

Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs

Hearing

March 7, 2017

Written Testimony by Eerik Marme

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Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy, members of the Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to testify before the United States Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs. It is an honor to be here. We are here to discuss an important topic: Russia and Europe.

First, let me emphasize how important the United States' steadfast support for the freedom and independence of Estonia has been. Your non-recognition policy helped carry us through the darkest days of Soviet occupation and we thank you for your unwavering support to join the family of nations since we regained our independence. Our membership in Euroatlantic institutions is the cornerstone of our prosperity and security and we are mindful of the role the US has played in assisting us.

As Russia's immediate neighbor, Estonia would like nothing more than to have good relations with a democratic Russia, including prosperous trade and active everyday relations at all levels of society. But shared commitment to the core values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law are indispensable pillars for good-neighborly relations. Those values have underpinned the post-war international order and we should not abandon them. It is now up to Russia to honor those fundamental principles.

We shouldn't be guided by wishful thinking but by real facts. Russia has demonstrated time and time again that it cannot be trusted. There is a disturbing pattern of aggressive behavior that dates back at least to 2008. We have learned that inadequate responses to such behavior can only feed future transgressions.

Examples of Russia's malign activities in Europe, to name but a few, include the Russia-Georgia war, the annexation of Crimea, the war in Eastern Ukraine, provocative activities by the Russian military, and interference in Western democratic processes, including elections.

I would like to stress that Russia's ambitions and activities are not only of concern to NATO's eastern flank or the countries represented at this hearing, but are influencing all our allies in the West. We, as neighbors to Russia, are just a bit more used to witnessing such behavior. Upcoming elections in the Netherlands, France, and Germany are a perfect theatre for the Russian disinformation warriors. Therefore, it is essential not to regionalize the Russian threat to Eastern European countries, but to clearly recognize that the threat of Russia's subversive methods has expanded far beyond the "Eastern flank" of Europe, including to the United States.

The goal of Russia's influence and activities in the European Union is to create tensions and sow confusion both between member states and within individual states. By doing so, the Kremlin hopes to influence the decision-making process and steer the narrative and outcomes towards its own interests¹. Russia sees the problems ailing the European Union – including Brexit, the migrant crisis and the debt crisis – as signs of the weakening of the Western-led world order and it seeks to reconfigure power relationships in international politics.

The Kremlin makes extensive use of Russian- and foreign-language media outlets, as well as countless fake social media accounts. The fabricated information often falls on fertile soil in certain circles in the EU, who further disseminate the Kremlin's talking points.

The illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 succeeded largely because of a successful information war that allowed Russia to avoid a direct military confrontation. It can be expected that Russia will use this tactic - extensive manipulation of information to support its military goals in order to achieve strategic advantage - in the future as well. This forces the adversary to doubt and verify the facts, thus delaying its response².

To carry out its foreign policy goals, the Kremlin is increasingly reliant on right- and left-wing populist parties arrayed against or frustrated by the European Union and NATO. Open or covert sponsoring of the numerous populist anti-establishment far-right and far-left political

¹ Estonian Information Board, 2017. International Security and Estonia.
http://teabeamet.ee/pdf/EIB_public_report_Feb_2017.pdf

² Ibid.

movements across Europe lends the Russian message credibility and allows it to distance itself officially. We have also seen how the Russian diaspora can be instrumentalized and how the Russian Orthodox Church and state monopolies can be mobilized to achieve their foreign policy goals. President Putin has even managed to use history as a tool of warfare.

The best way to build resilience against Russia's malign influence is to make sure our own house is, and remains, in order. Cohesiveness of our societies, trust in government and sticking to our fundamental values make us less susceptible to such attempts.

The unity of the West, joint action and the decision to stay the course towards Russia, has been the strongest message in response to Russian actions so far. To be credible we need to stand by our values and be consistent in our policies. We need to take into account that Russia sees itself being in a confrontational era with the West for a long time. Only a strong, united and efficient Europe can contribute to the fight against terrorism and also counter Russian malign influence. US backing and cooperation, both with individual countries and through Euro-Atlantic institutions is vital to this effort.

We, the West, need to address the subversive actions in a systematic and coordinated way within the EU and NATO, but also in cooperation between these two organizations. This should be in very practical terms: we need to share more intelligence on Russia's subversive methods - to decode "the Russian hybrid method playbook". We need to raise the awareness of decision makers and the public at large in order to limit the ability to abuse the open nature of our societies. We can do it by exposing or countering Russia's malign tactics such as covert support to political parties and politicians, seemingly innocent NGO-s or economic leverage gained through murky business connections. Also, transparency regulation and anti-corruption measures can and should be strengthened.

Merely constant reactions to propaganda is not enough and can sometimes even be countereffective. The quality of strategic communication capabilities and the formation of our own messages needs to be improved. The effect of disinformation can be diminished by enhancing critical reading skills within intended audiences. The best medicine against disinformation is an open and free, high-quality and pluralistic media environment offering a variety of voices and opinions.

I firmly believe the subcommittee plays an important role in effecting positive change in areas I've described above. Funding for initiatives that fall under the State Department, USAID, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the National Endowment for Democracy, to mention but a few, wisely chosen and strategically deployed, can all contribute to building capability and resilience in Europe in order to counter changes Russia is trying to achieve.

In conclusion, I'm sure all the countries represented here would like to have good-neighborly and predictable relations with a democratic Russia that respects the core values of democracy and international law. Unfortunately for the time being, Russia remains a common concern for the West as it is an unpredictable and aggressive actor in Europe and beyond. Transatlantic unity and a clear, unwavering posture in our policy towards Russia will remain crucial in near future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide you with my thoughts and I look forward to answering your questions.