

## **Civil Society Perspectives on Russia:** *Countering Russian Soft-Power in Europe*

Testimony by Jan Erik Surotchak  
Regional Director, Europe  
International Republican Institute

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Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy, Subcommittee Members, thank you for holding this timely and important series of hearings. As you may know, the International Republican Institute (IRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing representative government and democratic values around the world. We trace our roots back to President Reagan's unshakeable belief that, "Freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings." As such, we are deeply concerned about the systematic campaign by the Russian Federation to undermine democratic institutions across Europe.

### **Moscow's Strategic Interest in Undermining Democratic Institutions**

Mr. Chairman, IRI has been working to support the full implementation of President George H.W. Bush's vision of a "Europe whole and free" since the early 1990s. At the time, the field for democracy advocates – both European and American – was wide open. The people of the former Eastern bloc were hungry for assistance, we had the full support of the United States government, and Russian interference declined dramatically following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Two decades later, the strategic situation has changed radically, and in some ways has reversed. As the United States has scaled back its global engagement, Vladimir Putin has been emboldened, cracking down on dissent at home and pursuing policies of aggression and provocation abroad. One of the central pillars of Putin's approach to foreign policy has been to destroy the post-Cold-War transatlantic consensus, and the inroads he has made are deeply disturbing.

The Kremlin has deployed a multi-faceted campaign to achieve its objectives. Moscow effectively uses its control of energy supplies to effectively blackmail its neighbors; regularly practices military gamesmanship in areas such as the Baltic Sea; and has been the power behind covert operations to bring down democratic governments, which we most recently saw in Montenegro. Russian support for divisive parties and political movements in Europe has been increasing for at least the last decade, and now poses a major challenge to the political well-being of the Continent.

As an organization that works with political parties around the globe – including Europe and Eurasia, IRI has seen firsthand the destructive influence of this campaign to weaken democratic institutions. As a result, with support from the National Endowment for Democracy, we are now working to countering Russian meddling in European affairs by strengthening transatlantic alliances and identifying sources of Russian disinformation and interference. This program, called the Beacon Project, has identified five general categories of engagement employed by the Kremlin to achieve its strategic goals.

### **Direct Financial or Political Support for Selected Parties**

The first of these five areas is direct financial and/or political support of political parties that support Russian Federation positions on the national and/or at the European Union level. The most extensively-documented example of this practice is the 9 million Euros given to Marine Le Pen's *Fronte Nationale* in France in 2014 — the largest documentable Russian financial investment in a foreign far-right party to date. In the same year, party founder Jean-

Marie Le Pen's political fund Cotelec received another 2 million Euro loan from a Russian-backed fund based in Cyprus. There are also increasing concerns that Russia has made at least indirect inroads with mainstream French parties including the center-right *Les Republicains*, as recent revelations about their presidential candidate's private business activities suggest close personal business links between the candidate and Russian officials.

In Germany, while there has been no financial trail, the increasingly deep ties between the right-wing, anti-establishment *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party and Putin's United Russia party in Moscow have raised red flags. In 2016, the AfD youth organization (*Junge Alternative* or JA) entered into a formal relationship with the youth wing of United Russia. These relationships give the AfD international credibility and connected it with valuable international campaign and organizational expertise. Similarly, in December 2016 the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) announced a "Five Year Plan" agreement with Putin's United Russia Party.

In Hungary, the extreme right-wing *Jobbik* party is reportedly under investigation for allegedly receiving funding from the Russian government. Jobbik's lavish campaign spending in 2009, 2010 and 2014 prompted suspicions, as did the activities of MEP Bela Kovacs, widely known as KGBela, who has a long record of close ties to Moscow. The Hungarian government has asked the European Parliament to strip Bela of parliamentary immunity in order to continue its investigation.

This is not merely a problem with the far-right. Italy's regionalist Northern League and the far-right New Force from Italy and Greece's left-wing Syriza and right-wing Golden Dawn have also come under scrutiny as a result of their support for Moscow. And while evidence of an actual transfer of funds has not yet emerged, leaders of all three parties regularly participate in conferences, seminars and other events organized by Russian government-backed think-tanks in Moscow.

### **Organized Disinformation Campaigns**

The second pillar of Moscow's effort to undermine Europe is its execution of sophisticated disinformation campaigns against governments, parties and individuals who do not toe the Kremlin's line. In some countries, the objective is to simply muddy the public debate, but in other countries, Russian reach higher. The launch of a French language version of its Russia Today in advance of the French elections is no coincidence, as Russian-funded outlets have coalesced around pro-Moscow candidates and have vilified pro-transatlantic candidate Emmanuel Macron.

In Germany, the ultimate goal is to remove Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union party from power in this year's elections. In addition to the many examples of disinformation narratives designed to undermine Merkel's government, Germany's leading intelligence officials have warned that the country will almost certainly face cyberattacks and other attempts at election meddling.

Taking the long view, this is nothing new. After the Russian Revolution, the first Bolshevik ambassador to Germany was caught carrying anti-German propaganda. Of course today, the internet has made the transmission of propaganda far more sophisticated and dangerous.

Evidence collected by the Beacon Project suggests that the campaign against the Merkel government has rested on three core narratives, some of which have also been adapted to other European countries.

- First, that Merkel's immigration and refugee policies have left the country at the mercy of Muslim criminals. The infamous "Lisa Case" of early 2016 and the "Lisa 2.0 Case," in which migrants were falsely accused of raping women in Germany, are the clearest examples of this narrative.
- Second, that Merkel's government is incapable of protecting women and children from violence, or *alternatively* that Germany is the source of violence. This was the main thread in last month's fake news regarding an alleged rape by German soldiers deployed by NATO in Lithuania.
- And third, that Merkel's policies have weakened the economy by driving ethnic Germans out of the country.

These narratives illustrate the way in which the Kremlin exploits legitimate policy debates surrounding Germany's open-door migrant policy and exacerbates tensions through fake news. With the German Bundestag already having been hacked, the country's leaders are very aware of the threat posed to their democratic process. We can surely expect much more Russian engagement in that country in the run-up to elections on September 24.

### **Taking Advantage of Unforeseen Domestic Debates**

It has often been said that all politics is local. Moscow has clearly absorbed this lesson, as they've seized upon areas of domestic tension to sow divisions that play to their advantage. The tactics deployed in Germany referenced above are just one of many examples. But perhaps the clearest example of this tactic could be seen in the campaign leading up to the April 6, 2016, referendum in The Netherlands organized by an anti-EU NGO, asking whether or not the public would support the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine.

After Russian puppet Viktor Yanukovich was ousted in the Maidan Revolution of 2014 and Russia responded by annexing Crimea and invading Donetsk and Luhansk, Moscow justified its illegal actions by arguing that Ukraine had been taken over by fascist bandits. This same narrative found its way into the syllabus of the "No" campaign in the Dutch referendum in the form of flyers contending that Ukraine suffers, among other things, from "armed fascist militias" roaming the streets. This material was taken directly from Russian propaganda outlets.

Again, this wasn't just a right-wing problem. The Socialist Party, as part of its "3 X No" campaign against the referendum, condemned the Association Agreement as "partially responsible" for "a bloody civil war with nearly 10,000 deaths and more than a million people in flight" from or within Ukraine. Of course, this ignores the fact that it was Yanukovich's refusal to sign the Agreement that brought about his downfall and that Russia

invaded with the aim of undermining the legitimate Ukrainian government. Dutch voters were asked to believe that voting to remain in the EU would antagonize Russia and risk war on Europe's doorstep. Faced with this sophisticated campaign of scaremongering, 61 percent of the Dutch electorate voted "No."

### **Use of Fake "Democracy Support" Organizations in Europe**

Just as Russia has become one of the world's leading sources of "fake news," the Russian Federation has established so-called "democracy support" organizations that actually exist to discredit elections that do not deliver Moscow-friendly governments, and legitimize elections that deliver the desired results.

As recently as last month, the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region held a so-called "constitutional referendum" that was "observed" by fake election monitors from far-right parties allied with Putin's United Russia party, including representatives of the German AfD and Austrian FPÖ. For the Russian Federation, the goal is to maintain conflict in the region between Armenia and Azerbaijan and angle to support both in order to enhance their regional leverage. Russia has played a similar game in Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltic States—not mention countries outside of Europe where they are seeking to increase their influence.

A few of the fake "democracy support" organizations worth noting include the Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections (EODE), which claims to have a presence in Moscow, Paris, Brussels, Sochi, and Chisinau. The EODE notoriously fielded observation missions for the March 2014 Crimean Referendum and the November 2014 "parliamentary elections" in Donetsk and Luhansk. The organization describes itself as "committed to a multipolar world" and to "the unity of Eurasia, designed as geopolitical entity," a vision it says is "shared by many governmental and political spheres, including the current Russian leadership and V.V. Putin."

The European Centre for Geopolitical Analysis (ECGA) is a Kremlin surrogate based in Poland, run by Polish far-right political figure Mateusz Piskorski. In May 2016, Piskorski was detained by Polish authorities on suspicion of espionage for Russia and possibly China. The ECGA's promotional materials boast that "Our monitoring services have been already twice highly estimated by the Central Electoral Commission of Russian Federation which granted us, as the only NGO, exclusive access and accreditation to observe parliamentary and presidential elections."

One of the most frequent participants in EODE and ECGA missions is a former Austrian MP and MEP Ewald Stadler. Stadler has proposed the creation of an Agency for Security and Cooperation in Europe (ASCE), in a clear attempt to undermine the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or OSCE.

### **Support for European Think Tanks**

Russian funding for think tanks and other NGOs inside the European Union is another component of the Kremlin's soft-power strategy. A number of large, Russian "government-

organized non-governmental organizations” or GONGOs support think tanks across Europe in an attempt to influence foreign policy. This effort is most clearly motivated by a desire to break the sanctions regime imposed by the EU as a result of its illegal annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, IRI’s Beacon Project collects and analyzes the data that enables us to understand the campaign I just outlined for you and your fellow Subcommittee Members. We do this for one purpose: to share with policy makers in Europe at the national and European Union level, and help develop a stronger transatlantic response to Russian influence. In Europe, this means working with parties and NGOs to restrict foreign funding for political parties. It also means working closely with members of the European Parliament to press for full funding of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom counter-disinformation effort. The Beacon Project is in the process of fielding a multinational poll that will provide valuable public opinion research to aid these efforts.

Although the picture I’ve painted is worrying, there are encouraging signs on a number of fronts. Last month, the United Kingdom announced a £700 million “Empowerment Fund” to support allied governments in their battle against Russian soft-power aggression. In January, the Czech government launched the Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats to manage their push-back against Russian disinformation. And governments across Europe are scrambling to fortify the Russian intelligence capacities that had withered in the wake of the Cold War. These initiatives make an important contribution to our common transatlantic effort to shore up democratic institutions and undercut Russian interference and should continue to be supported.

The United States is uniquely positioned to take the lead on what may be one of the defining geopolitical challenges of our time. It is in our national security and economic interest. Twenty-eight years after George H.W. Bush’s speech in Mainz in 1989, we are undoubtedly further along in building a Europe whole and free and at peace. But threats we thought had been vanquished have return in full force, and partnership with our European allies is as important as ever. We at IRI look forward to continuing this important work and thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective with you.