws.” CNN Live Event, 2020.

**Department of Justice**

The repeated failure to enforce the law banning the solicitation or receipt of foreign intangible contributions should be corrected by a deliberate and unmistakable reversal toward more aggressive prosecutorial discretion. The DOJ should update its guidance for the prosecution of election offenses to underscore the broad scope of a “thing of value,” and the Attorney General should distribute a memorandum to all U.S. attorneys underscoring this broad interpretation and strongly encouraging them to prosecute violations of the foreign-source ban.\textsuperscript{135}

**Federal Election Commission**

The FEC should adopt an interpretive rule, such as the September 2019 draft prepared by then-Chair Ellen Weintraub, summarizing the foreign-source ban with recognition of the “broad scope” of a “thing of value” to include goods or services even when their value “may be nominal or difficult to ascertain.”\textsuperscript{136}

Again, all of these laws, regulations, and enforcement priorities should be undertaken as soon as possible, without waiting for the other authorities to act.


Authoritarian regimes have a track record of subverting target societies through covert human and financial ties to politicians and their backers. More than any other aspect of malign finance, it is essential that Western countries address this vulnerability in ways that stay true to the values of an open society governed by the rule of law. That precludes guilt by association, ethnicity, wealth, or accusation.

For the purpose of our review, that means strictly limiting our focus here to cases that are the subject of public concern expressed by Western law enforcement or intelligence services. We deliberately exclude cases that do not meet this threshold, even if they have been the subject of some public debate. For example, some analysts speculate that the biggest Russian businesses and oligarchs (including some billionaires who got rich in Russia in the 1990s and maintain tight operational security) are required by the Kremlin to set aside a portion of their wealth for “patriotic” activities abroad.

Similarly on the alleged receiving end of Russian money, Western leaders who consistently act obsequiously toward Putin—from Czech President Miloš Zeman to U.S. President Trump—draw scrutiny and suspicion around their obscure history of financial dealings with Russian mobsters and shell companies. Others are more open about their business with Moscow, like former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who advances Russia interests even through it is unclear how much financial incentives influence his behavior.

We do not include those instances in our analysis. Accusing a duly elected national leader of secretly being on the payroll of a hostile foreign power would be, in the words of Anton Shekhovtsov, “a very strong accusation, for which really strong evidence is needed.” Journalists have found sufficiently strong evidence in some leader-level cases, like Russia’s attempts to fund the political party of Matteo Salvini (who reportedly negotiated for oil money to fund his political party while serving as Deputy Prime Minister of Italy) and the financial backers of Jacob Zuma (who pushed South Africa into a nuclear deal it could not afford after Zuma’s son and the family who funds him secretly bought the uranium mine that would profit from supplying the plant). On the Russian side, the U.S. government has similarly shown interference to have been funded and controlled by major oligarchs like Yevgeny Prigozhin and Oleg Deripaska. But we exclude unsubstantiated instances for reasons of fairness and because we view the high standard of evidence as vital to the health of democracy.

A national security state of mind

Stopping foreign efforts to undermine democracy will require balancing civil liberties against threats to national security. When it comes to citizens and residents that government agencies have warned are funnelling covert foreign money from authoritarian regimes, the best and worst responses by national governments are illustrated by Australia and the United Kingdom, respectively.

In 2015 the Australian national security intelligence service (ASIO) quietly warned the heads of the major political parties about taking donations from two billionaire property developers because they may have been conduits for Chinese Communist Party interference in Australian politics: Chau Chak Wing, a Chinese-born Australian citizen, and Huang Xiangmo, a Chinese national who was then a permanent resident of Australia and a leading promoter of Chinese foreign policy.

When the Liberal and Labor parties were still accepting the donations 18 months later, “senior official sources” told the Australian press about the briefings, creating public pressure that finally forced the parties to stop taking the money.

Over the year that followed, the Australian government—led in clear and decisive terms at the highest level by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull—explained the threat of foreign interference to the public, reviewed its national security laws for gaps, designed the most sweeping counterintelligence overhaul in decades, took on board some public feedback, and enacted

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**2. Straw Donors and Agents Supported by Foreign Powers**


140 See Rick Noack, “He used to rule Germany. Now, he oversees Russian energy companies and latches out at the U.S.,” Washington Post, August 12, 2017; Raphael S. Cohen and Andrew Radin, Russia’s Hostile Measures in Europe Understanding the Threat, Los Angeles: RAND Corporation, 2019, pp. 126-130.


144 Australia and the United Kingdom represent two ends of the spectrum as to how seriously targeted countries have taken these issues as national security challenges. For comparison, the United States has generally performed well in terms of investigating cases (e.g., the Mueller report and the House investigation into Ukraine in 2019) but poorly in terms of taking actions and enacting reforms to build resilience and credible deterrence. Whereas New Zealand appears to be following the strong Australian model, many E.U. member states are closer to the British end of the spectrum in that they have not even shown interference to have been funded and controlled by major oligarchs like Yevgeny Prigozhin and Oleg Deripaska. But we exclude unsubstantiated instances for reasons of fairness and because we view the high standard of evidence as vital to the health of democracy.


the legislative package with bipartisan support. In addition to catching up with international best-practices by banning foreign political donations and requiring foreign agent registration, the laws went further by making it illegal for Australians to participate in foreign political influence operations (with prison sentences up to 25 years).

Moreover, Huang was exiled from Australia on national security grounds based on the advice of ASIO, revoking both his permanent residency and his application for citizenship. Sam Dastyari, the Australian senator who accepted gifts from Huang and lobbied for his citizenship application, resigned in disgrace after leaked audio proved that he took China’s side in a dispute over the South China Sea while standing next to Huang.

Some countries are following the strong example set by Australia. In New Zealand, proxies of the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front have allegedly funneled secret donations to parties and candidates on at least four occasions. Taking inspiration from Australia, New Zealand is responding by investigating and prosecuting both straw donors and recipients, kicking bad actors out of the party or the country, using public hearings and official studies to educate the public about foreign interference, and now considering a comprehensive slate of 55 potential reforms.

But not all countries are learning the lesson. The most lax model is “Londongrad.” More than a physical place for Russian oligarchs and their ill-gotten money, the nickname describes the situation in the United Kingdom, whereby many members of the British elite are ignoring the national security threat posed by Russian malign financial activity in the British political system.

A landmark report on the Russia threat to British democracy completed in 2019 by the U.K. Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) warned that “the U.K. now faces a threat from Russia within its own borders” in the form of “Russian oligarchs and their money.”

The ISC report helps avoid overly broad language that could be picked up by xenophobic voices. The broad term “Russians” is most prominently used in the context of critics of Vladimir Putin who have sought sanctuary in Britain and need better protection. Threat actors can be either Russian expatriates in London who remain “members of the Russian elite who are closely linked to Putin” or their Western enablers who manage and lobby for the Russian elite and government.

Yet the report is strikingly clear about the role some elements of the British immigration system have played in opening this vulnerability to malign financial influence. It concludes that “[t]he key to London’s appeal was the exploitation of the U.K.’s investor visa scheme, introduced in 1994,” allowing a holder investing £2 million to smoothly turn the visa into a British passport, which comes with important legal rights such as the ability to donate to political parties. About 60 percent of these “golden visas” went to Russian and Chinese nationals in a process that involves minimal anti-money laundering scrutiny.

The Kremlin’s cultivation of influence in the U.K. made a stride forward in 2003 with an audacious move that three sources claim was conceived and ordered by Putin himself: Send to London on a golden visa a Russian oligarch who is thoroughly controlled by Putin but sufficiently distant from Putin’s long-time St. Petersburg friends and KGB cronies as to be a publicly acceptable face in the West of Russian business—Roman Abramovich—and have him win over the British people by investing heavily in their beloved Chelsea Football Club, which would also help buy clout with FIFA and use it to lobby for Russia to host the World Cup.

As Abramovich established Moscow’s beachhead on the Thames, more Russian billionaires followed, along with their money in the form of unscrutinized IPOs and cash infusions from offshore financial centers. Alisher Usmanov, a formerly imprisoned Kremlin-friendly metals tycoon, bought a London home in 2008 and has made sizable Western investments, although he has had to reduce stakes and has struggled to take control over English soccer clubs as U.S. senators call for him to be sanctioned for corruption. In 2009 and 2010, former KGB spy Alexander Leb...
edev bought the loss-making Evening Standard and The Independent, bringing into the London media business his son Evgeny, whose parties are attended by Boris Johnson (who made him a British lord). These and other Soviet-born billionaires access the upper echelons of public life in London through investments in sports, media, energy, mansions, and most importantly for purposes of malign finance: political donations. A section of the ISC report titled “trying to shut the stable door” warns that these business and investment links between the Russian elite and London “cannot be untangled and the priority now must be to mitigate the risk.”

The classified annex of the ISC report on Russian threats to U.K. democracy reportedly names nine elite Russian expatriates who donated to the Conservative Party.

The U.K. has an immigration tribunal system that makes it difficult for the domestic intelligence agency (MI5) to deport foreign citizens on national security grounds. In 2011, MI5 tried and failed to expel a 25-year-old Russian woman who worked as a researcher for (and had an affair with) a member of parliament on the Defense Select Committee. This daughter of a well-connected Russian businessman had drawn scrutiny from MI5 for some time, raising further suspicions when she asked for an inventory of Britain’s nuclear arsenal and locations of international submarine bases, both of which are Russian military intelligence collection priorities. MI5 has had some occasional successes, like when it vetoed the appointment of Pauline Neville-Jones to serve as David Cameron’s National Security Advisor because of her financial ties to Ukrainian oligarch Dmytro Firtash. However, Firtash’s influence machine in London remains intact.

In some cases, elite Russian expatriates connected to Moscow embed deeper into British society by becoming U.K. citizens and even develop “a public profile which positions them to assist Russian influence operations.” This could be viewed as a more public, political, and offensive version of the so-called illegals blending into civilian life, a tactic that Russian intelligence services and other Kremlin proxies have continued to use over the past decade (with sleeper cells caught as recently as 2010 in the United States and 2011 in Germany, and the case of Maria Butina from 2015 to 2018).

As an example involving citizenship, the classified annex of the ISC report on Russian threats to U.K. democracy reportedly names nine elite Russian expatriates who donated to the Conservative Party. First, Alexander Temerko is a former Russian arms tycoon who speaks proudly of his past work with Russia’s defense ministry and current leadership of Russian intelligence, has donated over £1.3 million to the Tories since becoming a British citizen in 2011, and supported his “friend” Boris Johnson’s campaign to take Britain out of the E.U. Second, Lubov Chernukhin is married to a former Putin ally and Russian deputy finance minister, became a U.K. citizen around 2009, and since then has given over £1.7 million to become the Conservative Party’s biggest donor. After Reuters reported on Temerko’s influence in the Tory Party, both he and his ally Chernukhin began making donations to members of the ISC as they were completing their report on Russian interference in British democracy. Temerko and Firtash have also paid John Whittingdale, who is Boris Johnson’s minister responsible for defending Britain from disinformation.

In other cases, Russian spies, diplomats, oligarchs, and state-owned enterprises have reportedly cultivated British business people engaged in politics by dangling lucrative business deals. Arron Banks gave Leave.EU the largest contribution in British political history around the same time as an undercover Russian spy and Moscow’s ambassador to the U.K. connected Banks with a Russian oligarch, who in turn offered exclusive opportunities to make highly profitable investments in Russian gold and diamond firms. There is no sign that Banks took the sweetheart deals, although a company partly owned by his closest business partner, Jim Mellon, did invest in one of the offerings, which was completed at a discounted price and at lightning speed just three weeks after the 2016 U.K. referendum.

165 See Hill and Gaddy, pp. 344; Butina Plea Agreement, pp. 2; ISC Russia Report, pp. 16.
172 See David D. Kirkpatrick and Matthew Rosenberg, “Russians Offered Business Deals to Brexit’s Biggest Backer,” The New York Times, June 29, 2018; Rudolph, 2019; Belton, pp. 440, 583. The U.K. Electoral Commission developed reasonable grounds to suspect that Banks knowingly concealed the truth and was not the “true source” of the money, but then the National Crime Agency found—defining its investigation narrowly—that Banks was legally entitled to take a loan from his Isle of Man company (through which Banks co-owns Manx Financial Group together with Mellon) and pass it on to Leave.EU. See Luke Harding, Shadow State. Murder, Mayhem, and Russia’s Remaking of the West, New York: HarperCollins, 2020, pp. 211-212; U.K. Electoral Commission, “Investigation into payments made to Better for the Country and Leave.EU,” April 29, 2020; U.K. National Crime Agency, “Public statement on NCA investigation into suspected UK referendum offences,” September 24, 2019. Separately, Charlemagne Capital is an investment company co-founded by Mellon, who served as a non-executive director and held a 19.4 percent equity share at the time of the deal (a share that declined later in 2016). Iain Campbell, “Revealed: How Arron Banks’ campaign ‘ambassador’ made his millions in Russia,” Open Democracy, November 10, 2018. Three weeks after the E.U. referendum, Charlemagne Capital participated in a private placement of shares issued at a discount to the market price by the Russian state-owned diamond company, the lucrative deal that had been offered to Banks. See Kirkpatrick and Rosenberg, 2018. Mellon’s representative said that Mellon had stopped out of day-to-day management of Charlemagne Capital and any investment decisions were made by a formal committee. See Kirkpatrick and Rosenberg, 2018. There is no allegation that Banks or Mellon broke the law.
Without clear direction from Number 10, British law enforcement agencies have repeatedly stalled, declined to investigate, defined their remits narrowly, and passed around investigations like hot potatoes. None of the elite Russian expatriates in London or their Western enablers and business partners have faced a Mueller-style probe, which in less than two years included more than 2,800 subpoenas, 500 warrants, 280 email and phone records, 13 collaborations with foreign governments, and interviews of some 500 witnesses (many of whom were pressured into cooperation).  

For a moment after the 2018 poisoning of Sergei Skripal by Russian military intelligence, it looked like London was about to get serious about defending against Russian malign financial activity. When former Prime Minister Theresa May called Moscow’s aggression an “unlawful use of force by the Russian State against the United Kingdom” and expelled 23 Russian diplomats from the country, she also announced that the NCA would bring all its capabilities to bear against Russian corruption. May seemed to be launching a public campaign against the Russian oligarchs—but as May’s political clout faded, her focus narrowed to getting Brexit done and she was unwilling to order an investigation of Russian economic and business leverage over political objectives inside the United States, while one of the “moderate” threats was Russian provision of financial services to sell the laundered gems on the open market.  

Second, Matteo Salvini (the leader of Italy’s right-wing League party who was serving at the time as Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister) reportedly conducted secret negotiations in Moscow with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak. The deal, which appears not to have been completed before it was publicly reported, was for a Russian oil company to funnel profits through a London bank to Eni, a major Italian oil company controlled by the Italian government. The agreed 4 percent discount (worth about $130 million) would be passed along to the League party to fund its 2019 European Parliament election campaign.  

The third case involves Dmytro Firtash, the Ukrainian oligarch who operates more like a Kremlin influence agent than a businessperson per se. Firtash made billions buying natural gas cheaply from Russian state-owned energy conglomerate Gazprom and selling it at marked-up prices to Ukrainians. That fortune, together with loans from bankers close to Putin, enabled Firtash to bankroll the 2010 campaign of pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. There are also allegations that Firtash laundered his corrupt proceeds internationally before repatriating it back to Ukraine to bribe officials in Kyiv. Firtash also devotes considerable effort to activities in the U.K., and has documented financial links to several Conservative MPs and members of the aristocracy (including donations and payments made or controlled by a British businessman who operates as Firtash’s man.

Commodity enrichment

Shifting gears from the response of target countries to the tactics of adversaries, the Russian government often employs international business dealings to enrich and develop leverage over political contributors abroad. In emerging markets, a common method involves exclusively granting favored donors lucrative positions in the corrupt, obscure, and byzantine markets for raw materials. Energy and other commodities are particularly well-suited for malign Russian activity because they are often either difficult to trace or uniquely controlled by the Russian government through state-owned enterprises and loyal organized crime groups. This can be seen in three different examples across Europe: alleged illicit diamond smuggling from Africa, discounted oil exports to Italy, and gas transit through Ukraine.

First, the central allegation about Brexit donor Arron Banks is that he secretly sourced black-market diamonds from Zimbabwe (where sales are strictly controlled due to corruption and human rights abuses, which leads Zimbabwe to sell them to smugglers at deeply discounted prices). According to his former business partner, Banks pretends that illegal diamonds he really obtains from Zimbabwe are discovered in his South African mines so he can sell the laundered gems on the open market. Both South African and Zimbabwean officials believe the Russian intelligence services have indirectly controlled the underground diamond trade in Harare for more than a decade, so anyone reaping profits from it would need support from Moscow.  

Second, Matteo Salvini (the leader of Italy’s right-wing League party who was serving at the time as Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister) reportedly conducted secret negotiations in Moscow with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak. The deal, which appears not to have been completed before it was publicly reported, was for a Russian oil company to funnel profits through a London bank to Eni, a major Italian oil company controlled by the Italian government.  

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180 See ISC Russia Report, pp. 10-11.
183 Ibid.
186 In addition to the cases documented in our case study, see the memo sent by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and FBI warning U.S. states of ways Russia could interfere in the 2020 election. U.S. officials noted the “high” risk of Russian economic and business leverage to influence political objectives inside the United States, while one of the “moderate” threats was Russian provision of financial support to American political candidates or campaigns. See Tucker, AP News, 2020.
in London).197 While Firtash’s corrupt energy apparatus is far less lucrative than it used to be, it continues to support pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine such as Yuriy Boyko. That group is also allied with Putin’s closest proxy in Ukraine, Viktor Medvedchuk, who is worth hundreds of millions of dollars having allegedly benefited from preferential oil and gas trading from Russia to Ukraine.198

The Americans

Turning to the United States, there are two recently revealed cases of foreign powers and their proxies using U.S.-based straw donors to funnel money into political campaigns. The two operations collectively demonstrate that the threat of foreign malign financial activity does not target a single party or candidate but spans political and ideological divides. They also demonstrate the full range of tools and tricks that foreign agents funded by different regimes use to cover their tracks.

The first case involves Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman (associates of Rudy Giuliani and Trump) receiving more than $2 million from pro-Kremlin sources.199 Most of the funds came from the combination of wealthy Russian businessmen (probably Andrey Muravev and the family of Yandex CFO Greg Abovsky) and Dmytro Firtash.200 U.S. citizens Parnas and Fruman spent a portion of the Russian money buying access to U.S. politicians and lawyers involved in the effort to acquire information that could damage former Vice President Joe Biden, Trump’s leading opponent in the 2020 presidential election.201

The second case shows that foreign financial support and cultivation of U.S. politicians is not limited to alleged Russian support or one party. In the 2016 presidential campaign, an advisor to the ruler of the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) named George Nader funneled more than $3.5 million of illegal contributions to Hillary Clinton’s campaign.202 Nader and his U.S.-based conspirators caused political committees supporting Clinton to unwittingly file false FEC reports.203 The indictment does not charge a violation of the foreign-source ban, but it does allege Nader was using access to Clinton to gain favor with, and potentially financial support from, the U.A.E.204

Whereas the past experiences of Parnas and Fruman mainly involve failed businesses and unpaid debts, Nader has spent three decades serving as a shadowy go-between for high-level Middle Eastern officials.205 He also worked with a U.S.-based straw donor named Andy Khawaja who is skilled at connecting unreputable businesses to the international financial system.206 As such, this foreign influence operation featured more sophisticated tradecraft. It started with donations worth $275,000 to gain access to the Clinton campaign before graduating to $1 million contributions to secure a small private meeting with Bill Clinton and allegedly as many as four meetings with Hillary Clinton.207 Because Nader’s sordid personal history likely precluded him from donating himself, he funneled money (disguised as false invoices for software that was never provided) to California-based straw donors, who in turn attended and hosted events with the candidate, inviting Nader as their “guest.”208 The conspirators evaded contribution limits by distributing money to additional straw donors across four PACs supporting Clinton.209 It was all discussed either in person or through coded language transmitted over encrypted applications, which never would have been discovered if not for the Mueller investigation.210

Immediately after the 2016 election, the Nader operation pivoted toward Trump, with Khawaja giving $1 million to the inaugural committee through his payment processing company and inviting Nader to attend as his guest.211 This may be part of a federal investigation into whether people from Middle Eastern countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E. used straw donors to disguise illegal foreign donations to the inaugural committee and a pro-Trump super PAC to buy influence over U.S. policy.212 Another political consultant admitted to having arranged U.S. straw donors to give money to the Trump inaugural committee on behalf of a Russian and a Ukrainian.213

202 See Parnas Filing, pp. 5-7.
204 See Parnas–Fruman Indictment, pp. 5-14; Trump–Ukraine Report, pp. 98-103. Parnas and Fruman are Soviet-born U.S. citizens. While they falsely indicated on FEC forms that some of their donations were made in the name of an anonymous Delaware shell company, some of their other donations were made in their own names.
207 See Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 6-20. In March and April 2016, Khawaja contributed at least $275,000, and brought Nader as his guest to an event for Clinton. On May 6, Nader attended an event at Khawaja’s home with an official from the campaign. On June 24, Nader told a U.A.E. official appearing to be ruler M.B.Z. that he was “traveling on Sat morning to catch up with our Big Sister [Hillary Clinton] and her husband: I am seeing him on Sunday and her in Tuesday Sir! Would love to see you tomorrow at your convenience … for your guidance, instruction and blessing!” Khawaja contributed almost $1 million of money funneled by Nader in order to host a fundraiser for Hillary Clinton at Khawaja’s home on June 26, which featured Bill Clinton and other guests invited by Khawaja. Khawaja told Nader there would also be a June 26 event with Hillary Clinton, while Nader claimed to the official appearing to be M.B.Z. that he met with Hillary Clinton on June 7, June 29, August 23, and October 13, although the indictment does not verify whether these meetings took place. On August 2, Khawaja told Nader he had arranged a two-hour breakfast at his home with only Hillary Clinton, Khawaja, his wife, and Nader, but then an hour later Khawaja told Nader “was too hard to get it set up. Too small of birthday gift [contribution] and the time is worth 5 times more they say,” to which Nader replied “I will press the bakery [funder] to prepare me another tray of Baklawa [money] to arrive in time for that event!” Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 6-20; Kirkpatrick and Vogel, 2019.
209 See Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 18.
210 See Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 6-20.
211 See Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 6-20; Dan Friedman, “Who’s Really Behind a $1 Million Donation to Trump’s Inauguration?” Mother Jones, December 5, 2019.
U.S. Recommendation:

Make campaigns report to law enforcement any contacts they have reason to believe might be operating as intermediaries to a foreign power aiming to funnel support to the campaign.

On its face, the U.S. foreign-source ban is theoretically quite broad, covering both foreign contributions and complicity on the U.S. side. Nevertheless, straw donor schemes are quite common, often without any evidence that the U.S. campaigns or parties know they are taking foreign money. While this challenge overlaps with the problems of shell companies and in-kind intangibles, it also takes the form of U.S. citizens making financial donations in their own names while they are secretly funded by and taking direction from foreign powers, as potentially demonstrated by the Parnas and Nader cases.

This is a hard problem to solve without infringing upon the essential rights of campaigns and citizens to interact with each other (through donations and communications). But policy reforms are needed, because it is naive and risky to assume that political campaigns themselves always have the ability and the willingness to identify and reject all covert foreign donations and influence operations.

An aggressive approach might include some form of governmental (e.g. FEC) involvement in donor vetting, which would present a minefield of First Amendment challenges. We leave it to others to analyze whether those constitutional considerations could be navigated, for example by making such services voluntary for campaigns and by gearing them toward helping campaigns identify illegal (and perhaps only foreign) donations. Such a proposal would require significantly more legal work.

Congress

Instead, we focus on a more moderate approach that has been developed into multiple bills in both chambers of Congress: U.S. election law should be amended to establish a requirement that campaigns report to law enforcement any offers of assistance they receive from foreign powers. This takes a page out of the anti-money laundering playbook, whereby banks must file suspicious activity reports to law enforcement, which analyzes the data systematically for risks that any single bank may be unable or unwilling to see.

The most comprehensive bill mandating campaign contact reports is the SHIELD Act, which passed in the House in October 2019 but remains stalled in the Senate. The bill would require all federal campaigns to notify the FEC and FBI (which in turn share the notification with the two Congressional intelligence committees) within a week of any foreign government, party, or agent offering the campaign help in connection with an election.

The version of corresponding legislation that was successfully voted out of committee in June 2020 in the Senate is known as the FIRE Act. In order to get some bipartisan support, the FIRE Act was watered down in a few notable ways. First, it would only apply to presidential campaigns, not Congressional campaigns. This is problematic because foreign powers have been known to secretly cultivate and support fringe lawmakers (from the Kremlin’s “material support” for and “absolute control” over an AfD parliamentarian to Chinese spies trying to install lawmakers in Australia and New Zealand), and they might also have an interest in election interference that could swing party control over the U.S. Senate. Second, FIRE would not apply to super PACs, only candidates and their authorized committees. Both the Parnas–Fruman and Nader–Khawaja operations involved engaging with super PACs just as much as campaigns. Third, FIRE would not include SHIELD’s requirement to notify Congressional intelligence committees. With that elimination, the path to public awareness of foreign interference in campaigns would depend upon how the information is handled by law enforcement. Finally, FIRE would define several terms in more lenient language.

Unfortunately, Senate Republicans insisted on revising the

217. SHIELD Act.
218. Ibid.
220. Ibid.
222. FIRE Act.
223. The drafters of the FIRE Act were understandably concerned about politicizing notifications by automatically transmitting them to Congress. However, some recent major cases have shown that this is a risk within law enforcement too, from the handling of sensitive information by the FBI’s New York field office in the fall of 2016 to the fact that Trump’s July 2019 call urging the Ukrainian president to investigate his 2020 opponent only came to light through a formal channel to notify Congress. See Garrett M. Graff, “The Real F.B.I. Election Culprit,” The New York Times, July 13, 2018; Greg Miller, et al., “How a CIA analyst, alarmed by Trump’s shadow foreign policy, triggered an impeachment inquiry,” Washington Post, November 16, 2019. Moreover, top leadership of U.S. law enforcement has recently become politicized to such a degree that it cannot be counted on as an honest broker to warn the public about election interference. See Alexander Mallin, “Evidence that anti-SHS’s foreign actors involved in sowing unrest and violence: AG Barr’s,” ABC, June 4, 2020; Warren P. Strobel and Sadie Gurman, “William Barr Looking Into U.S. Finding That Russian Wanted Trump toWin,” The Wall Street Journal, June 21, 2019; Robert Draper, “Unwanted Truths: Inside Trump’s Battles With U.S. Intelligence Agencies,” The New York Times Magazine, August 8, 2020. In this unfortunate environment, the safer route may be to err toward automatic Congressional notification, because at least the politicization will facilitate disclosure on both sides.
224. In addition to the two differences noted above, the FIRE Act says the candidate or campaign must “believe” they are in contact with a “government of a foreign country or any agent thereof,” which is a higher threshold than the SHIELD Act, which said the U.S. side “knows, has reason to know, or reasonably believes” it is a “covered foreign national” (which in turn is defined to include not only foreign agents and governments but also foreign political parties as well as any of those foreign entities’ representatives, employees, servants, or anyone else operating under their order, request, direction, control, supervision, financing, or subsidization, as well as any sanctioned person). It could help deter troubling foreign contacts if prosecutors would not have to prove what the candidate or campaign official “believes” and if the law extends to a broad set of possible proxies (from George Nader to Natalia Veselnitskaya to Lev Parnas, none of whom had registered as foreign agents). FIRE also removed SHIELD’s inclusion of the candidate’s family members, which we think is important given that foreign powers were contacting a spouse and the children of presidential candidates on both sides of the 2016 election. On the other hand, FIRE risks being overly broad by removing a key phrase in SHIELD about reportable contacts having to be “in connection with an election” (which helps preclude benign diplomatic relations, like conversations with allies about policy or broader political matters that do not relate to the U.S. election).
services are worried may be supported by adversarial foreign countries (like the nine Russian donors named in the U.K. report) but for whom the legal evidence and political will has not yet reached the point of kicking them out of the country (like Huang in Australia).

Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, we would narrow the scope of countries for which the broadest part of the bill applies. That is, while offers of contributions (as defined by U.S. election law) should be reportable no matter what country they come from, campaigns should only have to report “information or services to or from, or persistent and repeated contact with” foreign nations if they are from adversarial countries.232 We would not limit these broader (non-contribution) contacts to instances of campaign “coordination or collaboration with” the offer.233 But we would limit reportable broader contacts to persons from NATO countries or major non-NATO allies.234 We recommend this to preserve space for benign foreign relations, such as general and frequent conversations about current events with officials from allied countries that are simply establishing diplomatic ties without any intention of providing electoral assistance. While this adjustment is important for these substantive policy reasons, narrowing the scope of SHIELD in this way would also lighten the compliance burden and enhance its bipartisan appeal.

Department of Justice

As with and in addition to broadening “thing of value,” while lawmaking is the most sweeping and durable action needed, law
enforcement also needs clearer and stronger guidelines about when and how to investigate, notify, and prosecute campaigns. To a large degree, the FBI had to make it up as they went along in 2016, operating on (and in some cases deviating from) very general standards that did not clearly apply to the known facts on either side of the presidential campaign.237

This is part of a reform area that could potentially extend beyond foreign interaction with political campaigns, and thus the scope of this paper. As such, we will only point to two very different approaches.

First is strict control by DOJ leadership. In February 2020, Attorney General Bill Barr issued an order requiring his written approval before opening any federal investigation into a presidential candidate or their senior staff.238 The order also requires the FBI and all other components of U.S. law enforcement to notify and consult with DOJ leaders before investigating lawmakers or opening inquiries into “illegal contributions, donations or expenditures by foreign nationals to a presidential or congressional campaign.”239

Second is a more balanced system of guidance, such as a proposal currently being developed by the bipartisan duo Bob Bauer and Jack Goldsmith. Their forthcoming book called After Trump will include a chapter rethinking the process and standards for opening and conducting investigations against politicians and campaigns.238 The authors will also endorse statutory reforms to broaden “thing of value” and mandate campaign reporting of foreign offers of assistance.239 Law enforcement also needs clearer guidance around public notifications relating to foreign interactions with campaigns, as will be discussed more broadly (in the context of any foreign interference operations) in the chapter on enforcement and coordination.

Federal Election Commission

In the absence of legislation to make campaigns report offers of assistance from foreign powers, the FEC should adopt a rule like the one proposed by a petition in July 2019.240 That proposal would force campaigns to notify the FEC within three days of being offered valuable information from a foreign national.241 As written, it would define “valuable information” in broader terms than we would prefer (as discussed above with respect to the SHIELD Act).242 But what we really like about this proposed approach is its procedural requirements that the FEC would have to (without taking a vote) start investigating the foreign contact and share the information with the FBI right away and with the public within 14 days.243

While these issues involve complexities in lawmaking, enforcement, regulation, and compliance burdens for campaigns, they are vital to preventing foreign adversaries from interfering in U.S. political campaigns.


237 Barr Memorandum.

238 See Stanford Law School, “After Trump: An Agenda for Reform,” YouTube video, 1:04:31, January 17, 2020; Bharara-Goldsmith, 2020; Cass R. Sunstein, “Imagining That Donald Trump Has Almost No Control Over Justice,” The New York Times, February 20, 2020. A tricky and controversial question at the core of this debate—which again, involves but extends beyond foreign interference in campaigns—is how high the threshold should be to open and conduct politically sensitive investigations, as well as the extent to which control and accountability should fall to political appointees. On one extreme is the fundamentalist belief in unitary executive theory, represented by Barr. On the other end of the spectrum is Harvard professor Cass Sunstein, who recently revived a post-Watergate proposal that Congress should transform the DOJ to a fully independent agency (legally immunized from the president’s day-to-day control, like the Federal Reserve, FCC, and FEC). Bauer and Goldsmith recognize risks in both directions. Guidance and control that is too strict could chill the willingness of FBI agents to investigate risks or—even worse—could become a tool for political appointees to stop investigations into their own side. But too loose of an ability to investigate could also be used for political ends, as occurred under the FBI of J. Edgar Hoover. Goldsmith suggests that accountability and control could be split between political appointees and senior career officials, as well as reporting to Congress.


241 Ibid.

242 See 84 Fed. Reg. 37,154 (July 31, 2019); Noti/Gyory Correspondence. Critics of this petition argue that the FEC likely does not have the authority to enact such reporting procedures and is not equipped to investigate these foreign contacts, so such proposals should instead be enacted legislatively with the SHIELD Act. We agree that legislation would be a more robust route, but in the meantime we think the FEC should err toward taking action and building its capacity to play a stronger role in the investigation and reporting of foreign contacts.

243 See 84 Fed. Reg. 37,154 (July 31, 2019).
3. Companies with Foreign Funders

Corporate avenues for malign finance are split in two forms: (1) shell companies, which do not have real business activities but are instead vehicles for financial maneuvering, and (2) domestic subsidiaries of foreign parent companies, which may involve real businesses but can also be used to funnel foreign money into politics.

The latter group (domestic subsidiaries of foreign parents) arguably gets more attention than any other policy area from campaign finance advocates focused on foreign influence. But importantly and conversely, whereas we identify eight cases of foreign interference through shell companies, we only find two major instances of foreign parent companies funneling political contributions through domestic subsidiaries and neither of those two meets our definition of malign finance.

**Anglo-American shell companies**

Like the legal presence and political rights that come with citizenship, free and open economies offer a broad attack surface and toolkit that have been exploited by foreign powers.

Corporate vulnerabilities are particularly pervasive in the market-based economies of the United States, the United Kingdom, and British overseas territories (as opposed to the relationship-based and institution-dominated banking systems in continental Europe and Asia). Kleptocrats like to hide their money in Anglo-American financial systems because they offer strong property rights and the rule of law, anonymous shell companies, and deep asset markets (especially London, New York, and Miami).

After authoritarian money reaches the British and U.S. financial systems, two policy weaknesses allow it to be weaponized into covert political donations: (1) the right to incorporate anonymous shell companies, and (2) the ability to lie to campaign finance regulators about where the money comes from. Let us address each issue in turn.

The good news is that Britain and America are both moving in the direction of requiring companies to disclose the identities of their “beneficial owners” (i.e., the people who ultimately control the firm or enjoy its economic benefits).

In 2016 the United Kingdom made its corporate ownership registry publicly available. Implementation came with some major kinks, such as exemptions for Scottish limited partnerships and the ability to just name another company as the owner (rather than the humans who control it, creating chains of ownership that could end anonymously with a non-British company), although the country has worked to address those issues. The latest loophole to emerge is companies being granted anonymity when their lawyers convince Companies House behind closed doors that their beneficial owners could be at risk of “serious violence or intimidation.” This exemption has been justifiably granted to firms working in private security, animal testing, and psychopathy. But it has also been used to hide the beneficial owner of Aquind Ltd, a company that seeks approval to build a sensitive electrical connector from Britain to France, is run by former executives of major Kremlin-connected companies in Moscow, and has given £242,000 to the Conservative Party since 2018. Luxembourg public records related to Aquind’s holding company revealed that the beneficial owner is a secretive Russian-born tycoon named Viktor Fedotov, who U.K. security and law enforcement agencies say is not genuinely at risk of violence or intimidation.

Beyond exempted entities, the British beneficial ownership disclosure system has two other significant problems. One is the lack of data verification, so whoever sets up the company can just make up fake information (leading to names such as “Mr Xxxx Xxx,” some 4,000 companies supposedly owned by babies, and individuals named as owners of more than 6,000 companies). Two is that offshore centers spanning the former British empire do not yet have public beneficial ownership registries, making them the most extensive “spider’s web” of financial secrecy in the world. The British government has been pushing these overseas territories and crown dependencies to deliver public registries by the end of 2023 and more than half of them committed to that timetable (starting with Gibraltar in May 2018, joined by Jersey, Guernsey, and the Isle of Man in June 2019, and followed by the Cayman Islands in October 2019). But nearly half are resisting reform, led by the single most popular jurisdiction for corporate registration: the British Virgin Islands.

The United States will be the last large country to outlaw anonymous shell companies. But here too the momentum is encouraging, with a bipartisan group of senators having negoti...
ated the AML Act, which would require firms to disclose to law enforcement the identities of their beneficial owners during the incorporation process.\textsuperscript{257}

The bad news is that progress is not being made on addressing the second part of the problem: Campaign finance regulators do not investigate anonymous corporate political contributions to verify that the company named as the donor is the true source of funds.\textsuperscript{258}

British law technically prohibits contributions from shell companies by defining “permissible donors” to include companies only if they “carry on business” in the United Kingdom and are incorporated within the European Union.\textsuperscript{259} But in practice, the law is easy to evade. Even in cases of complaints or concerns raised by civil society or MPs, the Electoral Commission relies on assurances from the recipients, essentially allowing them (i.e., political parties) to self-certify that they have taken reasonable steps to identify the beneficial owner and confirm that the company making the donation is a real business.\textsuperscript{260}

This is how Dmytro Firtash has apparently been able to funnel millions of pounds to a handful of Conservative MPs.\textsuperscript{261} The donations have been made by a series of corporate entities owned or controlled by one of his closest associates, Robert Shetler-Jones.\textsuperscript{262} For example, Shetler-Jones owns Scythian Ltd., which derives the majority of its income from management services provided to Firtash and his companies.\textsuperscript{263} Scythian was long listed as “dormant” by Companies House and the Electoral Commission relies on the Conservative Party’s assurances that the company now carries on business.\textsuperscript{264} Other political donations have come from Cyprus and British Virgin Islands entities similarly owned or controlled by Shetler-Jones, who claims the donations are his personal choice and not made on behalf of Firtash.\textsuperscript{265}

Firtash is also one of the benefactors of the U.S. lawyers and operatives who tried to dig up compromising material on President Donald Trump’s leading 2020 political opponent.\textsuperscript{266} The Americans, Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, also falsely claimed that some of their political donations came from a Delaware shell company called Global Energy Producers LLC (GEP).\textsuperscript{267} It turns out that the perpetrators incorporated GEP five weeks before the contributions, the company had “no income or significant assets,” and the money in question never even passed through GEP accounts.\textsuperscript{268}

GEP fit the pattern that U.S. civil society sleuths search for in public records to spot cases of malign finance: political newcomers with deep foreign connections (reported in news articles) suddenly making big donations (disclosed in FEC filings) and showing up at exclusive events (posted on social media), often obscuring their identity in public filings by pretending the donor is an LLC (which has no website or evidence of business activity, just a recent anonymous incorporation record).\textsuperscript{269}

The FEC is not responsible for actively looking for malign finance, just responding to complaints filed by watchdogs. Even then, partisan gridlock typically prevents major FEC investigations and enforcement actions, even when they have a quorum (as will be discussed in the chapter on enforcement).\textsuperscript{270} As such, the Parnas and Fruman case probably would not have been uncovered if it had not been noticed by Lachlan Markay at The Daily Beast and the Campaign Legal Center had not filed a complaint with the FEC laying out the evidence to suggest that GEP was a front company.\textsuperscript{271} It is unclear what, if anything, the FEC did with the complaint, although the allegations were echoed in a DOJ indictment of Parnas and Fruman.\textsuperscript{272}

If the story ended there, with criminal charges for lying to the FEC, using straw donors, and spending foreign money in U.S. elections, all in an effort to buy access to U.S. politicians, it might not have met our standard for inclusion as a case of malign finance. What matters is what they did with the access after they bought it. If it was solely to advance their marijuana and natural gas ventures, that would have been pure corruption and not malign interference meant to weaken the United States.\textsuperscript{273} But it turns out they were also secretly working for Russians and Ukrainians trying to help Trump acquire harmful information.

\textsuperscript{257} See Josh Rudolph, “The One Place Congress Works,” The American Interest, October 2, 2019; AML Act.


\textsuperscript{259} Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, c. 2, § 54.


\textsuperscript{261} See Fauscen and Marson, 2014; Leischchenko, 2015; Bellon, pp. 7.


\textsuperscript{263} See Fauscen and Marson, 2014.


\textsuperscript{265} See Fauscen and Marson, 2014.

\textsuperscript{266} See Parnas Filing, pp. 5-7; Berthelsen, 2019, Becker, et al., 2019. Firtash paid Parnas $200,000 between August and October of 2019 (purportedly for translation services, as part of the legal team that included Victoria Toensing and Joseph diGenova) and another $1 million in September 2019 (for unknown purposes). There are many unanswered questions related to this scheme, such as what Firtash got in exchange for his payments, why the $1 million September transfer flowed via a separate opaque channel (a Russian bank account controlled by Firtash’s Swiss lawyer, as opposed to the $200,000 from the Toensing-diGenova law firm), why Parnas seemingly tried to conceal the $1 million (both by failing to disclose its existence to SDNY and by pretending it was a loan repayment to his wife), and what Parnas did (or planned or promised to do) beyond translating in exchange for Firtash’s money (e.g., was it hush money).

\textsuperscript{267} See Parnas–Fruman Indictment, pp. 5-10.

\textsuperscript{268} See Parnas–Fruman Indictment, pp. 5-10; Paul Sonne, et al., “Lev is talking. So where is Igor?” Washington Post, January 21, 2020; Rosalind S. Helderman, et al., “How two Soviet-born enigmas made it into elite Trump circle — and the center of the impeachment storm,” Washington Post, October 12, 2019; Complaint before the Federal Election Commission, Campaign Legal Center et al. v. Global Energy Producers, LLC, et al., July 25, 2018 (“Campaign Legal Center Complaint”); Ben Wieder, “With Parnas, Fruman pot plan up in smoke. Russian money man turned to California,” McClatchy DC, March 13, 2020, Corn, 2019. The donations were made before Parnas and Fruman are known to have connected with Firtash. The true source of funds was “a private lending transaction between Fruman and third parties.” $3 million in reverse mortgage Florida records show Fruman to have taken out against one of his Miami properties, which was financed by the parents of Yandex CFO Greg Abovsky and then laundered through multiple bank accounts and “Foreign National-1” (who “is a foreign national Russian citizen and businessman who, at all relevant times, was not a citizen or lawful permanent resident of the United States,” and who also funded a marijuana startup that never came to fruition, leading some investigative journalists to believe it is Andrey Muravev). Separately, Parnas and Fruman apparently intended to involve GEP in their plans to ship American natural gas to Ukraine through Poland, which also never came to fruition and would have required cooperation from Naftogaz (and may have been one of the reasons why they were advocating for the removal of Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch).

\textsuperscript{269} See Ilya Marritz, “How Parnas and Fruman’s Dodge Donation Was Uncovered by Two People Using Google Translate,” ProPublica, February 5, 2020; Rosalind S. Helderman, et al., “Global Energy Producers, LLC accounts.\textsuperscript{268} With Parnas, Fruman pot plan up in smoke. Russian money man turned to California,” McClatchy DC, March 13, 2020, Corn, 2019. The donations were made before Parnas and Fruman are known to have connected with Firtash. The true source of funds was “a private lending transaction between Fruman and third parties.” $3 million in reverse mortgage Florida records show Fruman to have taken out against one of his Miami properties, which was financed by the parents of Yandex CFO Greg Abovsky and then laundered through multiple bank accounts and “Foreign National-1” (who “is a foreign national Russian citizen and businessman who, at all relevant times, was not a citizen or lawful permanent resident of the United States,” and who also funded a marijuana startup that never came to fruition, leading some investigative journalists to believe it is Andrey Muravev). Separately, Parnas and Fruman apparently intended to involve GEP in their plans to ship American natural gas to Ukraine through Poland, which also never came to fruition and would have required cooperation from Naftogaz (and may have been one of the reasons why they were advocating for the removal of Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch).


\textsuperscript{272} See Marritz, 2020.

\textsuperscript{273} Parnas and Fruman are Soviet-born U.S. citizens. While they falsely indicated on FEC forms that some of their donations were made in the name of an anonymous Delaware shell company, some of their other donations were made in their own names. See Parnas–Fruman Indictment, pp. 5-14; Trump–Ukraine Report, pp. 98-103.
on his leading 2020 political opponent, Joe Biden, including an in-kind “favor” from the Ukrainian government.\textsuperscript{274}

Included in Appendix A are additional cases of shell companies being used for malign electoral interference, such as the opaque entity with foreign ties that funded a Northern Irish political party’s pro-Brexit ad in London two days before the 2016 referendum, a top donor to Latvia’s pro-Russian political party that received funds from the Magnitsky and Azerbaijani laundromats through Danske Bank, the Cypriot offshoot of VEB that sent €2 million through a Swiss bank account to a National Front fundraising association in 2014, and the Bahamas-based shell company allegedly used to funnel money from Moscow to Moldova’s ruling pro-Russian Socialist Party.\textsuperscript{275}

We also came across many other cases of anonymous shell companies being used to funnel foreign money into U.S. elections. LLCs incorporated in Delaware were used as conduits for Chinese nationals to donate to politicians in 2016 as part of a visa-for-sale scheme.\textsuperscript{276} Malaysian financier Jho Low used shell companies and straw donors to conceal (from the candidate, the campaign, the government, and the public) contributions exceeding $1 million to then-U.S. President Barack Obama’s 2012 campaign.\textsuperscript{277} Low also negotiated to pay tens of millions of dollars to a law firm that employs the wife of Elliott Broidy, a fundraiser and close associate of Trump.\textsuperscript{278} All these payments were reportedly meant to get the DOJ to drop its 1MDB probe or ultimately to buy a presidential pardon.\textsuperscript{279} It is a notorious case of international corruption, but as with the cases of domestic subsidiaries covered in the next section, in our view it is not foreign interference meant to harm the country (as discussed when presenting our definition in the methodology chapter).

**Domestic subsidiaries of foreign parents**

If you do a Google search on foreign financial influence in U.S. elections, essentially every single think tank report, academic paper, news article, or reform proposal will focus on the possibility of foreign parent companies funneling political donations through their U.S. subsidiaries.\textsuperscript{280} While foreign nationals are not allowed to fund or direct U.S. contributions, money is often fungible between foreign and domestic operations and directives from abroad as to how the U.S. subsidiary should make political donations are usually difficult to prove or not explicitly communicated.

While this concern is not without merit, in our view it is the most overstated issue in the realm of malign finance. In all our empirical surveying, we found only a couple cases of this loophole being exploited by corrupt foreign interests and no proof that it has ever been driven by malign political objectives.

\textbf{Political activity by domestic subsidiaries of foreign parents is the most overstated issue in the realm of malign finance.}

The reason why this risk receives so much focus may be its salient origin story. In January 2010, a week after the five conservative justices on the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in \textit{Citizens United} that U.S. companies (including subsidiaries of foreign parent companies) may donate unlimited amounts to super PACs, then-U.S. President Obama criticized the decision in his State of the Union address. Obama warned that it would “open the floodgates for special interests—including foreign corporations—to spend without limit in our elections,” prompting a visibly annoyed Justice Samuel Alito to apparently retort “not true.”\textsuperscript{281}

With the exchange developing into a controversy the next day, a senior Obama administration official doubled down and clarified that the issue was U.S. subsidiaries: “There is a loophole that we need to address and are working with Congress to address. There are U.S. subsidiaries of foreign-controlled corporations that could influence our elections because of this ruling.”\textsuperscript{282} This issue had been raised in the liberal dissent to \textit{Citizens United}.

Within five months, the Democratic-controlled House had passed (and Republicans would filibuster in the Senate) a bill to rein in \textit{Citizens United}.

The latest iteration of this proposal involves prohibiting U.S. companies with more than a certain portion of foreign ownership from spending in U.S. elections. Such thresholds were included in the original version of \textit{H.R. 1} introduced by House Democrats in January 2019, barring donations by U.S. companies that are owned at least 5 percent by a foreign government, 20 percent by any given foreign person, or 50 percent by a combination of foreign persons.\textsuperscript{283} Liberal advocates propose even lower thresholds of 1 to 5 percent, which would block all political spending by roughly 98 percent of the largest 500 U.S. companies.\textsuperscript{284} The top Democrat at the FEC advocates for this as the

\textsuperscript{278} See Tom Wright and Bradley Hope, \textit{Billion Dollar Whale: The Man Who Fooled Wall Street, Hollywood, and the World}, New York: Hachette, 2018, pp. 372. Jho Low’s diversion of $4.5 billion from 1MDB was notable for not having any viable end game to recover and return the money, a bit like a Ponzi scheme. Instead, he likely wanted to buy influence in Washington, D.C., to avoid legal accountability. One of his personal heroes is Marc Rich, the indicted fugitive trader who was pardoned on President Bill Clinton’s last day in office after making large donations to the Democratic Party and the Clinton library (as well as to other officials who lobbied Clinton on his behalf).
\textsuperscript{279} See Wright and Hope, pp. 372.
\textsuperscript{281} See Perez’s remarks, 2010; Martin Kady, “Justice Alito mouths ‘not true,’” Politico, January 27, 2010.
\textsuperscript{283} Justice Stevens’s dissent warned that the decision “would appear to afford the same protection to multinational corporations controlled by foreigners as to individual Americans,” \textit{Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission}, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).
\textsuperscript{286} United States Congress, H.R.1 - For the People Act of 2019, introduced January 3, 2019.
\textsuperscript{287} See Michael Sozan, “Ending Foreign-Influenced Corporate Spending in U.S. Elections,” Center for
These thresholds were removed in the version of H.R. 1 that passed the full House in March 2019. The concern was that it would curtail the speech rights of companies that employ thousands of U.S. citizens and are commonly considered “American” companies. A prime example is Anheuser-Busch, which was founded in St. Louis in 1852, continues to operate all 12 of its breweries in the United States, but for the past decade has been a wholly owned subsidiary of Belgian company InBev.

In our view, we must build resilience to foreign interference through bipartisan reforms that limit the extent to which we sacrifice the democratic freedoms exploited by our adversaries, including the speech rights of Americans organized through corporations (as determined by the Supreme Court).

Our sense that the risk of foreign-owned subsidiaries is overstated is also informed by our survey of possible cases of malign finance.

If it is often challenging to disentangle “private” versus “patriotic” motives when analyzing shell companies, it is even harder in cases of real international companies whose owners are often politically connected and whose private business interests can be advanced with corrupt donations.

We dug into two major instances of political donations by domestic subsidiaries owned by Chinese billionaires. We do not consider either to be malign financial interference, because we cannot find evidence of Beijing using these operations to weaken target societies. They look more like international corruption.

First is the example of “foreign influence” most frequently cited by critics of Citizens United. It involves Gordon Tang and Huaidan Chen, a billionaire and his wife who are Chinese nationals living in Singapore as permanent residents. They own a Chinese parent company, which in turn owns a U.S.-based real estate investment firm that donated $1.3 million in 2015 to a super PAC supporting Jeb Bush. The Chinese owners participated in the decision to donate and were assisted by U.S. lawyers and family members (of both the Chens and the Bushes), which led to a rare enforcement action by the FEC, which levied fines against both the Chinese donors and the recipient PAC supporting Jeb Bush.

But that is not evidence of the Chinese government sending operatives on a mission to harm the United States. Two additional factual circumstances make it look more like private corruption.

The first complication involves motive. Tang and Chen have given money to many other U.S. politicians in a pattern that looks a lot more like buying influence with executives whose support could help advance the interests of their real estate empire.

The other issue is attribution to Beijing. Our Chinese-language search did not find evidence that Tang is in the good graces of the Chinese government and it is even possible that the opposite could be true.

The second case is arguably a closer call as to whether it constitutes foreign interference, because the donor’s ties to the Chinese government are clear. Inner Mongolia Rider Horse Industry is a company that owns China’s largest horse farm. The firm is owned partly by Chinese billionaire Lin Lang and partly by the Inner Mongolian regional government in China, while also enjoying the backing of China’s biggest state-owned financial conglomerate, Citic Securities. In New Zealand’s 2017 electoral cycle, the National Party’s largest donation was $150,000 from the New Zealand-based subsidiary of Inner Mongolia Rider Horse Industry, which was legal because New Zealand has the same domestic subsidiary loophole as the United States. This has caused controversy, with the Prime Minister calling it “outside the spirit of the law.” Some argue that this is foreign interference because Citic was set up under United Front auspices and the New Zealand MP who brought in the donation refers to China’s concentration camps for Muslim minorities in Xinjiang as “vocational training centers” (the term preferred by the Chinese government).

In our view, these are important red flags but not enough to prove


289 H.R. 1 (Passed).


293 Ibid.


295 This includes their executives donating to the mayor of San Francisco and the Chens paying for and supporting the mayor’s visits to China, where he worked to deepen real estate investment relations. Fang, et al., 2016. The U.S. real estate subsidiary also donated to the governor of Oregon, the mayor of Portland, and other politicians in that state, which is where the company was incorporated and secured its biggest early investments. Peter D’Auria, “A Chinese-Owned Company Donated Thousands of Dollars to Oregon Candidates. Was That Illegal?” Willamette Week, August 30, 2016. Chen also helped then-U.S. Ambassador to China, Gary Locke, by buying his Maryland home in 2013 while he was still in office and struggling to sell it. Lee Fang and Jon Schwartz, “Desperate Sellos,” The Intercept, August 3, 2016. Three months after the sale, Locke invited Chen’s brother (who runs the U.S. subsidiary) to discuss investment opportunities and local barriers faced by the firm at an exclusive meeting at the ambassador’s residence. The Chinese man brought along a much bigger package from China and the United States. Fang and Schwartz, “Desperate,” 2016. Chen also acknowledged that connections to prominent U.S. politicians, from Locke to the Bushes, benefit those involved with the company by bolstering their stature in Asia, where the family’s broader business empire is based.

296 Tang is not known to have returned to China since the early 2000s, when he was reportedly accused by the Chinese government of leading a smuggling ring and evading customs fees, leading to a prison sentence that was later suspended. New Zealand, “Mangereuru Businessman Offers Intercept Reporter $200,000 Dollars “Not to Mention Rumours About His Past,” May 15, 2010. When a reporter from The Intercept asked Tang about the allegations, he offered her a $200,000 bribe if she promised not to publish anything about it. The Intercept, “Chinese Businessman Offers Intercept Reporter “200,000 Dollars “Not to Mention Rumours About His Past,” 2016.


298 See Land Information New Zealand, “Inner Mongolia Rider Horse Industry (NZ) Limited,” Case 201900304, December 19, 2019. Between the Lines, “Malaysia’s Game of Thrones, and Three new cases of political interference in New Zealand,” produced by Tom Switzer, aired March 5, 2020, on ABC Radio National, at 1:00pm. 20:30, Brady, pp. 29, Wells, 2018. China is sponsoring Lang’s bid to expand China’s racing industry by importing roughly 1,500 horses from New Zealand.


that Lang’s objectives extended beyond his commercial interests. The meeting between Lang and the New Zealand MP turned out to cover the horse-breeding industry, live race broadcasting, impediments to doing business with New Zealand, and the fact that Lang’s company had opened a branch office in Auckland.302 Moreover, Citic has one of the largest pools of foreign assets in the world and all its thousands of investment recipients should not be automatically associated with United Front work.303

Other naïve or potentially influenced politicians have similarly parroted Chinese narratives. Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, makes money connecting German companies with Chinese officials and dismissed the mass detention of Uighurs in Xinjiang as “gossip.”304 But as discussed in the previous chapter (and which also goes for affiliated companies and business relationships), accusing elected leaders of being in league with hostile foreign powers should require proof that has been ideally substantiated in a court of law or at least flagged as alarming by intelligence or security officials.

The domestic subsidiary loophole does seem to be a favorite of Chinese billionaires. There are other cases as well, like the committee opposed to a local Beverly Hills ballot measure (that would have allowed a Hilton Hotel to be built across the street from a hotel owned by the richest man in Asia, a Chinese national tied to Xi Jinping) that was funded by a loan from the Chinese owner’s business partner (which the FEC unconvincingly considered purely domestic funding).305 However, these cases are international corruption, not within our definition of malign finance.

Finally, a recent press report identified a possible case of malign finance through a U.S. subsidiary, but its details would have to be developed further to credibly establish its malign geopolitical purpose: Citgo, the Houston-based subsidiary of Venezuela state-run oil giant PDVSA, contributed $500,000 to Trump’s inaugural committee soon after the 2016 election. At the time, Venezuela was desperately looking to court U.S. investment and repair relations with Washington.306 PDVSA was also working with then-Congressman Pete Sessions (and paying a $50 million retainer to his close former colleague) to broker a meeting with the CEO of Exxon Mobil.307 If nothing else, this shows that this legal loophole could pose a national security risk, even if it is has typically been used for commercial purposes.

304 See Rudolph, 2019.
305 See Shonkwiler/Wanda Group Correspondence; Barkin, 2018.
307 Ibid.

U.S. Recommendation:

End anonymous shell companies. Take targeted steps to restrict foreign donations funneled through U.S. subsidiaries, such as CEO certifications and limited prohibitions around adversarial foreign powers.

Both problems should be addressed. But anonymous shell companies should immediately be banned entirely, while domestic subsidiaries deserve more nuanced treatment as part of a broader legislative initiative focused on malign finance.

Outlaw anonymous shell companies

From late 2018 to the summer of 2020, beneath the fray of impeachment, two national election seasons, coronavirus, and many other issues that gripped public attention, a bipartisan band of senators kept their heads down and waged a quiet war against anonymous shell companies.308 The result is the Anti-Money Laundering (AML) Act of 2020, which does exactly what U.S. and international financial enforcement authorities have been recommending since 2006: Force companies to report the identities of their beneficial owners to the U.S. Treasury Department.309

After beneficial ownership reform spent years trapped behind partisan gridlock, a political window opened at the end of 2018 with the House flipping to Democratic control while the Republican administration signaled its willingness to sign it into law. Between those supportive start and end points to the (still not yet enacted) legislative process, was a long, informal, deliberative, consensus-building process for which the Founding Fathers designed the upper chamber.310 It started with Senators Mark Warner and Tom Cotton collaborating on the ILLEIT CASH Act, which they introduced in September 2019 with eight bipartisan co-sponsors.311 Over the following nine months, the Senate Banking Committee consulted experts and stakeholders throughout a negotiating process that defined key terms with an objective of minimizing possible loopholes while maintaining bipartisan support. In June 2020, a deal was struck by Banking Committee Chairman Mike Crapo and Ranking Member Sherrod Brown, who proposed the legislation as the AML Act in the form of the Crapo-Brown Amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020.312

302 See Nippert, 2019.
304 See Rudolph, 2019.
305 See Shonkwiler/Wanda Group Correspondence; Barkin, 2018.
307 Ibid.
308 See Rudolph, 2019.
310 See Rudolph, 2019.
Just as with the **FIRE Act** (discussed in the previous chapter), bipartisan support in committee has not secured broad enough Republican support for the **AML Act** to reach the Senate floor. But unlike **FIRE**, an enormous amount of consensus-building has gone into the **AML Act**, which has resulted in it substantively improving upon all other versions of beneficial ownership reform, from the 2019 version that passed the House to Treasury’s Customer Due Diligence rule.313

First, the **AML Act** has an air-tight definition of “beneficial owner.” It includes anyone who “directly or indirectly, through any contract, arrangement, understanding, relationship, or otherwise” either “exercises substantial control over the entity” or “owns not less than 25 percent of the equity.”314 Importantly, this cannot be a nominee, intermediary, custodian, agent, employee, creditor, heir, or child—all the proxies beneficial owners tend to hide behind.315

Second, the **AML Act** balances the desire to hold the data privately and securely versus the countervailing needs of federal and state law enforcement, national security, and intelligence agencies to access the data. It would only be made available to authorized government agencies to support significant and ongoing investigations, similar to the standard needed to issue a subpoena, but without having to get approval from a federal judge every time the government wants to access the data (critics of the bill tried to add that federal judicial process as a poison pill to make the data inaccessible).316 There are also steep penalties for unauthorized disclosures.317

Third, the **AML Act** covers all entities not already required to disclose ownership under other financial regulations (such as publicly traded companies).318 U.S. banks are staunch supporters of beneficial ownership reform, because to be able to get the information from the government rather than collect it themselves will cut the cost of complying with the Customer Due Diligence rule. However, several smaller interest groups throughout the financial industry—from providers of pooled investment vehicles and certain non-profits to home builders that rely on dormant companies—lobbied for exemption from the reporting requirement. This risked creating new anonymous vehicles like the Scottish limited partnerships that expanded after the U.K. unmasked its beneficial ownership registry, forcing the government to go back and eliminate the exemption. Blocking and tackling each type of entity, the Senate reached compromises to satisfy these groups without creating loopholes that could be exploited by bad actors. It is inevitable that unforeseen cracks will emerge that Congress will have to address, but the Senate worked hard to close all known and foreseeable loopholes.

Fourth, the Senate went further than the House to ensure that the reporting process for businesses is cheap, easy, and does not introduce new legal risks. Senator Cotton highlighted eight safeguards in the bill, such as embedding the ownership question within existing reporting forms, not requiring ongoing reporting unless ownership changes, and providing that minor mistakes would not be penalized.319 As a result, more than three quarters of small business owners support this reform initiative because crooks and swindlers can stand behind shell companies to secretly raid law-abiding businesses through contract fraud, employee embezzlement, surreptitious lawsuits, and the exploitation of subsidies meant for small businesses.320

The users of financial secrecy instruments such as anonymous shell companies are not going down without a fight. They seem to be using front organizations purporting to champion popular interests such as small businesses, which is one reason why there is a commonly held misconception that small business owners oppose beneficial ownership reform.321 Fortunately, the opponents are vastly outnumbered because an estimated 99.7 percent of Americans do not anonymously own shell companies. Beneficial ownership reform would combat such a wide range of criminal elements—kleptocrats, terrorists, tax evaders, human traffickers, etc.—that it has attracted one of the broadest political coalitions in modern history.322 The bedfellows include national security experts, Treasury, the Chamber of Commerce, big CEOs, small businesses, banks, realtors, the FBI, district attorneys, police, sheriffs, labor, religious groups, human rights watchdogs, environmentalists, and even Delaware (the state most notorious for incorporating shell companies).323

After enacting beneficial ownership reform, this alliance for financial transparency should become the political army that fights to close the loopholes authoritarian regimes exploit to fund political interference in democracies, as covered in this report. The **AML Act** points in this direction and gets the governmental work started by mandating a report by Treasury and DOJ on ways authoritarian regimes exploit the U.S. financial system to conduct political influence operations, sustain kleptocratic methods of maintaining power, export corruption, and fund various NGOs, media organizations, or academic initiatives to advance their own interests and undermine U.S. democracy—as well as providing any recommendations for legislative or regulatory action.324 Congress should follow up on that report with open hearings to gather input and focus public attention on covert foreign money. As with beneficial ownership, this should be done in a bipartisan and bicameral manner, spending political capital on the most exploited vulnerabilities while tailoring more limited solutions to theoretical weaknesses.

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314 AML Act.

315 Ibid.

316 Ibid.

317 Ibid.

318 Ibid.
Take targeted steps against U.S. subsidiaries

Although there is limited evidence that domestic subsidiaries of foreign parent companies have been used for foreign political interference, it is possible that they could be in the future (such as a scenario in which China deploys to the Anglo-American financial system a more aggressive posture of malign donations, a corporatized version of the illegal malign finance campaigns carried out by United Front agents and straw donors in the Asia-Pacific region, which we discuss in chapter 8). And even if domestic subsidiaries continue to be used only for international corruption, that would not be a reason to do nothing.

We recommend two targeted steps U.S. policymakers should take to tighten restrictions around donations by U.S. subsidiaries.

The lighter option is for either the FEC or Congress to make companies certify compliance with existing standards—most importantly that no foreign national participated in any decisions made by the U.S.-based company to spend money on U.S. politics.\textsuperscript{325} When the ownership thresholds were removed from \textit{H.R. 1}, House Democrats replaced them with this milder alternative recommended by Republican FEC commissioners, to some consternation on the left.\textsuperscript{326} While Democratic commissioners at the FEC prefer to go further, they agree that this would help motivate corporate lawyers (and CEOs, who are required to make the certification in the \textit{H.R. 1} version) to “think twice before signing off on corporate political giving or spending that they cannot guarantee comes entirely from legal sources.”\textsuperscript{327}

The stronger option is for Congress to amend the thresholds originally included in \textit{H.R. 1} to only apply to owners based in (or linked through intermediaries, ultimate beneficial owners, or other proxies or influential ties) adversarial countries such as Russia, China, Iran, or North Korea. We would do that by defining countries of concern as being neither NATO members nor major non-NATO allies (or alternatively, create a blacklist of countries that have interfered in democracies over the past decade, as described in the previous chapter for campaign contact reporting).

These options should stand a reasonable chance of securing bipartisan support and would focus more narrowly on the foreign threat while saving political capital for more glaring problems.


4. Non-profits with Foreign Donors

Non-profits are often secretly exploited by authoritarian powers to pass funding through to political actors by (1) bankrolling like-minded political parties, (2) achieving narrow policy or political outcomes, or (3) capturing political elites.

In keeping with our definition of malign finance, we limit our focus to operations in which the money seems to play a central role, such as non-profits serving primarily as a funding conduit. In addition to malign finance, the Alliance for Securing Democracy’s Authoritarian Interference Tracker covers four other tools.328 One such tool is civil society subversion, which often operates through non-profits. This includes authoritarian funding for destabilizing social movements such as biker gangs, street protestors, paramilitaries, and other violent or seditious groups within target countries.329 It includes espionage targeting political influencers affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church or Chinese diaspora communities. Civil society subversion can overlap with manipulation of public narratives (another of the five tools) by think tanks funded by Kremlin proxies, like the Dialogue of Civilizations in Berlin or the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation in Paris.330 Malign finance often plays a supporting role for these other tools, but because it is not the main thrust of the operation, we do not include those cases in this analysis.

Conduits for European political party funding

When pro-Kremlin political parties in Europe want to create a secret channel to funnel money from Moscow, they often use non-profits. Foundations, associations, churches, and other charitable organizations can be attractive conduits for covert foreign money because many Western legal systems treat them as third-party entities permitted to spend money on politics without disclosing the identities of their donors.

Compared to malign influence operations targeting democracies closer to Russia and China’s perceived spheres of influence, foreign interference in Western Europe traditionally tends to be more subtle and covert, which makes identification and attribution rare. As with the three examples below, the clearest illustrations of how non-profits could potentially serve as conduits are often quite opaque, making it difficult to attribute the source of the funding directly to Russia or any other foreign power. Even so, we discuss them here to illustrate a policy gap that many European political parties appear eager to exploit.

First, most of the media spending—billboards, posters, newspapers, online ads—encouraging Germans to vote for the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD) is bought by a non-profit called the Association for the Preservation of the Rule of Law and Civic Freedoms.331 Technically a third-party club, it does not have to disclose its donors or expenditures under German law.332 The group maintains no physical offices in Germany, just a post office box that redirects to an obscure public relations firm in Switzerland.333 A journalist who researched the story for two years asked more than 50 people where the money came from and not a single source provided an answer.334

“... When pro-Kremlin political parties in Europe want to create a secret channel to funnel money from Moscow, they often use non-profits.

Second, when then-Austrian Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache was caught on camera soliciting support from a woman posing as the niece of a Russian oligarch, he explained how the party hides its controversial and foreign donations.335 He detailed how “a couple of very wealthy people” funnel large secret donations “not to the party but through a non-profit association … circumventing the court of auditors.”336

Third, when Italy prohibited foreign donations in 2019, the League successfully added an amendment exempting “foundations, associations and committees” from the foreign-source ban. League politicians claimed the loophole was meant to enable contributions from Italian emigres who live abroad and want to funnel their contributions through expat associations that are legally organized abroad.337 Two examples from Central and Eastern Europe offer clear instances of Russian campaign funding flowing through non-prof-

329 ASD defines “civil society subversion” as “The hijacking or co-option of foreign social movements, organizations, diaspora communities, advocacy groups, or other civil society entities through non-transparent or seditious means to amplify political and social cleavages, promote extremism, or otherwise divide target societies.” ASD, “Authoritarian Interference Tracker.”
331 See OSCE, pp. 6, Lobby Control, 2017.
332 This is a longstanding loophole in German campaign finance. It also played a role in the wide-ranging scandal in the 1990s of anonymous donations to the CDU’s off-the-books Swiss bank accounts that turned out to originate from a Saudi Arabian lobbyist in exchange for sales of German tanks. While that case involved much illegality (including failure to disclose donors and amounts exceeding the limits of anonymity), one legal part was pre-CDU spending by associations with secret donors. See Barnett and Sloan, pp. 7, Deutsche Welle, “The scandal that rocked the government of Helmut Kohl,” January 18, 2010.
333 See Barnett and Sloan, pp. 6.
334 See Barnett and Sloan, pp. 9.
336 See Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2019-2020. We have not included this case in our analysis because it was a sting operation rather than real foreign funding. But its details are instructive as to how the Freedom Party hides its donations. Most of the media coverage in May 2019 of the recorded conversation focused on a planned takeover of Austria’s top newspaper. Since then, however, Austrian investigators have opened more than 30 cases stemming from the Ibiza affair and many of them relate to corrupt donations, procurements, and expenses. For example, in the video Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache threw out the idea of Russia funneling undisclosed donations through an association. While he never named the non-profit, he did name some donors (weapons manufacturer Gaston Glock, a German department store heiress, a real estate billionaire, and gambling machine firm Novomatic, all of whom publicly deny it) who “pay between 500,000 and 1.5 to 2 million” (above the €3,570 threshold for which the party would have to publicly disclose it) “not to the party but through a non-profit association … circumventing the court of auditors.” While Austria’s court of auditors does not have the power to verify or audit (despite its name) political parties’ finances, it does review financial reports identifying large donors. Austrian investigators are looking into several Freedom Party-related associations, clubs, and research institutes, including “Austria in Motion,” “Economy for Austria,” “Institute for Security Policy.” Investigators have also obtained pictures of sports bags full of cash that were regularly received by Strache and handled by his bodyguard. Das Gupta, et al., 2020.
337 The League first tried and failed to attach this amendment to the January 2019 foreign-source ban when it was first drafted in November 2018. Foreign donations were entirely illegal for just four months, until April 2019, at which time the League successfully amended an unrelated economic bill to include the exemption for foreign associations. Morley and Soula, 2019.
First, an Estonian mayor and leader of a pro-Russian party obscured political donations from Russian oligarch Vladimir Yakunin by funneling it through funds meant for the construction of an Orthodox church.  

Second, a Polish think tank associated with Mateusz Piskorski’s pro-Kremlin political activity in Europe served as a conduit for Russian Launderomat money.  

Non-profit organizations and events have also been used to obscure donations in Asia. For example, the mayor of Auckland (the largest city in New Zealand) funded the majority of his 2016 campaign through a charity auction with undisclosed bidders (some of whom are leaders in the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front, while the biggest secret bidder dialed in from Beijing).  

Bespoke instruments for specific policy objectives

Russian covert missions are often more narrowly targeted than supporting a like-minded political party. Moscow’s objective is often to influence a particular policy or affect the outcome of a single referendum. As with party funding, non-profits can be useful fronts or pass-through conduits, due to their financial secrecy and because legitimate and politically influential civil society groups are common in Western democracies.  

First, when Russia wanted to prevent the E.U. from ratifying an association agreement with Ukraine in 2016, a little-known Eurosceptic in the Netherlands named Thierry Baudet formed a think tank called Forum for Democracy (FvD) to help collect the signatures needed to force a referendum and then campaign against the deal. Baudet’s private WhatsApp messages would later reveal that he told his FvD colleagues, “We are going to Putin.” After the referendum went against Ukraine, FvD condemned Vladimir Kornilov is, Baudet replied, “a Russian who works for Russia.”  

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Second, Dmytro Firtash uses a network of charitable foundations in Europe and the United States to support from “Kornilov with all his money.” Asked who Baudet expected to support from “Kornilov with all his money.”  

Fourth, a year before the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Russian individuals associated with the Internet Research Agency funded a new troll farm in Africa to stoke racial divisions in the United States through social media. Organized as a Ghanaian non-profit purporting to advocate for black empowerment globally, it was really posing as African Americans to target U.S. audiences.  

Vehicles for elite capture

The informal convening role of non-profits—through conferences, member meetings, private briefings, etc.—and their influence with political elites can make them useful fronts for authoritarian regimes conducting elite capture operations.  

First, CEFC China Energy used its non-profit think tank to advance the Belt and Road Initiative by bribing heads of state, high-ranking officials at the UN, and other elites on four continents. After the think tank’s leader was convicted in the United States, civil society groups that partnered with the group to host conferences said they were comfortable at the time “because it was a genuine 501(c)(3) organization.”  

Second, Dmytro Firtash uses a network of charitable foundations working alongside his shell companies to buy influence in London. He established and funds the British Ukrainian Society, which describes itself as a non-profit meant to deepen ties with political elites can make them useful fronts for authoritarian regimes conducting elite capture operations.  

Second, the lobbying effort against Russia sanctions in the United States led by Kremlin-connected lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya was organized as a Delaware non-profit foundation purportedly focused on Russian adoptions. This legal structure helped conceal the sources of funding from Moscow, which, if revealed, might have required registering as a foreign agent.  

Third, Russia allegedly funds U.S. environmental non-profits to oppose the development of energy infrastructure around hydraulic fracking.  

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The entity employs former U.K. intelligence officers and lawmakers and pays for current parliamentarians and the minister for disinformation to visit Ukraine and meet associates of Firtash. His company’s charitable fund bankrolled an influential
Third, Russian covert agents and money launderers spent years cultivating some top conservative politicians through the National Rifle Association (NRA), using the organization to open a back channel to Donald Trump in 2016 and 2017. The FBI has also investigated the possibility that Russia funneled millions of dollars in 2016 donations to Trump through the NRA’s 501(c)(4) non-profit arm, which does not have to disclose its donor identities, vetting methods, or accounting systems.

U.S. Recommendation:

Require non-profits engaged in politics to publicly disclose the identities of both domestic and foreign donors. Require all U.S. non-profits to publicly disclose foreign funders.

The DISCLOSE Act would require non-profits and other entities that spend at least $10,000 advocating a political candidate to publicly disclose the identities of their donors. The bill covers an impressively broad set of entities, including corporations, LLCs, labor unions, 527 organizations, and tax-exempt entities organized under section 501(c) of the tax code (except for 501(c)(3)’s as they are prohibited from spending on elections). The policy logic is that donor disclosure should be triggered by the activity of any entity spending money on politics, not by the section of U.S. law under which an organization decides to incorporate.

The DISCLOSE Act has failed to reach the Senate floor due to opposition from defenders of donor anonymity. Domestic political interests have worked through all three branches of government to fight similar non-disclosure requirements, even rules that only share donor identities with law enforcement. A bit like how foreign ownership thresholds would gut the ability of corporations to make unlimited donations, DISCLOSE would roll back some implications of Citizens United by imposing transparency requirements on domestic “dark money” groups such as 501(c)(4)’s. Moreover, on the other side of the debate, reformers worry DISCLOSE is too limited in how much disclosure it would require by donors restricting usage of their funds or giving less than $10,000, while non-profits could avoid disclosing all donors by setting up a segregated account for political activity and only disclosing donors to that account.

To overcome both political and substantive constraints and to target malign finance more aggressively, we propose a separate law modeled after DISCLOSE but with seven important differences in its scope. It would require all non-profits (whether they spend on politics or not) to report the identities of all their funders (foreign and domestic) to law enforcement while only revealing publicly the identities of their foreign funders.

That is, non-profits would have to file two statements with the FEC. First would be a list of foreign nationals who provided funding to the entity, a report that the FEC would release publicly. Second is a list of all the entity’s funders, foreign and domestic, to be retained securely and confidentially by the FEC, which would coordinate with the DOJ to use it in support of law enforcement work. This second filing would importantly avoid infringing upon Americans’ privacy rights while enabling law enforcement to trace all non-profit funding to spot malign financial activity conducted partly through U.S. persons. DISCLOSE includes a tracing mechanism to ensure disclosure if money is passed from one entity to another, a provision that should carry over to this law.

Compared to DISCLOSE, the scope of covered entities could be narrowed to exclude corporations, which are better addressed through beneficial ownership legislation like the AML Act. At the same time, this proposed reporting requirement would apply regardless of whether the entity engages in political activity, and for that reason the scope of covered entities should be broadened to include 501(c)(3) organizations.

Expanding the law beyond entities spending directly on political activity would address at least three key risks. First, 501(c)(3)’s...
might pass money to 501(c)(4)'s to spend it on politics. Second, 501(c)(3)'s such as think tanks might allow funding by foreign governments to influence their research and advocacy. Third, various 501(c)'s could accept foreign funding and buy "issue ads" fanning the flames of socially divisive issues like race, immigration, and Second Amendment rights—activity that represented the bulk of active measures run by the Internet Research Agency in 2016.

The law should be broader than DISCLOSE in three additional ways. First, the types of payments that must be reported should include not only donations per se but also any other form of financial remuneration, such as membership fees, sponsorship arrangements, program service expenses, and charity auction proceeds. Second, non-profits should have to identify, verify, and report the identities of foreign beneficial owners, not just the "person who made such payment." Third, non-profits should have to publicly disclose audited details of how exactly their internal accounting and control systems segregate foreign money from political accounts and specify what foreign money was ultimately spent on, addressing the risk of foreign money being fungible with domestic political spending.

This carefully targeted reform would cut off a major loophole for malign finance and would do so in a way that avoids imposing public disclosure requirements on domestic "dark money" interests. Opponents of campaign finance reform may even support this as a way to sidestep more domestic-oriented disclosures, or they may worry about it being a slippery slope toward more transparency (covering the domestic political spending targeted by DISCLOSE). Reformers may support it as a step in the right direction or may resist it as the lowest common denominator that could become a more limited replacement for DISCLOSE. That both sides could understand its merits and faults suggests to us that it provides a reasonable outline for a bipartisan compromise.

364 Shell games of passing money back and forth among 501(c) organizations has been used for various purposes, including between politically active non-profits to avoid limitations on political spending. See Center for Responsive Politics, "Dark Money Alchemy," accessed July 30, 2020. For our purposes, the concern is that a foreign government could donate to a 501(c)(3), which could pass the money on to a 501(c)(4) or other entity spending heavily on domestic politics, and if 501(c)(3)'s were not part of the disclosure and tracing system the foreign origin could go undisclosed.

365 See Ben Freeman, Foreign Funding of Think Tanks in America, Washington: Center for International Policy, 2020.

366 See United States Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference In the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media with Additional Views, 2020, pp. 6 ("SSCI Report Vol. 2").

367 Putting the onus on the regulated entity to identify, verify, and report beneficial owners resembles the Treasury Department’s Customer Due Diligence Rule requiring banks to collect beneficial ownership information of depositors. FinCEN, 2020. Non-profits could outsource the compliance work to banks or other companies better equipped to identify and verify beneficial owners efficiently. The due diligence work will have already been done if the money is flowing through a U.S. bank and could become even easier if the U.S. Treasury takes on the work of collection, which is separately recommended in this report. AML Act. If lawmakers worry that compliance might be too costly for non-profits, they could consider increasing the $1,000 threshold used in the DISCLOSE Act to a higher level such as $10,000. In whatever form it takes, the point is that public disclosures of substantial contributors to non-profits are an important part of building capacity to identify and close off this conduit channel through which foreign powers funnel money into U.S. politics.
Political advertisements that appear on the internet are not subject to the same disclosure rules and restrictions against foreign purchases that apply to political ads on television, radio, and newspaper. Remarkably, the U.S. Congress has failed to regulate online political ads even after the Internet Research Agency (IRA) troll farm secretly bought ads to target American voters in 2016. The absence of U.S. policy has led to a what Twitter calls a game of “cat and mouse” between the private sector and foreign adversaries. Big tech platforms are each voluntarily implementing their own versions of protections, which are often inconsistent andpregnable, while smaller and up-and-coming providers have little or no similar systems. Meanwhile, foreign powers continue to experiment with new ways to buy political ads without detection, like “franchising” troll farms in Africa with local employees.

2016 and response

This battlespace opened in 2016, when the IRA spent approximately $100,000 on more than 3,500 Facebook ads, many of which explicitly supported President Donald Trump or opposed Hillary Clinton. The IRA’s $1.25 million monthly budget was distributed through 14 shell companies to conceal the ultimate beneficial owner, who turned out to be Yevgeny Prigozhin. The IRA also bought ads on Instagram (owned by Facebook) and operated on Twitter, YouTube, and many other platforms.

Under public pressure, Facebook, Twitter, and Google (which also owns YouTube) have responded to this abuse of their platforms with some protections that are important but far from foolproof. Four key types of resilience improvements are particularly relevant for stopping online political ads (which are just one of many vectors of information manipulation, most of which are separate from malign finance, with some more impactful than paid advertising) from becoming tools of foreign interference.

First, Facebook and other platforms now publicize their take-downs of accounts engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior, which both informs the public and imposes some deterrent cost on bad actors who prefer to keep their activities hidden. The platforms explain what they know about attribution to foreign entities and how much reach the removed accounts had, including both organic distribution and paid advertising. This is one way we know how extensively information manipulation has continued since the 2016 election, including more than ten cases of Russia, China, Iran, and other countries secretly buying political ads on social media.

Second, Facebook, Twitter, and Google have labeled political ads and created public archives identifying who paid for them, much like the public files that traditional television broadcasters have had to maintain for decades (Twitter went further in October 2019, banning political ads altogether). However, those existing interfaces have been criticized for being incomplete, inconsistent, and difficult to use. Google’s archive excludes issue ads, which Russia used more extensively than explicitly political ads in 2016, while Twitter’s only includes ads from the past seven days. Moreover, a wide range of other tech companies either do not have comparable public repositories or share far less information, including rapidly growing video streaming services such as Hulu, Roku, and Sling.

Third, some platforms have begun banning political ads. In November 2019, Twitter stopped taking ads globally that refer to candidates (or any ads bought by candidates or their PACs and 501(c)(4)s) while restricting micro-targeting of issue ads. Twitter’s CEO argued that the reach of political messages should be earned, not bought, at least until modern democratic infrastructure is better prepared to handle political ads. It was a clear contrast with Facebook, which allows not only political ads but also unlabeled lies in those ads. However, in June 2020 Facebook did start blocking ads from state-controlled media outlets targeted to people in the United States (while also labeling the pages and non-U.S. ads of state-controlled outlets).

Fourth, Facebook and Google (and Twitter before it banned...
political ads) have imposed processes to verify the identity of advertisers before they are authorized to buy political and issue ads.381 In April 2018, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse’s questioning of Mark Zuckerberg revealed that Facebook’s verification process would fail to identify a Russian owner running ads through a corporation domiciled in Delaware.382 In June 2020, Facebook acknowledged it is still not piercing through shell companies.383 But the platforms have updated their verification processes to require a business website, employer identification number, and, in some cases, a U.S. address where the platform can mail a unique code to be entered online.384

Probing for weaknesses

Of course, while the U.S. platforms have been improving their resilience, foreign powers have been testing out new ways to evade those defenses. Facebook says it would be hard for Russia to reuse the same exact tactics of 2016 but “we’ve seen threat actors evolving and getting better.”385

A simple and common tactic is for entities tied to foreign governments to have their employees publish content and buy ads purportedly in their own personal capacity. Sputnik News had 364 employees in Moscow misrepresent themselves as independent news pages covering topics of general interest in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, when in truth they were posting and promoting through ad purchases content advancing Kremlin narratives critical of NATO and pro-democracy protests.386 Employees of the Pakistani military used 103 fake accounts to promote their narrative about Kashmir and the Indian government.387

Another technique ad buyers use to evade detection is to operate through nationals within the target country or in third countries. Two key examples are instructive.

First, a Russian agent in Kyiv paid more than 300 Ukrainian citizens to temporarily rent their Facebook and Twitter accounts.388 The tactic was tailor-made to circumvent Facebook’s safeguards against foreign ad purchases.389 The Russian operation meant to use ads, fake news, and komsomat to tarnish candidates Mos-

Second, Prigozhin has repeatedly “franchised” new troll farms within African countries, where they try to evade detection by employing locals.390 Some operations have involved interfering in African elections, such as a trio of Prigozhin’s networks Facebook took down in October 2019.391 This massive campaign targeted several African countries through Arabic-language posts, with one of the networks posting 3.6 times as much content as the IRA was putting out in 2016.392 Prigozhin’s operations appear to have paid local citizens to set up Facebook accounts, buy ads, attend rallies, set up new local media organizations, hire existing media groups, and write favorable articles about the Kremlin’s preferred candidates.393 Separately, other African troll farms funded by Russians associated with the IRA have aimed to fuel racial division in the United States, such as one employing 16 Ghanaians and eight Nigerians posing as African Americans (mentioned in the chapter on non-profit fronts).394 Facebook says its systems repeatedly rejected attempts by that troll farm to run political or issue ads in the United States, although $379 of Facebook ads were successfully bought by Ghanaians who later joined the group.395

Another example of foreign experimentation and mixed resilience by U.S. platforms is TheSoul Publishing.396 This creator of clickbait do-it-yourself craft videos appears to have been started a week after the 2016 U.S. election by Russian nationals.397 It grew out of a company founded in Russia that moved to Cyprus in 2016.398 By late 2019, TheSoul’s 140 YouTube channels and 70 Facebook pages had the third most views of any online media and entertainment creator, behind only Disney and WarnerMedia.400 If that were the entire story, it might not be concerning. But they also post history videos with a strong pro-Russian political tinge, such as claims that Ukraine is part of Russia and that the Soviet Union gifted Alaska to America.401 Before the U.S. midterm elections in 2018, TheSoul paid rubles to buy a very small amount of Facebook political ads (which can be seen in Facebook’s ad library) targeting U.S. citizens over the age of 18. It is possible that they verified their U.S. address by having Facebook and YouTube mail codes to a shared workspace in New York.402 This mysterious case has not been credibly attributed to a foreign government, but it is a bad sign that Facebook’s defens-

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383 On June 3, 2020, Facebook’s head of cybersecurity, Nathaniel Gleicher, told journalist Casey Michel, “There will always be layers of shell corporations that are going to be difficult to pierce—there will always be entities that will find ways to hide who they are. I think there’s a point where we just won’t be able to pierce these shell companies, and quite frankly that’s a reality of the choices we’ve made across society.” In our view, Facebook is absolving responsibility as if they have no choice for some unexplained technical reasons, seemingly unless the U.S. government outsources anonymous shell companies. This lax mindset was common in the banking sector until after 9/11, when the government started requiring banks to do the diligence of identifying beneficial owners, which they now do quite successfully under Treasury’s Customer Due Diligence Rule. This shows that regulation is needed to force the private sector to take responsibility.
384 See Facebook, April 23, 2018; Google, “About verification.”
386 See Gleicher, January 17, 2019.
387 See Nathaniel Gleicher, “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior and Spam From India and Pakistan,” Facebook, April 1, 2019.
391 Ibid.
392 Ibid.
393 Ibid.
394 Ibid.
395 Ibid.
396 Ibid.
397 Ibid.
398 Ibid.
399 Ibid.
400 Ibid.
401 Ibid.
402 Ibid.
These private sector defenses against bad actors have some similarities with the efforts by U.S. banks to spot money laundering and terrorist financing. In both the financial and information ecosystems, the vast majority of flows (whether money or information) are clean and legitimate, but it is the sliver of dirty or malicious content that poses a substantial threat. In both arenas, the open nature of Western societies is turned into a vulnerability and exploited by cunning authoritarian regimes that continually adapt their tradecraft. And in both fights, the private sector needs to be the tip of the spear, both because there are important limitations on U.S. government control over these sectors (especially in the realm of free speech) and because bad actors live beyond the reach of U.S. law enforcement (i.e., in countries like Russia and China that do not have extradition treaties, so indicting perpetrators just means they cannot travel outside those countries). But the big difference is that, whereas the United States has been regulating money laundering for fifty years and terrorist financing since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, the internet has expanded more recently in a time of partisan political gridlock that has precluded regulation, even after it has clearly become a national security imperative. U.S. banks would not have built such strong defenses if it was voluntary (it took some multi-billion-dollar fines and criminal convictions), and protections against foreign online political ads cannot be voluntary either.

**U.S. Recommendation:**

Adopt legislation like the *Honest Ads Act* requiring broad public disclosure of who pays for online political ads as well as legislation like the *PAID AD Act* prohibiting foreign individuals and governments from purchasing campaign ads.

U.S. campaign finance law has not been substantially updated since 2002. Since then, two historic developments—the advent of social media and the return of authoritarian aggression—have altered the environment in which political ads run. As detailed below, these two key challenges offer an instructive division, because one calls for disclosure requirements like the *Honest Ads Act* and the other merits tighter prohibitions against foreign political spending like the *PAID AD Act*.

First, the dramatic expansion of internet usage generally and social media specifically has made digital ads a major vehicle for political spending. Spending on online political ads reached $1.4 billion in 2016, more than quadruple the 2012 amount. In addition to their increasing prevalence, digital ads are often hidden from the public at large due to enhancements in online targeting, which hinders the ability to spot disinformation campaigns until well after elections.

This calls for public disclosures around who pays for political ads. That is exactly what the *Honest Ads Act* would require, modeling its new internet disclosure system on Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requirements for political ads on television and radio. All social media companies would be legally required to maintain publicly accessible archives of ads run on their platforms that relate to political campaigns or legislative issues (including information about who bought the ads), and online political ads would have to clearly and conspicuously display disclaimers. This mandate for “ad libraries” and disclaimers would essentially extend to the internet the same disclosure requirements that apply to traditional mediums, as recommended by the bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee report on Russian interference in the 2016 election.

The second development is that authoritarian governments and their proxies have adopted a much more aggressive posture toward interference in Western elections in recent years. While active measures were used in the Cold War, it was not a risk U.S. policymakers focused on when reforming campaign finance in 2002. While it is important that Western responses avoid sacrificing the open nature of our free societies, this new geopolitical environment warrants debate about whether to tighten restrictions against the ability of foreign countries to communicate their messages across borders through advertising.

As compared to *Honest Ads*, the *PAID AD Act* more aggressively targets foreign funders. The only section of the U.S. legal code *PAID AD* amends is the foreign-source ban, expanding its scope with a couple new prongs. First, foreign nationals would be prohibited from buying ads (in any format, including but not...
limited to the internet) that "promote, support, attack or oppose the election of a clearly identified candidate" at any time whatsoever (whereas similar electioneering rules covering Americans only apply a month or two before an election). Some critics worry this could chill the speech of foreign citizens residing in the United States and whose lives are deeply affected by politicians, from the "dreamers" to people of Chinese ethnicity endangered by racism related to coronavirus.\textsuperscript{412} Second, \textit{PAID AD} would prohibit foreign governments and their proxies from buying issue ads in an election year for purposes of influencing an election. While this would outlaw ads like those bought by the Internet Research Agency to stoke division around race throughout 2016, it would also prohibit Mexico and Canada from using ads to share their views on the USMCA.\textsuperscript{413}

For those worried about \textit{PAID AD} too broadly prohibiting speech by nationals and governments from friendly countries, one option would be to exempt political ad purchases by nationals and governments from NATO and allied countries, just as we recommend for foreign-owned companies and campaign contact reporting.\textsuperscript{414}

Another enhancement that would strengthen both \textit{Honest Ads} and \textit{PAID AD} would be to make social media platforms responsible for identifying the true beneficial owner ultimately funding the ad, rather than merely "the name of the person purchasing the advertisement" and "a contact person for such person." This is similar to the beneficial ownership due diligence that the Treasury Department requires of U.S. banks. In our view, that is not too much to ask of social media companies.

Finally, note that \textit{Honest Ads} and \textit{PAID AD} are intended to be complementary, respectively broadening disclosures and the foreign-source ban. That is why both are included in the \textit{SHIELD Act}, because resilience to malign foreign ads requires both broad transparency and targeted prohibitions.

\textsuperscript{412} See Luis Miranda, "Get The Facts On The DREAM Act," U.S. National Archives, December 1, 2010; Allyson Chiu, "Trump has no qualms about calling coronavirus the 'Chinese Virus.' That's a dangerous attitude, experts say," Washington Post, March 20, 2020. "Dreamer" refers to the 825,000 unauthorized immigrants brought to the United States as children who would have a pathway to legal permanent residency under the DREAM Act.

\textsuperscript{413} See Washington Post, "Americans deserve to know who pays for political ads. But is that enough?" July 2, 2019.

\textsuperscript{414} This would not really address another challenge with \textit{PAID AD}, which is that it could help autocrats argue that this U.S. prohibition is similar to their own laws blocking Western spending on democracy promotion, even though that assistance is meant for non-political capacity-building rather than trying to influence election outcomes one way or the other. Limiting the prohibition to particular non-allied countries could arguably make this problem even worse by justifying foreign designations of Western countries and institutions as "undesirable." This risk weighs more heavily on prohibition bills like \textit{PAID AD} than it does on mere disclosure bills like \textit{Honest Ads} and the \textit{DISCLOSE Act}. 
6. Media Outlets with Foreign Funding

As with political ads, foreign-funded media outlets are proliferating rapidly, particularly through fringe start-up news websites, extending from Moscow and Tehran all the way westward to Ukraine, the European Union, Africa, and the Midwestern United States. With increasingly sophisticated tradecraft that usually involves some form of non-transparent presence within target countries where press freedoms are strongly protected, this intersection of malign finance and information operations is the cutting edge of foreign interference in democracies.

New tools tested in Ukraine

The first place to see what new active measures Russia is cooking up tends to be Ukraine, given its long history as a testing ground for weapons that Moscow later deploys further west.

In the run-up to the 2019 Ukrainian election, Russia reused its tools of social media manipulation previously unveiled against the United States in 2016 and 2018. U.S. law enforcement tipped off Facebook about a network of Russian trolls presenting themselves as Ukrainians and sharing news stories in ways that had technical and behavioral overlaps with past activities by the Internet Research Agency. Ukraine’s cyber police also spotted a surge in Russian-linked bots.

In some cases, those tactics were upgraded with new methods to avoid detection, including cases mentioned in the prior chapter on online political ads that overlap with online media outlets. First, a Russian agent in Kyiv tried to pay Ukrainian citizens for access to their personal Facebook pages. Russia intended to use ads to promote fabricated news articles that it had planted to discredit presidential candidates opposed by the Kremlin.

Second, as noted previously, 364 Sputnik News employees in Moscow pretended to be operating independent news pages. As with political ads, foreign-funded media outlets are proliferating rapidly, particularly through fringe start-up news websites that are paid by unknown benefactors to publish “news” articles that push manipulative Kremlin narratives about Ukraine.

This distribution network was first spotted by Texty, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Kyiv investigating anti-Ukrainian misinformation. They developed a machine-learning algorithm capable of identifying manipulative news articles, which then scoured the Ukrainian internet and found 80 outlets where at least 25 percent of the stories were manipulated. The majority of the content was critical of the Ukrainian government. A fourth of the sites were administered from Russia or the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine. Experts we consulted see the websites continuing to turn over a couple times a year, restarting under new titles and URLs without any contact information or identification of editors.

The junk websites make money by being paid to write as well as remove stories that purport to reveal compromising material about a target person. The researchers at Texty called one such “newsroom” and was told it would cost $65 to publish a fabricated story discrediting a potential Ukrainian presidential candidate. The sites also make money removing stories if the target is willing to pay what amounts to blackmail.

Texty also believes the sites accept large orders that ultimately come from Russian propagandists. They lack hard evidence, instead basing this assumption on their observation of the junk websites reposting Kremlin narratives that are critical of the Ukrainian government. We include this case because we are told Ukrainian intelligence services also take this seriously as a threat vector of Russian malign influence.

Given the central role that money plays in the junk website business, Texty’s principal legislative recommendation for countering disinformation is to require media outlets to declare their sources of financing.

The second medium of outlets increasingly aligned with the Kremlin’s interests is Ukrainian television news channels, about half of which have been taken over by Putin’s closest confidant in Ukraine, Viktor Medvedchuk.

First, as part of their mission to track Russian malign influence, Ukrainian intelligence services and civil society experts monitor thousands of small “junk websites” that are paid by unknown benefactors to publish “news” articles that push manipulative Kremlin narratives about Ukraine.

Ukrainian politicians themselves also got into the disinformation game, with media outlets owned by or aligned with leading candidates slinging false accusations at opponents. As in other countries, when Ukrainian elites fuel distrust of the country’s news environment, it hurts Ukrainian democracy, making it ripe for further interference, which suits the Kremlin’s perceived interests.

In addition to Russian social media manipulation and purely domestic disinformation, Ukrainian information and security experts we consulted see Russian malign influence operating through two new vectors of financial support for media outlets: funding small junk news websites and owning big traditional television channels.  

415 Gleicher, January 17, 2019.
418 Schwitz and Frenkel, 2019.
419 Gleicher, January 17, 2019.
422 Ibid.
423 Ibid.
424 Ibid.
425 Ibid.
426 Ibid.
427 Ibid.
428 Ibid.
429 Ibid.
430 Ibid.
The intersection of malign finance and information operations is the cutting edge of foreign interference.

This is an important vector for information warfare in a country where television is the main news source for about three quarters of the population. As such, ownership of television channels has been a key factor behind the recovery of the pro-Russian political forces in Kyiv such that they now rank second among national parties.432

After gaining control through a middleman who made acquisitions between mid-2018 and mid-2019, Medvedchuk is now regarded as the owner of three Ukrainian channels: 112, NewsOne, and ZIK.433 While these three channels only have a 3 percent share of the total Ukrainian television market, they do not provide any entertainment content.434 Instead, they dominate news and political programs.435 By one credible estimate, the three channels host a 45 percent share of Ukraine’s informational TV market.436 As with most other Ukrainian media, the shows are used to advocate for politicians associated with the oligarchs who own them, which in the case of Medvedchuk’s channels means himself and pro-Russian presidential candidate Yuriy Boyko.437

Medvedchuk and Boyko also enjoy steadfast support from the Inter television channel, which is owned by either Firtash or Medvedchuk.438 Adding Inter, the estimated share of top Ukrainian informational shows owned by the pro-Russian group rises to 55 percent, including 75 percent of the top political programs and 35 percent of the top news shows.439

In May 2020, the threat was summed up by former prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who warned that “Putin controls 50 percent of the news channels in Ukraine, so he can easily control 50 percent of the minds and hearts of Ukrainians.”440

Westward probing in the European Union

Three cases of Russian-supported online media outlets in the E.U. show a steady march further into Western nations: first in the Baltics starting in 2013, then a Berlin-based operation targeting Americans in 2017 and 2018, and finally interference in Sweden’s 2018 election.

First, a shell company registered three websites in a small Dutch down in 2013: baltnews.lv, baltnews.ee, and baltnews.lt (one dedicated to each of the three Baltic countries).441

Baltnews claimed to be a portal of independent local news outlets owned by private investors in the Netherlands.442 In truth, they were owned by a string of front companies whose ultimate beneficial owner was Rossiya Segodnya, the Russian state-owned news agency.443 Rossiya Segodnya is also the parent company that owns Sputnik News, but the difference between Sputnik News and Baltnews is that Baltnews did not disclose that it was established, funded, managed, and owned by the Russian government.444

The secret ownership by the Russian government was first noticed by the Estonian security service, which identified a co-founder to be Vladimir Lepekhin, the “animosity ambassador” of Kremlin propaganda “who participates in Russia’s influence operations in neighboring countries.”445

An investigative report by BuzzFeed later revealed that the other co-founder, Aleksandr Kornilov, took editorial orders from Rossiya Segodnya, which provided lists of topics to be covered.446 The editorial lines provided by the Russian government were meant to heighten social division within the Baltic nations, encourage diplomatic splits with Western nations, and push Moscow’s geopolitical narratives.447

Second, two online video channels—Maffick Media and Redfish—have misleadingly represented themselves as independent amateur productions without disclosing that they are ultimately owned by RT, which is in turn funded by the Russian government and described by the U.S. intelligence community as “the Kremlin’s principal international propaganda outlet.”448

Both online channels produce videos that fan the flames of social tensions within Western countries or offer criticism of U.S. foreign policy and the media.449 Both employ former RT workers.450 Both are owned and co-located at the same Berlin address as RT’s acknowledged subsidiary Ruptly TV.451 Neither discloses to viewers their close ties to the Russian government.452

Third, Swedish security officials say Russia interfered in the country’s September 2018 election by nurturing its anti-im-
migrant digital ecosystem, including at least six far-right news websites.453

The fringe news sites feed content to a network of closed Facebook pages built by the Sweden Democrats, a political party with neo-Nazi roots.454 Despite having only ever previously won 5.7 percent of the vote, the Sweden Democrats had more online presence than any other party going into the 2018 election, in which they enjoyed their best showing ever, winning 18 percent.455

Sweden’s alt-right information space benefited from several foreign support mechanisms.456 These included state and non-state actors, contributors closely tied to the Kremlin, and web links from abroad that help improve websites’ search ranking.457 There were also incidents in which dozens of masked men tried to start violent riots against police officers in immigrant communities and then Russian state-owned TV channels suddenly showed up offering to pay young immigrants to make trouble in front of their cameras.458

Most intriguing is the covert assistance that the six far-right Swedish websites received from the same obscure source.459 The sites were financially supported by advertising revenues from a network of ad buyers that were distributed in an effort to appear unrelated but turned out to all trace back to companies located at the same Berlin address and owned by the same parent company, Autodoc GmbH.460 That is an online auto-parts store owned by four businessmen from Russia and Ukraine, three of whom have adopted German-sounding last names.461 Autodoc also placed ads on anti-Semitic and other extremist websites in Germany, Hungary, Austria, and elsewhere in Europe.462 An early version of the Autodoc website also had a hidden back door (only accessible if you know and type in the full URL) to socially divisive content completely unrelated to auto parts translated into a variety of European languages.463

The progression of covert support channels—from shell companies in the Baltics to state subsidiaries in Berlin and obscured ad revenues and secret online backdoors in Sweden—shows a clear westward progression of increasingly sophisticated backing of media outlets. And the spread has now extended beyond the European continent.

Prigozhin’s African laboratory

The Kremlin seems to now treat Africa like a weapons lab to test new, more aggressive methods in the years between bigger conflicts like U.S. presidential elections.464 A bit like Ukraine, Africa offers a ripe environment to buy malign influence over traditional news and online media outlets, given the relatively weak institutions of democracy (such as an independent press) and deeply entrenched corruption (particularly in the natural resources sector).465 Most Russian government-mandated hybrid warfare activities in Africa are carried out by Wagner Group, which is the shadowy private security outfit funded by Kremlin-connected oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin.466 Wagner’s mix of low-tech and cutting-edge methods intersect malign finance and information manipulation, funding both traditional media assets and social media troll farms.

"The Kremlin seems to now treat Africa like a weapons lab to test new, more aggressive methods in the years between bigger conflicts like U.S. presidential elections.

In Madagascar, Wagner printed and distributed the island’s largest newspaper.467 The articles are written by local students paid to write flattering pieces in the local language about candidates favored by the Kremlin.468

The most salient Russian activity in the Central African Republic is Prigozhin’s mercenaries working to protect the government and other local elites in order to secure the diamond trade.469 But Wagner also launched a radio station to broadcast Kremlin talking points in the country and distributes a free newspaper to publicize the benefits to Russia’s presence in the region.470

Libya is similarly known as a destination for Wagner mercenaries supporting warlord Khalifa Haftar.471 There, Wagner is reuseing the Madagascar playbook by creating a pro-Haftar newspaper (printing a circulation of 300,000 copies distributed to territory controlled by Haftar) while also hedging its bets by also supporting the opposition (including an extensive campaign to bring to power Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of the late dictator).472 To explain to Saif al-Islam Gaddafi how he could win, Prigozhin flew in one of his troll farm workers who “specializes in influencing elections that are to be held in several African states.”473 Moreover, Prigozhin’s funding of media outlets is even more...
advanced in Libya than it is in other African countries. From January 2019 onwards, Wagner revitalized the old pro-Gaddafist propaganda channel with technical, financial, and advisory support.475 This included paying off the TV station’s debts in exchange for a 50 percent equity stake, modernizing it with entertaining programming that resembles modern Russian news TV, unifying the channel with a related news agency, launching six new regular broadcasts, and building up an extensive social media presence.475 At the same time, they also advised a pro-Haftar TV station on how to optimize its broadcasting.476

Recall that Prigozhin is best known for funding the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency troll farm indicted for interfering in the 2016 U.S. election.477 Thus it comes as no surprise that he has been running multiple networks of trolls targeting collectively eight African countries.478 They pose as local news organizations, establish or hire genuine media organizations, pay subcontractors who are native speakers to write favorable articles about Russia’s preferred candidates, share stories from state media outlets in both Russia and Africa, and direct traffic to alternative news websites.479 This array of African operations demonstrates the powerful symbiosis between social media manipulation and funding of traditional and online news outlets.480

Foreign websites pretending to be U.S.-based

The U.S. cases are split into two types, with two examples of each. This first section covers two fully verified and attributed cases of authoritarian regimes creating websites in their own countries that are made to look like they are purely American news services. The next section will touch upon reporting of suspected but unproven foreign funding of two U.S. media outlets.

First is a Moscow-based website called USA Really which features stories about divisive U.S. social and political issues.

USA Really is probably an amateurish project that should not be overstated in terms of its reach or what it means about the Kremlin’s capabilities. However, we include it as a case of foreign interference in our data for a couple reasons. One is that its founder, Alexander Malkevich, was sanctioned by the U.S. government for attempting to interfere in the 2018 midterm elections.481 The other is that the site is funded by the Federal News Agency, an offshoot of the Prigozhin-funded Internet Research Agency.482

In fact, the most interesting aspect of USA Really might be that its launch was publicized with a press release by the Federal News Agency and a trip to Washington, DC, by Malkevich.483 If there is any organized design behind this effort, it could be an experiment with more overt operations whereby Kremlin-connected (yet legally non-government) actors claim responsibility in some public forums while the website itself lacks viewer disclaimers about its ties to Russian government-affiliated actors. It could be meant to test the boundaries of what the U.S. government and U.S. technology platforms will allow while also seeking to legitimize a new form of information manipulation. Or it could be an inexpensive farce that does little more than attract some publicity and exemplify how Russian chaos strategy is often carried out by opportunistic freelancers with varying degrees of competence.

The second case of foreign websites purporting to be American is more extensive and covert: Iranian state media created at least six inauthentic news websites, including Liberty Front Press, and supported them with 652 Facebook accounts and pages, 284 Twitter handles, and accounts on YouTube, Pinterest, Reddit, Instagram, and Google Plus.484

The websites purported to be independent news services operated by Americans.485 In reality, they were set up by Iranian state media organizations such as Press TV.486 Much of their content was appropriated from genuine news outlets like Politico and CNN and occasionally modified to promote political narratives in line with Iranian interests, including anti-Saudi, anti-Israeli, and pro-Palestinian themes, as well as support for the Iran nuclear deal.487

American Herald Tribune is an inauthentic news site that was included in the network but was not one of the six sites publicly named in the initial reports.488 Established in 2015, one of its most viral stories was a since-debunked claim about Donald Trump’s father being in the Ku Klux Klan.489 For a fee of a couple hundred dollars, the story was authored by a U.S. citizen in Salem, Oregon.490 Viewed more than 29 million times, the story still appears on the American Herald Tribune website and in Google search results.491

475 Experts at the Stanford Internet Observatory note that through the secret investment in Jamahiriya TV station “Prigozhin is refining his ability to blur the lines of media authenticity.” They note that it has become difficult to know when foreign support for local media outlets crosses the line into facilitating inauthentic behavior. For example, Jamahiriya TV was historically pro-Gaddafi. But after Prigozhin invested it also started supporting Haftar. The shift backfired when locals on social media derided the “Haftarization” as obvious foreign influence. See Grossman, et al., 2020.
477 See MacFarquhar, 2018.
478 See Gleicher, October 30, 2019.
479 See Harding, 2019; Stanford Internet Observatory, 2019.
481 Treasury, December 2018
482 Ibid.
483 See Sergei Petrov, “Прощай, Америка---ФАН готовит к запуску новое информационное агенство [“Prosnis, America”—FAN gotovit k zapusku novoye informatsionnoye agente],” Federalnaye Agentstvo Novostei, April 4, 2018; Amy MacKinnon, “Russian Troll or Clumsy Publicity Hound?” Foreign Policy, June 15, 2018; Amy MacKinnon, “The Evolution of a Russian Troll,” Foreign Policy, July 10, 2019. The trip turned out to be a bit of a flop, as within hours of arriving he was ejected from his WeWork rental near the White House while Facebook and Twitter quickly blocked access to USA Really and he has not been able to attract American employees.
485 See FireEye, 2018; Facebook, August 21, 2018.
486 See FireEye, 2018; Facebook, August 21, 2018.
487 See FireEye, 2018; Facebook, August 21, 2018.
488 See Donie O’Sullivan, “Exclusive: This site pays Americans to write ‘news’ articles. Signs indicate it originates in Iran,” CNN, January 24, 2020.
489 Ibid.
490 Ibid.
U.S. websites with undisclosed funding sources

We have not identified any proven cases of U.S.-based media outlets secretly funded by authoritarian regimes. But the risk is evident, not only from foreign-funded outlets in other democracies that target those populations along with Americans, but also because U.S.-based outlets are not required to disclose their sources of funding. The inability to identify foreign money is demonstrated by investigative journalists who have scrutinized fringe U.S.-based outlets on both the left and the right yet have not found definitive answers.

An example on the left is Mint Press News, a Minnesota-based website which publishes international news sourced from major outlets while adding a strong slant that either criticizes the foreign policies of Israel, Saudi Arabia, or the United States or sympathizes with the ruling regimes of Iran or Syria. Its best-known article—falsey claiming a chemical weapons attack in Syria had actually been perpetrated by rebel groups rather than the Assad regime—was cited as evidence by Syria, Iran, and Russia, though it turned out to have been reported by a man in Syria who at times appears to have been based in St. Petersburg and Tehran. When staff asked who funded their paychecks, they were told it was “retired business people.” The hidden nature of the funding caused some staff enough discomfort that former employees cited it as their reason for leaving Mint Press. Local journalists have tried and failed to figure out where Mint Press’s money comes from. The outlet’s first hire told Buzzfeed News that questions about the funding and control of Mint Press always seem to circle back to the founder’s father-in-law, who was born in Jordan and later studied for five years under a Grand Ayatollah in Qom, Iran, before becoming an adjunct professor of Islamic theology at St. Thomas University.

An example on the right is The Daily Stormer, a neo-Nazi website that was registered in Ohio in 2013 and became the top hate site in America by 2017. Its finances are non-transparent because it does not have advertising or commercial sponsorship, instead relying on undisclosed donors. The most shared Daily Stormer post celebrated the murder of Heather Heyer when an Ohio man drove his car into a crowd in Charlottesville, Virginia. At that point, U.S. tech platforms canceled the site’s domain registration, email services, and cyberattack protection. The Daily Stormer went dark but then reappeared the next day as dailystormer.ru (Russian) and then spent months cycling through the domains of various small countries around the world before settling in February 2020 on .su, the domain that was assigned to the Soviet Union in 1990 and now provides haven to cyber criminals and pro-Kremlin projects. A week after the Charlottesville rally, when The Daily Stormer could not get U.S. banking and payment processing services, it received its single biggest known donation in the form of bitcoin. While it is still unclear who provided the bitcoin, an investigation by a U.S. cyber security firm found that before being laundered through 29 pass-through wallets it originated from a transaction with an English and Russian speaker sitting on $25 million in bitcoin. That transaction was in 2012, around the time when Anglin relocated to Russia, where he continues to hide as a fugitive of U.S. legal enforcement.

Having described these two websites and their non-transparent funding, it is very important to remember that protecting the values of an open society under the rule of law requires the high-


494 See Gray and Testa, 2013.

495 See Gray and Testa, 2013. One reporter told Buzzfeed News: “I stopped writing for Mint Press because I felt deeply uncomfortable that its finances are hidden from both the writers and the public. Whether this dark money influenced the mess that happened with the Syria chemical weapons piece remains to be seen. But given the gravity of the ongoing Syrian humanitarian quagmire, the public deserves to know who’s funding not only Mint Press, but everyone else who’s weighed in on Syria, as well.”

496 See Lambert, 2015. As staffing levels declined following the 2013 Syria controversy, the Mint Press website continued to list addresses of their physical office spaces, but local journalists spent hours driving around only to find that the sites are apparently fictitious or associated with unrelated business.

497 See Gray and Testa, 2013.

498 See Luke O’Brien, “The Making of an American Nazi,” The Atlantic, December 2017; Brett Barroquere, “Family Ties: How Andrew Anglin’s dad helped his neo-Nazi son with the Daily Stormer,” Southern Poverty Law Center, December 20, 2018. The site was founded and operated by Andrew Anglin, who relies on his father to file paperwork for the site in Ohio while he lives abroad. Anglin got attention in the summer of 2015 for endorsing Trump on the Daily Stormer, and then the site’s web traffic climbed throughout the 2016 election season. An analysis conducted in February 2017 showed that The Daily Stormer’s Twitter reach was also being amplified by a network of bots and trolls that shut down for the night between 5:00 p.m. and 11:30 p.m. Eastern Time, which is midnight to 6:30 a.m. in St. Petersburg, Russia. See O’Brien, 2017.

499 The Daily Stormer lacks access to U.S. bank accounts and major online fundraising platforms, so it is funded by mailed-in donations from undisclosed supporters, some of whom paid in foreign currency. See Barnouw, 2019.


501 See O’Brien, 2017. The Daily Stormer was dropped first by its domain registrar, GoDaddy, and then by its email service providers, Zoho and SendGrid, as well as the company that protected it against cyberattacks, Cloudflare. See O’Brien, 2017.


503 See O’Brien, 2019. The $60,000 bitcoin donation was enough to keep the hate site running. See O’Brien, 2019.


est evidentiary standard before labeling U.S. citizens and U.S. media outlets as beneficiaries of malign assistance from foreign powers. In our view, these two cases do not meet those standards, so they are not included in our dataset of foreign interference. This discussion is not meant to imply wrongdoing, but rather to illustrate the possible national security risk enabled by the total lack of disclosure requirements about U.S. online media outlets’ sources of funding from hostile foreign countries.

U.S. Recommendation:

Online media outlets should have to publicly disclose their beneficial owners in “outlet libraries” maintained by U.S. technology companies, while the United States should return to banning more than 25 percent foreign ownership of television and radio licenses and should require foreign owners to make clearer on-air disclosures.

The combination of traditional and online media assets in foreign interference campaigns suggests that defenses should be similarly broad-based, from radio and television stations to online media outlets. However, the scope of such regulations must be calibrated based on the differing strictness of constitutional scrutiny facing the two mediums.

Radio and television

The United States has prior tradition of regulating foreign funding of media assets to prevent news outlets from becoming channels for foreign propaganda. In 1934 when radio and television were the emerging technologies of the day, Congress restricted foreign ownership of broadcast assets by prohibiting foreign nationals from owning more than 25 percent of a station license. This was meant as a national security safeguard to protect ship-to-shore communications and thwart the airing of foreign propaganda on U.S. airwaves.

After decades of this rule serving as an effective ban against significant foreign ownership, the FCC changed its policy in 2013 to start approving foreign holdings above 25 percent, subject to case-by-case evaluations in coordination with the national security agencies of the executive branch. The deregulation was driven by broadcasting companies lobbying for access to foreign capital and arguing that the restriction was an antiquated wartime law from a bygone era when radio stations were a likely channel for foreign propaganda.

With the benefit of hindsight, the FCC’s 2013 deregulation was unfortunately timed on the eve of the revival of authoritarian information operations. As documented in this report, activity jumped starting in 2014 and was not solely limited to online channels. Putin-connected oligarchs interfere in democracies by owning traditional media assets, from Prigozhin’s African radio stations, broadcast television, and satellite channels to Viktor Medvedchuk and Dmytro Firtash’s ownership of half of Ukrainian television news. Russia has also used shell companies to pretend outlets are owned by passive investors in allied countries like the Netherlands, while China’s United Front has used traditional media to interfere in Taiwan and effectively monopolize Chinese-language media in Australia and New Zealand. Instead of reconsidering its deregulation in light of these risks, the FCC has pushed further and approved foreign ownership up to levels of 100 percent in 2017 and 2020.

In our view, the FCC or Congress should return to prohibiting foreign-owned companies from acquiring more than 25 percent of U.S. broadcast licenses. At a minimum, Congress should enact a requirement that lawmakers be given a 30-day opportunity to overrule FCC decisions approving foreign acquisitions above 25 percent, if only to motivate more regulatory scrutiny and public justification around such decisions.

Additionally, Russia, China, and other governments use funding avenues short of ownership (such as leases and brokered fees) to pay U.S. television and radio owners to carry state media programming. RT pays for its network to be carried by major U.S. cable, satellite and broadcast operators in a unique way that leaves the stations unable to cease the programming under the U.S. “leased access” law. Rossiya Segodnya (the Russian state-owned news agency that is the parent company of Sputnik News) handsomely pays two previously struggling radio stations—one in Washington, DC, and one in Kansas City, MO—to broadcast Radio Sputnik programming. Sputnik is negotiating to similarly expand to other cities and intends to broadcast in all major U.S. markets. For China, CGTN America is the

511 See Jingbi, 2017; Jason Pan, “China steps up united front to sway elections forum,” Taipei Times, November 1, 2019, Yinou Lee and J-hwa Cheng, “Paid news: China using Taiwan media to win hearts and minds on island — sources,” Reuters, August 9, 2019; Rowe, pp. 18-19.
512 Memorandum Opinion and Order and Declaratory Ruling before the Federal Communications Commission, In the matter of Frontier Media, LLC., DA 17-190, February 23, 2017, Declaratory Ruling before the Federal Communications Commission, In the matter of Cumulus Media, Inc., MB Docket No. 19-143, May 29, 2020 (“Cumulus Declaratory Ruling”). The May 2020 approval of foreign ownership up to 100 percent showed some of the protections the FCC now uses in its approval process. The U.S. company, which was emerging from bankruptcy and would be on a stronger financial footing if it could sell equity warrants to foreign investors, is the owner of nearly 450 radio broadcast stations licenses. The FCC received a letter from “relevant Executive Branch agencies with expertise on issues related to national security, law enforcement, foreign policy, and trade policy … stating that they have no objection to grant of the request and have not requested that we impose any conditions on grant.” The FCC also stipulated that the company would have to come back to the FCC for approval before any foreign investor or group of foreign investors would be allowed to own more than five percent of the company. Cumulus Declaratory Ruling.
515 See Chris Hazut, “Russian ‘Propaganda Machine’ Selects Kansas City As Its Second Radio Broad-

508 Commission Policies Declaratory Ruling, pp. 1. The FCC was able to do this without an act of Congress because the statute explicitly provides an exception “if the Commission finds that the public interest will be served.” As such, the deregulation technically just “clarified” the FCC’s interpretation of the law that ownership may be permissible above the 25 percent threshold if the FCC approves the transaction, and the FCC said it was open to considering foreign investment proposals. This was surprising to many who had treated the 25 percent limitation as an absolute cap for decades. See Brian Fung, “FCC relaxes rule limiting foreign ownership of media stations,” Washington Post, November 14, 2013; David Oxenford, “FCC Allows More Than 25% Foreign Ownership of Broadcast Stations — Instructions for Investors are to Be Developed,” Broadcast Law Blog, November 22, 2013.
D.C.-based part of the international arm of CCTV, the main domestic propaganda organ of the Chinese Communist Party. Through CGTN America, Beijing reaches 30 million Americans by broadcasting seven hours of daily programming through cable and satellite providers like AT&T and Comcast.

Unlike bans against foreign nationals owning broadcast licenses, government prohibitions against contracting with foreign media would violate the First Amendment rights of Americans (including U.S. broadcast licensees or cable operators as they choose their programming content). However, the government can and should insist that listeners be clearly and frequently warned that they are tuning into propaganda sponsored by a foreign government, putting in effect a commonsense disclosure requirement.

In theory, the executive branch already has legal authority to require effective disclosure and has indeed employed some of these tools. In 2017 the DOJ insisted that RT and Sputnik register as foreign agents under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) after the U.S. intelligence community concluded that both outlets contributed to Russian interference in the 2016 election. Similarly, in 2019, CGTN America registered as a foreign agent at the urging of the DOJ. FARA registration requires foreign agents to file paperwork detailing business arrangements, which is why we know what amount Rossiya Segodnya pays radio stations to broadcast Radio Sputnik. It also requires foreign agents to label their information distributions, in which the case of radio and television broadcasts means on-air identification of the foreign principal (which could be a government or a private entity or person) and disclosure that more information is on file at the DOJ. This dovetails with FCC requirements that broadcast stations “fully and fairly disclose the true identity” of anyone paying money for the airing of programming (regardless of whether or not the sponsor is a foreign agent).

The problem is that these state media outlets do not name their foreign principal to be the “Russian government” or “Chinese state” per se, but instead provide the names of entities that most Americans have never heard of. Thus, when Sputnik News reads its hourly disclosure statement required by the DOJ and the FCC, it says its “programming is distributed by RM Broadcasting, LLC on behalf of the Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International News Agency.” No reasonable listener can be expected to know that means they are hearing Russian government-funded propaganda. Similarly, RT identifies as “ANO TV-Novosti” and CGTN America claims to broadcast on behalf of “CCTV.” By contrast, social media companies clearly label each post by accounts associated with RT and CCTV (or their subsidiaries like Maffick Media) as “Russia state-controlled media” or “China state-affiliated media.”

Congress should enact legislation requiring the FCC and the DOJ to clarify that when the true sponsor or foreign principal is in turn associated with a government, the on-air disclosure should clearly refer to the name of that government in terms that are recognizable by most Americans. Congress should require these now-hourly disclosures to air with greater frequency, such as once every 20 minutes (an interval that is sufficiently below the 27-minute average U.S. commute time that the disclosure would air at least once for roughly two thirds of commuters). Congress should require public disclosure when foreign agents seek time on U.S. airwaves, as recommended by Rep. Anna Eshoo. Authorizing the FCC to require sponsorship identification and political files by third-party programming providers would require amending the Communications Act of 1934. Lastly, Congress should provide the DOJ and the FCC the necessary resources to proactively monitor foreign agents’ compliance, quickly investigate possible infractions, and swiftly enforce the law.

U.S. broadcasters were correct when arguing to the FCC in 2013 that technological innovation has now taken information operations online. However, our survey of both offline and online foreign interference shows that the policy implication should not be that broadcast protections should be weakened, but rather that they should be strengthened while regulations should also be expanded to cover internet media outlets.
Online outlets
Extending defenses against malign foreign influence from broadcast media to online outlets would involve some different approaches, driven partly by the fact that internet regulations face stricter judicial scrutiny under the First Amendment (in 1997, the Supreme Court ruled that websites are akin to newspapers and thus enjoy stronger constitutional protections).\(^{532}\) There are also practical challenges to enforcing internet laws as they apply to millions of people and small entities operating below the radar and across borders. Fortunately, while the United States has generally struggled to figure out whether or how to regulate online media without endangering the values of an open society, Congress did some substantial work on one related topic from which we can draw legislative lessons: The Honest Ads Act would mandate public disclosure of who pays for online political ads, partly by requiring social media companies to operate online libraries of political ads that run on their platforms.\(^{533}\)

We recommend new U.S. legislation that would amend election law to require U.S. technology companies to maintain publicly accessible "outlet libraries," which would be analogous to the "ad libraries" of Honest Ads except that they would identify the beneficial owners funding online media outlets that use the internet services provided by U.S. technology companies.\(^{534}\)

If an online media outlet wants to register its websites in the United States, appear in search results, earn revenue through advertising technology, and operate on social media, it would have to share its beneficial ownership information with U.S. technology platforms for publication in outlet libraries. However, the legal obligation to create and run the libraries and verify their information would fall not on the outlets but instead on U.S. web hosting providers, domain registrars and registries, search engines, advertising technology firms, and social network platforms. This takes a page out of anti-money laundering and financial sanctions playbook, whereby the ubiquitous position of the U.S. dollar and financial sector provides a private-sector instrument for enforcement. It also imposes upon U.S. technology companies the requirement to collect and verify beneficial ownership data, similar to the obligations of U.S. banks under Treasury's Customer Due Diligence rule.\(^{535}\) The rules should leave room for these companies, if they so desire, to collaborate on or outsource to third parties the due diligence and other compliance work.\(^{536}\) But like the duties of the U.S. financial sector, taking on this obligation should become part of U.S. technology companies’ responsibilities to uphold a transparent and secure information ecosystem.

In defining online media outlets, lessons should be drawn from other democracies with strong constitutional protections for free speech that have started regulating internet media in carefully limited ways. For example, a 2011 law in Iceland, which has the most free internet in the world, defined media outlets in such a way as to include internet news organizations (which regularly provide the public with content that is subject to editorial control), while excluding personal posts on social media, blogs, and most other online communications.\(^{537}\) For our purposes, such a definition would cover news outlets that distribute articles and opinion pieces through both traditional mediums and online, including hundreds of newspapers and news channels in the United States.

The scope should be limited further to target only the medium-sized outlets that are small enough to allow non-transparent funding yet big enough to be possible vectors for malign foreign influence. Specifically, we would eliminate very large and small outlets by borrowing approaches from two respective bills discussed in this report.

Like Honest Ads, small local outlets should be exempted by defining online media outlets as only including those whose websites receive at least a certain level of engagement such as 100,000 unique monthly users. That would mean at least 100,000 unique monthly visitors for a web hosting service, at least 100,000 unique social media profiles engaging with (e.g., reading, sharing, or commenting on articles) the outlet’s content for purposes of a social media platform, and similar metrics for other online companies. We selected the 100,000 threshold to exclude the


533. Specifically, the “ad library” requirement of Honest Ads amends U.S. election law to make online platforms “maintain, and make available for online public inspection in machine readable format, a complete record of any request to purchase on such online platform a qualified political advertisement which is made by a person whose aggregate requests to purchase qualified political advertisements on such online platform during the calendar year exceed $500.” The record must include a copy of the ad, description of the audience targeted, price, name of the candidate or national legislative issue to which the ad refers, and the name and contact information of the person purchasing the ad. Online platforms are defined as “any public-facing website, web application, or digital application (including a social network, ad network, or search engine) which sells qualified political advertisements and has 50,000,000 or more unique monthly United States visitors or users for a majority of months during the preceding 12 months.” Honest Ads Act.

534. Like Honest Ads, disclosure requirements for online media outlets fit better as amendments to the Federal Election Campaign Act with related rulemaking and reporting to be implemented by the FEC rather than amendments to the Communications Act administered by the FCC. Whereas the latter has substantial authority over broadcasting, it is constitutionally constrained from compelling speech (such as the disclosures we recommend) by print and online outlets. Like Honest Ads (as opposed to PAID Ads), this proposal is limited to disclosure requirements, which is constitutionally important because the Supreme Court has repeatedly struck down campaign finance limits and prohibitions in the same rulings that upheld disclosures and disclaimers. See, e.g., Buckley v. Valeo, 424 U.S. 1 (1976); McConnell v. Federal Election Commission, 540 U.S. 93 (2003); Citizens United v. FEC.

535. See FirstON, 2020. This compliance burden would diminish if the United States enacts beneficial ownership reform, which would save costs by enabling banks to obtain the data from the Treasury Department, which would become responsible for collecting and verifying it.

536. The tech companies should be free to contract with banks or any other type or third parties or to collaborate within Silicon Valley to develop some form of joint clearinghouse (which could potentially even operate a master outlet library that satisfies the participating tech companies legal obligations and publishes information about the outlets without detailing which tech platform published with that outlet, which might be appealing to tech companies concerned about sharing any form of customer lists). There would be both efficiency and constitutional advantages to the statute only requiring that the tech companies see to it that the information gets disclosed while not micro-managing the precise structure. For efficiency, the tech companies may be better placed to develop a low-cost process, easy-to-use interface, and other implementation details that get the job done well. Allowing for this may lead to a better outcome and help avoid opposition from the tech companies. Legally, leaving some details to the private sector would also be preferred because it avoids potential constitutional issues associated with government-sponsored bodies keeping lists of media organizations with information about them that could potentially have a chilling effect on the editorial or funding decisions made by the free press. There is an ongoing debate in the campaign finance policy community as to whether ad archives like those required by Honest Ads should be hosted by a government agency like the FEC. We see reasonable merits on both sides of the issue as it relates to ad libraries, but would not recommend governments host archives of media outlets.

537. See Lög um fjölmiðla, 2011 nr. 38 20. April, Útgáfa 150b (English translation); Human Rights Law and Regulating Freedom of Expression in New Media: Lessons from Nordic Approaches, Mart Susi, et al., eds., New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 87-88. For as long as Freedom House has been assessing the level of internet freedom, Iceland has consistently ranked as the world's best protector of internet freedom, having no civil or criminal cases against users for online expression while having near-universal connectivity, limited state intervention in the editorial structure and final composition of the outlet.” This excludes personal blogs and individual personal communications on the internet. See Matt Haas, et al., eds., pp. 82-88.
websites of town newspapers while still including the fringe outlets identified in our case study as having received Russian support. 538

Like the AML Act, entities would be exempted if U.S. regulators already make them disclose their ownership. For example, publicly traded companies regulated by the SEC should be exempted, which would include the parent companies of ABC, CNN, NBC, Fox, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, the New York Times, and hundreds of newspapers and television or radio stations owned by Gannet Company, McClatchy, News Corporation, Tribune Publishing, Berkshire Hathaway, Lee Enterprises, iHeartMedia, Entercom, Cumulus Media, and other publicly held owners. Other simplifications should similarly be borrowed from the AML Act, like the fact that ongoing updates should only be required when ownership changes.

As with our recommendation for non-profits, all forms of foreign financial remuneration should be covered, not just equity ownership per se. For instance, it should include advertising revenue (used to support the Swedish extremist websites) and donations (which support The Daily Stormer). 539

Lastly, if policymakers remain concerned about this disclosure requirement potentially chilling the free press or if it is otherwise deemed unviable, it could be limited even further to only cover foreign funding. Likewise, outlets could be exempted if no more than a certain portion of their funding—such as at least 10 percent—comes from beneficial owners who are foreign nationals. 540

The important part is that the public must know when foreign powers are manipulating Americans by surreptitiously funding media outlets, as Russia, China, Iran, and other authoritarian regimes have done around the world and could easily do in the United States.

538 Honest Ads Act.
539 See Becker, 2019; O’Brien, 2019.
540 The reason why the 10 percent threshold we propose for internet funding is lower than the 25 percent level for broadcast ownership stems from the fact that there are no barriers to entry for websites. For that reason, there is a deep and diverse range of online viewpoints, including many already producing content that authoritarians might see as advancing their interests (such as socially divisive or populist content on both the left and the right). That means that rather than having to take over control and influence the content of an outlet (as might be required to subvert most traditional local radio stations), a foreign power could run an effective information operation by merely propping up an existing extremist website by supplementing its income by say 10 to 25 percent, just enough to help keep it in business.
7. Emerging Technologies Offering Anonymity

Because campaign finance rules are contentious, major policy overhauls are rare. Most campaign finance legal systems were not designed for national security and have not been updated for an age of globalized finance, automated donation and reporting capabilities, and authoritarian kleptocracies adept at weaponizing corruption and technology to interfere in democratic elections abroad.

The outdated nature of campaign finance rules creates many of the loopholes discussed in this paper, but it is especially relevant for new technological advancements that lawmakers and regulators have not previously faced. Cyber-attacks and social media bots are not the only emerging technologies deployed by authoritarian regimes to interfere in democracies.

Small donors

The clearest risk among emerging technologies and a prime example of rules not fit for purpose is the possibility that foreign powers will electronically distribute millions of dollars through thousands of anonymous small donations.

Campaigns and parties are not required to (and they do not) disclose the identities of donors giving less than $200 within an election cycle. This small donor exemption is as old as campaign finance reporting itself. In 1925 Congress responded to the Teapot Dome scandal by forcing campaigns and parties to file quarterly reports identifying donors contributing more than $100. After Watergate, Congress established the FEC to enforce reporting requirements and soon increased the small donor threshold to $200. Those two domestic corruption scandals involved secret donations ranging from $25,000 to $400,000, so the assumption was that the threshold of $100 to $200 would catch misbehavior while preserving the privacy of small donors—akin to the confidentiality of the ballot box—who do not give large enough amounts to buy corrupt favors or dirty deeds.

In the view of some campaign finance professionals, this approach needs to be reconsidered to mitigate the risk of online small donor pooling in the age of malign finance.

This vulnerability is illustrated by an allegation that we have not included in our dataset because it does not meet our standard of verification from credible outlets. However, some of the reported technical details have important policy implications because they show how an indicted financial technician at least would have constructed the kind of small donor scheme that U.S. policymakers have long worried about.

As discussed in the chapter on straw donors and foreign agents, Andy Khawaja was the California-based payment processing expert who conspired with George Nader to funnel $3.5 million to Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign. Khawaja claims that separately from the contributions to Clinton, the Saudis and Emiratis distributed tens or hundreds of millions of dollars into the 2016 election through “online micropayments,” each below the $200-per-donor disclosure threshold.

Khawaja claims Nader told him in 2016 that the U.A.E. wanted Khawaja to show them how to distribute small donations to a presidential candidate and they wanted to buy his company’s “payment engine” to conduct the operation. Khawaja claims he agreed and sold them the blueprints of the necessary tools for $10 million. Khawaja further alleges Nader told him the Emiratis would run the operation using data they bought from the Chinese on 10 million stolen identities of U.S. consumers. Allegedly the Saudis would fund the donations and Putin gave it a green light.

The notion that leadership from five countries could pull off such a bold global operation to surreptitiously fund an American presidential campaign and not yet get caught strikes us as a bit fantastical. While some current and former FEC officials tell us they have long worried about this risk, others are skeptical,
asking why a foreign power would go through all this trouble when they could instead utilize a few sizable straw donors, shell companies, dark money non-profits, and the other loopholes discussed in this report.

Although it remains unproven, there continues to be intense focus on this possibility—by good and bad actors alike, across the United States and Europe.

The U.K. Brexit Party funds itself almost entirely from donations below the £500 threshold for public disclosure. The party was criticized by the U.K. Electoral Commission for not having any system to ensure that big funders are not illegally splitting their contributions into many small donations. One of the regulator’s recommendations was to make donors complete Captcha security prompts to stop bots from automating multiple payments. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown warned that the Brexit Party could be abusing the small donor exemption to get funding from foreign powers. However, in the British campaign finance system, political parties only have to “satisfy themselves” that they have done sufficient diligence.

We cannot continue to fly blindly into the risk of hostile foreign powers secretly distributing large amounts of political contributions through networks of small donors.

### Crypto donations

Whereas the small donor landscape shows smoke but no fire, the Russian intelligence services were caught red-handed using another emerging technology to anonymously fund election interference: The GRU mined, acquired, laundered, and spent bitcoin in order to secretly buy its hack-and-dump infrastructure in 2016.

While the formal international financial system continues to suffer from major cases of money laundering, particularly in Europe, big banks have become better at identifying laundered money and terrorist financing over the past two decades. Thus, for the most secret missions, bad actors turn to mediums of exchange that (in the words of Mueller’s indictment of the GRU) “avoid direct relationships with traditional financial institutions, allowing them to evade greater scrutiny of their identities and sources of funds.”

That is why, in 2016, most of the GRU’s transactions to buy servers, register domains, and otherwise facilitate its hacking activity occurred in the form of bitcoin. Each bitcoin transaction is added to a public ledger called the Blockchain, but it only identifies the parties by numbers known as bitcoin addresses.

To avoid a paper trail that could tie back to Russia, the GRU spent its bitcoin with hundreds of different email addresses, sometimes creating a new email account for each purchase. They also used related emerging payment processes and technologies to further obscure the origin of their funds for hacking. These included buying bitcoin on peer-to-peer exchanges, layering transactions with the help of third-party exchangers, converting through digital currencies other than bitcoin, and using pre-paid cards.

While terrorist financing is separate from and not covered in our work on malignant finance, a development over the past year is notable for our purposes here: Hamas and the self-proclaimed Islamic State group developed a way of fully anonymizing themselves on the Blockchain. By creating funding websites that generate a new unique bitcoin address every time the page is refreshed, terrorist organizations can now keep their bitcoin activity secret. This tool could be added to the arsenal of authoritarian regimes looking to cover their tracks when interfering in democracies.

In terms of outdated campaign finance regulations, cryptocurrency is another area where U.S. policymaking has been hampered by partisan gridlock. In 2014 the FEC voted 6-0 to allow bitcoin donations. But then after the meeting, the Democratic and Republican FEC commissioners released very different statements about what they had just agreed to, leaving it unclear whether the limit for bitcoin donations was $100 or $2,800.

At first the $100 limit appeared to hold, but now campaigns are willing to accept amounts up to $2,800.
We do not yet have solid proof of bitcoin being abused to anonymously donate to U.S. political campaigns, but there are signs that some unknown actors are trying.

Last year, an anonymous LLC incorporated in Delaware tried (and mostly failed) to convince the FEC to permit unlimited donations by mining cryptocurrencies and giving the proceeds to U.S. political candidates. 571

As mentioned in the chapter on media outlets, the U.S. neo-Nazi publication The Daily Stormer received a large bitcoin donation in 2017 from a secret, wealthy, sophisticated donor with possible ties to Russia. 572

With all this probing activity, it is simply not worth the risk to allow cryptocurrency spending on U.S. politics.

**Good news: Conduit PACs usher in transparency**

Financial innovation is not all bad. In some cases, it can facilitate broader participation in democracy and through more transparent channels. Combined with a nuanced artifact within U.S. campaign finance law, that is what is happening with the expansion of online platforms for small donations.

ActBlue and WinRed provide state-of-the-art online fundraising infrastructure to process donation payments for Democrats and Republicans respectively. 573 Both are legally organized as conduit PACs, which are political action committees that serve as intermediaries to pass along earmarked contributions. 574 The regulations that remain in force today for conduits were written more than 30 years ago. 575 At the time, conduits were not widely used and the regulators’ animating concern was that they could facilitate end runs around campaign finance disclosure. 576 As such, the FEC required conduits to report on forms that become public the names and addresses of all earmarked contributions, even those below $200. 577 Nobody was anticipating the historic wave of small donations, which was facilitated by ActBlue over the past six years. 578 Together with ActBlue’s new twin for Republican fundraising, WinRed, these two conduit PACs are now being used by most lawmakers and nearly all presidential candidates on both sides. 579 The side effect of this development is greater transparency. The vast majority of donor identities have quickly become publicly accessible information (representing 94 percent of money raised and an even higher portion of individual donors, essentially everything except for small checks sent in the mail and some purchases of campaign swag). 580

While ActBlue and WinRed are now used by most political candidates, these platforms have yet to be universally adopted. 581 Similarly, cryptocurrency donations are shunned by most major candidates but accepted by a certain fringe. 582 Rather than backing into a system whereby candidates are permitted to effectively opt out of what has now become the standard donor disclosure and payment regime, the same basic legal requirements should be imposed upon all campaigns and committees as a matter of national security.

**U.S. Recommendation:**

Report the identities of small donors to the FEC and make the information publicly accessible through a secure, limited, and conditional gating process. Prohibit cryptocurrency contributions.

The two elements of our reform proposal—donor identities of all sizes must be publicly accessible and cryptocurrency donations should be prohibited—would essentially codify what has recently become the de facto payment and disclosure regime with the advent of conduit PACs like ActBlue and WinRed. That change in the campaign finance landscape provides a current window to legislatively extend that prevailing transparency regime to all. However, we only recommend doing so together with the establishment of a secure access system developed and administered by the FEC to protect the personal privacy of small donors.

**Small donors**

As a matter of national security, the time has come to eliminate the blanket exemption for small donor disclosures. However, a

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571 The mysterious LLC was incorporated in August 2018 under the name “OsiaNetwork.” Less than a month later, it submitted to the FEC its proposal to enable people to pool their computing power to mine cryptocurrencies and give them to political campaigns. While the FEC said such services are permissible, they importantly rejected OsiaNetwork LLC’s argument that it should be considered “volunteering,” instead ruling that it is a “contribution.” That is a critical distinction, not because unlike volunteering, such services are potentially used and the regulators’ animating concern was that they could facilitate end runs around campaign finance disclosure. As such, the FEC required conduits to report on forms that become public the names and addresses of all earmarked contributions, even those below $200. Nobody was anticipating the historic wave of small donations, which was facilitated by ActBlue over the past six years. Together with ActBlue’s new twin for Republican fundraising, WinRed, these two conduit PACs are now being used by most lawmakers and nearly all presidential candidates on both sides. The side effect of this development is greater transparency. The vast majority of donor identities have quickly become publicly accessible information (representing 94 percent of money raised and an even higher portion of individual donors, essentially everything except for small checks sent in the mail and some purchases of campaign swag).


573 See Levine and Zubak-Skees, 2018; WinRed, Twitter post, January 6, 2020, 6:46 AM.

574 ActBlue or WinRed have opted to file their reports semi-annually to avoid front-running the quarterly reports filed by the campaigns themselves. These two types of filings overlap in the cases of donors giving more than $200, which are reported by both the campaigns (which only report $200 donors, including big checks that are not processed online) and the conduits PACs (which also report small donors). Journalists conduct analyses semi-annually that combine these two sources and remove duplicates. For Democratic presidential candidates in 2019, the two sources of disclosure included 94 percent of all money raised (and a higher portion of donors). The 6 percent that remained undisclosed came from donors giving candidates $200 or less and not through the main donation form on the websites (processed by ActBlue). That undisclosed residual of unreported small donations is thought to mainly entail one-time checks of less than $200 sent in the mail and purchases of campaign swag. See Josh Katz, et al., “Detailed Maps of the Donors Powering the 2020 Democratic Campaigns,” The New York Times, August 2, 2019; Rachel Shorey, Twitter post, November 4, 2019, 11:49 AM.


576 See Levine, July 2019.
new regime for handling small donor data should be designed in a nuanced manner that weighs national security-driven transparency objectives against important privacy concerns. We will review these considerations and then lay out our proposal to make small donor information publicly accessible through a secure, limited, and conditional gating procedure.

“Congress certainly was not aware that hostile kleptocrats might develop bots capable of automating thousands of donations in the names of stolen identities.”

When Congress created the $100 threshold above which donor identities must be disclosed in 1925, they were focused on domestic corruption. When lawmakers increased it to $200 in 1979, they were trying to reduce the paperwork burden on campaigns, a reporting process that most campaigns have now largely automated. Congress certainly was not aware that hostile kleptocrats might develop bots capable of automating thousands of donations in the names of stolen identities. This unaddressed national security risk is straightforward.

On the other hand, donor privacy is very important for reasons of security, liberty, and democratic enfranchisement. Everyday citizens should be able to participate in democracy, whether it is through voting or small donations, without having their name, address, and political preferences listed on the internet.

Fiercely divided societies such as Northern Ireland during the late 20th century have had to limit public disclosure to avoid donor intimidation. While U.S. polarization has not reached those extreme heights, it has increased to such a degree that donor disclosures have threatened people’s livelihoods. In 2014 the CEO of Mozilla had to step down due to the revelation that he had donated $1,000 in support of California’s Proposition 8 against gay marriage. In 2019 Rep. Joaquin Castro (D-Texas) publicized the names of small business owners in San Antonio who donated to President Donald Trump, accusing them of funding a hate campaign against Hispanic immigrants.

Furthermore, risks could extend beyond personal privacy and economic security to physical security, such as for people protected by restraining orders or otherwise intent on keeping their mailing addresses unlisted. Some donors who are aware of conduit PAC disclosures have gotten personal post office boxes just to make political contributions while keeping their address off the internet. Worse, most donors probably do not read the privacy policies buried on the ActBlue and WinRed websites claiming that the conduit is legally required to report donors’ names, addresses, occupations, employers, and contribution details to the FEC, which in turn posts it on the internet.

This status quo is unbefitting of a modern democracy and another example of how campaign finance laws have not kept pace with a rapidly evolving landscape.

The first element of our proposal is to codify what is already a common internal recordkeeping practice: Campaigns, parties, and super PACs should have to collect and retain information about all donors, including those who give less than $200.

The main new requirement would be that committees report such small donor data to the FEC. It should be filed on a separate form as donors who give more than $200, a new filing that will not be simply posted online in a PDF and machine-readable database. The rules for conduits should be updated accordingly, putting them under the same disclosure regime as campaigns and parties.

The FEC should be charged with establishing a system of sharing the data through a carefully circumscribed and secure gating process. For starters, this should include providing unencumbered digital access to law enforcement agencies, which should be required to randomly audit and investigate the data for possible criminal activity and report back to Congress about the effectiveness of the disclosure system.

Importantly, the FEC gating process should also make small donor data publicly accessibility in a limited way, because the best hope for spotting patterns of possible straw donor schemes is analysis by investigative journalists, public interest advocates, and academics. At the same time, stalkers, snoops, and other bad actors should be deterred from abusing personal data. These considerations should be balanced by having to formally request access to the data through a security-check process that involves the requester identifying their purpose, providing their own identifying information to be kept on record by the FEC, and committing not to misuse individual small donor information or make it publicly available, or else they will face severe penalties. Organizations that regularly access large amounts of the data—such as national media outlets, major watchdog agencies, or university research programs—should be able to do so electronically if they are able to maintain special FEC approval based on demonstration of strong internal controls. Smaller one-off requestors should have to come in person to do the security check and access the data at the public records room (which the FEC still maintains and was the only way to access donor disclosures before the internet).

584 See USA Today, “Mozilla CEO resignation raises free-speech issues,” April 4, 2014.
585 See Joaquin Castro, Twitter post, August 5, 2019, 11:13 PM.
586 Act Blue, “Privacy Policy,” accessed June 12, 2020; WinRed, “Privacy Policy — Your Privacy Rights,” March 2, 2020. FEC disclosures include the full address that donors provide as a place where they can receive mail. The FEC’s searchable online database only discloses donor addresses down to the level of the city in which the donor receives mail, but the underlying forms with full addresses are also uploaded on the FEC website in a machine-readable format (and can be looked up rather easily if you know the person’s name and you first search the date of their donation in the FEC database so that you then know which semi-annual ActBlue or WinRed report the full address appears in).
Crypto donations

We recommend prohibiting all donations and political ad purchases in the form of cryptocurrencies. Again, this codifies the ActBlue and WinRed regime because those widespread platforms do not accept crypto donations.

As a policy matter, our proposal goes further than the $100 limit advanced by FEC Democratic commissioners. They argued that cryptocurrency’s untraceability presents similar risks as physical currency.587 And while it is true that crypto and cash are similarly used to evade the anti-money laundering controls of the U.S. banking system, crypto also offers the ability to spend money in larger amounts around the world (as demonstrated by the GRU in 2016) and potentially in a more covert and automated fashion.588 And there is ample evidence that crypto is—among other things—an increasingly favored tool of the criminal underworld.589

By contrast, we believe that cash donations up to $100 should remain permitted due to both their more limited risk profile and their important role in the enfranchisement of unbanked Americans. As noted in the context of small donors, arguments about democratic participation and privacy rights are important to us and call for developing carefully balanced policies. We do not see similarly meritorious arguments in favor of allowing cryptocurrencies to be spent in any size on donations, independent expenditures, or other political ads.

588 See Netyshko Indictment, pp. 21-24.
8. Illegal Activities and Multi-vector Campaigns

We noticed something when cataloguing instances in which the central thrust of cases appears to involve illegal activity: They are rarely standalone operations.

It is not always the case. But when an authoritarian regime gets caught breaking the law in ways that involve large amounts of money (funding violence, paying outright bribes, funneling big laundered foreign-sourced political contributions, etc.), that boldness often reflects a broader multi-vector malign influence campaign also utilizing legal loopholes discussed in this paper as well as non-financial tools of interference. Such aggressive campaigns also tend to be seen by the authoritarian regime's top leadership as essential to its perceived strategic interests. Because this context is important to stopping these dangerous operations, this chapter will include more discussion of regional foreign policy campaigns, often approved by a head of state such as Putin.

China has also been conducting sweeping illegal influence campaigns, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. In a few cases, Chinese bribery also makes its way as far west as the Belt and Road Initiative does.

But the westward march of illicit finance as a weapon of geopolitical hostility is mainly a Russian story, starting in Ukraine and now driving deep into the halls of power in Western capitals.

Central and Eastern Europe

On top of Moscow's military occupation of neighboring countries, Russian criminal activity has been undermining democracies in the former Soviet Union even before the last decade, from energy corruption in Kyiv to rampant money laundering through the Baltic countries to Russian fiscal leverage over Georgia's breakaway regions. But three cases in the past decade around the frontlines of Europe—eastern Ukraine, Montenegro, and North Macedonia—show an increasingly aggressive Kremlin secretly funding multi-vector destabilization activities on the ground meant to block these peoples from choosing their own paths toward European institutions.

Since the spring of 2014, in addition to direct military action in Ukraine and the seemingly legal media influence described in the prior chapter, Russia has funded separatist armed forces in eastern Ukraine. The form of this malign financial support evolved over the first year of the war as Russia developed increasingly sophisticated channels for plausibly deniable funding. At first, when the Kremlin wanted to quickly install loyal and well-funded leaders in the Donbas region, it relied on oligarch Konstantin Malofeev. Later in 2014, financial regulators in Moscow allowed an online network of over a dozen purportedly humanitarian aid groups in Russia to raise millions of rubles to buy weapons and other military equipment to "crowdfund the war." In the spring of 2015, Russia instituted more formal fiscal and financial arrangements to secretly move rubles across borders, both of which continue to operate today. First, Russian military supply lines transport newly printed rubles worth more than a billion dollars a year to fund from 70 percent to 90 percent of the Donetsk and Luhansk fiscal needs. Second, a Russian-supported breakaway region of Georgia created a shadow banking system to funnel billions of rubles electronically from Moscow to the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine in order to evade Western sanctions and provide the separatists with "financial, trade, economic, legal and organizational infrastructure." Since 2017, Russia has also propped up the separatists' coal industry by laundering their illegal exports through networks of cross-border trains and shell companies based in Georgia. The UN's highest court is in the process of considering whether this malign financial support constitutes a Russian violation of a terrorist financing treaty.

Russian influence campaigns have been particularly aggressive toward countries making plans to join NATO, simultaneously firing all five tools of foreign interference to hit the two most recent entrants to the Western military alliance.

First, when Montenegro's 2016 election became a de facto referendum on NATO membership, it was all hands on deck for Russian interference. The Kremlin-tied oligarch with the deepest strategic economic ties in the country, Oleg Deripaska, helped bankroll the pro-Russian political opposition. Cyberattacks hit government and news websites. Russia coordinated a disinformation campaign on social media alleging widespread voting irregularities, such as dead people being registered to vote. Most brazenly of all, GRU officers in Belgrade tried to foment violations of the terrorist financing treaty.

950 In 2004, Putin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma established in Switzerland a key intermediary to fund breaking-pro-Russian political interference in Ukraine, RosUkrEnergo, co-owned by Dmytro Firtash and Garipov. See Grey, et al., 2014. In 2008, Georgia became the first target of modern Russian hybrid warfare, from military invasion to Kyiv to rampant money laundering through the Baltic countries to Russian fiscal leverage over Georgia's breakaway regions. But three cases in the past decade around the frontlines of Europe—eastern Ukraine, Montenegro, and North Macedonia—show an increasingly aggressive Kremlin secretly funding multi-vector destabilization activities on the ground meant to block these peoples from choosing their own paths toward European institutions.


953 See Memorial Submitted by Ukraine, Ukraine v. Russian Federation, International Court of Justice, June 12, 2018 ("Ukraine Memorial").

954 See Julian Röpcke, "How Russia finances the Ukrainian rebel territories," Bild, January 1, 2016.

955 See Trojanovskaya, 2018.


957 See Mike Corder, "UN court says it has jurisdiction in Ukraine-Russia case," AP News, November 8, 2019.

958 See Treasury, November 2018.


a violent coup by spreading rumors of voter fraud on election day and sending Serbian nationalists to try to impersonate police officers, fire upon crowds, occupy parliament, assassinate the prime minister, and install pro-Russian leadership.\textsuperscript{600} The Russians funded the covert operation with a Western Union wire transfer listing the sender’s address as the GRU headquarters in Moscow.\textsuperscript{602} Fortunately, the authorities were tipped off by an informant and thwarted the coup hours beforehand. \textsuperscript{600} The Kremlin-backed political parties lost the election and Montenegro carried out the will of its people by joining NATO in 2017.\textsuperscript{604}

Second, North Macedonia has similarly been the target of all five tools of Russian interference. Over the decade leading up to 2018, instruments of Russian malign influence included gas pipelines, cultural centers, Orthodox churches, and funding for Macedonian media outlets aimed at the country’s Albanian minority.\textsuperscript{605} Russia also broadly supported the nationalist political party, whose leader ran the country from 2006 to 2017 and was indicted for money laundering and extortion, causing him to flee to Hungary.\textsuperscript{606} As with Montenegro, the Kremlin launched a multi-vector interference campaign against a Macedonian referendum that would enable the country to join NATO if it renamed itself North Macedonia. Russian-backed online groups directed disinformation on social media through hundreds of new websites and Facebook profiles originating outside the country purporting to be Macedonians urging ballot burning and retweeting a #Boycott campaign.\textsuperscript{607} There were also official warnings of “malicious cyber activity” and allegations of cyberattacks during the election period from Russian intelligence centers in Bulgaria.\textsuperscript{608} Most nefariously, a Kremlin-connected oligarch secretly funded violent protests against the name change in both Macedonia and Greece.\textsuperscript{609} As is often the case with Russian active measures, they arguably achieved a partial or tactical win rather than a sustained strategic advantage. While 94 percent of voters backed the name change, a 37 percent turnout meant the issue was forced back to parliament, which met the two-thirds requirement for ratification in October 2018. North Macedonia joined NATO in March 2020.

The strategic failure of both Balkan operations demonstrates the propensity of foreign interference to backfire, particularly when operatives are caught. But that has not stopped the Kremlin from continuing to interfere in these democracies after the 2016 and 2018 elections while also expanding Russian usage of the interference toolkit beyond Europe.

\textbf{Africa and the Asia-Pacific}

Before turning to the West, two vast malign influence campaigns in other regions have been notable over the past couple of years: Russia in Africa and China in the Asia-Pacific. Both are part of initiatives approved by heads of state—Putin and Xi—and implemented by plausibly deniable proxies.

As touched upon in the previous chapter, the broadest expansion of Russian hybrid warfare in the past couple years has been in Africa, conducted by Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Wagner Group.\textsuperscript{610} The plausible deniability that Wagner provides the Russian government has been thoroughly pierced by investigative journalists, who have revealed the company’s operations to be tightly integrated with the Russian military and its intelligence arm, the GRU.\textsuperscript{611} Prigozhin speaks or texts extremely frequently with the entire leadership of Putin’s presidential administration, while coordinating as an equal with the Russian Defense Ministry’s top man in Africa: Konstantin Pikalov.\textsuperscript{612}

Prigozhin’s interest in Africa reportedly arose around the end of 2017, when he sold Putin on the idea of ousting Chinese influence from Africa and showcasing Russia as a great power around the world.\textsuperscript{613} Africa also offered an ideal testing ground for new tactics of foreign interference, given its relatively weak democratic institutions and less intensive monitoring by Western social media platforms and intelligence agencies.\textsuperscript{614} Prigozhin may also have been interested in profiting from the anticipated Africa campaign, with a new mining company tied to the Russian Defense ministry being registered in St. Petersburg in November 2017.\textsuperscript{615} By summer 2018, Putin was talking about the prospects of Russian business on the continent and a Russia–Africa summit (which took place in October 2019).\textsuperscript{616}

In the spring of 2018, Prigozhin’s staff prepared an extensive reference guide to twenty African countries.\textsuperscript{617} In March 2018, the then-president of Madagascar met with Putin and Prigozhin, who both agreed to help him get re-elected in November.\textsuperscript{618} A few weeks later, Prigozhin flew 15-20 operatives to Madagascar.\textsuperscript{619} When the incumbent was not polling well, Russia switched allegiances by diversifying their support across six other presiden-

\textsuperscript{610} Russian independent outlet Proekt notes that Russian malign activity in Africa has risen so much that it seems to be visible in official statistics. According to data from the Russian border service, the number of Russians visiting African countries jumped by nearly 70 percent in 2018. The increase cannot be explained mainly by tourist flows, which only grew by 20 percent at popular destinations. The sudden and unexplained difference amounts to a few hundred Russians, as the statistical increase in 2018 was 441 people (more than double other past increases on record). Proekt attributes the increase in Russian travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities. The Dozd channel counted known Prigozhin travelers to the large numbers of political strategists, trolls, mercenaries, geologists, media specialists, and other operatives sent by Wagner and related entities.

\textsuperscript{611} See Bellingcat, 2020.

\textsuperscript{612} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{613} See Rozhdestvensky and Badanin, 2019.

\textsuperscript{614} See Alba and Frenkel, 2019.

\textsuperscript{615} See Rozhdestvensky and Badanin, 2019.


\textsuperscript{617} See Schwartz and Borgia, 2019; Rozhdestvensky and Badanin, 2019.

\textsuperscript{618} See Schwartz and Borgia, 2019; Rozhdestvensky and Badanin, 2019.

\textsuperscript{619} See Schwartz and Borgia, 2019; Rozhdestvensky and Badanin, 2019.
In a nod to the likelihood of Russia deploying this tradecraft in Western democracies, the Africa campaign was referenced in a February 2020 memo from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and FBI about possible Russian interference tactics ahead of the 2020 election. The memo raised eyebrows by warning in its first bullet that Russia could covertly advise political candidates and campaigns, a concern U.S. officials had not previously highlighted when warning the public of Russian election interference. The memo went on to explain that such covert advice has been a feature of Prigozhin’s political campaigning in twenty African countries.

Turning away from Russia for a moment, over the past decade, Xi Jinping has revived China’s long-dormant penchant for malign financial interference in elections.

The Chinese government has prior experience with malign finances, having allegedly funneled foreign money to the Democrats to interfere in the 1996 U.S. presidential election. U.S. signals intelligence showed that the Chinese Embassy was used for planning contributions to the DNC. Some longtime friends and funders of Bill Clinton and Al Gore were allegedly tied to Chinese intelligence agencies. One donor claimed that the Chinese general in charge of military intelligence funneled $300,000 through him to support the Clinton-Gore re-election campaign. China denied the allegations, but the U.S. government won convictions against the main players for illegal fundraising schemes.

Such subversive methods of foreign influence were not usually pursued so aggressively under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) until Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. In 2014 and 2015, Xi used speeches, conferences, new bureaucratic structures, and redirection of resources to promote the importance of China’s United Front work. Adopting a Leninist strategy of uniting with lesser enemies to defeat greater enemies, China’s United Front co-opts and neutralizes sources of potential opposition to CCP policies and authority at home and abroad. The CCP’s United Front Work Department coordinates affiliated organizations, ranging from cultural associations in foreign cities to Confucius Institutes on college campuses, in order to harness overseas Chinese communities and cultivate prominent ties with the Chinese diaspora.

When authoritarian regimes are caught breaking the law in ways that involve large sums of money, that boldness is often reflective of broader regional strategic influence campaigns authorized at the highest levels.

620 See Schwirtz and Borgio, 2019; Reichstedtensky and Badanin, 2019.
621 See Schwirtz and Borgio, 2019; Reichstedtensky and Badanin, 2019.
622 See Schwirtz and Borgio, 2019; Reichstedtensky and Badanin, 2019.
623 See Schwirtz and Borgio, 2019; Reichstedtensky and Badanin, 2019.
624 See Schwirtz and Borgio, 2019; Reichstedtensky and Badanin, 2019.
626 See Alba and Prenkel, 2019; Stanford Internet Observatory, 2019; Gleicher, March 12, 2020.
627 See Alba and Prenkel, 2019; Stanford Internet Observatory, 2019; Gleicher, March 12, 2020.
628 See Harding and Burke, June 2019.
629 Ibid.
630 See Reichstedtensky, et al., 2019.
While the United Front mainly targets potential opposition within China, it also carries out influence operations that undermine the sovereignty of nearby democracies. This “overseas Chinese work” is a growing focus of the United Front, as a 2018 restructuring increased the number of overseas bureaus from one to three of twelve total.640 Taiwan has been a repeated target of Chinese malign influence.641 But the CCP’s most flagrant interference in democracies has been the political donations flowing from United Front leaders in Australia and New Zealand.

In 2014 Australia Labor Party Senator Sam Dastyari starting accepting Chinese assistance in the form of debt repayment and other gifts from CCP-linked organizations.642 One of the benefactors was Huang Xiangmo, a Chinese property developer who moved to Australia in 2011 and led several groups tied to the United Front.643 Together with people and entities associated with him, Huang donated $2.7 million to Australian political parties.644 In one case, Huang allegedly walked into Labor Party headquarters and handed the party boss a shopping bag with $100,000 of cash withdrawn by his employee at a casino, which was then laundered through 12 straw donors at a Chinese Friends of Labor fundraising dinner.645 In another case, the day after Labor’s defense spokesman criticized the Chinese territorial aggression in the South China Sea, Huang threatened to withdraw a promised $400,000 donation to the Labor party and then stood next to Dastyari as he took China’s side over his own party and country.646 Huang also put several senior government or political party officials on his payroll or on retainer soon after they left office, while also lavishing sitting government officials gifts.647 The Australian government deported Huang as a matter of national security (as discussed in the chapter on foreign agents and straw donors) and is prosecuting him for an alleged $140 million unpaid tax bill.648

Over the past two years, New Zealand has joined Australia in uncovering malign finance operations tied to the United Front. A key figure is Zhang Yikun, a wealthy Chinese national who founded the largest and most important United Front organization in New Zealand.649 Zhang was allegedly the source of funds behind two $100,000 donations, one in 2017 and another in 2018, distributed among eight straw donors to evade disclosure before being paid to the National Party.650 Zhang was indicted early in 2020, along with former National Party MP Jami-Lee Ross and two others.651 Ross accused party leader Simon Bridges of involvement and said another $150,000 of undocumented donations came from Zhang’s sister.652 Zhang apparently advocated the National Party to support the parliamentary candidacy of his Chinese friend and business partner, Colin Zheng.653 Separately, Zhang was a bidder at a 2016 charity auction and dinner with Auckland’s Chinese community that Phil Goff used to raise the majority of his campaign funds.654

Chinese influence operations differ from Russian hybrid warfare in a few notable ways. While China wields all five tools of foreign interference, it is less common to see evidence of them all being deployed in unison like the Kremlin does on the front lines of NATO. China appears to more readily use human agents and straw donors, whereas Russia often leads online (both cyber and information) and its malign finance tends to be shrouded in shell companies and other sophisticated techniques to launder oligarch money. Finally, China generally does not appear to be aiming its weapons of malign finance as far west as Russia (the furthest known major financial case being the Czech Republic).

That said, Chinese information operations have ratcheted up to look more Russian amid international pressure around Hong Kong protests and coronavirus. It remains unclear whether this is a temporary surge (like after 1989) or the next stage in Xi’s United Front revival, while it is also difficult to predict whether Chinese malign finance will similarly go global. It bears watching.

**Western Europe and the United States**

Before 2014, Putin built political ties with Western Europe through friendly heads of state like Gerhard Schröder, Silvio Berlusconi, and to a lesser extent, Nicolas Sarkozy.655 Cooperation between Moscow and peripheral Western politicians was limited to electoral observation and engagement with Russian state media, activities that fringe European populists and the Kremlin both use to legitimize their own politics and policies.656

Putin’s disappointment with mainstream Western politicians built up over a decade—from 2003 to 2013.657 His belief that Russia is owed “privileged interests” to violate the national sovereignty of its former imperial conquests within Russia’s so-called...
"near abroad" turned out to be fundamentally at odds with the post-war order. Feeling rebuffed, Putin started aggressively promoting non-mainstream politicians and parties. This was done in part to develop alternative political allies to serve as front organizations advocating for Western acceptance of aggressive Russian policies. However, those allies can also be seen as combatants in a form of political warfare: bought-and-paid-for human assets meant to serve—wittingly or not—as active measures to destabilize the liberal-democratic consensus.

While invading Ukraine in April 2014, the Russian government also began interfering in Western politics, with malign finance as the tip of the spear. On April 17, Putin publicized his growing support for anti-establishment politicians in Europe, applauding the electoral victory of Viktor Orban's Fidesz party and the strong showings by Jobbik and Le Pen's party as "rethinking the values in European countries" with "conservative values" and "national sovereignty" being more effective than E.U. governance in Brussels. The following day, a Cypriot shell company described as an offshoot of VEB (a Russian state-owned bank used regularly by the Kremlin to finance politically important projects) wired €2 million from its Swiss bank account to Jean-Marie Le Pen's fundraising association for National Front campaigns. Konstantin Malofeev helped set up the deal. It was only a month after Marine Le Pen publicly endorsed Russia's annexation of Crimea and a senior Kremlin official privately agreed that "it will be necessary to thank the French in one way or another." In September 2014, the National Front itself would borrow another €9.4 million from First Czech Russian Bank, which was ultimately owned by Putin's close friend Gennady Timchenko.

In 2015 a "Russian who works for Putin" appears to have funded Thierry Baudet's new think tank in the Netherlands, Forum for Democracy (FvD), which organized a referendum against an E.U. association agreement with Ukraine. FvD campaigned against Ukraine's deal, assisted by disinformation seeded by Russian state TV and amplified by a St. Petersburg troll farm. It is unclear whether the secret funding, which Baudet denies entirely, continued flowing to FvD after it transformed into a political party in September 2016. Dutch political parties may accept foreign money but must disclose the identities of donors giving more than €1,000.

In 2015 and 2016, the Leave.EU campaign received the largest donation in British political history from Arron Banks, who was at the time being offered lucrative business opportunities by Russian spies, diplomats, oligarchs, and state-owned firms, while also allegedly profiting from illicit diamond trading in Africa believed to be controlled by Russia intelligence services (which Banks denies).

In 2017 Alternative for Germany (AfD) lawmaker Markus Frohmaier reportedly sought "material support" and "media support" from the Kremlin. Frohmaier was elected and then proceeded to "immediately start operating in the foreign policy field," as he had pledged to do in his request for help from the Russian government, which internally viewed him as an "absolutely controlled MP." Calls for an official investigation have gone unheeded, even though it is illegal in Germany to receive more than €1,000 in foreign support.


In 2018 Italy's most prominent politician reportedly negotiated a deal in Moscow to secretly funnel Russian oil profits to support his political party in the 2019 European election campaign. It appears the deal was uncovered by journalists before it was closed. If it had been completed though, it likely would have been illegal as the approximately $130 million price discount far exceeded the €100,000 limit for political contributions in Italy at the time.

These cases typically involve Western politicians (e.g., Marine Le Pen, Thierry Baudet, Markus Frohmaier, and Matteo Salvini) allegedly arranging Kremlin support through intermediaries (e.g., Aleksandr Babakov, Vladimir Kornilov, Manuel Oechsleiter, and Gianluca Savoini, respectively). This shows how Russian government relationships with the Western European far
right are no longer centralized within the KGB, like in the Cold War, but instead managed by individuals hoping to impress the Kremlin. Another difference is that Russia is far more financially integrated into Western markets than the Soviet Union ever was, so it can act more covertly and effectively than ever before.

Lastly: Russian interference in the United States. The most famous example of a multi-vector foreign interference campaign is summed up in the this key line of the Mueller report: “The Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion.” And of course, it was illegal, with Mueller charging Russians for perpetrating the social media campaign and hacking operations.

Importantly, Russian interference never stopped. In fact, social media activity by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) increased, rather than decreased, after the 2016 election.

A month before the 2018 U.S. midterm elections, the DOJ charged the IRA’s chief accountant with the same offense as the IRA committed in 2016: conspiracy to defraud the United States. Spending more than $10 million in 2018, the IRA was still impersonating Americans and buying political advertisements on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In September 2019, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned six IRA employees for partaking in the 2018 interference. To this day, Facebook takes down another authentic IRA-linked network every few months, with two thirds of those being Russian operations that target Americans.

Throughout 2019, two wealthy pro-Kremlin oligarchs paid more than $2 million to Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman (associates of Donald Trump and Rudy Giuliani) as they sought information that could potentially tarnish Trump’s leading opponent in the 2020 presidential election.

In February 2020, U.S. intelligence officials warned Congress that Russia is interfering in the 2020 election, a report that received a lot of attention because it concluded that Russia aimed to help re-elect Trump, who became angry that the assessment was disclosed to Democrats. Less noticed in that report was the U.S. finding that the Russians recognize they need a new playbook of as-yet-undetectable methods. Even less attention was generated by an Associated Press report three months later based on a public records request that revealed what those new methods might be. A week before the Congressional briefing, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the FBI sent a memo warning of eight possible Russian interference tactics ahead of the 2020 election. In addition to various forms of information manipulation and cyberattacks such as seen in 2016, the memo warns that Russia may use three methods of malign finance covered in this report: provide financial support to candidates or parties, covertly advise political candidates and campaigns, or use economic and business levers to develop influence within a campaign or administration.

The clear implication is that Russia is continuing its illegal and multi-vector campaign against U.S. democracy. The U.S. executive branch needs to meet this challenge by similarly coordinating all the related components of law enforcement, the intelligence community, and policy “in a sweeping and systematic fashion.”

**U.S. Recommendation:**

Administrative reforms are needed to reorganize the U.S. government around the threat of malign finance in order to coordinate efforts against both legal and illegal activities.

The U.S. government departments and agencies that should be responsible for countering malign finance—Treasury, the FEC, Commerce, economics components at State and the DOJ, etc.—need to dramatically enhance the extent to which they prioritize foreign interference in politics.

A crucial finding of our survey is that authoritarian regimes—whether through master planning or decentralized advocacy—run multi-vector campaigns in a gray zone occupied by multiple tools, actors, motives, and messages in ways that are overt and covert, legal and illegal, public and private, true and false, online and offline, etc.

As Western responses need to be similarly wide-ranging and coordinated, our recommendations start with a set of coordination proposals in the Policy Blueprint for Countering Authoritarian Interference in Democracies published by the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD). Then we will turn specifically to reform proposals for malign finance.
Executive branch coordination: policy, intelligence, and diplomacy

When Special Counsel Robert Mueller testified to Congress about his investigation, he assiduously kept to his written report. The only new comments he made were in response to questions about how to organize U.S. efforts to stop similar foreign attacks in the future.687

With regards to policy and enforcement, Mueller advised: “The first line of defense really is the ability of the various agencies who have some piece of this to not only share information, but share expertise, share targets and we use the full resources that we have to address this problem.”

ASD recommends the U.S. president appoint a foreign interference coordinator at the National Security Council (NSC) to direct policy formulation and task agencies across the full spectrum of tools and threats. To maintain prominent interagency standing, the president should appoint a former senior official, ideally cabinet-level or a former member of Congress to be named a deputy assistant to the president and entrusted as the president’s advisor and voice on all things foreign interference. The coordinator would also work closely with Congress, the private sector, civil society, and allies.

Asked by a lawmaker about a specific proposal around intelligence sharing, Mueller responded: “The ability of our intelligence agencies to work together in this arena is perhaps more important than that. And adopting ... whatever legislation will encourage us working together—by us, I mean the FBI, CIA, NSA, and the rest—it should be pursued aggressively early.”

ASD recommends establishing a Hybrid Threat Center at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) to bring together experts across the intelligence community to track individual tools, actors, or regions. Foreign interference should be elevated on the list of intelligence collection and analytic priorities, and the Threat Center should coordinate holistic assessments of malign foreign influence operations targeting the United States and its allies.

On the related topic of intelligence assessments and attributions, Russia’s successes in 2016 and its campaigns against new entrants to NATO that arguably backfired collectively serve to demonstrate the importance of publicly exposing foreign interference operations in an apolitical national security frame. The internal process set forth by the Trump administration in November 2019 reserves the right for the president to decide whether to inform the public about threats the government identifies.688 By contrast, Canada leaves the decision about public notifications in the hands of senior non-partisan bureaucrats, a model Congress should consider formalizing in legislation.689 More-over, the Trump administration’s process of notifying Congress and campaigns about foreign interference appears to be uncoordinated at best and seemingly corrupted by personal political motives, which leaves the public uninformed, undermines faith in elections, and weakens deterrence efforts against foreign interference.690 ASD recommends Congress introduce mandatory reporting requirements for both the intelligence community and Department of Homeland Security to release information about foreign interference to Congress in unclassified formats, and when appropriate, to the public.

Lastly, only the executive branch is capable of coordinating the kind of collaboration required among democracies to stand up to authoritarian regimes and promote an open, transparent, and secure arena for political finance. While getting the U.S. financial security house in order by addressing the vulnerabilities reviewed in this report, the President of the United States should host a global summit of democracies broadly framed as renewing the resilience of the free world. The White House, State Department, and other departments and agencies should work beforehand to secure new country commitments around fighting corruption and defending against authoritarian interference, including closing the seven loopholes of malign finance and reorganizing administrative structures around this threat.691 The summit should include civil society groups working to defend democracies around the world from corruption and authoritarianism, while also calling on the private sector to do its share. The U.S. government should then lead the implementation of that leader-level mandate through all manner of multilateral forums and bilateral relationships.

Malign finance: Treasury and the FEC

From college majors to long careers in government service, most people do not work extensively across both national security and finance/economics. Within the executive branch, the handful of teams focused on both areas tend to err one way or the other in their professional expertise and policy views. Within the Treasury Department, for example, International Affairs (IA) is staffed by economists while the sanctions side of the house is mostly run by lawyers and intelligence analysts with a national security mandate.

To help break down those silos, an NSC foreign interference coordinator should have a senior director for malign finance, with a staff of detailees from Treasury, State, and the intelligence community to better combine expertise in finance and national

689 See Amanda Connolly, “Here are the rules for when Canadians will learn about election interference attempts,” Global News, July 9, 2019.
691 Another ASD recommendation that will be particularly relevant for these country commitments is to formalize government-to-government channels to share information about foreign interference among allies. Such coordination is currently conducted sporadically in technical stovepipes. For example, cyber experts conduct exchanges with each other, as do specialists in disinformation or illicit finance, but rarely do governments share intelligence around and jointly develop assessments of and responses to the overall threat landscape. Additionally, the U.S. government should consider explicitly prohibiting its intelligence community from conducting foreign interference operations. Such an undertaking would involve manifold risks around public messaging and how narrowly to define interference, but it could be important to establish an international consensus around what constitutes foreign interference that shall not be tolerated. See Robert K. Knake, “Banning Covert Foreign Election Interference,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 29, 2020.
security. The Hybrid Threat Center should similarly include a team focused on financial intelligence, including representation from Treasury’s component of the intel community, the Office of Intelligence and Analysis (OIA). The need to improve intelligence around malign finance is supported by the data found in our research: Out of the roughly $300 billion taken out of Russia by Kremlin cronies, we have identified $300 million specifically spent on malign finance, which underscores the urgency of investigating what the other 99.9 percent was spent on. Specialists in Russian money laundering and shell company structuring should sit next to experts in campaign finance law, real estate, media, investments, and other industries, combining public and private experience.

In addition to sending staff to work at the recommended coordinating bodies at the NSC and ODNI, administrative reforms are needed within the Treasury Department and the FEC to meet the challenge of malign finance. We will address each of the two agencies in turn.

First, Treasury should reorganize its Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI) in such a manner as to dedicate the same degree of administrative priority to countering authoritarian influence (CAI) as it does to combating the financing of terrorism (CFT).

“Treasury should reorganize to dedicate as much administrative priority to fighting authoritarian influence as it does to combating terrorist financing.”

As background, in the weeks after September 11, 2001, the Treasury Department added CFT to its traditional focus on anti-money laundering (AML). The United States then got the rest of the world to do the same through international standards developed by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) that were later adopted by the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Treasury reinforced the importance of CFT through bilateral engagements and provided partner countries and international bodies with training and technical assistance to enhance their own capabilities.

The U.S. Treasury Department has not led any kind of similar expansion of its priorities around malign authoritarian influence in the four years since it so clearly became a top national security threat in 2016. Instead, Treasury used its 2018 update of its national strategy to add the risk of financing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). At the time, the United States held the rotating presidency of the FATF for the first time in 23 years and so Assistant Secretary Marshall Billingslea used that agenda-setting role to get the FATF to correspondingly add WMD to its own mandate, although at the same time the FATF adopted an “open-ended mandate” toward all threats. The UN, IMF and World Bank remain focused on AML/CFT.

WMD proliferation financing is very important and should remain on Treasury’s radar along with persistent threats such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and organized crime. It is, though, a risk that the international security system has been addressing—sometimes effectively, sometimes not—for decades. By contrast, the surge in authoritarian influence operations over the past four years merits more urgent and proactive policy focus. As such, the alphabet soup of top-level threat finance priorities should be AML, CFT, and CAI. In this context of financial regulation, we would define CAI by its objective to deter, detect, disrupt, and defund abuse of the U.S. financial system by authoritarian governments and their proxies as they work to undermine democracies.

Congress can help prod the administration in this direction with legislation like the REPEL Act, which would mandate that Treasury add CAI to its national strategy, similar to AML and CFT. Drafted by the House Financial Services Committee and the Helsinki Commission but not yet formally introduced, the REPEL Act would require Treasury to create a cross-border payments database, regulate money transmitters, streamline AML targeting authority, and broaden coverage of AML/CFT/CAI compliance obligations to include the real estate sector, law firms, investment advisors, accounting firms, and trust and company service providers, as recommended by the FATF.

However, this work can only really be done well by an enthusiastic executive branch. Beyond publishing a public strategy document, Treasury should give CAI just as much focus as CFT by reprioritizing administrative goals, resource planning, internal processes and structures, and patterns of external engagement.

692 One of the few teams in the U.S. Government traditionally positioned to integrate perspectives on matters of economic statecraft (a much broader field than malign finance) is the International Economics directorate at the NSC. When coordinating the development of sanctions programs, financial assistance, energy policies, or trade deals, the International Economics staff would convene the economists and analysts from Treasury, Commerce, the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), the Department of Energy, and other agencies around the same table as the national security experts from State, Defense, and the intelligence community. Specialists would meet (often for the first time) at the White House, debate the relative importance of economic and security trade-offs, and develop well-vetted policy options that incorporate a wide range of considerations. For example, a typical productive exchange of viewpoints might involve the security hawks advocating for tough sanctions against an adversarial country while Treasury/IA cautions about unintended macro-financial systemic consequences and Commerce warns of costs to U.S. businesses, with the White House International Economics team at the head of the table brokering the process. But this group is also susceptible to erring one way or the other depending on the interests of the President and his or her top staff. Dating back to when the National Economic Council (NEC) was established in 1953, the International Economics staff always had dual-hatted reporting to both the NEC and the NSC in order to balance economic and security interests. The team was run by a Deputy Assistant to the President who most often but not always came from Treasury. Given its intensive focus on trade relations, the Trump Administration appointed a string of trade negotiators (often coming from USTR) to run International Economics and in November 2019 the White House broke the team’s ties with the NSC altogether, such that it now reports exclusively to the NEC. See Nahal Toosi, “Trump’s plan to shrink NSC staff draws fire,” Politico, November 11, 2019.

693 Since 2006, Putin’s crony group has transferred some $195 billion to $325 billion out of Russia, with half that presumably belonging to Putin himself. See Åslund, pp. 174. The Russian government and its proxies launder such vast sums offshore partly to create parallel black cash budgets for the Kremlin’s strategic purposes, from bribery to election interference. See Bellon, pp. 404. There is some anecdotal and circumstantial evidence suggesting that the biggest money laundering channels into the West are controlled by the FSB’s Directorate K. See Bellon, pp. 408-410.


697 For clarity and focus, the definition should also explicitly cover efforts made by authoritarian regimes to connect their own networks of oligarchs, princelings, organized criminals, current and former intelligence professionals, energy companies, state media, and other corrupt intermediaries together with withing or unwitting U.S. persons, including political actors (parties, campaigns, candidates, donors, advisors, etc.), wealthy elites, banks, shell companies, domestic subsidiaries, non-profits, academic programs, social movements, media outlets, and other individuals or groups. Such authoritarian influence operations are meant to undermine democracies by influencing policy and political outcomes, making the rest of the world as corrupt as they are, and sustaining their kleptocratic systems of maintaining power.

698 This would probably require a process of negotiating with interest groups, similar to the work that was required to finish drafting the AML Act.
Making CAI a top priority at Treasury would require major contributions from each of the four offices under the umbrella of TFI. The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) administers sanctions, including those freezing the assets and financial networks of human rights abusers and oligarchs who fund authoritarian influence operations as well as sectoral sanctions meant to deter countries from pursuing policies of aggression. The Office of Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes (TFFC) is TFI’s policy and outreach team, which quarterbacked Treasury’s drive to get the interagency and international partners to focus on CFT after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, a job that must now be replicated for CAI. OIA is responsible for intelligence at Treasury, so they would do the vital mapping of financial networks used by proxies of authoritarian regimes to undermine democracies. The Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) administers the Bank Secrecy Act, which includes the receipt of suspicious activity reports from U.S. financial institutions and making the data accessible to law enforcement and other domestic and foreign partners.

The planning process for the CAI mission should bring in at an early stage Treasury’s partners throughout the interagency. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies need to brainstorm with FinCEN and OIA about why it has been difficult to track authoritarian money even within the U.S. financial system and which new financial intelligence data sources should be collected, made accessible, and analyzed. The State Department and other policy agencies need to work closely with OFAC (responsible for sanctions) and TFFC (developing policies for the full range of financial enforcement tools) around how to ratchet up pressure on authoritarian regimes. All this would ideally be done through the Hybrid Threat Center and an NSC Foreign Interference Coordinator, but Treasury should not wait for those coordinating bodies to get up and running before taking the initiative to start prioritizing CAI together with its interagency partners—the coordination could always be formalized later.

Second, the other regulatory agency needed in the fight against malign finance is in dire need of structural reform: The FEC.

In September 2019, when the FEC lost its quorum of commissioners and therefore its formal authority to act, not much changed in practice. For most of the past decade, there has been virtually no enforcement of U.S. campaign finance laws. In the decade ending in 2016, the amount of civil penalties imposed by the FEC declined by roughly 90 percent. The main driver of FEC dysfunction is that it cannot pursue its most important functions without a majority of commissioners agreeing. However, by law, only half of the commissioners can come from each major party, requiring compromises to get FEC commissioners from either party to take action against a politician from their own party. But over the past decade, extreme partisan division on Capitol Hill has infected the FEC too, largely because commissioners are chosen by Congressional leaders. The result is that one of the two parties has developed ideological opposition to campaign finance law and its enforcement, becoming reluctant to uphold rules against either party out of concern that it would lead to a slippery slope of enforcement against both parties. By 2016, the portion of regular enforcement cases that were blocked by party-line deadlocked votes had jumped seven-fold to a level that includes most matters of significance.

Gridlock has prevented meaningful FEC investigation or action in response to interference in support of either side during the 2016 election. Instead, the known cases were discovered and pursued by the FBI, criminal prosecutors, Congress, and civil society—even everyone except the FEC. The $3.5 million of illegal contributions that George Nader helped funnel from the U.A.E. to the Hillary Clinton campaign were identified as part of the Mueller probe, investigated by the FBI’s D.C. field office, and prosecuted by the DOJ’s criminal division. The as yet unconfirmed possibility that Putin-allied money man Alexander Torshin may have funneled laundered donations to the NRA to help Trump in 2016 was investigated by the FBI and Congress while a related case involving Maria Butina was prosecuted by the U.S. attorney’s office for D.C. but later explicitly rejected through a 2-2 vote at the FEC. This pattern has continued beyond matters involving the 2016 election, such as Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman’s straw donor scheme, which was spotted by the Daily Beast, became the subject of a complaint by the Campaign Legal Center, and was later prosecuted (together with allegations of Russian funding) by the Southern District of New York.

The FEC is similarly missing in action when it comes to providing guidance to political actors on novel or unclear areas of campaign finance law. The rulemaking process has virtually ground to a halt, while advisory opinions (based on requests to which the FEC is required to respond) have similarly been stymied by dysfunction. Over the decade ending in 2017, the rate at which advisory opinions have ended in unclear partisan deadlock has risen five-fold.

700 TFFC also interfaces with other components of the U.S. Treasury Department, including Treasury offices beyond TFI that will also be involved in CAI, such as International Affairs (IA). After 9/11, Treasury IA stood up a new office to track what different countries and multilaterals were doing to cooperate on CFT, from bilateral commitments to G7 action plans to IMF and World Bank frameworks to tabulations of frozen assets. See Senator, pp. 32.
703 While this has always been a challenge, throughout most of the FEC’s existence deadlocked votes were unusual, only happening between one and three percent of the time. See Preet Bharara, host, “Free and Fair Elections (with Ellen Weintraub),” Stay Tuned with Preet (podcast), July 9, 2020.
704 Extreme gridlock has undermined the FEC ever since 2008, when a particularly partisan batch of commissioners who were less interested in finding common ground came into office. See Bharara-Weintraub, 2020.
706 Technically, the portion of deadlocked votes rose from 4.2 percent in 2006 to 37.5 percent in 2016. But the 37.5 percent statistic understates the problem because almost all votes on which commissioners reached consensus in 2016 were housekeeping matters, minor violations, or dismissal of frivolous allegations. See Weiner, pp. 3.
707 See DOJ, December 2019.
710 As with decisions around enforcement, the portion of votes ending in deadlock climbed from 4.9 percent in 2008 to 24.1 percent in 2017, which the 24.1 percent understating the problem because most of the advisory opinions the FEC does issue deal with straightforward matters like whether campaigns can use funds for particular purposes or when professional associations may operate a federal PAC. See Weiner, pp. 5.
Our report documents six policy loopholes exploited by foreign actors that could be closed or at least clarified by FEC guidance. These include the scope of a “thing of value,” the fact that campaigns do not have to report contact with foreign nationals offering assistance, donations by U.S. subsidiaries of foreign parent companies, disclosure requirements around non-profit funding, the permissibility of crypto-currency donations, and the open question of whether the foreign-source ban covers electioneering.

This is not how the U.S. campaign finance system was designed to work. After Watergate, Congress established the FEC with balanced party membership to prevent partisan enforcement, expecting commissioners to enforce the laws fairly with good faith.711 The FEC is supposed to do more—not less—enforcement than the DOJ. Violations that are either unwitting or do not exceed statutory minimums for criminal prosecution (like Mueller’s treatment of the Trump Tower meeting or the DOJ’s view of the solicitation of investigations by Ukraine) are supposed to be handled through civil enforcement by the FEC.712 Partisan gridlock has broken the FEC, which must be fixed as a matter of national security.

The leading FEC reform proposal was developed in 2019 by the Brennan Center.713 Their first and most important recommendation is to change the number of commissioners to an odd number (i.e., five rather than six), with no more than two from each party and at least one being a political independent. The reform agenda also includes an overhaul of the FEC’s civil enforcement process by creating an independent enforcement bureau with a director authorized to initiate investigations and issue subpoenas.714 The Brennan Center also recommends a bipartisan blue-ribbon advisory panel to help vet nominees, the designation of one commissioner to manage budgetary approvals and staff appointments, and an end to the practice of allowing commissioners to remain in office indefinitely. Some of these proposed structures, such as changing the number of commissioners to five, are based on what works well at other multimember independent regulators such as the Federal Trade Commission and Securities and Exchange Commission. Most of these proposals were included in H.R. 1.

Finally, we would add that clear protocols for coordination between the FEC and the DOJ are particularly important in the context of malign financial interference by foreign powers. While the FEC administers campaign finance reporting, the DOJ is better integrated with the intelligence community and the rest of the national security interagency through its National Security Division and the FBI’s Foreign Influence Task Force. For purposes of enabling strong enforcement of the foreign-source ban and avoiding intrusion by the foreign policy apparatus into the democratic political process, the FEC and the DOJ need clear guidelines around information sharing, the process of case referral, and the scope of their respective jurisdictions and responsibilities.

Unfortunately, coordination between the DOJ and the FEC has gone in the wrong direction, with the DOJ no longer adhering to a 1977 memorandum of understanding around how to coordinate. This became controversial in 2019 when the DOJ declined to prosecute President Trump’s request for a Ukrainian investigation, a probable violation that the DOJ, under the 1977 memo, would be required to refer to the FEC.715 The GAO recently recommended that the FEC and the DOJ review and update their guidance for coordination, including the 1977 memo.716 Given the rise of malign finance over the past four years, we recommend that review includes the process of coordinating enforcement of the foreign-source ban by the FEC and the DOJ.

711 See Ravel, 2017.
714 The most important goal in restructuring the FEC enforcement process should be that if the non-partisan professional staff think an investigation is warranted then it should require a majority vote of the commission to block the initiation of such an investigation, versus the current structure whereby it takes a majority vote to approve the initiation of an investigation. While the final determination around enforcement actions should continue to require approval by a majority vote, switching the presumption around initiating investigations would result in there much more often being a factual record on which to base such final determinations. See Bharara-Weintraub, 2020.

Conclusion

Having surveyed 115 cases of authoritarian malign finance, observed that about 83 percent of them operate through legal loopholes, and categorized them accordingly, we propose eight carefully scoped U.S. policy reforms to thwart covert foreign money:

1. **Broaden the definition of in-kind contributions:** “Thing of value” should be broadly defined, interpreted, and enforced to unambiguously include intangible, difficult-to-value, uncertain, or perceived benefits.

2. **Report campaign contacts with agents of foreign powers:** Make campaigns report to law enforcement any contacts they have reason to believe might be operating as intermediaries to a foreign power aiming to funnel support to the campaign.

3. **Outlaw anonymous shell companies and restrict political activity by U.S. subsidiaries of foreign parent companies:** End anonymous shell companies. Take targeted steps to restrict foreign donations funneled through U.S. subsidiaries, such as CEO certifications and limited prohibitions around adversarial foreign powers.

4. **Disclose funders of non-profits:** Require non-profits engaged in politics to publicly disclose the identities of both domestic and foreign donors. Require all U.S. non-profits to publicly disclose foreign funders.

5. **Disclose online political ad buyers and ban foreign purchases:** Adopt legislation like the Honest Ads Act requiring broad public disclosure of who pays for online political ads as well as legislation like the PAID AD Act prohibiting foreign individuals and governments from purchasing campaign ads.

6. **Disclose media outlets’ foreign funding:** Online media outlets should have to publicly disclose their beneficial owners in “outlet libraries” maintained by U.S. technology companies, while the United States should return to banning more than 25 percent foreign ownership of television and radio licenses and should require foreign agents to make clearer on-air disclosures.

7. **Ban crypto-donations and report small donor identities to the FEC:** Prohibit cryptocurrency contributions. Report the identities of small donors to the FEC and make the information publicly accessible through a secure, limited, and conditional gating process.

8. **Coordinate across the executive branch and reform the FEC and Treasury:** Administrative reforms are needed to reorganize the U.S. government around the threat of malign finance in order to coordinate efforts against both legal and illegal activities.

The remainder of this final chapter will provide more context—data, arguments, and precedents—to underscore the urgency of meeting this challenge.

Global surge of malign finance

Over the first four years of our survey (2010-2013), we identify only a couple cases per year, as shown in the chart on the next page. Two well-known examples are long-time wealthy proxies of Moscow and Beijing, respectively: Dmytro Firtash operating in Kyiv and London and Huang Xiangmo in Sydney.717

Malign financial activity jumped up to nine new cases in 2014, many of which involved either forms of Russian financial support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine or related activity in Europe, such as two multi-million-euro loans to Marine Le Pen’s party.718 Around this time, Russian government-connected foundations were also non-transparently funding more than 40 NGOs promoting subversive Kremlin propaganda in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.719 Many Western observers still viewed all this Russian hostility as an Eastern European problem that would remain focused on Russia’s borders, a more aggressive extension of its 2008 invasion of Georgia.

But the 2014 burst of activity turned out to be the leading edge of a global wave of malign finance that came fully into view with 30 new cases in 2016. A handful of these cases involved the financial aspects of Russia’s “sweeping and systematic” campaign against the U.S. election, including IRA ads, GRU bitcoin, Veselnitskaya and WikiLeaks dirt, and some degree of NRA cultivation.720 Russian activity in Europe also escalated with payments to the campaign against the Dutch referendum on Ukraine, financial ties to the top Brexit donor, funding political parties and an attempted coup in Montenegro, lavish gifts to a top Swiss law enforcement officer, gifts of debt repayment for Czech President Miloš Zeman’s pro-Russian economic advisor, and some degree of NRA cultivation.721 Meanwhile, China’s Huang Xiangmo continued operating in Australia while other Beijing proxies funded the winning mayoral campaign in Auckland, New Zealand.722 And the biggest proven case of foreign money infiltrating the 2016 U.S. election did not involve Trump, Russia, or China: It was the Emiratis bankrolling George Nader’s secret mission to buy potential influence with Hillary Clinton.723

Another striking takeaway from the time series of malign financial activity is that it did not cease after 2016. It barely even

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723 See DOJ, December 2019; Kirkpatrick and Vogel, 2019.
slowed down in 2017, when Russia backed ethno-nationalists in elections in Germany, Sweden and elsewhere, while Chinese United Front operatives orchestrated straw donor schemes in New Zealand and bribes related to Belt and Road corruption made its way as far afield as Chad and Uganda. Hoping to oust China from Africa, the Kremlin interfered in twenty elections on the African continent in 2018 and early 2019, activities that have continued since. Of course, that has not distracted Russia from trying to contain the free, whole, and peaceful institutions of Europe, such as by spending money in both North Macedonia and Greece ahead of the 2018 referendum on NATO. Meanwhile Moscow’s big, bold, illegal operations are driving further into Western halls of power, with oil profits for the League in Italy, donations to the Tories in Britain, and oligarch funding behind operations to tarnish Joe Biden the year before the 2020 election.

The pace of malign financial activity is accelerating: Of the 115 cases we have identified over the past decade, 78 percent have occurred since 2016 and 92 percent since 2014.

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Some will question whether the underlying activity has really increased or whether investigative reporting has simply dedicated more scrutiny to Russian aggression since 2014 and election interference since 2016. We have wrestled with this question as well and have developed confidence that the activity has spiked, for two reasons. One is how extensively the caseload exploded in 2014 and 2016, as shown in the chart. Two is the reporting we covered in the chapter on multi-vector campaigns detailing how regional expansions have been approved by Putin (Europe in 2014, the United States in 2016, and Africa in 2018) and Xi (elevating the United Front in 2014 and 2015).

Malign finance is also going global, as shown in the map on the next page. About half of the cases involve Russia operating in Europe, although, this share has been decreasing, not because Europe is targeted any less, but because the Kremlin has been busy in Africa and elsewhere, while China and Middle East actors are using these tools more frequently. The most common target of malign finance—hit more than 25 times—is the United States.

The globalized nature of malign finance is also apparent in the evolution of the toolkit, with the cutting edge being covert funding support for information operations—including inauthentic social media manipulation and online media outlets—that sometimes target multiple countries at once and can be difficult for democracies to shut down quickly.

This global surge in malign finance cannot be accepted as a new normal, as it represents an abrupt and dangerous departure from the post-Cold War norms of democratic sovereignty.

**Whataboutism**

Because our analysis is supported by irrefutable evidence and it excludes speculative cases, the most likely critical response will probably be to deflect attention from authoritarian malign finance by alleging that the United States does the same thing. We split this argument into two crucially different time periods and address each in turn chronologically: first the history of U.S. electoral interference during the Cold War, and then the ongoing Western funding of democracy promotion.

We agree with and even underscore this critical perspective toward U.S. foreign policy to the extent that it is limited to a historical observation about the Cold War era. During that period, both the Soviet Union and the United States are marred with a dark history of interfering in elections around the world.

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725 See Rozhdestvensky and Badanin, 2019; Rozhdestvensky, et al., 2019.
727 See Nardelli, July 10, 2019; Harper and Wheeler, 2019; Parnas Filing, pp. 5-7; Berthelsen, 2019.
The KGB’s tool of choice was disinformation, which can be wielded more aggressively by authoritarian states with tightly controlled media ecosystems and more cynical political instincts. By contrast, democracies are reliant on objective information and constrained by how much information manipulation the public will tolerate from its intelligence agencies. 728

As such, the more natural tool for the CIA became covert campaign financing. By one count, the United States interfered in 81 foreign elections between 1946 and 2000, with 59 of those operations involving the provision of campaign funding to the side favored by the United States. 729 That is, money was a vector in nearly three quarters of U.S. election interference operations, which was roughly four times more frequent than U.S. usage of disinformation. 730

U.S. interference was typically meant to prevent electoral victories by communists or other parties sympathetic to Moscow. It started with a series of Italian elections through the late 1940s and 1950s, when the CIA handed bags of cash amounting to tens of millions of dollars to pro-Western political parties. 724 Four years after the CIA carried out a 1954 coup in Guatemala, they secretly provided $97,000 in campaign funding for the U.S.-backed incumbent government standing for election. 725 A decade before the CIA supported the coup that deposed Salvador Allende (President of Chile, 1970-1973), the CIA spent $3 million keeping Allende from winning the 1964 election by funding over half the campaign of his opponent (Eduardo Frei Montalva, President of Chile, 1964-1970). 723

This program of systematic U.S. interference in elections stopped with the end of the Cold War. 726 There have been a couple debatable cases, such as the provision of economic assistance explicitly timed to bolster the governments of Boris Yeltsin in 1996 and Mahmoud Abbas in 2006. 727 The Bush administration formulated a plan to funnel covert funds to favored Iraqi candidates and parties ahead of the 2005 election, although it ran into bipartisan resistance in Congress, arguably showing that the norm against interference was solidifying. 728 But whereas our survey of activity spanning the past decade identified 115 cases of authoritarian interference, we could not find a single similar case perpetrated by the United States or any other democracy since 2010. Some will speculate that such activities remain covert, but we find it highly implausible that Western intelligence agencies are pulling this off without leaving a trace while authoritarian regimes have gotten caught 115 times. 739

The second “what aboutism” argument, which we find far less convincing than the historic criticism, is that U.S. election interference after the Cold War took on the more subtle form of funding efforts to promote democracy. The leader of this conspiracy theory is Vladimir Putin, who adamantly believes that U.S. funding for NGOs that monitor elections while demanding greater transparency and accountability is a secret CIA plot to undermine political systems like Russia’s. 740 Putin’s cynical skepticism toward democracy promotion is best de-
Putin’s analysis of the fall of the Berlin Wall, which he experienced as a KGB officer in Dresden, is that the West spent the 1980s orchestrating political revolution in Eastern Europe."742 Turning to the 1990s, Putin refers—without offering proof—to “the fact” that many Americans who came to Russia on technical assistance projects in the 1990s secretly worked for the CIA or other U.S. security agencies.743 Putin similarly assumes the color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 were fomented by the CIA with support from the civil society partners that Western nations fund as part of their democracy promotion programming.744 Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 was marred by large Russian protests, triggered by Russian civil society finding evidence of fraud in recent elections, unrest that led Putin to envision a U.S. plot to take him down.745 In July 2012, a new law required all Russian organizations that received foreign money or grants to register with the government as “foreign agents.”746 Then government inspection and tax agencies raided civil society groups that had monitored Russian elections to look for malfeasance.747 The government soon ousted from Russia the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other U.S. and European democracy-promotion groups.748 In March 2014, when the Russian government tried to justify its annexation of Crimea, it launched an unprecedented propaganda campaign claiming—again, without evidence—that Moscow was protecting its interests from a U.S.-backed coup in Kyiv.749 Putin lambasted Western support for “a whole series of controlled ‘color’ revolutions … Standards were imposed on these nations that did not in any way correspond to their way of life, traditions, or these peoples’ cultures. As a result, instead of democracy and freedom, there was chaos, outbreaks in violence and a series of upheavals. ‘The Arab Spring turned into the Arab Winter.’”750 As discussed in the previous chapter, it was just a month later that the Kremlin launched a multi-vector campaign of support for anti-establishment politicians in Europe, starting with payments to back Marine Le Pen’s political party.751

Thus, Putin seems to believe that after decades of Western countries secretly funding a fifth column of opposition NGOs, media, dissidents, and politicians in Russia and other post-Soviet countries, the Kremlin is finally hitting back with the same tools of malign finance.752

742 See Hill and Gaddy, pp. 343, Belton, pp. 388.
743 Putin is particularly insistent that the Yeltsin-era privatization program managed by Harvard University was staffed by CIA operatives. The assumption that university faculty are spies is probably a case of mirroring, as Putin himself was assigned to work at Leningrad State University by the KGB after he returned from Dresden. See Hill and Gaddy, pp. 344-345.
744 See Hill and Gaddy, pp. 305-306.
745 See Belton, pp. 371, 374.
746 See Hill and Gaddy, pp. 347.
747 Ibid.
749 See Belton, pp. 396.

This is probably a classic case of mirroring by a former KGB case officer who sees counterespionage threats everywhere.753 In Dresden, Putin ran agents deep in German neo-Nazi groups (which stoked the rise of the far right after the Berlin Wall fell) and the far-left Red Army Faction (which murdered U.S. military officers and West German industrialists to sow chaos and instability).744 Putin also served as handler for so-called illegals blending into everyday civilian life, a tactic Russian intelligence still uses to penetrate target societies, as shown by discoveries of sleeper cells of Russian spies in the United States in 2010 and Germany in 2011.755 Putin is convinced the CIA is doing the same thing and Russian counterintelligence must not be looking hard enough.756 The presumption that modern warfare includes covert financial support for chaos agents in target countries is also described by Putin’s chief of the general staff, Valery Gerasimov, who says Western nations use “political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures” against Russia, “implemented through the involvement of the protest potential of the population.”757 With that outlook, Putin instinctively imagines pro-democracy advocates in Russia to be covert CIA sleeper cells and front groups secretly plotting regime change in Moscow.758

It is true that ever since the 1990s democracy promotion has been a core foreign policy interest of the United States, starting with support for the democratic transitions of Eastern European and former Soviet states.759 And while U.S. law prohibits development assistance from being used to directly or indirectly influence election outcomes, it is also true that it shapes countries’ political direction toward good governance (with high participation, transparency, accountability, effectiveness, and equity), authentic political competition, apolitical rule of law, robust civil society, protection of human rights, and the free flow of information.760 Recent examples include training election monitors in Afghanistan, digitizing judicial records in Jordan, establishing anti-corruption agencies in Ukraine, providing technical assistance to municipal governments in Columbia, and supporting workshops on human and democratic rights in Ethiopia.761

But in several important respects, democracy promotion is the opposite of malign finance, which seeks to surreptitiously undermine self-determination by favoring particular candidates, fuelling sociopolitical divisions, corrupting well-connected elites, and advancing manipulative narratives. Three important differences between malign finance and democracy promotion are worth examining closely, both to draw out the distinctions and to highlight complications that deserve disciplined attention by

753 See Hill and Gaddy, pp. 342-343.
754 See Belton, pp. 36-42, 427.
755 See Belton, pp. 35, 446; Hill and Gaddy, pp. 344.
756 Ibid.
757 See Hill and Gaddy, pp. 342-343.
758 See Hill and Gaddy, pp. 343-345.
760 See Lawson and Epstein, pp. 1, 3.
761 See Lawson and Epstein, pp. 2-3.
First, democracy promotion is available to all sides of the political spectrum. Rather than picking and choosing preferred parties or candidates, it focuses on building up a country’s institutional capacity to administer free and fair democratic processes under the rule of law. Even when U.S. diplomats have had close relationships with autocrats or certain political parties, the quasi-independent U.S. organizations engaged in democracy promotion have been able to do their work at odds with the administration’s policy preferences.\[762\]

The problem is that in the eyes of an authoritarian strongman who sees democracy itself as a threat to his power, civic groups promoting democracy look like political opposition.\[763\] Moreover, when the autocrat tries to choke off political competition, control the media, and suppress voting, Western support for a level playing field necessarily helps the opposition more than the ruling regime.\[764\] This has led to accusations of partisan Western influence in a couple rare cases, such as the 1988 Chilean referendum against Augusto Pinochet and the 2000 Yugoslavian election that brought down Slobodan Milosevic.\[765\]

The second key distinction is that whereas we define malign finance as flowing “often through non-transparent structures designed to obfuscate ties to a nation state or its proxies,” U.S. funding of democracy promotion is transparently accounted for in the federal budgets for the State Department and USAID, as well as a few non-profits operating more independently of U.S. policy priorities such as the National Endowment for Democracy (which was the first organization blacklisted under Russia’s “undesirable” organizations law in 2015).\[766\] Aid providers publicly disclose information about grantees and how funds are spent in detailed quarterly and annual reports.\[767\]

The complication here is that some aid providers occasionally become less transparent in a few select “closed spaces” where grant recipients face risks of harassment and persecution by government crackdowns, such as Iran in the past decade.\[768\] USAID shuts down programs when the dangers become so great that implementing organizations must go to “undue lengths” to minimize their association with U.S. assistance. But until then, aid providers sometimes reduce transparency to protect the security of grantees, which feeds a vicious circle of increasingly repressive regimes accusing Western countries of covert political meddling, which drives civil society to become less transparent.\[769\]

Third, rather than violating the sovereignty of unwilling and uninterested target populations, democracy promotion is welcomed and voluntarily accepted by countries. If the recipient nation wants to kick out election monitors and repress the rights of its civil society to receive grants from abroad, it can pass laws to that effect, which will be honored by aid providers. Even after USAID and other providers left Russia from 2012 onwards, the Kremlin has continued to cry foul about U.S. democracy promotion in other countries such as Ukraine, which shows that the violation of sovereignty goes the other way.\[770\] Rather than respecting the popular democratic evolution in sovereign nations like Ukraine, Putin has said Ukraine is “not even a country” and Russia continues to occupy its territory.\[771\]

In addition to Russia’s perceived sphere of influence where the Kremlin purports to enjoy privileged interests over these countries’ sovereignty, there are two other complications on the matter of legitimate willingness. First, structural reforms to strengthen the rule of law and competitive markets are often attached as conditions to macroeconomic assistance through IMF and World Bank lending programs, in order to ensure official loans are only temporary bridges to sustainable economic growth. While aid programs are voluntary, lenders do have negotiating leverage when borrowers face economic crises and desperately need assistance, which may be why Putin says “standards were imposed on” post-colored revolution nations.\[772\] That is one reason why country ownership over their aid programs is critical.\[773\] Second, while interference in most mature democracies is entirely unwelcome, some authoritarian interference—particularly in Africa—is conducted in partnership with the ruling regimes. But that is not a strong argument for the legitimacy of interfering in elections, as the measures are typically secret arrangements to undemocratically prop up and enrich corrupt elites.

The cessation of U.S. interference in elections since the Cold War was made possible by an alignment of values and interests. Thomas Rid makes the case that the key is the value system embedded in constitutional democracy. Having surveyed the history of active measures, Rid argues that authoritarian regimes tend toward more aggressive foreign interference, fueled by political cynicism which erodes moral limitations.\[774\] Autocrats also often aim to justify their grip on power by stoking fears of foreign enemies at the gates, while the population lives in fear of interfering in elections, as the measures are typically secret arrangements to undemocratically prop up and enrich corrupt elites.

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\[762\] For example, U.S. funding for groups promoting democracy has continued even when it is opposed by autocratic rulers such as Indonesian president Suharto, Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev, Egyptian presidents Hosni Mubarak and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and the Aliyev family that rules Azerbaijan. See Carethers, 2018.

\[763\] See Carethers, 2018.

\[764\] Ibid.

\[765\] See Carethers, 2018; Shimer, pp. 109-115.


\[768\] See Lawson and Epstein, pp. 8-9; Carethers, 2018.

\[769\] See Lawson and Epstein, pp. 8-9; Carethers, 2018.


\[771\] See Angela Stent, “Putin’s Ukrainian endgame and why the West may have a hard time stopping him,” CNN, March 4, 2014.

\[772\] Sometimes structural reforms are not broadly popular and the recipient government uses the IMF or World Bank as cover to justify policy adjustments (such as reductions in subsidies). And while Putin regularly evokes the mixed reputation of loan conditionality, the “standards” that he finds most problematic probably relate to anti-corruption, which tend to be popular with the broader public (although not with corrupt elites of course). See Putin, 2014.

\[773\] The IMF defines “country ownership” as “a willing assumption of responsibility for an agreed program of policies, by officials in a borrowing country who have the responsibility to formulate and carry out those policies, based on an understanding that the program is achievable and is in the country’s own interest.” James Broughton, “Who’s in Charge? Ownership and Conditionality in IMF-Supported Programs,” International Monetary Fund, September 2003.

\[774\] Rid also notes that democracies rely upon objective truth, which is fundamentally at odds with active measures. We would add that modern kleptocracies are held together by corruption, which is a natural avenue for malign finance, whereas democratic capitalism thrives under the rule of law. See Rid, pp. 7, 61-179, 312; Goldsmith, 29:30.
of its intelligence communities. By contrast, robust democracies have oversight functions that grow stronger over time, which imposes limitations on how much malign activity the public will tolerate from the intelligence agencies charged with serving the public by supporting and defending constitutional order.775 Key examples of such oversight include the 1975 Church Committee (motivated not only by Watergate but also by CIA interference in Chilean elections and assassination attempts on foreign leaders), the Iran-Contra investigation, and the Senate report on CIA torture.776 This helps explain why the rate of U.S. interference in elections generally declined throughout the Cold War (the 1950s being the most aggressive period).777

"U.S. interests and values advance together, and it would be disastrously short-sighted to engage in retaliatory malign finance.

Others argue the United States stopped interfering because it was no longer in its interest after the end of the Cold War. Thomas Carothers, the Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says “interventionism has decreased significantly because U.S. policymakers no longer view the world as enmeshed in a global ideological struggle in which every country, no matter how small, is a critical piece on a larger strategic chessboard.”778

We have reviewed the “whataboutism” arguments not only to preempt criticism but also to promote learning from this perspective. To the extent the United States has stopped interfering in elections simply because it is no longer in its strategic interest, that norm could be foolishly broken now that great-power geopolitical competition has returned.779 A particularly hawkish minority within the U.S. national security establishment will argue that the end justifies the means.780 U.S. interference in elections could come in the form of either a resumption of the CIA campaign funding programs from the Cold War era or the perversion of democracy promotion in a partisan manner that Putin imagines but in reality has not been seen before.

In our view, U.S. interests and values advance together, and it would be disastrously short-sighted to respond to the surge in authoritarian interference documented in this report in ways that undermine the integrity of democracy. Our policy recommendations center around building resilience by closing loopholes and improving coordination. Deterring foreign interference is beyond the scope of this report, except to say it should not come in the form of retaliatory malign finance. Allowing foreign interference to become a new normal would end up sacrificing democracy everywhere, which is far too great a cost.

Why it matters

While authoritarian aggression was slaughtering millions in World War II, British philosopher Karl Popper wrote what was arguably the 20th century’s most influential defense of liberal democracy: It is the only form of government reliably capable of dismissing bad rulers without bloodshed.781 Voters and leaders make mistakes, so the best way to avoid revolutions, coups, war, persecution, terror, famine, and squalor is to protect voters’ right to correct mistakes by getting rid of their leaders, and to do that by enshrining the rule of law with constitutional checks and balances into robust institutions of democracy not easily destroyed by those in power.782 Two years later, in 1947, after helping to save liberal democracy, Winston Churchill agreed that it is the best system yet invented: “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”783

Through the second half of the 20th century, democracies delivered the most peaceful and prosperous era of human history. As political rights and stability created space for human and economic rights and a reliable legal environment for long-term investment, democracies grew affluent and “consolidated” with vibrant civil societies, independent state institutions, and political norms that precluded regressions toward authoritarianism. No modern democracy with an income level higher than $15,000 (the level in today’s currency at which Argentina suffered a military coup in 1975) has ever collapsed.784 And while democracies make tragic mistakes (think the U.S. wars in Vietnam and Iraq), they never go to war with each other. Meanwhile, the worst mass atrocities of the 20th century—Hitler’s Holocaust, Stalin’s Red Famine and Great Purge, Mao’s Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward, and more than a dozen other genocides around the world—were all perpetrated by governments that were not accountable to voters.785

776 See United States Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, “Intelligence Related Committees, Other Select or Special Committees and Special Reports,” accessed July 9, 2020; United States Senate, Select Committee to Investigate Between the United States and Chile, Report of the Committee of Inquiry. See also, U.S. Senate, Force in the Hallways: The Iran-Contra Affair: With Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987; United States Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program, together with Forward by Chairman Feinstein and Additional and Minority Views, Washington: Government Printing Office, December 9, 2014.
777 See Levin, 2016.
779 See Beinart, 2018.
780 Outside the domain of finance and elections, there is a report that the U.S. government may have already started in the direction of “backing back” with a 2018 presidential finding loosening prior restrictions on the CIA to conduct cyber-enabled covert operations, including back-and-dump activities and intrusions against media organizations, charities, and religious institutions believed to be working on behalf of adversarial governments. See Zack Dorfman, et al., “Exclusive: Secret Trump order gives CIA more power to launch cyberattack,” Yahoo News, July 15, 2020. It is possible that this finding was driven by a small cadre of Iran hawks amid a broken interagency process. The National Security Advisor at the time was John Bolton, who even before great-power politics had returned once lamented, “We once had a capacity for clandestine efforts to overthrow governments. I wish we could get those back.” John Bolton, “John Bolton: ‘Surrender Is Not An Option’,” Interview by Diane Rehm, WAMU 88.5, November 12, 2017; Beinart, 2018. The Yahoo News article also reported that “the CIA has wasted no time in exercising the new freedoms won under Trump,” conducting back-and-dump operations aimed at both Iran and Russia, while the report quoted a former U.S. official saying “People were doing backflips in the hallways” at CIA when it was signed. Dorfman, et al., 2020. As separate context, after Russia interfered in the 2016 election, former director of CIA’s Russia House, Steven L. Hall, said “If you ask an intelligence officer, did the Russians break the rules or do something bizarre, the answer is no, not at all.” Regarding the U.S. history of election interference, Hall said “I hope we keep doing it.” Hall only rejects a moral equivalence between American and Russia interference because it would be “like saying cops and bad guys are the same because they both have guns — the motivation matters.” Shaye, 2018.
782 Ibid.
All of that represents the first of two related reasons why we must defend democracy from authoritarian interference: Our ability to vote out disappointing leaders has been the fount of the freedoms, security, and prosperity that we hold dear.

The other reason has only become clear in recent years: The theory that democratic consolidation is a one-way street toward the end of history appears to be woefully naïve and over-confident. The troubling return of history means that we are now living through a rare moment when liberal democracy could fail—and our authoritarian adversaries know it.

After democracy spread dramatically through the final quarter of the 20th century, the number of democracies peaked in 2006. Larry Diamond estimates that to be the time when the world entered a decade of “democratic recession,” with autocrats destroying constitutional checks and balances in countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Turkey, Hungary, and the Philippines. Diamond warns that in 2016 the democratic recession gave way to something much worse: a crisis of full-on retreat from democracy.

Yascha Mounk describes most democratic history as “ordinary times,” when political decisions are important but democracy itself is not in jeopardy. Both sides play by the basic rules of the political game: settle differences in free and fair elections, accept the legitimacy of electoral losses, reject foreign interference, uphold the rule of law and the rights of political opponents, and adhere to other widely political norms. Losing a political battle only means redoubling efforts at peaceful persuasion to live on in hopes of winning the war.

Mounk uses polling data—showing disillusion with public institutions and sinking attachment to democracy—to argue that over the past couple decades, liberal democracies have entered into “extraordinary times,” when the basic contours of politics and society are being renegotiated. History teaches that during these rare times divisions become so fierce that politicians become willing to undermine elections, flout political norms, and vilify their opponents. The stakes of politics become existential, with both sides fearing that electoral losses could translate into new political rules that will permanently set the country on a path of injustice.

Mounk’s evidence suggests that the underlying problem and solutions come from within free societies: liberal democracies are struggling to deliver widely distributed prosperity, a sense of secure ethnic identity, and shared facts and values broadcast through traditional mass media. If these policy mistakes are not corrected but rather compounded by the continued election of populists, liberal democracy could die.

For our purposes, the vulnerability of liberal democracy represents an important backdrop, because this is also the time when a global surge in malignant finance is undermining democracy around the world. Diamond describes the “ill winds” filling the sails of authoritarian leaders as they become nakedly dictatorial. He argues that these global winds are not simply exhaust fumes of decaying democracies, but are blowing hard from the two leading authoritarian power centers: Moscow and Beijing. Russia and China, each in their own way and focused on different time horizons, are investing heavily in the subversion of democratic norms and institutions, including the malign financial activity documented in this report.

If the United States does not reclaim its place as a beacon for global democracy and organize a strong international response to authoritarian interference, Putin and Xi and their admirers could turn autocracy into the driving force of the 21st century.

We have done this before

This is not the first time the U.S. government has had to reorganize itself and rally the world’s democracies to confront a new threat to our way of life. Historic successes over the past century have been marked by financial and economic tools playing critical defensive and offensive roles.

During World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt led the United States to first become the “Arsenal of Democracy” with the Lend-Lease program and then to liberate Europe militarily. The U.S. government deftly used its economic strength and assistance as leverage to promote an open, rules-based order, which soon emerged with the principals of the Atlantic Charter, the decline of imperialism, and the formation of the Bretton Woods institutions, the United Nations, NATO, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (which later became the WTO).
With the onset of the Cold War, U.S. Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower focused on bolstering the free and open economic system that reinforced democracy at home, underwrote U.S. military power abroad, and resurrected the economies of Western Europe and Japan. They invested in the international financial institutions, the Marshall Plan, and the European Union, which together with good domestic policies created the most successful quarter century in global economic history. The United States led whole-of-alliance policies created the most successful quarter century in global economic history. The United States led whole-of-alliance policies created the most successful quarter century in global economic history. All of this culminated in the Cold War unexpectedly ending without a shot being fired—the greatest success of economic statecraft over the past century.

However, the most recent and relevant precedent for whole-of-government efforts to confront a new threat is the response to the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. The U.S. government reorganization included a half dozen major structural reforms: coordinating and integrating intelligence functions through the director of national intelligence role (as recommended by the 9/11 Commission), establishing the National Counterterrorism Center to ensure no terrorism threats get lost in the seams between domestic and foreign intelligence, transforming the FBI into the world’s first truly global law enforcement agency integrated with an intelligence service, shaping a national security prosecution strategy through the DOJ’s first new litigating division since civil rights in 1957, and bringing homeland security agencies and policy together under the Department of Homeland Security and the White House Homeland Security Council. These efforts, among others, contributed to the prevention of another terrorist attack on the same scale or worse than the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. But another critical component was finance, as seen in the documents found in Osama bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound reflecting a terrorist leader and movement in search of new sources of money because their old lines of financial assistance were cut off after Sept. 11, 2001.

The success of combatting the financing of terrorism (CFT) was a decade in the making, a story told in Juan Zarate’s book, *Treasury’s War*. It started two weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, when President George W. Bush announced, “At 12:01 this morning a major thrust of our war on terrorism began with the stroke of a pen. Today, we have launched a strike on the financial foundation of the global terror network … We will starve the terrorists of funding.” Bush was unveiling an executive order authorizing sanctions not only against the financial supporters of terrorism but also of entities owned or controlled by them or even those unknowingly associated with them. Bankers and passive investors who turned a blind eye to terrorist financing, often as a small but deadly sliver of otherwise legitimate cash flows, were put on notice that the U.S. government would be making them choose one side or the other. Evidentiary standards had to be met, but the new authorities opened the spigot for potential targets throughout terrorists’ broader financial infrastructure.

Treasury got to work using sanctions to freeze terrorist assets and take down their financial networks. They designated financiers, front companies, corrupted charities, remitters, banks, and other key actors and nodes operating in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and elsewhere. A flurry of designations in the fall of 2001 were followed up by a number of longer investigations into facilitation networks over the following decade. Policy and implementation were coordinated by new NSC committees and other interagency task forces dedicated to terrorist financing, all supported by renewed efforts across the intelligence community to track cash couriers, access SWIFT data, and chase down money trails. Aggressive financial intelligence and enforcement posture closed off the international financial system to terrorist funding, both directly by designating bad actors and indirectly by deterring financiers from going near potential targets. Treasury organized around these priorities with a structure that remains in place today, including offices like Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes reporting up (along with the sanctions and intelligence offices) to an Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence.

Congressional action was also key to closing loopholes to build resilience against foreign money. Fortunately, after billions of dirty money reportedly tied to Russian mafia boss of bosses Semion Mogilevich was found in 1999 to be flowing through the Bank of New York, Senator Carl Levin had his Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations staff spend more than a year investigating how foreign financial institutions exploit gaps in the U.S. anti-money laundering (AML) system. Five weeks before the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, Levin introduced what would become the basis of the most sweeping AML expansion since the 1970 Bank Secrecy Act, but at that point it still faced an uphill political battle. After the 9/11 hijackers were shown to have withdrawn money from U.S. banks in broad daylight, Levin’s AML bill was immediately reinforced with counter-terrorism provisions and passed in October as title III of the Patriot Act. The law authorized Treasury to expand AML-CFT coverage to non-bank financial institutions, impose know-your-customer requirements on U.S. banks (including the need to collect beneficial ownership information), designate banks as AML concerns, and develop many other powerful enforcement tools.

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807 See Zarate, pp. x.

808 See Zarate, ch. 1-4.


811 See Zarate, pp. 27.

812 See Zarate, pp. 27.

813 See Zarate, ch. 1-4.

814 See Zarate, ch. 1-4.

815 See Zarate, pp. 34, 39-65.


818 See Bein, pp. 78-80.

819 Ibid.

820 See Zarate, pp. 30-31.
Lastly, at the same time as the United States was getting its own financial security house in order, Treasury pushed the rest of the world to do the same in a remarkably short period of time for the usual standards of financial diplomacy. It so happened that on the week of Sept. 11, 2001, the Bush administration was rolling out its 90-page national money laundering strategy.821 Within days, Treasury liaisons assigned to all relevant multilateral forums got to work steering their respective international organizations to adopt the international components of Treasury’s AML strategy, along with the CFT-oriented reforms that Congress was rapidly adding to the Patriot Act.822 Just three days after Bush signed the Patriot Act, AML officials from around the world descended upon Washington, DC, for a special plenary of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a meeting Treasury had organized to call for an update to countries’ AML regulations with the addition of CFT.823 The eight CFT policy recommendations agreed by FATF would later be enacted as new laws, regulations, and processes in many nations and the standards were adopted by the World Bank, the IMF, and the United Nations.824

Our hope is that the comprehensive empirical research provided in this report on the financial loopholes exploited for authoritarian interference will jumpstart a policy reform initiative to build resilience against this threat.

That four-step playbook—presidential leadership, executive coordination, legislative reforms, and international diplomacy—will similarly be the key to integrating financial policies into the response to authoritarian interference in democracies.

It starts with the President of the United States explaining what kind of war we are fighting. As Bush said after 9/11, “[T]he American people must understand this war on terrorism will be fought on a variety of fronts, in different ways. The front lines will look different from the wars of the past. As I told the American people, we will direct every resource at our command to win the war against terrorists, every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence.”825 Only the voice of the president marshals the influence needed to educate Americans, corral bureaucrats, mobilize Congress, and rally allies—all at once in the same direction. This is even more important with authoritarian interference than with terrorism because, by definition, tools like malign finance reach political actors and touch upon societal values around transparency, openness, and speech, so this cannot be solved by technocrats alone.

The executive branch must organize around the threat of foreign interference, with a senior coordinator and staff at the NSC and a hybrid threat center integrating intelligence.826 Each should be staffed with professionals from across the interagency, including experts in malign finance. Treasury should reorganize to dedicate the same degree of administrative priority to malign finance as it does to CFT, while the FEC desperately needs structural reforms such as an odd number of commissioners with at least one political independent.827

Our hope is that this research report into the loopholes that enable malign finance will lay the groundwork for legislative work similar to the role played by Senator Levin’s investigation into AML deficiencies over the year or two before Sept. 11, 2001. About half of the reforms we recommend resemble legislation that has already been introduced in Congress and could be passed as soon as a political window opens, such as the SHIELD Act, AML Act, DISCLOSE Act, Honest Ads Act, PAID AD Act, and FEC structural reforms in H.R. 1.828 Some of the other statutory amendments would be straightforward, although five of our proposals would require a fair amount of public debate and drafting work that might take time and so it should begin now in order to be ready when politically feasible: broadening the definition of a “thing of value,” requiring all non-profits to publicly disclose foreign funders, creating “outlet libraries” to identify beneficial owners, improving rules for traditional media, and mandating small donor reporting.

Finally, these U.S. policies of resilience to malign finance should be rolled out to the democracies of the world to promote an open, transparent, and secure arena for political finance. This should start with a U.S.-led global summit of democracies that includes closing the loopholes of malign finance as part of a broader set of commitments around fighting corruption and defending against authoritarian interference. That leader-level mandate should then be acted upon by all manner of multilateral forums, bilateral relationships, political players and technical experts within countries, private sector and civil society actors, and everyone else who has a piece of this.

Authoritarian regimes have spent money interfering in democracies more than 100 times in the past decade, with some 92 percent of those cases occurring since 2014. It should not have taken four years to build defenses against covert foreign money. But democracies draw strength from their ability to reorganize against emerging threats, even if Winston Churchill was right that Americans only do the right thing after trying everything else. The time has come to do the right thing and lead the world in closing the financial loopholes exploited by authoritarian regimes to fund political interference in democracies.

822 See Zarate, pp. 31.
824 See Zarate, pp. 31-32.
826 Rosenberger et al., 2018
827 See Weiner, pp. 6.
828 SHIELD Act; AML Act; DISCLOSE Act; Honest Ads Act; PAID AD Act; H.R. 1.
Appendix A: Case Studies

1. In-kind contributions from foreign nationals

French political party of Marine Le Pen borrows from a Russian bank in 2014. When Le Pen broke with other European politicians by supporting Russia’s annexation of Crimea, a senior Kremlin official agreed in a private text message that “it will be necessary to thank the French in one way or another.”829 Months later, the National Front received €9.4 million from First Czech Russian Bank. This obscure bank in Moscow was owned by a Russian construction company that was in turn owned by companies and holdings of Gennady Timchenko, Putin’s close personal friend from St. Petersburg.830 The deal was arranged with the help of Kremlin proxy Aleksandr Babakov, who in turn reportedly worked through intermediaries to give Le Pen further messaging statements about the war in Ukraine.831 The day after the loan agreement was signed, the E.U. sanctioned Babakov for his activities in Ukraine. Two months later, the debt was revealed by a major investigative news report.832 The next day, Le Pen publicly acknowledged the existence of the loan and justified it by claiming that French banks would not lend to the party.833 She denied that the money influenced her political positions.834 Since then, Le Pen has made no secret of the fact that she took loans from Russia—shifting the financial ties from covert to overt—and even doubled down in 2016 by openly requesting another $30 million from Russia (which Russia turned down, seemingly because at that time François Fillon had become the leading pro-Russian candidate in public opinion polls).835 After the First Czech Russian Bank failed, the loan was transferred to a shell company and then bought by Aviazapchast, which is a Russian military aviation exporter whose personnel have reported links to the Russian intelligence services.836 In December 2019, Aviazapchast filed a lawsuit in Moscow against Le Pen’s party to recover the loan.837

Australian lawmaker accepts Chinese gifts in 2014. Australian senator Sam Dastyari accepted monetary and non-monetary gifts totaling an estimated 1.5 million Australian dollars from Chinese entities in 2014, some of which appear to have been structured to exploit loopholes in restrictions against foreign donations.838 A company owned by Huang Xiangmo and non-governmental organizations linked to Beijing paid off a debt incurred by the Senator’s office, donated bottles of wine, paid for the Senator’s tea catering, and funded his 15-day trip to China.839 As with the Le Pen loan, there are both overt and covert elements. Some of the contributions were publicly reported by Dast- yari, although the senator was repeatedly opaque or deceptive about his interactions with Huang.840 Dast-yari resigned after the leak of audio of a press conference with Chinese media in which he stood next to Huang and took China’s side over Australia in a dispute about the South China Sea (the day Labor came out against China’s position and Huang threatened to withdraw a $400,000 donation).841 Dast-yari eventually acknowledged that Huang was probably an “agent of influence” for Beijing, admitting, “You think you’re using them, but they’re using you.”842

Russia gives lavish gifts to a top Swiss law enforcement official for leniency on cases such as Magnitsky in 2016. Switzerland’s most powerful law enforcement and investigatory official, Michael Lauber, resigned amid impeachment proceedings over his mishandling of high-profile corruption and money-launder cases.843 He held secret, un-minuted meetings with the president of Fifa while leading a what has become a slow and problematic investigation into corruption at Fifa.844 Lauber’s top Russia expert (“Viktor K”), whose real identity cannot be revealed but has “fluid” links between Swiss federal prosecutors and Russian officials) accepted gifts from Russia, such as a bear hunting trip to Siberia.845 Russian officials lobbied Swiss prosecutors on sensitive cases such as the Magnitsky affair during a series of off-book meetings in expensive restaurants and during elaborate vacations and day-trips.846 Viktor K told the court the lavish trip could have been funded by one of several Russian oligarchs.847 A key Russian official on the trip was Putin ally deputy state prosecutor Saak Karapetyan, who died in a helicopter crash in October 2018.848

Swedish right-wing party’s political secretary sold a house for twice the price he had recently bought it for from a convicted Russian with government ties in 2014. Egor Putilov was born in Russia and moved to Sweden in 2007, after which he went by at least five different names, published opinion pieces on opposite sides of heated social debates to fuel discord, and became political secretary for the Sweden Democrats (an anti-immigrant

829 See Dupont, et al., 2015.
831 See Boust et al., 2017. Babakov is a senior member of the Russian Federation Council (the upper chamber of Russia’s legislative assembly) who also serves as Russia’s Special Presidential Representative for Cooperation with Organizations representing Russians Living Abroad. For his activities in Ukraine, he was sanctioned by the European Union on September 12, 2014, and by the United States on June 28, 2017. See Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No 961/2014 implementing Regulation (EU) No 269/2014 concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine (2014), Official Journal L 271/8; U.S. Depart- ment of the Treasury, “Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Involved in the Ongoing Conflict in Ukraine,” Press Release, June 20, 2017.
834 Ibid.
838 See ABC, 2017.
840 See ABC, 2017.
844 Jones, July 2020.
845 Jones, June 2020.
846 Ibid.
847 Ibid.
848 See RFE/RL, “Russian Prosecutor Linked to Trump Tower Lawyer, Other Kremlin Intrigue, Dies In Chopper Crash,” October 5, 2018.
party with neo-Nazi roots). In 2014 he bought a house from a man who is currently serving a prison sentence in Russia and married to a senior tax official in St. Petersburg. Putilov sold the house for twice the amount two months later, netting a profit of six million kronor. The scandal was seen as an espionage threat given his high-level access to the Swedish parliament, and Putilov had to resign. He accused the Swedish media of “a hate campaign” and says the accusations of him being a security risk are “ridiculous.”

Czech President Zeman’s financial advisor has his debt paid off by Russian oil giant in 2016. Czech President Miloš Zeman is known as the most pro-Russian politician in Europe and a close ally of Putin. Vladimir Yakunin courted Zeman long before his election as president in 2013. More than half of the total donations to Zeman’s political party come from employees of a string of companies owned by Fabio Delco, a Swiss lawyer who the Panama Papers revealed to be managing Putin’s wealth in the form of companies connected to Bank Rossiya and Sergei Roldugin. There have also been allegations of financial ties to the Kreml extending back to a 2001 deal proposed by Russia to intermingle Czech and Russian debt financing using company Falkon Capital. In our view, the evidence about these schemes is not developed to a level of detail required to prove that Zeman is bankrolled by the Kreml, although the pattern does provide an important backstop to a verified case of Russian government support for Zeman’s chief advisor, Martin Nejedlý. Nejedlý spent the 1990s working in Russia before returning to the Czech Republic in 2007 to found a Czech subsidiary of Lukoil, a major Russian oil company loyal to the Kreml. Despite winning no-bid contracts from the Czech government, the business failed and ended up with almost $7.5 million in debts, including $1.4 million Czech courts later determined Nejedlý owed personally. In 2013, Nejedlý engineered the financing behind Zeman’s 2013 election campaign. Nejedlý serves as President Zeman’s private advisor. Without a formal Czech government position, Nejedlý did not have a security clearance or have to follow financial regulations for Czech officials. He maintains an office right next to the president’s in the official palace and accompanies him to meetings with Putin. When the $1.4 million debt caught up with Nejedlý following a 2015 court judgment, it looked as if he might be unable to pay it and have to step down.

His sensitive position with Zeman was saved when a Dutch company owned by Lukoil stepped in to pay the settlement as a gift to Nejedlý.

Malagasy presidential candidates take Russian cash and media support in 2018. In March 2018, then-President of Madagascar, Hery Rajaonarimampianina, reportedly traveled to Moscow and met with Putin and Prigozhin, who agreed to support his re-election campaign in the November 2018 national election. A few weeks later, 15 to 20 Russians working for Prigozhin showed up in the capital city of Antananarivo with campaign swag misspelling the incumbent’s name. They started a bespoke troll farm in the country employing 30 Russians and many locals. Most of the Russian operatives do not return requests for comments, but three acknowledged visiting Madagascar in the election year and one admitted to working as a pollster for the president. Prigozhin’s company even printed and distributed the island’s largest newspaper, paying students to write flattering pieces about Kremlin-backed candidates in the local language. By presenting themselves as mere interested individuals, the Russians managed to skirt electoral laws and buy billboards and airtime on television stations. When the incumbent president was not polling well, the Russians switched allegiances with a more diversified strategy: They handed six more candidates backpacks full of enough cash to fund their electoral campaigns, in exchange for their commitments to drop out if they were not ahead in the final weeks and endorse whichever candidate the Russians would tell them to support at that point. It turned out to be another bad bet, as none of those six did well. Near the end of the campaign, the Russians decided to fund the front-runner and ultimate winner, Andry Rajoelina (who denies receiving Russian assistance but was indeed endorsed by the other Russian-supported contenders). While Russia succeeded at backing the current president, the operation was only marginally successful, as Rajoelina was already winning and has the closest ties to other foreign powers as well, not just Russia. Prigozhin’s parallel effort to parlay the political influence into corrupt profits from extracting chromite was also ineffective, because while the key St. Petersburg mining company was invited to form a joint venture in Madagascar in August-September 2018, operations were suspended by the end of 2018 due to a strike. Nevertheless, Prigozhin’s political operates remain stationed in Madagascar and have since adapted the interference strategy to other African countries.
Zimbabwe receives Wagner political consultants interfering in 2018 election. In August 2018, Zimbabwe had its first election after the 30-year reign of Robert Mugabe. The winner was Mugabe’s longtime enforcer who seized power in the coup, Emmerson Mnangagwa, continuing four decades of one-party rule. The opposition accused Mnangagwa and his party of employing 64 Russians in a suburb of Harare. While it is not clear how many Russians were involved, nor exactly how they were helping the Mnangagwa campaign (which denies the allegations), one of Prigozhin’s consultants told Russian independent outlet Proekt that political strategists associated with Prigozhin did participate in the election campaign (including under the cover of the same obscure publication that Prigozhin operatives in St. Petersburg used to interfere in Madagascar’s 2018 election: Association for Free Research and International Cooperation or Afric).

Central African Republic receives extensive security assistance from the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group, along with media ownership, bribes, and various in-kind services. Russia exerts influence in the war-torn Central African Republic (CAR) by sending mercenaries to protect the government and secure control over the contested diamond trade. The top Putin confidant behind Russia’s role in CAR is Yevgeny Prigozhin. His mining companies started working there in the autumn of 2017, and have also been active in pro-Russian public relations. Information operations have included launching a radio station to broadcast Russian narratives, owning a free newspaper publicizing the benefits of Russia’s presence, creating pro-Russian Facebook pages, and organizing soccer matches and beauty contests for publicity. In 2018, former GRU official Valeriy Zakharov became the top national security advisor to the country’s president. The most important Russian figure on the ground in CAR—the only person who talks with Prigozhin without fear and as an equal—is Col. Konstantin Pikalov, who represents the Russian Defense Ministry or the Kremlin in general. Pikalov first arrived in CAR three weeks before three Russian journalists were murdered there. They had been investigating Prigozhin’s ties to the diamond business and his shadowy mercenary outfit called the Wagner Group, which reportedly deploys half its forces in Africa while waging secret wars in Ukraine and Syria. In addition to providing CAR with weapons, supplies, advisors, and trainers, Wagner has bribed media figures and member of parliament with offers of cash, training, and equipment, to remove politicians seen as insufficiently friendly to Russian interests in the country. Prigozhin had a team of approximately 15 social media specialists, political consultants, and information security technicians in CAR—Russia’s foreign ministry and Prigozhin’s spokesman dismiss the allegations.

Russia sends mercenaries and underwrites broad-based media support to back multiple candidates in the next Libyan presidential election. The eastern side of the Libyan civil war is commanded by warlord Khalifa Haftar, who is trying to overthrow the UN-backed government in Tripoli. Russia provided military support to Haftar, reportedly including regulars, special forces, intelligence, and more than 1,000 mercenaries from the Wagner Group, funded by Putin confidant Yevgeny Prigozhin. Leaked documents from within Wagner show Prigozhin’s men alleging that Haftar consolidates territory not by winning battles but by bribing tribal leaders with $150 million from the U.A.E. And while Wagner has been unimpressed by Haftar, they also advocate for rigging the next Libyan presidential election to help his candidacy. At the same time, Russia has conducted an extensive campaign to bring to power Haftar’s opponent, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, who is the son of the late dictator and a fugitive from the International Criminal Court. Saif offered the Russians compomats on U.S. politicians he claims got campaign contributions from his family, but Prigozhin was more interested in investing in Saif’s presidential bid and thus restoring the Gaddafi regime. In April 2019, Libyan security forces arrested two Russians who had recently met three times with Saif and worked for a Prigozhin-funded troll farm that “specializes in influencing elections that are to be held in several African states.” Russian support for the two candidates has spanned four vectors of traditional and social media: (1) recapitalizing the old pro-Gaddafi propaganda channel; (2) creating 12 Facebook pages to support the two candidates and getting millions of views with the support of Prigozhin’s troll farms; (3) creating a new pro-Haftar newspaper that prints a circulation of 300,000 copies distributed in territory controlled by Haftar (and uploaded to the Facebook page of a pro-Haftar party); and (4) consulting with Al Hadath TV, a pro-Haftar TV station, to provide recommendations about how to optimize its broadcasting. The Kremlin, Haftar, and the two arrested Russians have all declined to comment.

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891 See Searcy, 2019.
893 See Weiss and Vaux, 2019; Badanin and Churakova, 2019.
894 See Weiss and Vaux, 2019; Badanin and Churakova, 2019.
895 See Weiss and Vaux, 2019; Badanin and Churakova, 2019.
896 See Al-Atrash, 2020.
897 See Al-Atrash, et al., 2019.
898 See Grossman, et al., 2020. The day after anti-Gaddafi forces captured Tripoli in 2011, they took the Jamahiriya TV station off the air. While it resumed broadcasting from Cairo in 2012, the service was regularly interrupted for 2-3 months at a time and it still looked like the drab and stodgy old pro-Gaddafi programming. Its content expressed nostalgia for Muammar Gaddafi, support for son Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, and criticism of Haftar. Starting in January 2019, the Wagner Group revitalized the channel with technical, financial, and advisory support. Wagner paid off its debts to staff and satellite providers, taking a 50 percent equity stake. Wagner unified Jamahiriya with the Jana news agency, modernized it regularly interrupted for 2-3 months at a time and it still looked like the drab and stodgy old pro-Gaddafi programming. Its content expressed nostalgia for Muammar Gaddafi, support for son Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, and criticism of Haftar. Starting in January 2019, the Wagner Group revitalized the channel with technical, financial, and advisory support. Wagner paid off its debts to staff and satellite providers, taking a 50 percent equity stake. Wagner unified Jamahiriya with the Jana news agency, modernized it
Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir gets advice and expertise from Russia in the face of protests. In late 2018 and early 2019, the Sudanese regime of Omar al-Bashir cracked down violently on pro-democracy protestors. It later became clear that Moscow was advising Bashir to use more disinformation and deadly force. As context, Russia had invested in the relationship with Bashir, who had authorized Yevgeny Prigozhin to explore gold mining in Sudan and who was talking to the Russian government about building a permanent military base with strategic port access to the Red Sea. That public-private combination in Sudan would also help Russia traffic illicit gold and diamonds from the Central African Republic to Russia. With Russian interests threatened by the protests, Russian guidance and support for Bashir came from M Invest, a St. Petersburg-based gold mining company owned or controlled by Prigozhin with an office in Khartoum. M Invest (along with its subsidiary Meroe Gold, two key executives, and three Thailand and Hong Kong-based front companies) would later be sanctioned by the United States for serving as cover for Wagner forces operating in Sudan and developing plans for Bashir to discredit and suppress protestors. In the scramble to quickly draw up the plans, the recommendations appear to have been copied and pasted from tactics used by the Kremlin at home, as one memo mistakenly said "Russia" instead of "Sudan." The Russian plan involved spreading disinformation on social media, increasing the price of credible newspapers, and smearing protestors as "anti-Islam," "pro-Israel," "pro-LGBT," "looters." Advisors from both the Russian state and Prigozhin's companies embedded in several Sudanese ministries and the intelligence service. They were spotted on the streets monitoring the protests. They told Sudan's military council to hold "public executions" and suppress protests with "minimal but acceptable loss of life." Prigozhin wrote a letter to Bashir warning that "the lack of active steps by the new government to overcome the crisis is likely to lead to even more serious political consequences." his "lack of active steps" warning that he was not moving aggressively enough against the protestors. A couple weeks later, Bashir was deposed.

Bolivian president receives social media help from Rosatom in 2019. Rosatom is a Russian nuclear energy company building a $300 million research center in Bolivia. Along with building nuclear infrastructure, Rosatom brings experience influencing election results, having been tasked during the 2016 Bolivian parliamentary election with ensuring victories for the United Russia party in 10 cities. Wanting to avoid repeating the political disaster it sowed in South Africa (allegedly secretly enriching associates of the president, only to see him forced out of office and the nuclear contract lost), Rosatom now sends political strategists around the world to create “a favorable information field.” Four months before the 2019 Bolivian election, Rosatom sent 10 social media specialists to La Paz, where they supported the messaging program of then-incumbent Evo Morales and ran “black PR campaigns” against his critics. Rosatom has declined to respond to requests for comment.

WikiLeaks coordinates with the GRU and potentially the Trump campaign, which develops a press strategy, a communications campaign, and messaging based on expected releases of hacked information. Shortly after the GRU started releasing hacked documents on dcleaks.com in June 2016, GRU officers contacted WikiLeaks with a Twitter direct message (DM) about coordinating the future release of stolen emails. A week later, on June 22, WikiLeaks sent a DM to the GRU’s Guccifer 2.0 persona similarly suggesting coordination for more impactful distribution. On June 29, the GRU used a Guccifer 2.0 email account to attempt to send a large encrypted file to WikiLeaks, but it went undelivered. On July 6, WikiLeaks sent Guccifer 2.0 another DM urging them to share any negative information about Hillary Clinton before the Democratic National Convention. On July 14, the GRU succeeded at transferring the stolen DNC documents to WikiLeaks through a Guccifer 2.0 email with an encrypted attachment, following up over DM with instructions on how to open it. WikiLeaks confirmed receipt on July 18 and released more than 20,000 emails and other documents on July 22, three days before the Democratic National Convention. On September 19, the GRU staged emails stolen from John Podesta for transfer to WikiLeaks, which appear to have been emailed via a similar encrypted attachment on September 22, although it is also possible that stolen documents were shared through intermediaries in London in the summer of 2016. Over the same summer months, the Trump Campaign developed a press strategy, a communications campaign, and messaging based on the possible release of Clinton emails by WikiLeaks. Starting before WikiLeaks began publicly discussing the emails in June, senior campaign officials including Trump himself spoke regularly to Roger Stone, Trump’s longtime confidant. Stone boasted of his access to Julian Assange and repeatedly gave Trump a heads up about the releases of emails that Assange made and was believed to be planning. Senior campaign officials treated Stone as their intermediary to WikiLeaks, both pressing

904 Ibid.
907 See Lister et al., 2019.
909 See Harding and Burke, June 2019.
910 Ibid.
911 See Lister et al., 2019.
912 Ibid.
913 Ibid.
914 Ibid.
915 See Badanin, et al., 2019.
916 Ibid.
917 Ibid.
918 Ibid.
919 Ibid.
921 Ibid.
925 Ibid.
929 Ibid.
Stone for explanations when expected releases were apparently delayed and then congratulating Stone moments after key releases. Stone operated through his own intermediaries such as right-wing conspiracy theorist Jerome Corsi, who in turn was in contact about Assange with London-based commentator Ted Malloch. For example, when the *Access Hollywood* video was about to come out on October 7, Stone contacted Corsi and they developed a plan to have WikiLeaks release information to counteract the expected reaction to the video’s release. Corsi claims he successfully reached Assange through members of his online media outlet, WorldNetDaily, although Mueller was unable to corroborate this claim. In any event, the video was published that afternoon and then 29 minutes later WikiLeaks released the first set of Podesta emails. Shortly after the release, an associate of Steve Bannon (then-chief executive of the Trump campaign) texted Stone “well done.” On October 12, WikiLeaks sent Donald Trump Jr. a DM with a link that Trump Jr. publically tweeted two days later. WikiLeaks continued releasing the stolen Podesta emails in a total of 33 tranches up until November 7.

U.S. campaign officials meet a Russian lawyer promising information on an opponent in June 2016. On June 3, 2016, at the request of his then-client Emin Agalarov (son of Russian real-estate developer Aras Agalarov, who Trump knew from the 2013 Miss Universe Pageant in Moscow), Robert Goldstone emailed Don Trump Jr. Goldstone emailed that the “Crown prosecutor of Russia … offered to provide the Trump campaign with some official documents and information that would incriminate Hillary and her dealings with Russia [as] part of Russia and its government’s support for Mr. Trump.” Within minutes, Trump Jr. responded that “if it’s what you say I love it,” and proceeded to arrange a meeting at Trump Tower on June 9, 2016. On June 6 or 7, Trump Jr. allegedly told his father, candidate Donald J. Trump, that the meeting to obtain adverse information about Clinton was still on, although both Trumps deny this and Mueller was unable to find documentary evidence that candidate Trump was aware of the meeting before it occurred. However, on June 7, hours after Don Jr. confirmed the meeting over email with Goldstone, candidate Trump was giving a victory speech after winning primary elections that day, and he announced, “I am going to give a major speech on probably Monday of next week and we’re going to be discussing all of the things that have taken place with the Clintons. I think you’re going to find it very informative and very, very interesting.” On June 9, the meeting lasted 20 minutes, led by Kremlin-connected lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya, who alleged that the Ziff Brothers broke Russian laws and funneled the profits through Cyprus before donating it to Clinton or the DNC. Trump Jr. asked how the alleged payments could be tied specifically to Clinton, but Veselnitskaya said she could not trace it once it entered the United States before pivoting to a critique of the origins of the 2012 Maginsky Act. Jared Kushner became agitated, asking “[w]hat are we doing here?” and texting Paul Manafort “waste of time” before leaving early. Analyzing whether the campaign conspired with Russia to receive illegal contributions, the Special Counsel cited three elements of U.S. campaign finance law (emphasizing the latter two) in his decision not to prosecute: (i) Lack of legal precedent left it uncertain how U.S. courts would resolve whether opposition research is a “thing of value” amounting to a campaign contribution. (ii) No evidence was obtained to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the campaign officials acted “willfully.” (iii) It would be difficult to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the value of the information exceeded the statutory maximum (≥$2,000 is a misdemeanor; ≥$25,000 is a felony).

U.S. campaign officials meet envoys from Middle Eastern royals and an Israeli company offering social media manipulation in August 2016. Senior Trump campaign officials met with George Nader, who conveyed that the princes who led Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. wanted to help Trump get elected. Also present at this “second Trump Tower meeting” was the head of a firm staffed by former Israeli intelligence officers that had prepared a multimillion-dollar proposal to shape public opinion in favor of Trump. After the election, Nader allegedly paid Zamel up to $2 million. The New York Times reports, “There are conflicting accounts of the reason for the payment, but among other things, a company linked to Mr. Zamel provided Nader with an elaborate presentation about the significance of social media campaigning to Mr. Trump’s victory.” It is unclear whether this incident is being investigated as one of the 14 cases (12 of which were entirely redacted in the public report) that Mueller spun off to other components of DOJ because they extended beyond the scope of his Russia probe.

U.S. president seeks political investigations from Ukraine. In a phone call on July 25, 2019, President Trump asked the Ukrainian President Zelensky for a “favor” of two investigations that would potentially influence voter perceptions in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Trump urged Zelensky to work with U.S. Attorney General Bill Barr. The DOJ then determined

930 See Mueller Report, Vol. I, pp. 51-53. Regarding the role of Roger Stone as an intermediary, he was also in contact with the GRU’s Guccifer 2.0 persona, although the known extent of their communications is limited. See Mueller Report, Vol. I, pp. 44.


945 Ibid.


948 See Mueller Report, Vol. I, pp. 188.

949 See Mazzetti, et al., 2018.

950 Ibid.

951 Ibid.

952 Whereas Nader was mentioned 119 times in the Mueller report, Zamel and Psy-Group were never named. Mueller reportedly seized Psy-Group’s computers in Israel and interviewed Zamel and other former employees of Psy-Group. See Mazzetti, et al., 2018.


954 See Trump–Zelensky Memcon.
that the request did not constitute a campaign finance violation because assistance with an investigation cannot be quantified as a "thing of value" under U.S. law. The operation was made possible by two wealthy pro-Kremlin oligarchs paying more than $2 million to U.S. political operatives buying access to U.S. politicians and lawyers partly to advocate for removing U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch.

U.K. Labour Party receives from suspected Russian intelligence operatives leaked documents detailing U.S.-U.K. trade talks. In October 2019, ahead of the December 2019 U.K. general election, 451 pages of documents detailing U.S.-U.K. trade talks appeared on Reddit. The account posting the leaked documents characterized them as showing Britain to be in the relatively weaker position vis-à-vis the United States. The documents were later reposted by another Reddit account, while a “pocket of accounts” coordinated to manipulate votes on the original post to amplify it. At this point, however, the effort was not successful, as the post received minimal attention. Pivoting to more direct distribution tactics, whoever was behind the leak started emailing the files directly to campaign groups such as the Labour Party and political activists. In late November, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn revealed to documents in a press conference, making a campaign issue out of the suggestion that the government had offered to privatize the National Health Service. In early December, Reddit announced that it had investigated and concluded that the accounts involved in leaking and promoting the documents on Reddit were part of a sweeping Russian influence operation called "Secondary Infection." Labour has declined to reveal where it obtained the documents. The Conservative-led government said, "the government has concluded that it is almost certain that Russian actors sought to interfere in the 2019 general election through the online amplification of illicitly acquired and leaked government documents.

2. Straw donors and agents supported by foreign powers

Australian officials accept millions in payments from Beijing-linked billionaire Huang Xiangmo. Huang is a Chinese property developer who moved to Australia in 2011 and led several groups (such as the Australian Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China) tied to the United Front Work Department. Until his money became politically untouchable in 2016, Huang donated $2.7 million to political parties in Australia. While some of the donations were made in Huang’s own name, others came from companies owned by him, senior executives who worked for him, or companies controlled by his known associates. Huang separately employed, paid consulting fees, or retainers to at least five senior government or political party officials, in some cases shortly after they left office. He regularly gave sitting officials fine wines, expensive meals, usage of his private plane, payment of their legal expenses, and other gifts. Two cases are particularly noteworthy. First, in order to circumvent a NSW law banning donations by property developers, Huang allegedly (he denies it) walked into Labor party headquarters and handed the party boss an Aldi bag containing $100,000 of cash withdrawn by his employee at a casino. The black donation was then allegedly laundered through 12 straw donors at a Chinese Friends of Labor fundraising dinner. Second, the day after Labor’s defense spokesman criticized the Chinese territorial aggression in the South China Sea, Huang threatened to withdraw a promised $400,000 donation to the Labor party (leading Labor senator Sam Dastyari to take China’s side the next day).

New Zealand lawmaker allegedly hides multiple donations from CCP-tied businessman. The New Zealand Serious Fraud Office charged four individuals with conspiring to adopt “a fraudulent device, trick, or stratagem whereby [two $100,000 donations, one in 2017 and another in 2018, each of which were] split into sums of money less than $15,000 [thus evading disclosure], and transferred into the bank accounts of eight people, before being paid to, and retained by, the National Party.” The true source of funds was Zhang Yikun, a wealthy and politically-connected Chinese national who founded the Chao Shan General Association, the largest and most important proxy organization of the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front work in New Zealand. The four defendants are Zhang, Zheng, Zheng Hengjia, and then MP Jami-Lee Ross. When news of the scandal broke in 2018, Ross was kicked out of the National Party, and he released an audio recording of himself speaking to party leader Simon Bridges about how to obscure the provenance of the donation and support Zheng for the party list. In March of 2020, Ross alleged that the National Party had received another $150,000 of undocumented donations, in this case funneled from Zhang’s sister and another Chinese national.

955 See Barrett, et al., 2019.
958 See Lomas, 2019.
960 See Lomas, 2019.
963 See Kevin Rawlinson and Aamna Mohdin, “Russia involved in leak of papers saying NHS is for sale, says Reddit,” The Guardian, December 7, 2019.
965 See Cave, 2019.
966 See Knaus, 2019.
967 See Chenoweth, 2019.
968 Ibid.
969 See Grigg, 2019.
970 Ibid.
971 See McKenzie, 2019.
973 See Brady, March 4, 2020.
974 See Walters, 2018.
977 See Brady, March 4, 2020.
British parliamentary report on Russia names in its classified annex nine elite Russian expatriates who donated to the Conservative Party. After the 2018 poisoning of ex-Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, the intelligence and security committee (ISC) of the British parliament embarked on an investigation they had been itching to conduct since 2015 into the threat of Kremlin influence in the U.K. The ISC held a number of evidence sessions with a broad range of witnesses, including the intelligence agencies and several notable outside experts. The resulting 47-page report emphasized malign finance more prominently than other assessments of the Russian threat such as the Mueller report. The ISC report starts with one chapter on cyberattacks and another on influence campaigns. The latter includes not only disinformation but also “illicit funding,” and that chapter mentions the £8 million donation from Arron Banks to the Leave.EU campaign.

More importantly, however, the ISC report has a third chapter on “Russian expatriates,” warning that “the U.K. now faces a threat from Russia within its own borders” in the form of “Russian oligarchs and their money.” Its focus is on people who move from Russia to London but remain “members of the Russian elite who are closely linked to Putin.” While the public report did not identify any such Russian expatriates, The Sunday Times reported that the report’s classified annex does name nine Russian business people who have donated to the Conservative Party.

Noting that some Russian donors are personally close to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, The Times points to former Russian arms tycoon Alexander Temerko, who moved to Britain by the end of 2004 and gained citizenship in 2011. Temerko speaks proudly of his past work with Russia’s defense ministry and current leadership of Russian intelligence. He has also donated over £1.3 million to the Tories. Temerko was reportedly behind an attempt to oust then-Prime Minister Theresa May out of frustration that she was not taking Britain out of the E.U. quickly enough, while he has also counts Boris Johnson as a “friend.” The Times notes that the parliamentary committee was briefed on Alexander Lebedev, the KGB spy in London who owns Evening Standard and The Independent and whose son Evgeny invited Johnson when he was foreign secretary to parties at the family’s castle in Italy (which Johnson attended in April 2018 without the security detail that normally protects senior ministers).

The Times also identifies “the largest Russian Tory donor” to be Lubov Chernukhin, the wife of a former Putin ally and Russian deputy finance minister. Ms. Chernukhin became a U.K. citizen in or around 2009, and since then has given over £1.7 million to become the Conservative Party’s biggest donor. Ms. Chernukhin’s largesse seems directed at whoever is the Conservative leader, shifting from £160,000 in 2014 to play tennis with David Cameron and Boris Johnson to a 2019 payment of £135,000 for a dinner with Theresa May. Separately, Private Eye revealed that the Conservative Party treasurer, Ehud Sheleg, began donating what would add up to £3 million to the Conservative Party after his art gallery business struck a deal with a Cypriot company owned by two powerful Russian businessmen in 2015. In 2016 a Labour MP raised concerns that a £400,000 donation to the Tories came from Gérard Lopez, the chairman of a private investment fund that had recently signed infrastructure deals worth billions with Russia and whose managing partner is understood to be close to Putin. There is absolutely no suggestion that any of these individuals have done anything wrong or that they are among the nine business people reportedly named in the parliamentary report. They merely illustrate apparent financial ties to Russia and seemingly legal donations covered in the British press.

Brexit donor with unexplained funding engaged with Russia about lucrative business deals before the 2016 referendum.

Nigel Farage’s Leave.EU campaign received £8 million, by far the largest political donation in U.K. history, from British businessman Arron Banks. Investigative journalists have had difficulty verifying Banks’s sources of wealth as his businesses are hidden beyond offshore shell companies (some of which were exposed by the Panama Papers), while he has dodged questions about how he was able to afford the donation. In the months before the 2016 Brexit referendum, a Russian spy under diplomatic cover at the Russian embassy in London connected Banks to the Russian ambassador to the U.K., who introduced Banks to a Russian oligarch, who in turn offered Banks limited opportunities to make highly profitable investments in Russian gold and diamond firms. There is no evidence that Banks participated in those deals, but his closest business partner, Jim Mellon (who got rich in Russia in the 1990s and is now based on the Isle of Man) did invest in one of the offerings, which was completed quickly at a discounted price just three weeks after the 2016 U.K. referendum. Banks had raised the funds for his donation by borrowing £6 million from Rock Holdings Ltd., an opaque Isle of Man company that Banks controls and that co-

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979 See ISC Russia Report, pp. 2.

980 See ISC Russia Report, pp. 8.

981 See ISC Russia Report, pp. 9-14.

982 See ISC Russia Report, pp. 15-18, 22.

983 See ISC Russia Report, pp. 16.


985 Felton, 2019.

986 Ibid.

987 Harding and Davies, 2020.

988 Ibid.


990 Ibid.


992 Harding and Davies, 2020.


995 See Rudolph, 2019.

996 Ibid.


998 See Kirkpatrick and Rosenberg, 2018; Rudolph, 2019, Belton, pp. 440, 585. The Leave.EU campaign was launched when Bank’s long-time business partner, Jim Mellon, provided funding and an introduction to Farage. See Campbell, 2018. A representative for Mellon said during the Brexit campaign that Mellon has not been involved in Russian investments since the 1990s and has no relationship with Russia. See Dominic Kennedy, et al., “Millionaire backer for Leave does not have right to vote.” The Times, April 15, 2016. It later turned out that firms in which Mellon held major interests continued to invest in Russia over the years, adopting a strategy of investing in companies with “management close to Putin,” and that Mellon met the Russian ambassador several times in recent years. See Campbell, 2018. The New York Times reported that three weeks after the referendum one of Mellon’s firms, Charlemagne Capital, participated in the discounted private placement of Alrosa shares that Banks says he turned down. See Kirkpatrick and Rosenberg, 2018. Mellon points out that he had no executive role or direct involvement in investment decisions at Charlemagne Capital, although he did serve as a co-founder, non-executive director, and held a 19.4 percent equity share at the time of the Alrosa deal after the referendum (exposure that Mellon points out has declined later in 2016). See Campbell, 2018. Mellon says he only learned about the Alrosa deal from a reporter in 2018. See Carole Cadwalladr and Peter Jukes, “Revealed: Leave EU campaign met Russian officials as many as 11 times,” The Guardian, July 8, 2018. There is no allegation that Mellon broke the law.
owns Manx Financial Group together with Mellon. The U.K. Electoral Commission developed reasonable grounds to suspect that Banks knowingly concealed the truth and was not the "true source" of the money, referring the matter to the National Crime Agency (NCA). The NCA defined its investigation narrowly and found that Banks was legally entitled to take the loan from his Isle of Man company and pass it on to Leave.EU. However, the NCA also hinted in a postscript that it was still delving into the allegations at the center of its investigation, which involve South Africa and Banks's assets there. Having previously worked in the insurance industry, by 2015 Banks had made a foray into South African diamond mining, acquiring four mines worked in the 1970s by mobsters, Semion Mogilevich. The key intermediary company, RosUkrEnergo, was established in Switzerland in July 2019.

Dmytro Firtash made more than $3 billion in Ukraine from acquisitions that the U.K. National Crime Agency (NCA) defined its investigation narrowly and found that Banks was legally entitled to take the loan from his Isle of Man company and pass it on to Leave.EU. However, the NCA also hinted in a postscript that it was still delving into the allegations at the center of its investigation, which involve South Africa and Banks's assets there. Having previously worked in the insurance industry, by 2015 Banks had made a foray into South African diamond mining, acquiring four mines worked in the 1970s by mobsters, Semion Mogilevich. The key intermediary company, RosUkrEnergo, was established in Switzerland in July 2019.

Ukrainian oligarch builds ties to London through a British citizen. Robert Shetler-Jones is a U.K. businessman described as “quite clearly Firtash’s man in London,” “one of the people closest to Firtash,” and his “chief London minion.” In 2005 Shetler-Jones lived in Ukraine and told the Kyiv Post “I have met Mr. Firtash on several occasions and we are acquainted.” Shetler-Jones’s association with Firtash has included working for his companies, claiming to own assets that later turn out to be part of Firtash’s business empire, and introducing Firtash to key members of the London establishment. Shetler-Jones also owns or controls several shell companies that make political donations to the Conservative Party.

U.S. associates of Rudy Giuliani and President Trump funnel more than $2 million of pro-Kremlin money to U.S. politicians and lawyers involved in the effort to acquire dirt on a leading 2020 candidate. Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman were indicted in October 2019 for making political contributions secretly and illegally funded by "Foreign National-1," who “is a foreign national Russian citizen and businessman who, at all relevant times, was not a citizen or lawful permanent resident of the United States.” Foreign National-1 wired Parnas and Fruman two $500,000 transfers in Sept.-Oct. 2018 from overseas accounts, part of $1-2 million contemplated in a spreadsheet used by Parnas and his associates. Foreign National-1 also funded a marijuana startup that never came to fruition, leading some investigative journalists to believe its Andrey Muraviev. Separately, Dmytro Firtash (a Ukrainian oligarch with top-level ties to the Kremlin and the Russian mob) paid Parnas $200,000 between August and October of 2019 (purportedly for translation services, as part of the legal team that included Victoria Toensing and Joseph diGenova) and another $1 million in September.
2019 (for unknown purposes).1022 Parnas and Fruman used this money to buy access to President Trump (starting in October 2016), Rudy Giuliani (in September-October 2018), and a lawmaker willing to help advocate for the firing of then-U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovich (in May–June 2018).1023

U.A.E. advisor funnels more than $3.5 million of illegal campaign contributions into 2016 presidential election to use their access and influence with the candidate to gain favor with, and potential financial support from, the U.A.E. George Nader funneled more than $3.5 million of illegal campaign contributions to PACs associated with Hillary Clinton in 2016, concealing the true source of funds through straw donors such as a California-based financial executive named Andy Khawaja (along with his wife, his high-risk payments processing company, and other associates).1024 Nader and his U.S.-based conspirators caused political committees supporting Clinton to unwtittingly file false FEC reports.1025 The indictment does not charge a violation of the foreign-source ban, but it does allege Nader was using access to Clinton to gain favor with, and potential financial support from, the U.A.E.1026

Foreign nationals donated to the Trump inaugural fund through U.S.-based straw donors. After the 2016 election, countries that appear to have formerly supported Clinton needed to quickly establish ties with Trump, and donations to the inaugural fund were their entry point.1027 U.S. federal prosecutors are investigating whether Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. used access to Clinton to gain favor with, and potential financial funds to buy a uranium mine that would supply the plant to be built by Russia.1035 Environmental activists learned of the plans, publicly protested, collaborated with the media, and won a court battle to get the secret deal thrown out.1036 With the corruption scandal and the specter of Putin’s malign influence looming over South African politics, Zuma was forced to step down in 2018 and his successor scrapped the plans with Rosatom.1037 As context, the Kremlin takes advantage of Cold War-era relationships and cultures of corruption to entrench its influence with many African governments (aiming to punch above the weight of its limited bilateral economic ties).1038 Its greatest success story on the continent over the past decade had been South Africa.1039 In retrospect, the progression toward state capture reached its zenith under Zuma, at which point Russia overreached by using corruption to hoist an expensive project upon a country that could not afford it and did not need it.1040 State capture was rejected by South Africa’s democratic antibodies of civil society, courts, and parliament.1041 Nevertheless, the lesson learned by Moscow was that next time they need to more proactively inter-

1022 See Becker, et al., 2019, Parnas Filing, pp. 5-7.
1025 See Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 6. The indictment says 73 times that the political committees were “unwitting” in that they were unaware that the donations in the names of straw donors were secretly proceeds of Nader. The indictment also makes one reference to the unexplained contributions of Clinton that Nader was not a contributor: “Prior to [a fundraising event hosted by Khawaja,] representatives of Candidate 1 requested that Nader not attend, as he had not contributed anything. Khawaja demanded that Nader be permitted to attend as his guest,[after which Nader] and others invited by Khawaja attended this event.” See Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 19.
1026 Nader was sending WhatsApp updates to “an official from Foreign Country A’s government.” See Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 6, 10-14, The New York Times reported that the country is the U.A.E. and the official appears to be the Emirati ruler, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (M.B.Z.). Kirkpatrick and Vogel, 2019. Nader claimed to the official appearing to be M.B.Z. that he met in 2016 with Hillary Clinton on June 7, June 29, August 23, and October 13, although the indictment does not verify whether these meetings took place. Nader told the U.A.E. official about these meetings over WhatsApp in coded language: “Traveling on Sat morning to catch up with our Big Sister and her husband: I am seeing him on Sunday and her in Tuesday Sir? Would love to see you tomorrow at your convenience … for your guidance, instruction and blessing! … Had a simply Terrific Magnificent brainstorming and discussion with the Big Lady This evening! … Had a magnificent sessions with Big Lady’s key people … You will be most amazed by my progress on that side! … Meeting with [Bill Clinton] was superb! … I am on my way to catch up with Big Sister and Family in NY Sir … I just had dinner with my Big Sister and had a very productive discussion with her.” Nader also exchanged WhatsApp messages with his U.S.-based straw donors, including Andy Khawaja, who was fronting the contribution money with expectation of reimbursement. They often discussed plans to host small private events with Clinton, in some cases with as few as three people in attendance and frequently needing large donations to secure the meetings. Nader referred to having to press “the bakery” (the conspirators’ code word for the funder) to funnel large amounts of “baklava” (code for money) in a timely fashion. Nader warned that “it will backfire if I push anymore” and “Friends prefer that comes from me directly to you,” while also referring toFlyin to provide private briefings to “HH” (code for His Highness M.B.Z.) and “as soon as we get back to [a foreign city] prepare something with bakery for the upcoming event.” It all sounds like Nader and Khawaja buying access and influence with Clinton while arranging funding or promises of repayment from the U.A.E. government (rather than “the bakery” referring to Nader’s private wealth managers). However, the indictment does not identify the ultimate funder (as opposed to the Parnas–Fruman indictment, which explicitly says that money came from “Foreign National-1” who is a “Russian citizen and businessman”). See Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 6-20.
1027 See LaFraniere, et al., 2018.
1028 Ibid.
1029 See Khawaja–Nader Indictment, pp. 20; Friedman, 2019.
1032 See Patton Statement of Offense, pp. 3-4.
1033 See Jon Swaine, “Trump inauguration took money from shell companies tied to foreigners,” The Guardian, March 8, 2019.
1035 Ibid.
1036 Ibid.
1037 Ibid.
1038 See Weiss and Rumer, 2019.
1039 Ibid.
1040 Ibid.
fere in electoral politics, as the case informed Rosatom’s broader approach to managing the information space in Bolivia.1042

3. Companies with foreign funders

Former Russian arms tycoon and other wealthy Russians donate to Tories through an obscure energy company. Aquind Ltd is a U.K.-registered company seeking to build a controversial £1.2 billion undersea electricity grid connector between Britain and France.1043 Its three named directors are Richard Glasspool (former partner at KPMG Russia and former executive at a Russian donors named in the ISC Russia report). 1044 It emerged in 2020 arms tycoon who supported his “friend” Boris Johnson’s campaign to take Britain out of the E.U. and is reportedly one of nine donors named in the ISC Russia report.1044 It emerged in 2020 that a still-unnamed fourth backer with control over Aquind had been granted anonymity by Companies House under a rare exemption for people who could be at risk of “serious violence or intimidation” should their name become public.1045 Luxembourg public records related to Aquind’s holding company revealed that the secret beneficial owner is Viktor Fedotov, a secretive Russian-born tycoon named, who U.K. security and law enforcement agencies say is not genuinely at risk of violence or intimidation.1046 Aquind has given £422,000 to the U.K. Conservative Party since 2018, including £8,000 to John Whittingdale (Boris Johnson’s minister responsible for defending Britain from disinformation) and £5,000 donation from Mark Pritchard (an MP who sits on the ISC).1047 It has also employed multiple British lords as directors or paid advisers.1048

Ukrainian oligarch funds British shell companies that donate to a handful of Conservative Party politicians. Dmytro Firtash’s companies fund Scythian Ltd., a U.K.-registered corporate entity owned by his man in London, Robert Shetler-Jones.1049 Scythian and Shetler-Jones have made donations to the Conservatives central office, Pauline Neville-Jones (payments that were reportedly presented by M15 as evidence of why she should not be appointed National Security Advisor), and MP Robert Halfon.1050 Richard Spring, a Conservative MP who is known as Lord Risby and chairs the Firtash-funded British Ukrainian Society, has accepted advisory fees from a Cyprus company called Spadi Trading Ltd., which is owned by a British Virgin Islands entity called Interbean Ltd., which in turn is controlled by Shetler-Jones.1051

U.S. associates of Rudy Giuliani and President Trump use a Delaware anonymous shell company to hide foreign contributions to U.S. politicians. In May 2018, when Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman wanted to conceal the true source of their political donations, they incorporated an anonymous shell company called Global Energy Producers LLC (GEP), which had “no income or significant assets.”1052 While Parnas and Fruman made some donations directly in their own names, they falsely identified GEP as the contributor for some other donations (including the $325,000 contribution to America First Action on May 17, 2018), when in fact “the funds came from a private lending transaction between Fruman and third parties, and never passed through a GEP account.”1053 Those third parties turned out to include the parents of Yandex CFO Greg Abovsky.1054 This way this money trail was identified demonstrates not only the role of shell companies but also the importance of civil society informed by public disclosures, and how law enforcement can build upon leads established by journalists and advocates.1055

Northern Ireland political party channels possible foreign money to the pro-Brexit campaign in 2016. Because U.K. campaign finance laws were reformed in 2000 after decades of sectarian violence, political parties in Northern Ireland were exempted from U.K. requirements to publicly identify contributors in order to avoid donor intimidation.1056 This enabled the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to spend £425,000 advocating for Brexit without disclosing its funding sources, including £282,000 on a major ad that ran in London two days before the referendum.1057 Under public pressure in 2017 to reveal the donor, the DUP identified a little-known opaque shell entity, which has in turn refused to disclose its own funders (only claiming that they are permissible U.K. sources) and whose only known member is tied to a former head of Saudi intelligence, a Danish arms dealer, a convicted criminal in Ukraine, and other illegal dealings.1058 The Northern Ireland exemption was repealed in 2018, but after the DUP was needed to prop up the ruling coalition, the U.K. government reneged on its previous commitment to disclose past Northern Ireland donors.1059

Large donor to pro-Russian party in Latvia funded through Magnitsky and Azerbaijani laundromats. Aivars Bergers has long been one of the biggest donors to Latvia’s pro-Russian Har-

1042 See Badlum, et al., 2019.
1046 See Middito, et al., 2020.
1048 See Middito, et al., 2020.
1049 See Fauscon and Marston, 2014; Leshchenko, 2015.
1051 See Fauscon and Marston, 2014.
mony party and political groups associated with it. In 2019 leaked financial transaction data showed that in 2010 and 2011, Berger received €270,000 through Danske Bank to his account at Swedbank from two UK-registered shell companies: Diron Trade LLP and Murova Systems LLP. Diron Trade LLP was used to launder money stolen by Kremlin cronies in a tax fraud scheme uncovered by Sergei Magnitsky before he was murdered in a Russian prison. Murova Systems LLP was used in the “Azerbaijani laundromat” to launder millions of dollars that were then spent bribing European politicians, buying luxury goods, and enriching elites around the world. Experts in Russian ties to pro-Kremlin European political parties have suspected that laundromats moving money from Russia and former Soviet republics—Danske and Swedbank apparently being the largest such known laundering operation in history—are used to fund political interference in Europe, although evidence of such clandestine activities is usually hard to come by. Berger says he cannot remember anything about the transactions and suggests that he is confident that Latvia’s anti-corruption agency would have caught anything illegal.

VEB offshoot in Cyprus sends €2 million to National Front fundraising association in 2014. National Front founder Jean-Marie Le Pen has used a political fundraising association called Cotelec, established in 1988, to lend money to electoral campaigns of party members. In April 2014, Cotelec received €2 million from the Swiss bank account of Vernonsia Holdings Ltd, a Cyprus-registered shell company whose ultimate beneficial owner was Yuri Kudimov. Kudimov is a former KGB officer who was then General Director of Vnesheconombank (or VEB, a Russian state-owned bank that is intertwined with Russian intelligence and regularly used by the Kremlin to finance politically important projects). Vernonsia Holdings Ltd is an offshoot of VEB Capital and the loan was arranged with the help of Konstantin Malofeev, who knows both Jean-Marie Le Pen and Kudimov. The two were introduced by then-foreign policy advisor to Marine Le Pen, Aymeric Chauprade, who reportedly borrowed €400,000 from Cotelec to fund his own E.U. parliamentary campaign in 2014. Mediapart suggested Chauprade may have received the loan “for the promise of Russian money to help fund [Cotelec].” Marine Le Pen also borrowed €6 million from Cotelec to fund her presidential campaign in 2017.

German association supports AfD with undisclosed foreign donations in 2016-2018. The Association for the Preservation of the Rule of Law and Civic Freedoms is a German NGO that the OSCE says is “effectively campaigning on behalf of” the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD). The NGO is not required to disclose its donors and expenditures because it technically does not run candidates itself. However, journalists estimate it spends between €20 million and €30 million—which far outstrips AfD’s own spending—on media telling Germans to vote for AfD candidates. It does not have any physical offices in Germany, just a post office box that redirects to a public relations firm in Switzerland, Goal AG. Separately from the non-profit, Bild cited German intelligence sources alleging that Russia funds AfD by selling it gold at below-market prices using middlemen (AfD funds itself partly by selling small gold bars and old Deutsche mark coins).

4. Non-profits with foreign donors

Estonian mayor’s pro-Russian party accepts funds from a Russian oligarch laundered through coal companies and church construction in 2010. Tallinn Mayor Edgar Savisaar was a former prime minister and two-decade leader of the Estonian Center Party, which represents most ethnic Russians in the country.
Polish think tank tied to pro-Russian political party serves as conduit for Laundromat money in 2013. The European Center for Geopolitical Analysis (ECAG) is a Warsaw-based think tank that organizes Russian-backed election missions in places like Crimea and publishes literature supporting the Kremlin's worldview. ECAG was co-founded by Manuel Ochsenreiter (the German far-right commentator who allegedly connected the AfD politician he worked for to the Kremlin, is implicated in a firebomb attack in Ukraine, associated with a separate think tank run by Konstantin Malofeev, and contributes to a far-right worldview). ECAG was a conduit for Laundromat money in 2013. The CEO of ECAG refused to be interviewed further while the treasurer confirmed the transaction and said it was transferred elsewhere shortly afterward, he would not say where.

Auckland mayor’s 2016 campaign is funded by Chinese charity bidders, donors, and companies. Phil Goff raised 366,115 Australian dollars—60 percent of his 2016 campaign funds—at a charity auction and dinner for the Chinese community. Goff has not had to disclose the donor identities because it was a non-profit event. However, one bidder who bought “an item or two” is Zhang Yikun, a leader in the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front work who has now been indicted on separate charges of funneling money through straw donors to the National Party (Goff is the former leader of the Labor Party). Almost half of the auction proceeds came from an undisclosed Chinese national who dialed in remotely from Beijing to buy a book owned by Goff and signed by Xi Jinping. Goff has not disclosed the identity of the donor but claims that “he is a New Zealand resident, if not a New Zealand citizen.” Another guest said that the reason so many people attended and bid strongly was they believed Goff would be the next mayor. Goff’s largest donor was a Chinese-owned company building a hotel in Auckland and working closely with New Zealand on the Belt and Road Initiative.

Dutch referendum campaign in 2016 against the Ukraine-E.U. association agreement is funded by a wealthy Russian who works for Putin. In 2013 under pressure from Moscow, the pro-Russian president of Ukraine reneged on a pledge to join an association agreement to deepen ties with the European Union. After the Ukrainian people revolted and the president fled to Russia, the next Ukrainian president immediately flew to Brussels and signed the agreement, which all governments in the European Union had agreed to ratify, including Dutch parliamentary approval in July 2015. But then a little-known Eurosceptic figure named Thierry Baudet formed a think tank called the Forum for Democracy (FvD), which helped collect the 300,000 signatures needed to force a national non-binding Dutch referendum on the matter. Baudet and FvD led the campaign against the association agreement with Ukraine, propagating disinformation invented by Russian state TV and spread by a St. Petersburg troll farm. Private WhatsApp messages would later reveal that Baudet told his FvD colleagues “We are going to need the Russians, I expect.” When discussing his shortage of income, Baudet said “maybe Kornilov wants to pay some extra” and also referred to support from “Kornilov with all his money.” Vladimir Kornilov was born in Russia, grew up in eastern Ukraine, maintains ties to the highest levels of Russian government, ran a one-man political meddling outfit in The Hague (the Center for Eurasian Studies), and now lives in Moscow. Baudet privately called Kornilov “a Russian who works for Putin.” Kornilov also provided some of the disinformation about Ukraine that Baudet peddled during the 2016 referendum campaign. After the low-turnout referendum resulted in a rejection of Ukraine’s E.U. agreement, Baudet converted FvD into a political party that takes Russia’s side on a variety of issues. FvD catapulted into the Dutch parliament when it...
Russia uses a U.S. non-profit to hide funding of a covert lobbying operation against Russia sanctions. In 2007 Kremlin cronies defrauded the Russian Treasury of $230 million. The scheme was uncovered by a lawyer named Sergei Magnitsky, who was murdered in a Russian prison. The U.S. sanctioned Russian officials responsible for the killing through the Magnitsky Act in 2012. In retaliation, the Kremlin banned Americans from adopting Russian orphans. In 2015 the DOJ was prosecuting a company owned by Russian businessman Denis Katsyv as a beneficiary of some of the stolen $230 million, which had allegedly been laundered and invested in New York real estate. Katsyv sought help from his U.S. lawyers at Baker & Hostetler LLP, who introduced him to former Soviet intelligence officer Rinat Akhmetshin and U.S. lobbyist Ed Lieberman, who proposed setting up a non-profit foundation in Delaware. They called it the Human Rights Accountability Global Initiative Foundation, purportedly for U.S. families wanting to adopt Russian orphans. By legally organizing as a U.S. non-profit, the foundation effectively concealed its sources of funding, which if revealed might have required registering as a foreign agent. The $500,000 of contributions turned out to have come from Katsyv and other Moscow elites asked to support him. The foundation held an account at Bank of America, which alerted the U.S. Treasury after investigating and suspecting that the transaction activity was evidence of corruption and bribery in Russia’s bid to overturn the Magnitsky Act. The influence operation employed lobbyists and consultants led by Natalia Veselnitskaya, a lawyer who was later indicted in a related case proving her ties to the Kremlin. Non-profits have similarly been used to lobby against Russia sanctions in other countries such as Canada.

U.S. Congressional committee accuses Russia of funding U.S. environmental non-profits. In 2017 the chairman of the U.S. House Science Committee and Energy Subcommittee released a letter urging to the U.S. Treasury Department to investigate “what appears to be a concerted effort by foreign entities to funnel millions of dollars through various non-profit entities to influence the U.S. energy market.” One of the chairmen added that “Russia is funding U.S. environmental groups in an effort to suppress our domestic oil and gas industry, specifically hydraulic fracking. They have established an elaborate scheme that funnels money through shell companies in Bermuda.” The letter also refers to a 2014 Senate Environment Committee staff report claiming “entities connected to the Russian government are using a shell company registered in Bermuda, Klein Ltd. (Klein), to funnel tens of millions of dollars to a U.S.-based 501(c)(3) private foundation [called Sea Change Foundation, the sixth largest U.S. provider of grants to environmental activists].

Russian-funded troll farm targeting Americans runs out of Africa as a non-profit front group. Eliminating Barriers for the Liberation of Africa (EBLA) is a small non-profit group renting a compound near Accra, Ghana. It housed 16 Ghanaians pretending to be Americans and stoking racial division on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The trolls were hired in the second half of 2019, and late in the year EBLA expanded to Nigeria, where it filled at least eight positions. In January 2020, EBLA advertised a position in Charleston, South Carolina. Ghanaian security services determined that all of EBLA’s funding had secretly come from Russia. Facebook took down the accounts, which they determined were operating “on behalf of individuals in Russia … Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their purpose and coordination, our investigation found links to EBLA, an NGO in Ghana, and individuals associated with past activity by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA).

Russian government-connected foundations non-transparently fund more than 40 NGOs promoting subversive Kremlin propaganda in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Between 2012 and 2015, four Russian government-linked foundations (Rossotrudnichesvo, Russky Mir, Foundation for Defense of Rights of Compatriots Abroad, and the Gorchakov Foundation for Public Diplomacy) provided at least €1.5 million to more than 40 pro-Russian NGOs in the Baltic countries. The Russian government and the four foundations are highly non-transparent about how much money flows from Moscow and who the grant recipients are, while the Baltic countries do not require non-profits to disclose funder identities. However, some details were uncovered by a year-long investigation by Riga-based OCCRP member Re:Baltica. At least two thirds of the grant recipients are connected to the pro-Kremlin political parties. Examples of other recipients include researchers accusing the

1099 Ibid.
1102 See Prevezon Complaint, pp. 22-26.
1103 See Prevezon Complaint, pp. 27.
1104 See Prevezon Complaint, pp. 38-40.
1105 See Baker and Reznik, 2017.
1106 Ibid.
1107 Ibid.
1108 See Loop, et al., 2019.
1109 Ibid.
1112 See Freeman, 2017.
1113 Ibid.
1116 Ibid.
1117 Ibid.
1118 Ibid.
1119 Ibid.
1121 See Jemberga, et al., 2015.
1122 Ibid.
1123 Ibid.
1124 Ibid.
Baltic states and Ukraine of human rights abuses, filmmakers promoting Russia's version of 20th century history, groups translating the Estonian laws into Russian, and participants in ethnic riots.\footnote{1135} Latvia's foreign minister explains, "The goal of these organizations is not to build cultural ties and public diplomacy in its best sense, but rather to serve as a conduit for the Russian foreign policy through the local Russian community as well as the instruments of the political influence."\footnote{1136} The Latvian State Security Service says Russia uses these civil society fronts and ties to the ethnic Russian population in Latvia to "oppose Latvia's membership of the Euro-Atlantic community, slander NATO, attempt to gain parity of status for the Russian language alongside Latvian, discredit Latvia on the international stage, change the institution of citizenship, legitimize Russia's aggressive foreign policy, popularize interpretations of history favorable to Russia, and promote the idea of the so-called 'Russian world.' \ldots [and] foundations involved in compatriot policy are also a cover for the activities of Russian special services"\footnote{1137} Lithuania's State Security Department says, "[The Russian government] … and other pro-Russian activists have developed many centers, financed by Russia, to 'protect' the rights of the local Russians. In reality, these centers discredit the Baltic states internationally and encourage ethnic disharmony at home … These organizations' 'experts' work according to the Russian interests, publicly accuse Lithuania … and make a contribution toward creating a negative image of the Baltic states in the eyes of the Russian society. In the future, this image may serve to justify an aggression against the Baltic states." The Estonian Internal Security Service has caught the Kremlin paying for representatives of some of these NGOs to attend OSCE conferences on human rights and actively promote anti-Estonian propaganda narratives (e.g., arguing that Estonia violates the rights of Russian children to be educated in their mother tongue and the country has a "massive" issue with people without citizenship).\footnote{1138}

Chinese company captures elites through international bribery schemes, often conducted by its non-profit arm. CEFC China Energy was a nominally private company with ties to Chinese military intelligence.\footnote{1139} It raised billions of dollars from China Development Bank and other creditors, and then spent the money acquiring companies in the energy, media, transportation, sports and other sectors in countries like the Czech Republic.\footnote{1140} While its economic activities failed (planned projects were in fact normal practices in the Belt and Road Initiative),\footnote{1151} the company was more successful in its political co-option.\footnote{1141} In the Czech Republic, after CEFC China Energy promised to invest heavily in the country, the company's chairman, Ye Jianming, was named as an honorary adviser to Czech President Miloš Zeman (Jianming was later arrested in China).\footnote{1142}

Ukrainian oligarch funds British foundations that deepen ties with London elites. Dmytro Firtash uses a network of charitable foundations working alongside his shell companies to buy malign financial links into the Czech Republic. He has existed before and after CEFC China Energy. When Zeman was elected president in 2013, China awarded a lucrative national lending license to his billionaire oligarch backer, Petr Kellner. Last year, Charles University had to close its China-friendly cultural center following reports that its executive secretary and others had taken payments from the Chinese embassy through a private company. See The Economist, 2019.\footnote{1143} See The Economist, 2019.\footnote{1144} See The Economist, 2019.\footnote{1145} See The Economist, 2019.\footnote{1146} See The Economist, 2019.\footnote{1147} See The Economist, 2019.\footnote{1148} See United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, "Former Head of Foundation Sentenced To 26 Months In Prison For Bribery Then-Ambassador And President Of United Nations General Assembly," Press Release, July 29, 2016.\footnote{1149} See Walker and Kalathil, 2019.\footnote{1150} See Hala, pp. 6.\footnote{1151} See Hala, pp. 9.\footnote{1152} CEFC China Energy also put civil servants and public figures on its payroll. These brazen influence operations are largely perceived to have backfired, rejected by the institutional antibodies of Czech democracy such as the free press.\footnote{1143} But they did produce enormous stresses in the Czech governmental framework, with some institutions like the presidency seen as repurposed to serve Chinese companies (CEFC, CITIC, Huawei) rather than their own country, at odds with more resilient institutions such as the national security apparatus.\footnote{1144} Separately from the Czech Republic, CEFC China Energy’s non-profit think tank called China Energy Fund Committee deepened corrupt ties between Chinese Communist Party leadership and foreign business and political leaders.\footnote{1145} This included “a multi-year, multimillion-dollar scheme to bribe top officials of Chad and Uganda in exchange for business advantages for CEFC China Energy” for which the head of the non-profit was convicted in March 2019.\footnote{1146} Specifically, the non-profit offered a $2 million cash bribe (hidden within gift boxes) to the president of Chad in exchange for valuable oil rights, paid a $500,000 cash bribe to the president of Uganda for a bank acquisition opportunity (the bribe being obscured as a gift to a Ugandan charity, while the non-profit also advised Jianming to donate to the Ugandan president’s campaign even though the election had already passed), and sent a $500,000 bribe to the Ugandan Foreign Minister soon after he completed his term as president of the UN General Assembly (UNGA).\footnote{1147} It is not the first time Chinese elites have used non-profits to bribe UNGA presidents. Shiwei Yan (aka, Sheri Yan), founder of the New York-based Global Sustainability Foundation pled guilty to facilitating more than $800,000 of illicit payments and in-kind gifts to UNGA President John Ashe on behalf of Chinese executives.\footnote{1148} It is difficult to disentangle these objectives of private corruption from the political repurposing of UN agencies to serve as a conduit for Chinese foreign policy priorities such as the Belt and Road Initiative, but there is evidence to suggest that both are involved.\footnote{1149} The possibility of this being strictly private corruption was further diminished when the head of CEFC’s non-profit tried to defend himself in court by arguing that he was not engaged in bribery so much as he was advancing Chinese foreign policy “in furtherance of the Chinese state’s agenda.”\footnote{1150} He unsuccessfully requested that experts on China be called to “educate” the court on how such corrupt payments were in fact normal practices in the Belt and Road Initiative.\footnote{1151}
influence in London.\textsuperscript{1152} He established and funds the British Ukrainian Society, which describes itself as “a not-for-profit organization which seeks to strengthen the ties between Ukraine and the United Kingdom at all levels by providing a platform for closer contact and cooperation between the two countries in the fields of politics, business, culture, education and science.”\textsuperscript{1153} Ukrainian anti-corruption reformers call it “the agent in the fields of politics, business, culture, education and science.”\textsuperscript{1153} Meanwhile, his company’s charitable fund, the Firtash Foundation, bankrolled an influential London festival focused on Ukraine.\textsuperscript{1156} Firtash’s DF Foundation has also funded £4.3 million to Cambridge University’s Ukraine studies program, which bought him publicity such as an invitation to join the university’s guild of benefactors in a ceremony presided over by Prince Philip.\textsuperscript{1157}

Beijing-linked billionaire Huang Xiangmo finances a pro-China think tank in Australia. Huang, a Chinese property developer, ran several groups tied to the United Front Work Department. In 2014 Huang donated 1.8 million Australian dollars to establish a think tank at the University of Technology Sydney called the Australia-China Relations Institute.\textsuperscript{1158} For its first six years it was directed by Bob Carr, who had just resigned as foreign minister in 2013 and has been a reliably pro-China voice in Australian officialdom.\textsuperscript{1159}

Russia cultivates ties to U.S. political leaders through the National Rifle Association (NRA). In 2015 a Russian gun enthusiast and aspiring foreign agent named Maria Butina pitched an espionage proposal to Alexander Torshin, who is a senior Russian government official and close Putin ally: Because official diplomatic channels under the Obama administration were not succeeding at altering U.S. foreign policy, Russia should instead pursue the same objectives via a back channel that Torshin and Butina would develop through the NRA to the Republican party and a future Trump administration.\textsuperscript{1160} Torshin agreed and funded the secret operation.\textsuperscript{1161} Butina brought into the conspiracy a longtime Republican operative she was dating named Paul Erickson.\textsuperscript{1162} She met one presidential candidate at an NRA annual meeting.\textsuperscript{1164} At the 2016 annual meeting, Torshin was trying to arrange a Trump–Putin summit and met privately with Donald Trump Jr. In 2018 Butina was arrested and pled guilty to conspiring “to establish unofficial lines of communication with Americans having power and influence in U.S. politics” for the “benefit of the Russian Federation.”\textsuperscript{1162} Separately, the FBI investigated whether Torshin funneled secret campaign donations to Trump through the NRA, but it is not clear what came of the inquiry, if anything, and the NRA was not mentioned in the unredacted Mueller report.\textsuperscript{1166} Spanish authorities have sought to arrest Torshin as they consider him the investor atop an elaborate money laundering scheme.\textsuperscript{1166} In 2016 the NRA spent triple the amount of money supporting Trump as it devoted to the 2012 election, with most of the money coming from the NRA’s 501(c)(4) that does not have to disclose its donors.\textsuperscript{1166} The NRA has said it only received $2,513 “from people associated with Russian addresses” or known Russian nationals living in the United States and that it did not spend Russian-linked money on politics, but the NRA has not disclosed its donor identifies, methods of vetting shell companies, or systems of segregating foreign money.\textsuperscript{1166}

South African political party courted by Kremlin proxies using non-profits as a front to plan electoral disinformation in 2019. Yevgeny Prigozhin worked with two of his employees to plan a disinformation campaign in South Africa’s May 2019 general election. The Russians dispatched political analysts from St. Petersburg to South Africa to draw up a 16-page plan for an information operation that would “favor” the ruling ANC and “discredit” rival parties.\textsuperscript{1170} While it is unclear whether the plan was executed, its tactics were to include theses for “public rhetoric,” “digital strategy for the ANC,” “generating and dissemi-nating video content,” and “coordinating with a loyal pool of journalists.”\textsuperscript{1171} The plot was concocted under the auspices of two Russian-owned non-profit offshoots of the Internet Research Agency: the Association for Free Research and International Co-operation (Afric) and the International Anticrisis Center (IAC). The non-profits offer the pretense of conducting geopolitical research, but they are in fact used by Prigozhin to curry favor with political elites. Prigozhin offers political leaders package deals that include corrupt business dealings, private security forces, and election interference.

\textsuperscript{1152} See Faucon and Marson, 2014; Leschikens, 2015.
\textsuperscript{1153} See British Ukrainian Society, accessed July 15, 2020.
\textsuperscript{1154} See Leschikens, 2015.
\textsuperscript{1155} See Burrell and Armitage, 2014.
\textsuperscript{1158} See Peter Jennings, “Huang Xiangmo’s $1m gift to Bob Carr’s think tank queried,” The Australian, December 12, 2017.
\textsuperscript{1159} See Care, 2019.
\textsuperscript{1160} See Butina Plea Agreement, pp. 1-2.
\textsuperscript{1161} See Butina Plea Agreement, pp. 3.
\textsuperscript{1162} See Butina Plea Agreement, pp. 1-5; Jen Kirby, “What you need to know about accused Russian spy Maria Butina’s plea deal,” Vox, December 13, 2018.
\textsuperscript{1163} See Butina Plea Agreement, pp. 1-5; Kirby, 2018.
\textsuperscript{1165} See Butina Plea Agreement, pp. 2.
\textsuperscript{1166} See Stone and Gordon, 2018.
\textsuperscript{1168} See Mike Spies and Ashley Balcerzak, “The NRA Placed Big Bets on the 2016 Election, and Won Almost All of Them,” Center for Responsive Politics, November 9, 2016.
\textsuperscript{1169} See Josh Meyer, “NRA got more money from Russia-linked sources than earlier reported,” Politico, March 13, 2018.
5. Online political ads bought by foreign nationals

The Internet Research Agency bought U.S. political ads on social media without disclosure or detection in 2016. The Internet Research Agency and others affiliated with the Russian government spent approximately $100,000 on more than 3,500 advertisements on Facebook, spending that may have helped IRA content reach roughly as many U.S. viewers as actually voted in the election.1172 This troll factory’s $1.25 million monthly budget filtered through 14 shell companies to obscure its ultimate trail to Yevgeniy Prigozhin.1173 This operation was hidden not only from the audiences on social media but also from the U.S. law enforcement and intelligence communities, which were more focused on the cyber intrusions in 2016.1174

Russia, Iran, China, and others buy advertisements on Facebook and other platforms to influence Western discourse, including more than a dozen operations since 2018. Facebook started taking down nation-state operations of information manipulation in 2018, defining “foreign interference” as coordinated inauthentic behavior led by a foreign actor seeking to manipulate public debate in another country.1175 We only include cases of information manipulation in our analysis of malign finance when they have a clear financial element, such as purchases of large amounts of advertisements, which includes most of the Facebook takedowns. Most of the removed Facebook networks originated in Russia, often attributed to Yevgeny Prigozhin or other individuals associated with the Internet Research Agency.1176 The second most common state actor is Iran, while some Gulf state operations have also been removed.1177 Facebook took down one network attributed to the Chinese government that was operating in the summer of 2019, calling Hong Kong pro-democracy protestors terrorists and cockroaches.1178 While Facebook did not identify ads associated with these inauthentic accounts, China’s largest state-run news agency, Xinhua News, did buy ads on Facebook and Twitter to smear Hong Kong protesters.1179 Even though Facebook and Twitter are banned in China, Beijing has bought ads on the platforms targeting foreign audiences to spread anti-Muslim propaganda and to blame Trump for the coronavirus crisis.1180 After taking down about a half dozen nation-state information operations per year since 2018, in February 2020 Facebook shifted to reporting all its take-downs in a monthly report.1181 While Facebook says this is “to make it easier for people to see progress we’re making in one place,” it also demonstrates how in some ways foreign interference has become the new normal.1182

Russia plots to undermine the 2019 Ukrainian election with fictitious and purchased Facebook accounts as well as bots. Three months before the April 2019 Ukrainian presidential election, based on a tip from U.S. law enforcement, Facebook took down a network of 148 accounts, groups, and pages that were sharing Ukrainian news stories. The individuals behind the accounts represented themselves as Ukrainians but were really Russians. Facebook said they “identified some technical overlap with Russia-based activity we saw prior to the U.S. midterm elections, including behavior that shared characteristics with previous Internet Research Agency (IRA) activity.” They spent rubles on $25,000 worth of ads in 2018. But the Russian intelligence services adapted their methods as Facebook instituted new security measures aimed at preventing foreign nationals from buying political ads. A month before the April 2019 election, Ukraine’s domestic intelligence service (S.B.U) released a video confession of a Russian agent admitting that he paid Ukrainian citizens to give him access to their personal Facebook and Twitter pages.1183 The Russian agent resided in Kyiv and was operating under orders from his Russian handlers. The ads on more than 300 accounts would have been to promote fabricated articles discrediting presidential candidates Moscow opposed and more generally to “manipulate the consciousness of the Ukrainian voters in the interest of the Kremlin.” Separately, Ukrainian security services also observed a surge in Russian-linked bots, a proliferation of fake accounts impersonating candidates, and an uptick in requests on dark web forums for unauthorized remove access to the Ukrainian voter registry, with much of this activity originating in Russia.1184

Prigozhin runs three networks of troll farms aimed at eight African countries. In October 2019, Facebook took down three networks of inauthentic accounts tied to Yevgeny Prigozhin, Putin’s go-to oligarch for sensitive hybrid warfare missions who was indicted for running the Internet Research Agency to interfere in the 2016 U.S. election.1185 In four ways, this campaign was more aggressive and innovative in its scope and methods than most other social media takedowns in recent years. First was the extent of its reach, using almost 200 inauthentic accounts to reach more than a million followers, with one of the networks posting 3.6 times as much content as the IRA was posting in 2016.1186 Second, whereas most coordinated inauthentic behavior online targets a single country, this trio of networks used Arabic-language content to target eight populations: Madagascar, Central African Republic, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Sudan, and Libya.1187 Third, while the networks originated in Russia, they relied on
local subcontractors who are native speakers and nationals of African countries, joining forces with local actors who know who they are dealing with. The Stanford Internet Observatory notes, “This variety of nested obfuscation increases hurdles to attribution of disinformation campaigns.” This was the first well-documented case of Russia “franchising” or outsourcing to local parties. Fourth, the operational tactics were wide-ranging with clear signs of evolution since past campaigns. The Russians appeared to pay local citizens to set up Facebook accounts, buy ads, attend rallies, set up new local media organizations, hire existing media groups, and write favorable articles about the Kremlin’s preferred candidates. In addition to buying access to local Facebook accounts, some Russian-run pages and groups used compromised Facebook accounts previously owned by real people but stolen and repurposed by hackers. They sought to draw users into their Facebook pages and groups through Facebook Live videos, Google Forms for feedback, and a quiz contest. At the same time, they increased interaction by driving users from Facebook and Twitter to public groups on WhatsApp and Telegram. Altogether, it was arguably Russia’s most sweeping and systematic social media operation yet.

6. Online media outlets with foreign funding

Junk news websites distribute Russian misinformation about Ukraine. An online ecosystem of “junk websites” that Ukrainian intelligence services see as a vector of Russian malign influence was identified by an investigation into anti-Ukrainian misinformation by researchers at Texty, a program supported by the International Renaissance Foundation (founded in 1990 by George Soros). Texty first recruited news editors to help identify 7,000 manipulative news stories about Ukraine, and then used that input to teach an artificial intelligence algorithm how to automatically identify manipulative stories on the internet. The Texty researchers compiled a list of 80 “junk websites” on which the algorithm considered at least 25 percent of the stories about Ukraine to be manipulative. More than a quarter of the websites turned out to be administered from Russia or the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine, and the algorithm marked these as particularly manipulative. The majority of content was critical of the Ukrainian government. The study was conducted in 2017 and the most negative sentiment was directed toward then-President Petro Poroshenko, while former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was another common target. Other stories were more generally negative about life “on” Ukraine (the term used in Russian misinformation about Ukraine as if it is a borderland region rather than a sovereign nation that people are “in”). The names and URLs of the junk websites tend to change a couple times a year, popping up as new media sites without any contact details or identifying information about their editors. This clearly presents a challenge to both the government trying to shut them down and the public trying to keep track of which media upstarts are credible. The junk sites’ main business model involves being paid to write and remove stories purporting to reveal compromising material about a target person. Sometimes the revelations are true and other times they are fake or distorted—the website itself may not even know. The outlet posts the article online and offers the additional service of taking it down for another fee (ultimately paid by the person impugned by the article, essentially making it a blackmail business). Some junk websites operate on a retail basis, like one that told Texty it would cost $65 to publish a fabricated story tarnishing a potential Ukrainian presidential candidate. Others only work with established PR agencies (retained by clients who ultimately pay for negative stories about particular targets). Texty explains: “We assume that these sites may accept large orders from PR agencies which in turn have contracts with Russian propagandists. But we have not caught anyone of them on spot. Instead we have been observing how junk websites repost Kremlin major theses.” The extensive usage of small websites to disperse vitriol about Ukraine is further corroborated by other data about the breakdown of positive versus negative stories about the Ukrainian government. In any case, this pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian manipulative information has extensive reach of about 50 million of visitors per month, more than major reputable Ukrainian news outlets. They are also used to seed disinformation and get cited by larger outlets or influencers on social media.

Half of Ukrainian television news is controlled by Kremlin proxies. As Putin’s main representative and closest personal friend in Ukraine, Viktor Medvedchuk’s power ebbs and flows along with the strength of pro-Russian political forces in Kyiv. His zenith was between 2002 and 2005, when the so-called “prince of darkness” advanced pro-Russian chauvinism behind the scenes as chief of staff to Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. His office sent secret memos to the top managers and editors of national television stations and some newspapers instructing them on how to cover the news. The same temniki system is

1189 See Stanford Internet Observatory, 2019.
1190 See Alba and Frenkel, 2019; Stanford Internet Observatory, 2019; Gilets, March 12, 2020.
1191 See Roose, et al., 2020; Stanford Internet Observatory, 2019.
1192 See Alba and Frenkel, 2019.
1193 See Alba and Frenkel, 2019; Stanford Internet Observatory, 2019.
1194 See Alba and Frenkel, 2019; Stanford Internet Observatory, 2019.
1195 See Bondarenko, et al., 2018.
1196 Ibid.
1197 Ibid.
1198 Ibid.
1199 Ibid.
1200 Ibid.
1201 Ibid.
1202 Ibid.
1203 Ibid.
1204 Ibid.
1205 Ibid.
1206 Ibid.
1207 Ibid.
1208 See Tetiana Popova, “Петросекрет між російськими та кримськими “нештатними” органами,” Facebook, April 7, 2020. The share of publications with a negative slant (32 percent, based on the quantity of outlets) is much higher than the share of viewers (12 percent), which is usually what happens when negative information is purposely distributed across many outlets. See Popova, 2020.
1209 See Bondarenko, et al., 2018.
1210 Ibid.
1213 See Human Rights Watch, Negotiating the News: Informal State Censorship of Ukrainian Televi-
used in Russia, where the editors of the main media platforms go to the Kremlin every Friday to receive their talking points for the week ahead from the presidential press secretary, while the troll farms receive similar directions. In 2004 Medvedchuk was accused of masterminding voter fraud in favor of then-Prime Minister Yanukovych, which triggered the pro-Western Orange Revolution. He returned to the spotlight in 2012, trying to steer public opinion toward Russia and away from Europe. By 2014 even though public opinion toward Moscow had not softened, then-President Viktor Yanukovych tried to go ahead anyway and impose the eastward shift. Ukrainian protestors ousted Yanukovych and the United States sanctioned both him and Medvedchuk for violating Ukrainian sovereignty.

Yanukovych fled to Russia and Medvedchuk was left as an undesirable political ally in Kyiv. Medvedchuk transitioned from acting as the liaison between Presidents Yanukovych and Putin to functioning as a go-between for Kyiv and Moscow on peace agreements and prisoner exchanges. His political status recovered over the Poroshenko years and ahead of the 2019 election he became a benefactor and the real boss behind pro-Russian presidential candidate Yuriy Boyko, who is also supported by Dmytro Firtash’s RosUkrEnergo group. In an effort to further consolidate the pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine, Medvedchuk allegedly offered Rinat Akhmetov safe passage through the Kerch Strait (which would be valuable to Akhmetov, who is Ukraine’s richest oligarch, because it would allow him to export products from his metallurgical plants and would require approval from Moscow, which blocks the waterway) if he joined the Medvedchuk-Boyko alliance. While the consolidation has only been partially successful and Boyko did not make it past the first round of last year’s election, their pro-Russian party is ranked second-highest in Ukraine. This swift resurrection of pro-Russian forces in Ukraine is explained first and foremost by Medvedchuk and his group buying up control more than half of the country’s top television news programs since 2018. Instead of taking overt legal ownership himself, Medvedchuk controls the channels through acquisitions by his political and business partner, Taras Kozak. Because Kozak is lawmaker, he is subject to public asset declarations, which show him to be worth less than $2 million. Nevertheless, he has managed to purchase roughly $20 million worth of television channels since 2018: 112, NewsOne, and ZIK. This has led political experts to call for investigations into the sources of Kozak’s money and to widely suspect that Medvedchuk is behind it. Importantly, while these three channels only have a 3 percent share of the total Ukrainian television market, they have no entertainment content and instead dominate informational shows. Programming is split between political talk shows (which typically give Medvedchuk and Boyko a platform to promote their party’s political agenda and receive praise from friendly talking heads) and news programs (skewed heavily toward stories of Boyko rebuilding schools and hospitals and whatnot). By one estimate, the three Medvedchuk-Kozak channels collectively broadcast 45 percent of the top 40 information programs in the country, including 70 percent (i.e., 14 out of 20) of the top political talk shows and 20 percent (i.e., 4 out of 20) of the top news programs. And that does not include the Inter television channel, which also reliably supports Boyko and Medvedchuk (and which Medvedchuk reportedly bought from Firtash in 2019—that they deny the reports, although it does not matter because it is a pro-Russian channel that supports them anyway). Including Inter, the four pro-Russian channels control an estimated 55 percent of the top information shows in Ukraine, including 75 percent (i.e., 15 of 20) of the top political programs and 35 percent (i.e., 7 of 20) of the top news shows. Russia’s reach could grow further as there are also reports that Medvedchuk may informally control and is planning to buy two major channels owned by former president Petro Poroshenko. Corroborating this finding, former prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk warned in May 2020 that “Putin controls 50 percent of the news channels in Ukraine, so he can easily control 50 percent of the minds and hearts of Ukrainians.” President Volodymyr Zelensky has proposed media legislation that would ban Russian persons from owning or financing media in Ukraine. This would be a positive step and it extends to beneficial owners, which advisors to Zelensky tell us would include Russian groups ultimately funding a portion of Firtash’s Inter channel. However, it unfortunately would not apply to Ukrainians, even if they are known to be representatives of the Kremlin like Medvedchuk or his own proxies like Kozak.

Baltic online news portal is secretly owned through front companies by the Russian government. Baltnews is an online portal providing Russian-language news and pro-Russian opinion pieces. It has teams and websites dedicated to each Baltic country: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The sites publish both local

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1214 See Gallootti, 2017. Tornelli are covert written directives sent from the Kremlin to major Russian news agencies to supplement direction given at weekly meetings with the Russian presidential press secretary, as to topics and narratives to be covered.
1215 See Sukhor, 2019.
1216 Ibid.
1219 See Miller, 2016.
1222 Ibid.
1223 Ibid.
1224 See UNIAN, June 21, 2019.
1225 See Hromadske, 2019.
1226 Ibid.
1227 See Grytsenko and Sorokin, 2019.
1228 See Makarenko, 2019.
1229 See Grytsenko and Sorokin, 2019.
1230 See Popova, 2019.
1231 See UNIAN, June 30, 2019.
1232 See Popova, 2019.
1233 See UNIAN, June 30, 2019.
1235 See Ukase of the President of Ukraine No. 837/2019, “Про необхідні заходи з проведення реформ та зміцнення державності” (Pro nevidkladni zakhodi z provedennya reform ta zmitsyennya der - zhavosti), October 8, 2019.
1236 Ibid.
1237 See Baltnews.lv (Estonia), accessed June 11, 2020; lv.Baltnews.com (Latvia), accessed June 12, 2020; Baltnews.lt (Lithuania), accessed June 11, 2020. The Lithuanian site is hosted on the .com domain because in July 2019 the Lithuanian government blocked access to baltnews.lt.
1238 See Baltnews.lv (Estonia); lv.Baltnews.com (Latvia); Baltnews.lt (Lithuania).
news and reprints from Russian media outlets and they display little to no advertising.1239 They claimed to be “a neutral news source” owned by private investors in the Netherlands.1240 In truth, its three web addresses were registered to a shell company incorporated at a residential flat in a small town in the Netherlands in 2013 with €1 of core capital.1241 The shell company’s undisclosed sole owner turned out to be a Russian-registered company that was itself owned by Russian newspaper Moskovskiy Novosti, which is in turn owned by the Russian state-owned media company Rossiya Segodnya.1242 Unlike the parent company’s other subsidiaries like Sputnik News, Baltnews did not disclose that it was established, funded, managed, and owned by the Russian government.1243 Instead, Baltnews used this obscure chain of owners (as well as partner NGOs tied to the same Russian operatives) to project an illusion of independent media outlets arising from local organizations in Northern Europe.1244

Covert funding was also routed through a company registered in Cyprus and the Serbian subsidiary of Rossiya Segodnya that is managed by Russian nationals to similarly finance a Russian state news branch in Ukraine.1245 The connection to the Russian government was first spotted by the Estonian security service, which identified a co-founder of Baltnews as Vladimir Lepekhin, known as the “animosity ambassador” of Kremlin propaganda because he “actively participates in Russia’s influence operations in neighboring countries.”1246 The true nature of Baltnews was discovered as part of a tax evasion and forgery criminal investigation into the overt founder of Baltnews, Aleksandr Kornilov, who is also described by the Estonian security service as a Russian propagandist.1247 The intelligence services in Latvia and Lithuania similarly confirmed that the Baltnews outlets in their countries were funded and controlled by the Russian government as covert operations to spread pro-Kremlin and anti-Western messaging abroad.1248 An investigative report by BuzzFeed revealed that Kornilov and Baltnews took editorial direction from Rossiya Segodnya, which provided lists of approved topics to cover.1249 In the two years up until the scheme was revealed, Kornilov exchanged thousands of messages over Skype with his main contact at Rossiya Segodnya, Aleksandr Svyazin (a bylined author on various Sputnik websites in Eastern Europe and Central Asia), who regularly dictated news coverage (e.g., “every day you need to report on three of the five topics that we will suggest” with certain “mandatory” stories).1250 The editorial lines provided by the Russian government (which also supplied potentially faked public opinion polling data) were often meant to undermine transatlantic cohesion, fan ethnic tensions within either the United States or the European Union, split Western solidarity around Russia sanctions, or present the Kremlin’s narratives around the war in Ukraine.1251 Baltnews also bought clicks and comments from Russian troll factories to extend their reach and sent the Russian government monthly traffic reports.1252 Following the public reporting by BuzzFeed and others in August 2018, Baltnews finally admitted to being owned and operated by the Russian government through Rossiya Segodnya.1253 In July 2019, Latvia blocked access to baltnews.lv, citing E.U. sanctions against the head of Rossiya Segodnya.1254

Berlin-based network of online video channels are run by subsidiaries of RT without disclosing their ties to the Russian government in 2018. Maffick Media and Redfish present themselves as “independent” or “grassroots” amateur media productions.1255 In truth, both are owned by and co-located with Ruptly TV, an openly acknowledged subsidiary of RT, which in turn is funded by the Russian government and considered by the U.S. intelligence community to be “the Kremlin’s principal international propaganda outlet.”1256 Maffick Media runs online video channels targeted toward young, digitally inclined, English-speaking consumers. Strong, often-fringe political stances are presented within Maffick productions such as In The Now and @SoapboxStand (focused on contemporary social and political issues), Waste-Ed (which claims to support environmental sustainability but often spreads false or misleading information about environmental issues), and BackThen (which provides revisionist perspectives of history).1257 Company records in Germany revealed that 51 percent of Maffick is owned by Ruptly and 49 percent by former RT employee Anissa Naouai.1258 Redfish’s sole shareholder is Ruptly.1259 Its initial report covering the fire at the Grenfell Tower in London that killed 72 people was praised by Vice as a “fantastic example of amateur community-produced media.”1260 In fact, five of the nine employees publicly associated with Redfish previously worked at state-backed media such as RT, which distributes Redfish documentary videos presented as independent local productions.1261 Both Maffick and Redfish push Russian geopolitical narratives, such as those voiced by Rania Khalek, a Beirut-based American commentator who describes herself as an anti-imperialist leftist.1262 Neither outlet discloses its close ties to the Russian government.1263 After Facebook required the entities to disclose their ownership ties to the Russian government, Maffick seems to have re-registered as a Delaware LLC and once again failed to disclose its ties to Russia.1264 In June 2020, Facebook started labeling “media outlets

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1239 See Meduza. “Following an investigative report by Buzzfeed and others, a network of pro-Kremlin news outlets in the Baltic states suddenly admits to being run by the Russian state,” August 29, 2018.
1242 See Hanlon and Morley, 2019; ODNI, 2017.
1243 See Hanlon and Morley, 2019; O’Sullivan, et al., 2019.
1244 See Davis, 2018.
1245 See Davis, 2018.
1246 See Davis, 2018.
1247 See Davis, 2018.
1248 See Davis, 2018.
1249 See Davis, 2018.
1250 Ibid.
1251 Ibid.
1252 Ibid.
1256 See Hanlon and Morley, 2019; ODNI, 2017.
1257 See Hanlon and Morley, 2019; O’Sullivan, et al., 2019.
1258 See Hanlon and Morley, 2019; O’Sullivan, et al., 2019.
1259 See Davis, 2018.
1260 Ibid.
1261 Ibid.
1264 See Donie O’Sullivan, “Facebook restores Russia-linked pages, but is still figuring out what to do about state-backed media,” CNN, February 25, 2019; Casey Michel, Twitter post, April 26, 2020, 10:14 AM. Maffick, LLC is a Delaware company with a subsidiary in California. Filings with the California Secretary of State do not reveal whether the ownership structure has changed but do list Naouai as the
that are wholly or partially under the editorial control of their government. This included both Maffick and Redfish, whose Facebook pages are now labeled as “Russia state-controlled media.”

Swedish security officials say Russia interfered in the country’s 2018 election by nurturing its anti-immigrant digital ecosystem, including at least six far-right news websites. Ahead of Sweden’s 2018 election, a cast of foreign state and non-state actors provided a range of financial support, content, and key links to give viral momentum to the far-right information space in Sweden. This included support for at least six news and disinformation websites that have grown rapidly to become some of the most shared media websites in Sweden. The sites feed content to a network of closed Facebook pages built by the Sweden Democrats, an anti-immigrant party with neo-Nazi roots. Even though the Sweden Democrats had only once captured enough of the vote to enter parliament (5.7 percent in 2010), their reach on social media would ultimately exceed that of any other party. In the 2018 election, the Sweden Democrats had their best result yet with 18 percent of the vote, which precluded the mainstream parties from forming a government for over four months. Based on interviews with counterintelligence officials in the Swedish Security Service, The New York Times reported that “Russia’s hand in all of this is largely hidden from view. But fingerprints abound.” The investigate report highlighted four types of ties to Russian intelligence services, Kremlin-connected individuals, Russian state-owned media, Russian and Ukrainian nationals, and far-right influencers in the United States: (1) At least six Swedish alt-right websites drew advertising revenues from what was obscured to look like an unrelated network of ad buyers but in truth all traced back to companies located at the same Berlin address and owned by Autodoc GmbH, an online auto-parts store. Autodoc was owned in turn by four businessmen from Russian and Ukraine, three of whom have adopted German-sounding last names. Moreover, hidden within a back door (only accessible if you know and type in the full URL) of an early version of the Autodoc website is a Kremlin-friendly Russian-language blog (Sweden4Rus.nu), an AfD-supporting site (FreieWelt.net), a far-right U.S. think tank associated with John Bolton and Rebekah Mercer (Gatesstone Institute), and a U.S. white supremacist site (Stormfront). The Swedish stories are also picked up and amplified by RT, Sputnik, Infowars, and Breitbart. (3) Writers and editors for the far-right Swedish websites have been befriended by the Kremlin. Contributors include a former worker for the Sweden Democrats who was denied parliamentary press accreditation after the security police determined he was in contact with Russian intelligence, Alexander Dugin (Putin’s fascist ideologue), and Manuel Ochsenreiter (the German far-right commentator who allegedly connected the AfD politician he worked for to the Kremlin, is implicated in a firebomb attack in Ukraine, founded a pro-Russian think tank in Poland, and is associated with a separate think tank run by Konstantin Malofeev). The founder of one Swedish site and the editor of another frequently travel to Russia, where they maintain ties with the government. (4) At a rally on February 18, 2017, Trump falsely claimed (based on a short segment by a fringe filmmaker interviewed by Tucker Carlson on Fox News the night before) that because Sweden “took in large numbers” of immigrants they had suffered from a crime problem “last night in Sweden.” In truth, no incident had occurred the night before in Sweden and crime rates have actually declined since the 2015 rise in immigration. But there was a real incident two days later, when several dozen masked men attacked Swedish police officers, throwing rocks and setting cars on fire. Around that time, television news crews from Russian state-owned channel NTV showed up at the scene, offering to pay young immigrant “to make trouble” in front of their cameras in order “to show that President Trump is right about Sweden.” Russian news agencies repeatedly tried to ride around with Swedish police patrols in the same immigrant-heavy district, requests that stopped abruptly right after the September 2018 election.

Russian troll with ties to the Internet Research Agency operates an inauthentic news site targeting Americans. Alexander Malkevich came to Washington, DC, in June 2018 to publicize the launch of USA Really, his online outlet for stories about divisive U.S. social and political issues. Within hours of arriving, he was ejected from his WeWork rental near the White House while Facebook and Twitter quickly blocked access to the website. The website claims to be “a non-profit media organization dedicated to journalistic accuracy and integrity.” It does not disclose that Malkevich is a Russian journalist who has ties to the Kremlin and the Moscow-based website is funded and promoted by Russia’s Federal News Agency. That is an enti-
ty believed to be funded and utilized by Prigozhin along with Concord Catering and entities to obscure continued activity related to the Internet Research Agency (all under the umbrella of Project Lakhta, a broad Russian effort to interfere in political and electoral systems worldwide).1291 When Malkevich returned to Washington, DC, for the U.S. midterm elections in November 2018 he was detained for questioning at Dulles Airport. A month after the election, he was added to the U.S. sanctions list along with Federal News Agency for attempted election interference.1292 Back in Russia, he was promoted to run a governmental advisory body on mass media.1293 He launched a foundation that is purportedly about protecting conservative values and also runs discussion clubs about Africa.1294 In April 2019, two of the foundation’s employees were arrested in Libya for attempting to meet with Saif Gaddafi and explain how Russia could help him run for president of Libya.1295

Iranian state media targets Americans and other audiences with an extensive network of inauthentic news sites and social media accounts. In the summer of 2018, cybersecurity firm FireEye identified an Iranian influence operation originating in Iran aimed at audiences in the United States, the United Kingdom, Latin America, and the Middle East.1296 It was promoting political narratives in line with Iranian interests, including anti-Saudi, anti-Israeli, and pro-Palestinian themes, as well as support for the Iran nuclear deal.1297 The finding led Facebook to take down 652 accounts and pages, Twitter to suspend 284 accounts, and YouTube one channel, most of which originated in Iran.1298 The first accounts were created in 2013, but starting in 2017 they increased their focus on the United States and Britain.1299 Most of these accounts and pages, as well as others on Pinterest, Reddit, Instagram, and Google Plus were associated with at least six inauthentic news websites that were themselves also part of the network.1300 The biggest such site was Liberty Front Press, which pretended to be an independent news service operated by Americans. In truth, it was a front established by Iranian state media in May 2017 to run a worldwide information operation.1301 The link to Iranian state-owned media organizations such as Press TV was corroborated by website registration information, related IP addresses, and shared administrators of Facebook pages.1302 Liberty Front Press articles were slanted to tap into liberal opposition to Trump (and supporting one anticipated Democratic primary contender) while advancing Iranian foreign policy narratives (such as support for Iran’s regional allies).1303 Much of its content was appropriated from real news outlets like Politico, RawStory, and CNN.1304 While this network showed that governments other than Russia have gotten into information manipulation, including through inauthentic news sites, the Iranians failed to display the same talent for stoking political divides as St. Petersburg trolls did in 2016.1305 This may be because with this network Iran was focused directly on issues of importance to their regime rather than pushing on existing U.S. cultural divides such as racial justice.1306 American Herald Tribune was one inauthentic news site that was included in the network and had some of its social media accounts (Facebook but not Twitter) taken down in 2018 but was not one of the six sites publicly named at that time.1307 Set up in 2015, one of the most viral stories by American Herald Tribune was a misleading-at-best claim about Trump’s father being a member of the Ku Klux Klan.1308 That article has been viewed more than 29 million times and still appears on the website and in Google search results despite having been debunked.1309 It was authored by Tim King, a U.S. citizen in Salem, Oregon, who admits to having been paid “a couple hundred dollars” for the article by the people who run American Herald Tribune. King has knowingly worked with Iranian media in the past but says that he does not believe American Herald Tribune is run by Iran.1310 It seems the Iranians also used the names of King and other Americans to cover their tracks in website registration records.1311

7. Emerging technologies offering anonymity

Russian GRU spent bitcoin on its hack-and-dump operation in 2016. The Russian military intelligence service, GRU, mined and acquired more than $95,000 of bitcoin, laundered it through a web of transactions that capitalized on the anonymity of cryptocurrencies, and then spent the bitcoin on the computer servers and internet domains used in their hacking activity.1312 The GRU used the same pool of bitcoin funds to buy a VPN and server in Malaysia that was used to host dleaks.com, log into the @Guccifer_2 Twitter account, and register domains for the hacking of the DCCC and DNC networks.1313 The GRU also paid bitcoin it had mined to a Romanian company to register the DCLeaks domain.1314 Using bitcoin as the principal currency for buying servers, registering domains, and making other payments to facilitate hacking allowed the GRU to “avoid direct relationships with traditional financial institutions, allowing them to evade greater scrutiny of their identities and sources of funds.”1315

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Russia funds the majority of the budget of annexed Crimea. Since its seizure and illegal annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula in 2014, Russia has covered almost 70 percent of the territory’s budget. In addition to budgetary subsidies, Russia has had to support Crimea’s economy with investments in a $3.7 billion bridge, new power facilities, Russian military presence, and the region’s tourism and wine-making industries.

Ukrainian separatists receive funding from Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, crowdfunding from online groups in Russia supported by the Kremlin, vast budgetary support from Moscow, shadow banking services through South Ossetia, a market for illegal coal exports, and control over the Ukrainian energy sector. Russian financial support for separatist activities in eastern Ukraine evolved considerably over the first year of Russian occupation. It started out with quick and easy oligarch funding, soon joined by non-transparent crowdfunding programs, before developing into more substantial and sophisticated cross-border fiscal, financial, and trade arrangements that remain in place today. Altogether, Russian financial support flowed through at least six main channels: (1) Europe and the United States sanctioned Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev in 2014 because he “funds separatist activities in eastern Ukraine” and “is one of the main sources of financing for Russians promoting separatism in Crimea.” Malofeev was described by experts as “acting on the personal directives of [Putin] to be one of the primary financiers of the entire separatist operation in eastern Ukraine,” serving as “the linchpin in funneling cash to the pro-Kremlin separatists, working through a network of charities … connected to Russian intelligence.” Malofeev’s former employees continued to report to him as they became early leaders of the self-proclaimed “Donetsk People’s Republic,” including its supposed prime minister and a top military commander credited with starting the war (while Malofeev is also close to the organizer of the Crimean referendum). Other plausibly deniable Kremlin-linked proxies such as the Wagner Group have significantly supported the separatists, but mostly through in-kind services like recruiting and sending soldiers or the provision of weapons, ammunition, and training. Separate from Ukraine, Malofeev finances pro-Russian and Orthodox fringe groups in various European nations, sometimes channeling funding through a Belarusian middleman who sponsors anti-Western protests and politicians in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. (2) In late 2014 and early 2015, an online network of more than a dozen groups in Russia with at least tacit support from the Kremlin was raising millions of rubles to support separatists in eastern Ukraine and thus “crowdfund the war.” While these groups purport to pursue a humanitarian mission, fundraising appeals pledge to provide weapons and other military equipment to “the militia of Novorossiya” and the “Donbas Militias.” The organizations direct donations to Russian state-owned banks such as Sberbank (as well as Russian payment processors like QiWI or internet companies like Yandex) accounts to collect rubles and transfer the funds to the separatists’ self-proclaimed governments. The involvement of companies owned and regulated by the Russian government was cited by Ukraine as a way Russia has enabled, rather than prevented or suppressed, financing of organizations waging war against Ukraine. (3) Since April 2015, the Russian government has sent newly printed rubles worth more than a billion dollars per year to fund from 70 percent to 90 percent of the Donetsk and Luhansk budgetary needs. The fiscal support was confirmed by a former separatist official, who said Moscow directly finances pensions and public sector salaries there. Asked about the pensions and state wages, the separatist confirmed, “Yes. These are the main areas. The budget sector and pensions, which need to be covered as a priority … Without outside help, it’s impossible to sustain the territory even if you have the most effective tax-raising system. The level of help from Russia exceeds the amounts that we collect within the territory.” Separately, leaked Kremlin emails show that Russian government funding and micro-management of Donetsk and Luhansk extend down to the level of paying invoices for office equipment. Bild calculated the annual cost of a billion dollars based only on public sector salaries and social services such as pensions. Bild noted that the burden is even higher when...
cluding subsidized energy and food products, as well as costs for soldiers, ammunition, and other war supplies.\textsuperscript{1338} The funds ultimately come from the Russian government, Russian proxies that are very close to the government, and Ukrainian politicians and oligarchs that fled to Moscow together with Yanukovych.\textsuperscript{1337} The rubles arrive mostly in the form of physical currency transported over nighttime truck convoys and heavily guarded military supply lines into three big train stations in the Donbas region.\textsuperscript{1338} Since May 2015, a shadow banking system in South Ossetia, Georgia, has enabled financial flows between eastern Ukraine and Moscow.\textsuperscript{1339} Russian banks cannot wire money directly to banks in eastern Ukraine, blocked by both Western sanctions and the fact that Russia has not officially recognized Luhansk and Donetsk (which would trigger further international pressure as it would show Russia to be overly undermining the Minsk agreements).\textsuperscript{1340} Instead, Russia recognizes and banks with the territory it controls in South Ossetia, which in turn is the only entity that recognizes Luhansk and Donetsk.\textsuperscript{1341} This triangular chain of legal recognition enabled South Ossetia to establish a correspondent bank called Mezhdunarodny Rashchyotny Bank (MRB) in May 2015. MRB processes financial flows from the accounts of the separatist “ministries of finance” at “state banks” in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine to banks in Moscow (on the Russian side are VTB and a corresponding MRB now called CMRBank).\textsuperscript{1342} The Ukrainian government alleges that billions of dollars of laundered financial support for the separatists have secretly flowed through this Georgian channel.\textsuperscript{1343} The Washington Post documented how the off-the-grid financial system enables imports and exports of products such as fuel, food, and building materials.\textsuperscript{1344} While the money flows through the correspondent bank and at least 146 shell companies in South Ossetia, the physical goods are transported directly across the eastern Ukrainian border controlled by Russia.\textsuperscript{1345} The lack of real operations in South Ossetia has given it the name “Little Switzerland.”\textsuperscript{1346} Similar to oligarchs and other proxies of the Russian government, this arrangement is valuable to Putin because of its plausible deniability, as he can say it is a matter between South Ossetia and Ukraine.\textsuperscript{1347} The intermediary role is also valuable to the South Ossetian government, which is now working to expand into other internationally ostracized territories that are close to Russia such as Crimea, Syria, and Transnistria.\textsuperscript{1348} (5) In the spring of 2017, the separatists seized coal mines and steel factories in the Donbas region and put them under the control of a South Ossetia-based company that works with companies controlled by Yanukovych’s family friend Sergey Kurchenko to export coal from the separatist-controlled regions to Europe.\textsuperscript{1349} The United States had sanctioned Kurchenko in 2015 and then in 2018 also designated these companies, prohibiting foreign buyers from buying coal that is legally regarded as stolen property.\textsuperscript{1350} However, the network of Russian-tied companies and transportation infrastructure helped sustain the separatists’ coal exports creating a market for their coal.\textsuperscript{1351} The shell game effectively laundered Donbas coal by shipping it on trains into Russia, where it is either consumed in Russian factories or re-labeled as Russian-originated coal and sold on the international market.\textsuperscript{1352} (6) A Kremlin-linked organized crime group managed by Russian elites Aleksandr Babakov and Yevgeny Giner projects substantial influence in Ukraine by controlling approximately 20 percent of the Ukrainian energy sector and a large portion of the Ukrainian hotel business.\textsuperscript{1353} The Babakov–Giner group, which previously cooperated with Russia’s Luhznikov gang, acquired their economic position in Ukraine with the help of criminal groups and connections inside the Ukrainian government, as well as outright corporate raids.\textsuperscript{1354} They privatized Ukrainian energy enterprises by paying a Slovakian state-owned company a $20,000 fee to register the group’s corporate entity, VS Energy, in the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{1355} VS Energy is now a Latvian company controlled by Russian beneficiaries through a chain of offshore entities registered under the name of Giner’s wife (who can register in Europe as a German citizen), another German business partner, and three obscure Latvian citizens.\textsuperscript{1356} The Babakov–Giner group carries out political, military, and cultural projects to advance the interests of Putin’s regime, from financing the 2005 presidential bid of Viktor Yushchenko to sponsoring the work of Donbas nationalists aiming to incite schism within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.\textsuperscript{1357} The group also exerts influence throughout the European Union through bribes, blackmail, and threats.\textsuperscript{1358}

Multi-vector Russian assault on 2016 Montenegrin election includes two operations of malign finance: bankrolling political parties and funding an attempted coup. Russia has long used expenditures to exert malign influence in Montenegro. For roughly a decade starting in 2005, Russia’s economic presence in Montenegro was exemplified in Oleg Deripaska’s ownership of an aluminum plant that was the largest company in the country, accounting for 15 percent of GDP.\textsuperscript{1359} The aluminum business was hit hard by the 2008 crisis and the courts declared Deripaska’s plant bankrupt in October 2013, after which it was taken over by the government and Deripaska sued.\textsuperscript{1360} Around that time, Deripaska’s CEAC sues Montenegro over aluminum plant bankruptcy,” December 3, 2013.

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\textsuperscript{1336} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1337} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1338} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1339} See Troianovski, 2018. 
\textsuperscript{1340} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1341} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1343} See Ukraine Memorial, pp. 117-118. 
\textsuperscript{1344} See Troianovski, 2018. 
\textsuperscript{1345} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1346} See Von Twickel, 2017. 
\textsuperscript{1347} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1348} See Troianovski, 2018. 

\textsuperscript{1351} See Treasury, July 2015; Treasury, January 2018. 
\textsuperscript{1352} See Warrick and Mufson, 2020. 
\textsuperscript{1354} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1355} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1356} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1357} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{1358} Ibid. 
Montenegro started reorienting away from Russia and toward Europe. In December 2013, Montenegro refused a request by the Russian government to install a military base in its deep-water ports on the Adriatic coast because Russian military presence would have meant an end to Montenegro’s NATO membership bid.1361 In December 2015, NATO foreign ministers invited Montenegro to join the military alliance, prompting the Russian government to warn that the NATO expansion “forces us to respond accordingly.”1362 At that point, Russian interference in Montenegro escalated from strategic economic coercion to the other four more active tools of foreign interference. First was civil society subversion, with the Montenegrin government accusing Russia of standing behind street protests against NATO accession (which had been agreed but not yet taken effect).1363 The October 2016 parliamentary election became viewed as a referendum on NATO membership and Russia tapped the same two tools it was simultaneously using against the U.S. election: disinformation (coordinating social media allegations of widespread voter fraud while also setting up or co-opting friendly media outlets) and cyberattacks against government and news websites.1364 At the same time, two malign financial operations sought to replace the pro-NATO government with the political opposition, most of whom wanted to change course and deepen ties with Russia. (1) Oligarchs and entities linked to the Russian government reportedly bankrolled the Democratic Front bloc of pro-Russian political parties.1365 Montenegrin prosecutors are investigating their suspicion that Russia spent €15 million to €17 million influencing the election.1366 This probe led to an indictment of 12 individuals, including the leader of one of the pro-Russian party leaders who was allegedly a member of an organized crime group and was in charge of arranging straw donors “who distributed the money to other individuals who then donated the sums to the Democratic Front.”1367 Montenegro’s Prime Minister, Milo Djukanovic, says Russian state entities directed funds to the opposition parties amounting to “I can tell you with certainty, tens of millions.”1368 In December 2018, when the Trump administration needed to defray criticism over its unrelated lifting of sanctions against Deripaska’s business empire, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned his deputy and former GRU officer, Victor Boyarkin.1369 Treasury announced that “Deripaska and Boyarkin were involved in providing Russian financial support to a Montenegrin political party ahead of Montenegro’s 2016 elections.”1370 TIME conducted an investigation that “confirmed that Deripaska and one other Russian oligarch bankrolled the pro-Russian opposition in 2016.”1371 In terms of what all this Russian money bought, in addition to digital and broadcast campaigning, the small country of 630,000 people was blanketed with anti-NATO street signs and billboards.1372 (2) The other Russian malign financial operation ahead of the 2016 election was even more insidious: funding an attempted deadly coup.1373 The GRU started bringing at least one Serbian nationalist to Moscow in May 2015 to groom him for the operation and read him in on the planned coup in April 2016.1374 The plot was overseen by two Russians in Belgrade who turned out to be GRU officers.1375 A month before the election, the Serbian nationalist flew to Moscow and received orders to buy weapons and uniforms needed to impersonate police officers, claim electoral fraud on election day, fire upon crowds, occupy parliament, assassinate Prime Minister Djukanovic, and install pro-Russian leadership.1376 The Serbian was given €200,000 to organize everything and he reportedly passed on €130,000 to a Montenegrin to buy 50 rifles and three boxes of ammunition.1377 The Serbian received a Western Union wire transfer in Belgrade listing the sender’s address as the GRU headquarters in Moscow.1378 He was also later found to be in possession of $100 bills whose serial numbers show they had been processed in Moscow.1379 As it turned out, Montenegrin authorities were informed about the plot and thwarted it hours before it was set to take place.1380 Montenegro joined NATO in 2017.

Multi-vector Kremlin assault on North Macedonian democracy includes a Russian oligarch funding protests in that country and Greece against a name-change-and-NATO deal. Russian spies conducted a decade-long covert influence operation (starting in 2008, when Greece first vetoed Macedonia’s NATO bid) to spread disinformation and provoke discord in Macedonia meant to prevent it from joining NATO.1381 The operation was coordinated by Russia’s embassy in Skopje and included three foreign intelligence service (SVR) agents in Belgrade, four GRU agents in Sofia, local reporters from Russian state news agency TASS, a representative of Rossotrudnichestvo (a Russian government aid agency that the FBI has long suspected of recruiting Americans to spy for Russia).1382 Russia also worked alongside Serbian intelligence to support anti-Western and pro-Russian nationalists in Macedonia.1383 In addition to classic espionage (recruiting officials of Macedonia’s military and interior ministry to gather intelligence), Russia tactics of interference included strategic economic coercion (using gas pipelines for leverage) and civil society subversion (creating cultural centers and Orthodox Churches and using them to push a “pan-Slavic” identity).1383 Russian agents funded Macedonian media outlets aimed

1369 See Treasury, December 2018
1370 Ibid.
1372 See United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Putin’s Asymmetric Assault On Democracy In Russia And Europe: Implications For U.S. National Security, Minority Staff Report, January 10, 2018, pp. 85.
1374 Ibid.
1377 See Ben Farmer, “Reconstruction: The full incredible story behind Russia’s deadly plot to stop Montenegro embracing the West,” The Telegraph, February 18, 2017.
1379 Ibid.
1380 Ibid.
1382 Ibid.
1383 Ibid.
1384 Ibid.
at the country’s Albanian minority in order to manipulate that audience in support of Russian policy goals. The Kremlin was also a strong public supporter of the nationalist party that governed Macedonia from 2006 to 2017 under Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who resigned in January 2016 amid a wiretapping scandal. When the Social Democrats formed a government in 2017, nationalist protestors stormed the parliament and attacked the new prime minister. At least one Serbian intelligence agent was present in the attack, which closely resembles the Russian coup attempt in Montenegro, but the operation has yet to be credibly attributed to any foreign government. After leaving office, Gruevski was indicted for money laundering and extortion, causing him to flee to Hungary. But as with Montenegro, Russian foreign interference stepped up considerably when it became clear the country was on the brink of deciding to join NATO. For Macedonia, that was late in the spring of 2018, when the country started nearing an agreement with Athens that it would change its name to North Macedonia in exchange for the Greek government lifting its veto on NATO accession. When the deal was announced in June 2018, Russia’s ambassador to the E.U. warned there would be “consequences.” In the run-up to the September 30 referendum about whether to accept the name change, Russia interfered with three vectors of interference: (1) Russian-backed online groups directed disinformation on social media meant to stoke fears about changing the country’s name and depress turnout below the 50 percent threshold that would have made it binding. Hundreds of new websites and Facebook profiles originating outside the country popped up with the sole aim of encouraging people to boycott the referendum (such as by burning their ballots). A Twitter #Boycott campaign quickly generated thousands of retweets. Western diplomats described this as forming a pattern of Russian electoral interference. Some sites were adept at dividing along ethnic lines (e.g., “Are you going to let Albanians change your name?”). One widely shared article warned that Google might eliminate Macedonian from its list of recognized languages. Some sites fabricated stories of police brutality (e.g., manipulatively repurposing an old picture of a famous Balkan singer bruised from domestic violence) against protestors who turned out to be secretly paid by a Kremlin proxy (see vector #3 below). There are allegations of cyberattacks during the election period from Russian intelligence based in Bulgaria. When U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis visited the country on September 17, he warned of Russian interference: “No doubt that they have transferred money and they are also conducting broader influence campaigns … We plan to expand our cybersecurity cooperation to thwart malicious cyber activity that threatens both our democracies.” The most prominent and crafty vector of Russian interference was a serious of violent protests on both sides of the border funded by Putin’s top oligarch in Greece who worked as Russia’s conduit to undermine the deal with Macedonia. Ivan Savvidis is a Russian billionaire, former Duma member from Putin’s political party, owner of a Greek soccer team, and resident of the Greek port city Thessaloniki. Savvidis gave at least €300,000 to Macedonian opponents of the name change, including more than a dozen Macedonian politicians, members of newly founded radical nationalist organizations, and soccer hooligans associated with the Komiti fan club (which is closely tied to the Macedonian nationalist party supported by Russia) of the Vardar football team (which is owned by another Russian millionaire). The same soccer hooligans took part in violent protests against the name change in front of the parliament building in Skopje. Ten of them were arrested and one admitted to reporters that the group had received money from Savvidis. Some of the payments were made in cash that was carried over Greece’s northern border by hand while others were transferred through financial institutions. At the same time, four Russian diplomats were secretly funding opponents of the deal within Greece. This reportedly involved offering bribes to Greek officials, organizing protest rallies in northern Greece, and cultivating local officials and bishops across the country (including through organizations with close ties to Moscow, such as the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society). Such malign Russian behavior was nothing new to the U.S. ambassador in Athens, Geoffrey Pyatt, a seasoned career diplomat who served as ambassador to Ukraine when Russia annexed Crimea and backed separatists. In June 2018, Pyatt warned Washington in a series of cables that Russian interference in the Macedonia referendum was coming. The U.S. intelligence community intercepted evidence of this in the communications of Savvidis. The U.S. government declassified the intercepts, passed them from Pyatt to Prime Minister Tsipras, and urged Athens to respond strongly, which it did by expelling the four Russian diplomats. Even after the referendum ended inconclusively, U.S. spies and diplomats viewed the exposure of Russian interference as successful pushback in an aggressive way the United States
might have been more hesitant to undertake in the past. \textsuperscript{1412} Taiwanese political parties and media groups are targets of Chinese malign influence. The United Front has allegedly long seen their top tactic in Taiwan to be the organization of a political party. \textsuperscript{1413} In 2018 officials of a pro-unification party were charged with spying for Beijing and receiving Chinese funding. \textsuperscript{1414} Ahead of Taiwan’s 2019 election, the United Front allegedly exerted influence through media executives and journalists and the Chinese government paid at least five media groups for positive coverage of China, while other outlets controversially supported a China-friendly presidential candidate. \textsuperscript{1415} Pro-Beijing activists and Triads associates reportedly linked to the United Front mobilized in Taiwan to violently disrupt pro-democracy activists. \textsuperscript{1416}

An Australian man allegedly offered a million dollars by a Chinese spy ring to run for parliament is found dead in 2019. In debt 32-year-old luxury car dealer Nick Zhao was found dead in a hotel room in March 2019 after he informed Australian intelligence officials that Chinese intelligence agents offered him a million Australian dollars to run as a candidate for the ruling Liberal party. \textsuperscript{1417} The offer was allegedly made by Melbourne businessman Brian Chen. \textsuperscript{1418} Australian authorities appear to believe Zhao was credible and are investigating the extent of Chen’s attempts to cultivate sources in Australia (where he has worked and lived on and off since at least 2006) on behalf of Chinese intelligence (which Chen and the Chinese Foreign Ministry deny entirely). \textsuperscript{1419} Australia created a new intelligence task force focused on foreign interference as they have grown more concerned about Beijing meddling in domestic affairs more broadly than the Zhao case. \textsuperscript{1420} In September 2019, the Australian press revealed Chinese government records showing that from 2003 to 2015 Australian lawmaker Gladys Liu was a member of the China Overseas Exchange Association, which is part of the United Front. \textsuperscript{1421} At first Liu claimed she did not recall any such association, but then admitted to it. \textsuperscript{1422} Liu was born in Hong Kong, has lived in Australia for three decades, and represents a district in which 70 percent of voters were born in China. \textsuperscript{1423} When asked about her ties to Chinese influence operations, Liu denied it while also repeatedly refusing to criticize Beijing over the South China Sea or to accept the characterization of Xi Jinping as a dictator, which drew comparisons in the Australian press to Senator Sam Dastyari. \textsuperscript{1424} But in our view, the evidence of Chinese influence in this case has not been developed to the same point as Dastyari or sufficiently to meet our threshold of proven foreign interference. We only include it here as context to the more credibly concerning case of Nick Zhao. Similarly, a 27-year-old asylum seeker named Wang Liqiang gave Australian authorities a 17-page dossier of alleged covert influence operations in Hong Kong that he claims to have participated in on behalf of Chinese military intelligence. \textsuperscript{1425} Both Australian officials and mainstream media outlets have clearly signaled that they have not verified the claims, so we exclude it from our analysis. \textsuperscript{1426} Similar to major press outlets, we only describe it here as context to the Nick Zhao case, which security officials do clearly view as credible. \textsuperscript{1427}

Italy’s head of the League party and his associate negotiate for illegal campaign funding in the form of discounted oil from Russia. Matteo Salvini has been the leader of Italy’s far-right League party since 2013. \textsuperscript{1428} Salvini’s “sherpa to Moscow” is Gianguinno Savoini, who has known Salvini for 20 years and served as his spokesperson. \textsuperscript{1429} Savoini is the president of the Lombardy–Russia Cultural Association, which was registered in February 2014 at the same location as the League’s head office, consistently pushes pro-Kremlin propaganda, and has ties to far-right groups in Russia and Europe. \textsuperscript{1430} Its honorary president is Alexey Komov, the Russian representative of the World Congress of Families who also serves as the connection to Konstantin Malofeev. \textsuperscript{1431} In October 2014, a joint delegation of Lombardy–Russia and the League visited Russia-annexed Crimea and met with its EU-sanctioned “Prime Minister” before traveling on to Moscow to meet senior officials, the first of frequent League visits to Russia. \textsuperscript{1432} Savoini is consistently at Salvini’s side during these trips to Russia. \textsuperscript{1433} In July 2018, when Salvini led an Italian delegation to Moscow as Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister, Savoini was noticed sitting at the table in pictures of the meetings posted online. \textsuperscript{1434} When journalists asked why he was there, Savoini claimed he attended as a “member of the minister’s staff,” although his name was not the official ministerial list of delegates and he does not work at the ministry, which raised unanswered questions about Savoini’s role and security clearance. \textsuperscript{1435} Over the following months, Savoini reportedly met...
often with Alexander Dugin, Putin’s fascist ideologue. They were photographed together on September 25, 2018, allegedly for Salvini’s upcoming trip to Moscow. Salvini made that trip on October 17, attending a conference and then reportedly ducking out through a side door to secretly meet Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, the man in Putin’s inner circle who supervises the energy sector. The meeting between the two deputy prime ministers reportedly took place at the office of Vladimir Pligin, a powerful member of Putin’s United Russia party with close ties to Kozak. On that day, Savoini was photographed meeting again with Dugin, and the two agreed that Savoini is the “total connection” between the Italian and Russian political sides. Savoini also had dinner with Salvini that night. The next morning, October 18, Savoini led the Italian side of six men—three Russians and three Italians—meeting in the lobby of Moscow’s Metropol Hotel negotiating the terms of a deal to covertly funnel Russian oil money to Salvini’s League party. On the Russian side, Ilya Andreevich Yakunin represents ties to Pligin, while Andrey Yuryevich Kharchenko works for Dugin (the third Russian, referred to as “Yuri,” has not been identified). On the Italian side, Savoini opened the meeting by pointing to the upcoming May 2019 European Parliament elections as a historic juncture to shift Europe closer to Russia through an alliance of the League in Italy, the FPO in Austria, AfD in Germany, National Rally in France, Fidesz in Hungary, and the Sweden Democrats. Savoini then handed the discussion over to the technical experts. On the Russian side, Kharchenko said the papers are already drawn up and ready to be given to the deputy prime minister but “we have to discuss latest decisions.” When Yakunin said “yesterday’s talks [possibly a reference to the reported Salvini-Kozak meeting at Pligin’s office] confront both types of fuel, aviation kerosene or diesel, Kharchenko corrected him: “No, no, no! There were no specifics mentioned. We’ll manage it.” The Italian who spoke the most was Gianluca Meranda, who represented Euro-IB, an investment bank discussed as the intended intermediary between Eni (a major Italian oil company controlled by the Italian government) and Rosneft. At one point they discussed using the Russian arm of the Italian bank Intesa, which Meranda says would be convenient because the League have “a man in there is called Mascetti” (likely referring to board member Andrea Mascetti, who strongly denies any knowledge of the negotiations and who BuzzFeed does not suggest had any awareness). The third Italian in what Savoini referred to as a secret “triangirante” was Francesco Vannucci, who seems to have been responsible for the mechanics of funneling the agreed 4 percent price discount to the League via the intermediaries. Looking ahead to the campaign season leading up to the May 2019 election, Vannucci advised, “I want to say how important it is to us to do this by December even if it is then delayed two, three months, June, July we don’t care.” Meranda said, “We count on sustaining a political campaign which is of benefit, I would say of mutual benefit, for the two countries.” When the audio recording of the October meeting was first released, BuzzFeed valued the discount—to be transferred from Russia to the League—at roughly $65 million, based on the price of 250,000 metric tons per month of diesel. Savoini refused to answer reporters’ questions about it while Savoini admitted to being there but said it was just a chance meeting with local entrepreneurs. But a month after the BuzzFeed report, L’Espresso released deal documents and emails detailing of the proposal sent to Rosneft eleven days after the October meeting in Moscow. The terms closely matched the discussion, but clarified that there was to be 250,000 metric tons of each fuel type, diesel and kerosene, meaning that the value may have been more like $130 million. The discount had been worked out to 6.5 percent, meaning that the Russians stood to pocket $80 million (because the Italians were only interested in the 4 percent needed by the League, preferring to send back the remaining 2.5 percent to the Russians because the corrupt enrichment guarantees their participation). If the transaction had gone through, it may well have been illegal, because at the time the maximum amount an Italian political party was allowed to accept was €100,000 (in January 2019 that €100,000 loophole was closed by outlawing all foreign funding or support, but in any case, the Russian oil plan far exceeded the threshold). But as of February 8, 2019, the Italians were still negotiating the same terms, by then with Gazprom instead of Rosneft. Given that L’Espresso first publicly reported the deal only 20 days later, on February 28, it seems unlikely that it was carried out to completion. Salvini and Savoini deny the League ever received foreign funding while Eni similarly claims it never took part in any transactions aimed at financing political parties and the supply operation never took place.

Venezuela allegedly funds M5S with a suitcase of €3.5 million in 2010. According to documents revealed by Spanish newspaper ABC, the Venezuelan government funded the Five Star Movement (M5S) in 2010, months after the Italian populist political

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1437 Ibid.
1438 Ibid.
1439 Ibid.
1440 See Tizian and Vergine, February 28, 2019; Marta Allevato, Twitter post, October 17, 2018, 5:10 PM.
1442 See Nardelli, July 10, 2019.
1444 See BuzzFeed, 2019.
1445 Ibid.
1446 Ibid.
1447 Ibid.
1448 See BuzzFeed, 2019; Alberto Nardelli, “I Took Part In The Moscow Oil Deal Negotiation With Salvini’s Aide, Says An Italian Lawyer,” BuzzFeed, July 13, 2019; Nardelli, July 10, 2019.
1449 See Nardelli, July 10, 2019.
party was founded in October 2009. The €3.5 million reportedly moved in the form of cash in a suitcase. The allegation is that the covert party financing was approved by Nicolás Maduro (then Venezuelan foreign minister in the administration of President Hugo Chávez), passed along by Venezuela’s consul in Milan (Gian Carlo di Martino), and destined for the M5S founder (Gianroberto Casaleggio). The documents describe Venezuela’s interest in funding an “anti-capitalist and leftist movement in the Italian Republic.” M5S has been an open supporter of the Maduro regime. Both M5S and the Venezuelan government insist the documents are forgeries.

German right-wing lawmaker “absolutely controlled” by Russia reportedly requests “material support” and “media support” from the Kremlin for the 2017 election. Five months before the 2017 German election, a former Russian spy serving as a staffer in the Duma emailed a six-page menu of “foreign policy activities” to the presidential administration for approval. In the discussion of the German election, the document advised “support in the election campaign” of Markus Frohnmaier, noting his “high” chance of being elected, the result of which would be that “we will have our own absolutely controlled MP in the Bundestag.” This internal Russian strategy memo, which was later leaked to Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s Dossier Center, promised that a more detailed campaign plan would be sent the following week. Sure enough, eight days later a second document was created with the title “Frohnmaier election campaign / action plan (draft).” It was intercepted by a Western European intelligence service and shared with the BBC. The plan reportedly “appears to be a request for help written on behalf of Mr. Frohnmaier’s campaign,” sent to the Kremlin through Manuel Ochsenreiter (a German far-right commentator who used to work for Frohnmaier, serves as a middleman between the AfD and the Kremlin, contributes to various think tanks and websites supporting Russian narratives in Europe, and is implicated in a firebomb attack in Ukraine) and Sargis Mirzakhanian (on the Russian side of the connection). Frohnmaier’s plan said “for the election campaign we urgently would need some support … Besides material support we would need media support as well […] any type of interviews, reports and opportunities to appear in the Russian media is helpful for us.” The campaign also promised to advocate for Russian interests during the campaign (“good relations with the Russian Federation: sanctions, E.U. interference in Russian domestic politics”) and that if elected Frohnmaier would “immediately start operating in the foreign policy field.” Frohnmaier won the election and continues to hold office and speak out against sanctions on Russia.

1463 See Mensurati, 2020.
1464 Ibid.
1465 Ibid.
1466 Ibid.
1467 See Gatehouse, 2019; Amann, et al., 2019; Frontal 21, 2019.
1468 See Gatehouse, 2019; Amann, et al., 2019; Frontal 21, 2019.
1469 See Gatehouse, 2019; Amann, et al., 2019; Frontal 21, 2019.
1470 See Gatehouse, 2019; Amann, et al., 2019; Frontal 21, 2019.
1471 See Gatehouse, 2019; Amann, et al., 2019; Frontal 21, 2019.
1473 See Gatehouse, 2019; Amann, et al., 2019; Frontal 21, 2019.
1474 See Gatehouse, 2019; Amann, et al., 2019; Frontal 21, 2019.
Appendix B: Policy Recommendations

**Congress should:**

*Hold public hearings on covert foreign money.* Hold open hearings on the ways authoritarian regimes undermine democracies by funneling money into their financial and political systems. Solicit input from experts and officials on how to close off the most commonly exploited vulnerabilities in targeted ways that are consistent with the values of a free and open society.

*Broaden the definition of in-kind contributions.* Amend the Federal Election Campaign Act to (1) clarify that a “thing of value” includes intangible, difficult-to-value, uncertain, or merely perceived benefits, including but not limited to any form of opposition research, politically motivated investigations (or assistance with such investigations), or any other type of negative information about perceived political opponents; (2) require all campaign workers to undertake web-based training on these rules and certify their understanding; and (3) clarify that the statutory thresholds of prosecution ($≥2,000 for a misdemeanor; $≥25,000 for a felony) can be met not only by the value of goods or services offered but also the costs of transmission incurred by any foreign national.

*Report campaign contacts with agents of foreign powers.* Pass a bill like the SHIELD Act, requiring U.S. campaigns to report to law enforcement offers of assistance from foreign powers. 1476 Consider (1) removing the exemption for contacts with foreign election observers; (2) clarifying a broad definition of “agents” of U.S. candidates and committees; 1477 (3) striking the reference to “coordination or collaboration with” the offer; and (4) more narrowly scoping broader non-contribution contacts (i.e., the prong covering “information or services” or “persistent and repeated contact”) such that it only applies to contacts with persons from adversarial countries. 1478

*Outlaw anonymous shell companies.* Pass a bill like the Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2020, requiring U.S. companies to report to the U.S. Treasury Department the identities of their beneficial owners. 1479 This bill would oblige companies to report beneficial ownership data during the incorporation process and on an ongoing basis, to be held securely by U.S. Treasury Department to support law enforcement investigations.

*Restrict political activity by U.S. subsidiaries of foreign parent companies.* Pass the provision of H.R. 1 that would oblige CEOs to certify compliance with existing law, including the requirement that no foreign national participated in any decisions made by the U.S.-based company to spend money on U.S. politics. 1480 Consider bringing back the percentage thresholds of foreign ownership (over which companies would not be allowed to make political contributions) that were originally included in H.R. 1, except narrow its scope by only counting ownership by persons in countries that are neither NATO members nor major non-NATO allies. 1481

*Require non-profits engaged in politics to publicly disclose the identities of both domestic and foreign donors.* Pass a bill like the DISCLOSE Act, requiring non-profits (except for 501(c)(3)’s) that spend at least $10,000 on political advocacy referring to a clearly identified candidate to publicly disclose the identities of their donors, whether they are foreign or domestic. 1482

*Require all non-profits to publicly disclose foreign funders.* Enact a new, separate, more targeted version of the DISCLOSE Act that would require all U.S. non-profits—whether they spend on politics or not—to file two statements with the FEC: (1) list of any foreign nationals who provided funding to the entity, a report that the FEC would release publicly; (2) list of all the entity’s funders, foreign and domestic, to be retained securely by the FEC and only made available confidentially to law enforcement agencies. Unlike the DISCLOSE Act, this proposal should include 501(c)(3)’s, exclude corporations, identify beneficial owners behind funding, include forms of income beyond just donations, and require reporting of financial audits.

*Disclose online political ad buyers and ban foreign purchases.* Pass a bill like the Honest Ads Act, requiring broad public disclosure of who pays for online political ads. 1483 Pass a bill like the PAID AD Act, prohibiting foreign individuals and governments from purchasing campaign ads. 1484 Consider amending a bill like PAID AD to exempt NATO and allied countries. Strengthens bills like Honest Ads and PAID AD by making social media platforms responsible for identifying the true beneficial owner ultimately funding the ad, rather than merely “the name of the person purchasing the advertisement” and “a contact person for such person.”

*Return to capping foreign ownership of television or radio licenses.* Amend the Communications Act of 1934 to remove the FCC’s discretion to allow foreign-owned companies to acquire more than 25 percent of U.S. broadcast licenses, or at least add a requirement that lawmakers be given a 30-day opportunity to overrule FCC decisions approving foreign acquisitions above 25 percent.

*Clarify on-air television and radio disclosures required of foreign agents.* Require the FCC and the DOJ, in consultation with each other, to promulgate rules clarifying that when the true sponsor or foreign principal is in turn associated with a govern-

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1476 SHIELD Act.

1477 One way to do this is to use language similar to SHIELD’s broad definition of proxies on the foreign side of reportable contacts, including “a person any of whose activities are directly or indirectly supervised, directed, controlled, financed, or subsidized” by the principal.

1478 One way to do this is by defining “countries of concern” as “any country that is not a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or a major non-NATO ally or strategic partner as such is defined by section 2521(k) of title 22 United States Code.” Another way would be alternative would be for Congress to establish a blacklist of governments that have interfered in democratic processes in the past decade, to be continually updated by the executive branch.

1479 AML Act. An earlier version of this legislation was called the ILLICIT CASH Act.

1480 H.R.1 (PASSED).

1481 H.R.1 (INTRODUCED).

1482 DISCLOSE Act.

1483 Honest Ads Act.

1484 PAID AD Act.

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ment, the on-air disclosure should clearly refer to the name of that government in terms that are recognizable by most Americans. Require such disclosures to air at least once every 20 minutes. Require public disclosure when foreign agents seek time on U.S. airwaves, as recommended by Rep. Anna Eshoo. Amend the Communications Act of 1934 to authorize the FCC to require sponsorship identification and political files by third-party programming providers. Appropriate to the DOJ and the FCC any resources needed to proactively monitor foreign agents’ compliance, quickly investigate possible infractions, and otherwise carry out their enforcement mission.

Require “outlet libraries” to publicly disclose the beneficial owners of online media outlets. Amend the Federal Election Campaign Act to require U.S. technology companies to maintain publicly accessible records of the beneficial owners who fund online media outlets that use the technology company’s internet services. Define U.S. technology companies to include web hosting providers, domain registrars and registries, search engines, advertising technology firms, and social network platforms. Define online media outlet to include entities regularly providing the public with content that is subject to editorial control, provided that (i) they distribute such content at least in part through a website or a group of websites that receives more than 100,000 unique monthly visitors or though social media pages receiving engagement from more than 100,000 unique monthly users and (ii) U.S. regulators do not already require the entity to disclose its beneficial ownership (such as publicly traded companies regulated by the SEC). Define funding to cover all forms of remuneration, including equity ownership, advertising revenue, donations, etc. Consider limiting the disclosure requirement to only cover foreign (not domestic) funding, and only if at least 10 percent of the outlet’s funding comes from beneficial owners who are foreign nationals.

Report the identities of small donors to the FEC and make the information publicly accessible through a secure, limited, and conditional gating process. Amend the Federal Election Campaign Act to (1) require campaigns, parties, and super PACs to collect and retain information about all donors, including those to give more than $200; (2) require committees to report small donor data to the FEC, filed on a separate form as donors who give more than $200; (3) update the rules for conduits, putting them under the same disclosure regime as campaigns, parties, and super PACs; (4) mandate that the FEC develop and administer a secure system to house small donor data and grant access to members of the public who undertake a security check and commit not to misuse or publicly disseminate personal information, or else they will face severe penalties; (5) mandate that the FEC provide full digital access to law enforcement agencies; and (6) require the FEC and the DOJ to randomly audit and investigate the data for possible criminal activity and report back to Congress about the effectiveness of the disclosure system.

Prohibit cryptocurrency political spending. Amend the Federal Election Campaign Act to stipulate that political ad purchases, independent expenditures, and political contributions—financial, in-kind, or any other type—may not take the form of cryptocurrency.

Require executive agencies to notify Congress about foreign interference. Introduce mandatory reporting requirements for the intelligence community and Department of Homeland Security to release information about foreign interference to Congress and, when appropriate, in unclassified formats and to the public.

Reform the structure of the FEC. Amend the Federal Election Campaign Act to (1) reduce the number of commissioners from six to five, with no more than two from each party and at least one being a political independent; (2) establish a bipartisan blue-ribbon advisory panel to help vet nominees to be commissioners, (3) have the president designate one commissioner responsible for administrative management, (4) end to the practice of allowing commissioners to remain in office indefinitely; and (5) overhaul the FEC’s civil enforcement process, most notably by creating an independent enforcement bureau with a director authorized to initiate investigations and issue subpoenas. The first four of these proposals were included in H.R. 1. All five are recommended by the Brennan Center, and in our view some form of the fifth proposal is important too so that an affirming majority vote is not required to initiate an investigation.

Administrations should:

Host a summit of democracies. The United States should host a summit of the world’s democracies with new country commitments to fight corruption and defend against authoritarian interference, including agreements to enact the eight recommendations in this report: closing the seven malign finance loopholes and reorganizing administrative structures around this threat.

Appoint a foreign interference coordinator. Appoint a foreign interference coordinator at the National Security Council, with enough staff detailed from the interagency to direct policy formulation and task agencies across the full spectrum of tools. The coordinator should be a former senior official, ideally cabinet-level or a former member of congress, and should be named a deputy assistant to the president. One of the senior directors reporting to the coordinator should be responsible exclusively for malign finance, with a staff of detailees from Treasury, State, and the intelligence community, combining expertise in finance and national security.

Establish a Hybrid Threat Center. Within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), create a Hybrid Threat Center to bring together experts across the intelligence commu-

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1485 This can take the form of reporting obligations for both foreign agents and U.S. broadcast, cable, and satellite companies. For the former, Rep. Eshoo recommends: “The FCC should require any foreign agents registered under FARA who seek time on American airwaves—radio, broadcast, and cable—to file publicly with the FCC under the same requirements used for political files by candidates and issue advertisers, and concurrently send a notice to the Department of Justice and the State Department. The filings should include: a description of when advertising actually aired, advertising preempted, and the timing of any make-goods of preempted time, as well as credits or rebates provided the advertiser.”

1486 H.R.1 (Passed).


1488 Rosenberger et al., pp. 22-23.
nity tracking individual tools, actors, or regions to coordinate holistic assessments of foreign influence operations targeting the United States and its allies. This should include a unit focused on financial intelligence with representation from Treasury’s component of the intel community, the Office of Intelligence and Analysis (OIA). Foreign interference should also be elevated on the list of intelligence collection and analytic priorities.

**Coordinate with allies in high-level and holistic channels.**

Formalize government-to-government channels at all levels (political and technical) to share information about foreign interference among allies.

**Prioritize countering authoritarian influence at Treasury.**

The Treasury Department should reorganize its Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence in such a manner as to dedicate the same degree of administrative priority to countering authoritarian influence as it does to combatting the financing of terrorism. This would involve new sanctions programs administered by the Office of Foreign Assets Control, policy and outreach work by the Office of Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes, mapping the financial networks of oligarchs and other authoritarian proxies by OIA, and utilizing Bank Secrecy Act data administered by the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network.

**Resume coordination between the DOJ and the FEC.**

The DOJ should work with the FEC to review their guidance for coordination (including the 1977 memorandum of understanding around how the two should coordinate, to which the DOJ has stopped adhering), and update guidance based on that review, as recommended by the GAO. DOJ-FEC coordination around robust enforcement of the foreign-source ban should be covered in such a review.

**Broadly prosecute the foreign-source ban.**

Update DOJ guidance for the prosecution of election offenses to underscore the broad scope of a “thing of value;” send a memorandum from the Attorney General to all U.S. attorneys underscoring this broad interpretation and strongly encouraging them to prosecute violations of the foreign-source ban.

**Require private disclosures by non-profits.**

Reimpose the decades-long IRS regulation (which was lifted in May 2020) requiring all 501(c) non-profits (beyond just 501(c)(3) charities, which are required by statute) to disclose the names and addresses of their substantial donors to the IRS, which holds the information confidentially and uses it to stop fraud.

**Expand list of non-NATO major allies.**

Consider adding to the list of non-NATO major allies some countries that have traditionally remained neutral around military alliances but have substantial investment sectors and may consider closer partnerships around hybrid warfare threats (particularly if the arrangement would exempt them from new rules meant to restrict adversarial countries). Candidates to become major non-NATO allies might include Switzerland, Ireland, Austria, Sweden, Finland, and India.

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1489 Rosenberger et al., pp. 23.
1490 GAO, pp. 54.
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