

Marcus Kolga

Stemming the **VIRUS**

Understanding and responding to
the threat of Russian disinformation

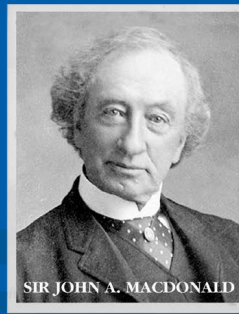
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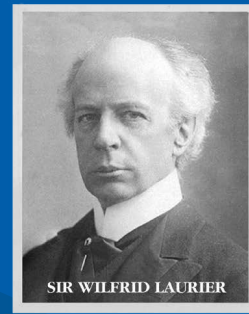
True North in
Canadian public policy



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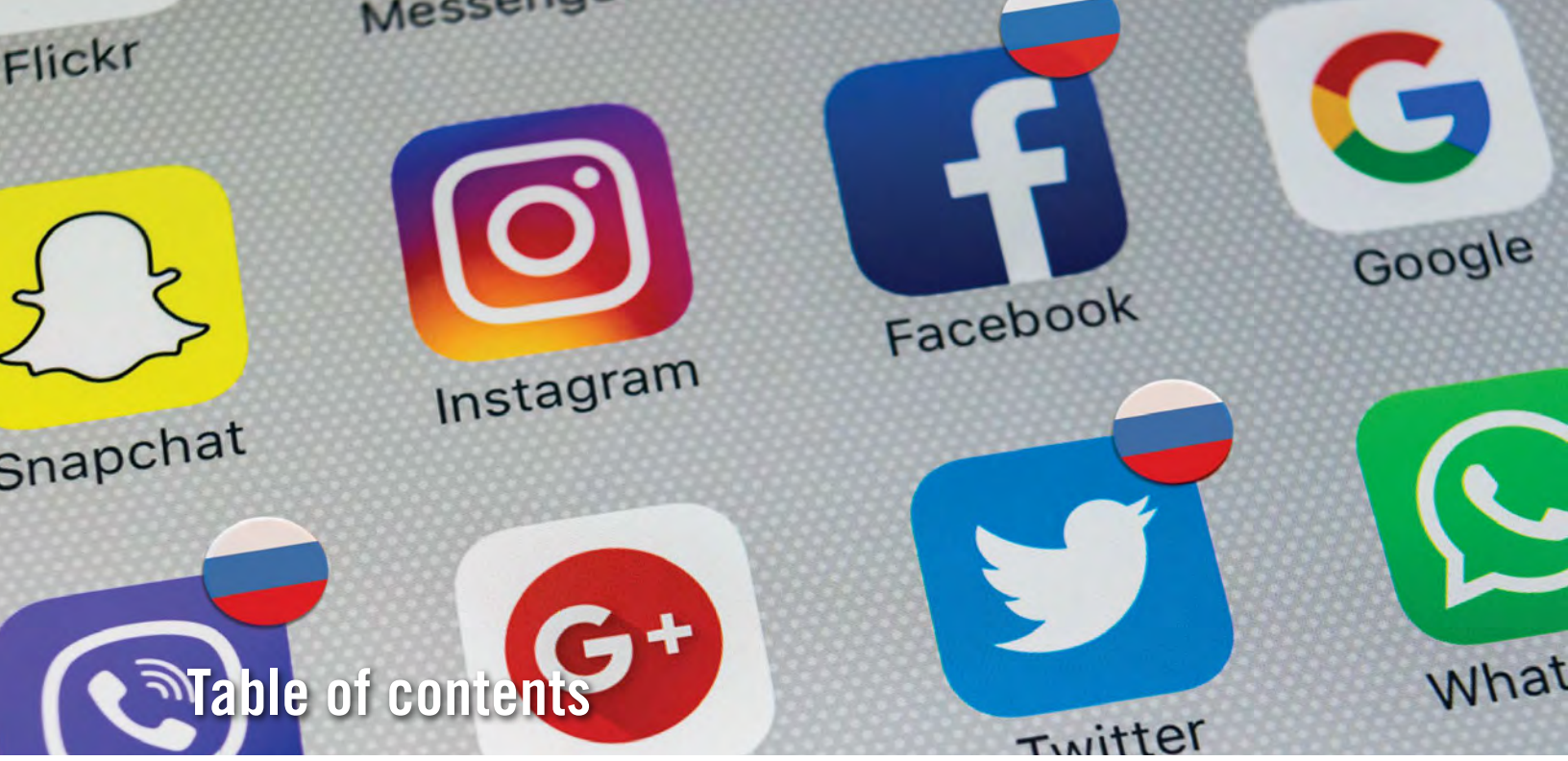


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Note: The section on “business and civil society” has been revised and clarified. The infographic on p.14, which incorrectly mentioned Irrussianality, has also been corrected. Other minor editorial changes (including on p.31) have been made to distinguish even more clearly between agents of influence and certain Canadian individuals and organisations who might sincerely hold pro-Russian views. We regret any confusion the earlier version might have created.

The author of this document has worked independently and is solely responsible for the views presented here. The opinions are not necessarily those of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, its Directors or Supporters.

Executive Summary

Truth is a mere nuisance in today's world of Kremlin propaganda. In the course of its conflict against Ukraine, Russian state news has boldly fabricated facts and evidence to support its positions, including fake interviews and even images. During the 2013-2014 Euromaidan uprisings in Ukraine, Russian television broadcast interviews with people who were secretly actors, alleging that Ukrainian "fascists" had committed atrocities, including the crucifixion of a child by Ukrainian forces. In the case of the 2014 downing of a civilian aircraft, Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, UK investigative collective Bellingcat discovered that Kremlin agents manufactured evidence to cover up Russian state involvement in the crime.

Canada has also been the victim of disinformation. Recent Kremlin disinformation about the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in Latvia provides a raw example of the crudeness of disinformation campaigns. In the Latvian case, the CAF was targeted by local Kremlin-controlled Russian language media to turn local public opinion against the mission. In one case, Defence Minister

Harjit Sajjan's appearance, including his turban, was exploited by pro-Kremlin media to stoke anti-Muslim sentiments. And another Russian speaking outlet used photos of convicted murderer Russell Williams to promote a negative story that Canadian soldiers were promoting homosexuality in Latvia.

Recent Kremlin disinformation about the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in Latvia provides a raw example of the crudeness of disinformation campaigns.

Perhaps most worrisome is the Kremlin's demonstrated ability to interfere in democratic elections. Election outcomes are not the primary focus of this warfare, but a measure of the overall success of the Kremlin's disinformation and active measures campaigns. The rot and decay of both our democracy and the trust we have in our media, leaders and allies is what Putin seeks to cultivate and grow.

As Canada approaches the 2019 federal elections, the government must pay closer attention to disinformation and influence campaigns that target Canadian media, decision-makers, civil society,

and other groups. Ottawa should develop a Communications and Digital Democracy Strategy that brings together key Ministries – including National Defence, Public Safety, Global Affairs, and Democratic Institutions, as well as Canadian intelligence agencies – to actively monitor and develop measures to safeguard Canadian democracy against manipulation by disinformation, foreign intelligence active measures, cyber attacks, and influence campaigns.

A dedicated office, the National Centre for Strategic Communications and Digital Democracy, should be created and tasked with five primary activities:

1. Monitor, detect, and identify disinformation and influence campaigns via:

- media monitoring;
- mapping out proxy groups and organizations;
- analytics development; and
- monitoring and detecting cyber threats.

2. Develop strategies to combat and disarm disinformation and influence campaigns:

- implement a national media literacy campaign for decision-makers, media, civil society, and the public;
- work with cable providers to ensure television-based propaganda platforms, like RT, are only available on a stand-alone basis and not bundled with basic cable packages;
- regulate propaganda programming with ratings and warnings;
- advocate for major search engines to add conspiracy theory and disinformation platforms to their restricted search;
- enhance the capacities of and empower positive third-party messengers;
- rapidly develop content to respond to and dispel disinformation to media, NGOs, and other groups in multiple languages;
- cooperate with international partners where disinformation about Canada emerges; and
- promote the development of transparent domestic media channels that challenge state-sponsored media.

3. Increase cyber literacy and security awareness, for personal, corporate, and political use.

4. Work with social media and other tech companies to:

- curb the spread of disinformation using their networks;
- identify troll and bot accounts;
- ensure that the privacy of users is protected;
- identify companies and individuals whose user information has been stolen and used to inappropriately target them with propaganda; and
- open dialogues with other jurisdictions and governments that are working on strengthening privacy and coordination with social media firms, including Australia, where the Assistance and Access Bill is being debated.

5. Expand existing and develop new international partnerships with various domestic and international organizations to help carry out monitoring, detection, and counter-disinformation activities, such as:

- domestic civil society groups including ethnic community and religious leaders;
- Canadian and allied intelligence gathering organizations;
- international civil society groups, including think tanks and academic organizations;
- supranational groups such as NATO and the EU; and
- international allied governments including the US State Department and the UK government.

When developing strategies and policies to combat foreign disinformation, governments must do so with the fundamental understanding that it is our democracy that is being targeted for subversion. The information warfare that the Kremlin is currently engaged in against Canada and its allies is total, and its objective is to tear apart our society and undermine our trust in our government, media institutions, and each other. Canada's response must therefore be robust and take into account all sources and methods of how foreign information warfare and democratic interference are conducted. Most importantly, we must be prepared for a very long fight.

Sommaire

La vérité n'est qu'une simple nuisance dans le monde de propagande actuel du Kremlin. Au cours du conflit contre l'Ukraine, les organes russes d'information d'État ont diffusé des faits et des éléments de preuve grossièrement mensongers à l'appui de la position russe, en plus d'entrevues et même d'images outrancièrement fausses. Les reportages concoctés pour

la télévision russe lors des soulèvements « *Euromaidan* » en Ukraine entre 2013 et 2014 ont manifestement été tournés par des comédiens : ils ont en effet témoigné des atrocités commises par les « fascistes » ukrainiens et notamment de la crucifixion d'un enfant par des militaires. Récemment, le groupe britannique d'enquête *Bellingcat* a découvert que des agents du Kremlin avaient fabriqué des preuves pour dissimuler l'implication de l'État russe dans l'accident en 2014 de l'appareil de la compagnie Malaysia Airlines assurant le vol MH17.

Poutine cherche à cultiver et à développer l'idée que de notre démocratie est corrompue et viciée, à l'image de la relation que nous entretenons avec nos médias, nos dirigeants et nos alliés.

Le Canada a également été une victime des médias russes, la récente désinformation du Kremlin sur les Forces armées canadiennes (FAC) en Lettonie offrant un exemple patent de la brutalité de ces campagnes de malveillance. Dans le cas de la Lettonie, les médias locaux de langue russe contrôlés par le Kremlin ont

pris pour cible les FAC dans le but de retourner l'opinion publique locale contre la mission. À une occasion, les médias pro-Kremlin ont exploité de manière abusive une apparition dans les médias du ministre de la Défense nationale Harjit Sajjan coiffé de son turban pour attiser les sentiments anti musulmans. Une autre entreprise médiatique russophone a utilisé des photos du meurtrier reconnu coupable, Russell Williams, pour mousser une nouvelle fabriquée de toutes pièces sur des soldats canadiens faisant la promotion de l'homosexualité en Lettonie.

La capacité démontrée du Kremlin à s'ingérer dans des élections démocratiques constitue peut-être le fait le plus inquiétant. Les résultats des élections ne sont pas l'objet principal de cette guerre, mais ces tentatives d'ingérence permettent quand même de prendre la mesure du succès général des campagnes d'actions et de désinformation provenant du Kremlin. Poutine cherche à cultiver et à développer l'idée que de notre démocratie est corrompue et viciée, à l'image de la relation que nous entretenons avec nos médias, nos dirigeants et nos alliés.

À l'approche des élections fédérales de 2019, le Canada doit accorder une plus grande attention à la désinformation et aux campagnes d'influence qui ciblent les médias canadiens, les décideurs, la société civile et d'autres groupes. Ottawa devrait élaborer une stratégie de communication et de démocratie numérique réunissant des ministères clés – Défense nationale, Sécurité publique, Affaires mondiales et Institutions démocratiques, ainsi que des agences de renseignement canadiennes – afin de surveiller activement et d'élaborer des mesures visant à protéger la démocratie canadienne contre l'utilisation abusive de l'information, les incidences du renseignement étranger, les cybermenaces et les campagnes d'influence.

Un bureau dédié, le Centre national pour la communication stratégique et la démocratie numérique, devrait être créé et chargé de cinq activités principales :

1. Surveiller, détecter et identifier les campagnes de désinformation et d'influence via :

- la surveillance médiatique;
- le dénombrement des groupes et organisations mandataires;
- l'élaboration d'analyses;
- la surveillance et la détection des cybermenaces.

2. Élaborer des stratégies pour combattre et contrer les campagnes de désinformation et d'influence par les moyens suivants :

- développer une campagne nationale d'éducation médiatique à l'intention des décideurs, des médias, de la société civile et du grand public;
- collaborer avec les câblodistributeurs pour exclure les plates-formes de propagande télévisées, telles que Russia Today, des forfaits de base pour qu'elles soient offertes uniquement en abonnement individuel;
- réglementer la programmation de propagande au moyen de systèmes de classement et de mise en garde;
- recommander aux principaux moteurs de recherche l'indexation des plates-formes sur la théorie du complot et la désinformation pour diffusion en mode restreint uniquement ;
- renforcer les capacités et la responsabilisation des messagers positifs tiers;
- élaborer rapidement des lignes directrices en plusieurs langues en vue de réagir et de dissiper la désinformation et d'y répondre : médias, ONG, autres groupes;
- travailler avec les partenaires internationaux susceptibles d'être visés par la désinformation à l'encontre du Canada;
- promouvoir le développement de canaux médiatiques nationaux transparents qui remettent en question les médias parrainés par l'État.

3. Renforcer la cyberalphabétisation et la sensibilisation à la sécurité, pour un usage personnel, professionnel et politique.

4. Travailler avec les médias sociaux et d'autres entreprises de technologie en vue de mener les actions suivantes :

- freiner la désinformation dans les réseaux;
- identifier les comptes fictifs et les dispositifs robots;
- veiller à la protection des renseignements personnels;
- identifier les sociétés et les individus dont les renseignements ont été subtilisés à des fins de propagande;
- mener des dialogues ouverts avec les administrations et les gouvernements qui travaillent au renforcement de la confidentialité et de la coordination avec les entreprises de médias sociaux, notamment en Australie, où *l'Assistance and Access Bill*, un projet de loi sur l'assistance et l'accès, est en cours de discussion.

5. Pour aider à mener à bien les activités de surveillance, de détection et de contre-désinformation, élargir les partenariats internationaux existants et en développer de nouveaux avec diverses organisations nationales et internationales, comme celles-ci :

- les groupes nationaux de la société civile, y compris les communautés culturelles et les chefs religieux;
- les organismes de collecte de renseignements canadiens et des gouvernements alliés;
- les groupes internationaux de la société civile, y compris les groupes de réflexion et les organisations universitaires;
- les groupes supranationaux tels que l'OTAN et l'UE;
- les gouvernements alliés internationaux, le département d'État américain et le gouvernement britannique.

Lorsqu'ils élaborent des stratégies et des politiques pour lutter contre la désinformation de source étrangère, les gouvernements doivent s'appuyer sur le principe fondamental suivant : c'est notre démocratie qui est la cible de la subversion. La guerre de l'information que le Kremlin mène présentement contre le Canada et ses alliés est *totale*. Elle cherche à déchirer notre société et à miner notre confiance dans notre gouvernement, nos institutions médiatiques et entre nous tous. La réponse du Canada doit donc être ferme et tenir compte de toutes les sources et méthodes utilisées dans cette guerre de l'information et ces ingérences antidémocratiques étrangères. Plus important encore, nous devons être prêts à livrer une très longue bataille.

Introduction

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has been particularly active in developing and sponsoring propaganda that supports and advances its interests. The Kremlin's state propagandists use disinformation to disrupt western democracy through means of media manipulation; promotion of a wide range of false narratives; and the erosion of public trust in our democratic institutions and values. When successful, such campaigns can threaten to break down civility, our democratic processes, and society.

The primary objective of Russian propaganda, disinformation, and information warfare is very much the same today as it was during the Cold War: to destabilize western democracies and undermine their alliances, potentially creating space for the Kremlin's ambitions. With disinformation, the Kremlin aims to "exacerbate existing divides, subvert international institutions and help create a world where its own form of corrupt authoritarianism flourishes" (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 24).

Propaganda and disinformation should be seen as elements in the Kremlin's broader efforts at what has traditionally been called "active measures," which refers to a whole range of political warfare tools, from media manipulation and disinformation to assassinations and persecution of dissidents. Active measures and disinformation come at a much lower cost than conventional (kinetic) warfare, and if successful, the destructive effects on targeted communities, societies, and democracies can be deep, long-term, and even permanent.

Truth is a mere nuisance in today's world of Kremlin propaganda.¹ In the course of its conflict against Ukraine, for instance, Russian state news has boldly fabricated facts and evidence to support its positions, including fake interviews and even images. During the 2013-2014 Euro-maidan uprisings that had toppled the pro-Russian Ukrainian government Viktor Yanukovich, and the subsequent (and ongoing) Russian incursion into Eastern Ukraine, Russian television has broadcast interviews with people who were secretly actors, alleging that Ukrainian "fascists" had committed atrocities, including the crucifixion of a child by Ukrainian forces. In the case of the 2014 downing of a civilian aircraft, Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, UK investigative collective Bellingcat discovered that Kremlin agents manufactured evidence to cover up Russian state involvement in the crime (Higgins 2015).

Perhaps most worrisome is the emerging reality that Kremlin information warfare may truly feature the characteristics of a virus – infecting and then replicating itself independently within western societies with the goal of subverting and turning us against each other. This can be seen with extremist groups of the left and right borrowing tactically from the Kremlin playbook.

This paper offers an important way to diagnose and treat this virus. It examines the strategy behind Russian active measures, how Russian disinformation and propaganda is generated, how it is weaponized against western democracies and alliances, and the accompanying influence operations that seek to manipulate policy and media. In particular, this paper looks at how the Kremlin does this in the Canadian context and the appropriate response from the Canadian government, civil society, and activists. Canada, alongside other democratic governments, must develop effective strategies and countermeasures to protect their democratic institutions from this growing threat.

Roots of the Kremlin's Disinformation

State propaganda is the dissemination of biased or false information with the intent to shape perceptions in order to benefit the state. Propaganda and disinformation have been used as a tool of statecraft for centuries, but only really started taking their modern shape in revolutionary Russia at the beginning of the 20th-century. The infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a work of fiction published in 1903, was used by pro-monarchy White Russians to demonstrate that the Bolshevik revolution was caused by Russian Jews. It is no surprise that the book was later used by Nazi Germany, another great 20th-century purveyor of propaganda and disinformation, to justify its genocidal policies.

The Kremlin's use of disinformation has its roots in Soviet-era propaganda and intelligence operations. Disinformation, or *dezinformatsiya*, as it was coined by Josef Stalin, formed an important part of Soviet *agitprop* (a portmanteau of *agitation* and *propaganda*). Disinformation was formally adopted by the Soviet regime as a tactical weapon in 1923, when the Bolsheviks created a special disinformation office to conduct active intelligence operations.² Disinformation became part of the Soviet Union's political and information warfare arsenal, also known as *active measures*, used to manipulate and influence world events to benefit the Soviet Union.

Oleg Kalugin, a former Chief of KGB Foreign Counterintelligence, who was exiled in the US in the 1990s, says that "subversion" was at the heart of all KGB foreign intelligence operations against the West (CNN 1998). Rather than intelligence collection, Kalugin says the primary objective was "to weaken the West, to drive wedges in the Western community alliances of all sorts, particularly NATO, to sow discord among allies, to weaken the United States in the eyes of the people of Europe, Asia, Africa, [and] Latin America." Canada was not spared.

From Gouzenko to Heine: Kremlin tactics exposed

In September 1945, a high-level Soviet defection in Canada shed light on the operational tactics of Soviet intelligence services. Igor Gouzenko, a Russian cipher clerk, decided to defect immediately after the end of the Second World War, taking with him a trove of documents about Soviet active measures in the West.

According to a 1946 Report of the Royal Commission, Soviet intelligence influence and activities in Canada started as early as the 1920s; they describe an organization in Canada "directed from Russia and operating with Communist sympathizers in Canada" (Taschereau and Kellock 1946, 14). Contrary to popular belief, however, the Kremlin did not limit their recruitment strategies to Communist Party members and sympathizers. Members of the Russian, Ukrainian, and other communities were approached as well, specifically those with family members still living within the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. Gouzenko told Canadian authorities that the KGB used the "fear that their relatives will be persecuted in the home country" (53).

Russian officials operating out of the Soviet embassy in Ottawa also employed Canadian civil servants and academics. The Report of the Royal Commission names several Canadian university professors and high-level administrators, including an officer, named F.W. Poland, in the Royal Canadian Air Force Directorate of Intelligence. In all, nearly two dozen Canadian citizens were caught committing treason by the Gouzenko defection.

Over 25 years later, a 1969 Canadian Report of the Royal Commission on Security concluded

that Canada remained the target of subversive activities, infiltration, penetration, and espionage, and “can be used as a base for operations against other countries, and especially against the United States” (Mackenzie 1969, 6). The Report defined Kremlin activities that ranged from “efforts to develop front organizations to attempts to subvert individuals in government, the mass media, the universities, the trade unions, émigré and ethnic groups and political parties” (6).

In the 1960s, the Soviets also exploited “and exaggerate[d] existing elements of social unrest and dissent” (Mackenzie 1969). This can be seen in the Heine Affair, when a former Estonian ‘freedom fighter’ Erik Heine appeared in Toronto in 1957. Heine had, in his own words, fought against Soviet occupation in various forms throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Eventually fighting with the German army, he was captured and later released, and then found himself traveling to Toronto. Heine began trading on his stories of his daring anti-Soviet activities, his incarceration, and his multiple cunning escapes. His legend propelled him to celebrity status in Toronto and the Estonian diaspora communities. He produced a film and toured throughout North America.

Yet according to the thousands of pages of declassified CIA and FBI documents, there were inconsistencies in his stories that generated serious doubts in the US intelligence community. A leading former British intelligence agent and high-ranking German officer, Alfons Rebane, believed that the story was completely false, telling US intelligence agents that “he had no doubts that HEINE was sent to the West as an agent of the RIS [Russian Intelligence Services]” (CIA 1966).

Through a subsequent civil lawsuit brought against Erik Heine, we now know that he was the primary author of an anonymous publication, known as the “ETA Bulletin,” which identified several Canadian-Estonian leaders as “communist sympathizers.” Such an accusation, in the Estonian emigre community at the time was explosive, creating irreparable damage to the cohesion of the community – a primary objective of Soviet intelligence. Erik Heine’s name later shot into international headlines after an American-Estonian CIA informant, Juri Raus, made several public allegations about Heine’s connections with Russian intelligence services and his motivations. Heine sued Raus for defamation, but in an April 1966 affidavit, CIA Director Richard Helms stated that Raus had been given information by “the Central Intelligence Agency to the effect that Erik Heine was a dispatched Soviet intelligence operative, a KGB agent.”

The immediate effect of the Heine affair was to split the Estonian community in Canada in two. Heine supporters, who were identified as the “Club Men,” attacked those deemed “soft” on the Soviet occupation and who engaged with any cultural representatives visiting from Soviet-occupied Estonia. The Heine case is a clear demonstration of how Russian intelligence active measures were deployed and how they met the goals of the Kremlin. By subverting the critics of the Soviet Union abroad and turning communities against themselves, resistance against Soviet crimes and occupation diminished.

Targeting of community groups and the subversion of western societies was a primary objective of the Kremlin.

Later high-profile Russian intelligence defectors, such as Yuri Bezmenov, confirmed that the targeting of community groups and the subversion of western societies was a primary objective of the Kremlin. Bezmenov was granted asylum in Canada in 1970 and later worked for the CBC. In a 1984 video, Bezmenov describes the goals and tactics of KGB active measures:

the main emphasis of the KGB is not in the area of intelligence at all. According to my opinion and [the] opinion of many defectors of my caliber, only about 15% of time, money, and manpower [are] spent on espionage as such. The other 85% is a slow process, which we call either 'ideological subversion,' or 'active measures' – in the language of the KGB – or 'psychological warfare.' What it basically means is, to change the perception of reality, of every American, to such an extent that despite the abundance of information, no one is able to come to sensible conclusions in the interests of defending themselves, their families, their community and their country. (Bezmenov 1984)

Historically, Russian disinformation and active measures have targeted democratic systems by attempting to undermine the society and institutions of the West through proxy organizations, distortion of narratives and the media, compromised individuals, agents of influence, and the manipulation of elections. The Kremlin's tactics and objectives remain fundamentally the same today as they were in the 1940s. The main difference is, as former Kremlin insider Gleb Pavlovsky, who once worked on Putin's election campaign, has said: "[I]n Soviet times the concept of truth was important. Even if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was 'the truth.' Now no one even tries proving the 'truth.' You can just say anything. Create realities" (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 9).

Modern Information Warfare: Democracy, alliances, elections, and beyond

Over the past decade, the Kremlin has demonstrated that it will spend untold resources and go to extraordinary lengths to disrupt the outcome of elections and decision-making processes around the world. The success of its operations during the lead-up to the US presidential election in 2016 has only emboldened the Kremlin. Other European and Latin American countries have also experienced such operations. Canada is not immune to this danger. Western governments, including Canada's, must be prepared for future attempts to undermine democratic institutions and processes.

Without a preference in an election race, the Kremlin tends to support extremists on the right and left simultaneously. A survey of 17,847 tweets from 14 pro-Kremlin accounts where articles and memes are frequently retweeted, including by the Russian Embassy in Canada, reveals that the vast majority of shared content is linked to Russian state media, and extreme left and right conspiracy sites. For the Kremlin, any conspiracy theory narratives that promote confusion through false news are useful relays to achieving their strategic objective. As a recent anonymous report (2018) published by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service notes: "Driving wedges between people is sure to be one objective of the Kremlin, and it is incumbent upon everyone to make an effort to not be pawns in a Kremlin game."

In the US 2016 presidential elections, attention was focused on the Kremlin’s use of social media bots and an army of online trolls, based in St. Petersburg, to amplify far-right propaganda and conspiracies. But messaging from the far-left was also amplified using the same means (Michel 2017). A good example is the US Green Party candidate Jill Stein. In late 2015, Stein was invited to participate in a foreign policy discussion panel in Moscow with Russia Today (RT) – the Kremlin’s primary foreign news outlet. In a press release issued by her campaign after the event, Stein characterized the Obama administration’s defence policy as “disastrous militarism.” In a YouTube post from an account named “antikriegtv,” a video of the presidential candidate shows Stein saying she was leaving Moscow “inspired” by the RT conference. Notably, this Youtube account also featured videos that supporting the Assad and Gaddafi regimes, various anti-western conspiracy theories, and European parties of the far-left.

Different platforms are used to spread this form of propaganda and disinformation, including media channels, government organized non-governmental groups, civil society organizations, sympathetic academics, social media, and agents of influence who are formally and informally connected with foreign adversaries. It is useful to categorize the type of disinformation propaganda into white, grey, and black: white refers to information from an official or legitimate source, grey refers to information from semi-official sources that have a questionable origin and whose accuracy is doubtful, and black refers to unofficial information with masked origins intended to subvert (see table 1).

TABLE 1: A TYPOLOGY OF DIFFERENT FORMS OF PROPAGANDA

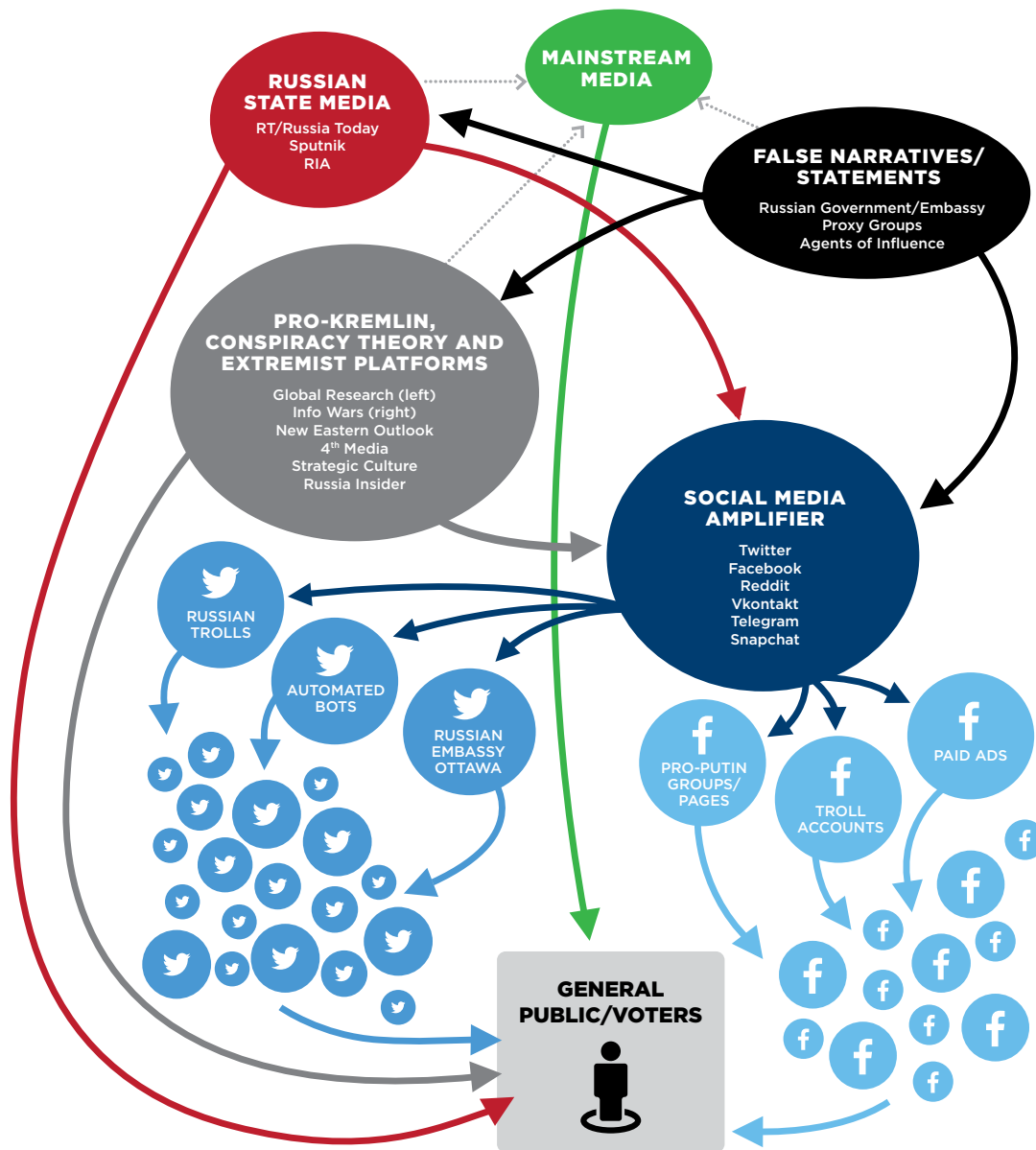
<p>WHITE PROPAGANDA <i>Information with an official or legitimate source</i></p>	<p>GREY PROPAGANDA <i>Information of semi-official, questionable origin that is never sourced and whose accuracy is doubtful</i></p>	<p>BLACK PROPAGANDA <i>Unofficial information with masked origins that is intended to subvert</i></p>
<p>Media sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State media, RT, SPUTNIK, TASS, IRNA, PRESSTV, CCTV, all available in Canada • Government sources, press releases <p>NGOs, government-organized NGOs, and diaspora groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russkiy Mir, Rossotrudnichestvo, Gorchakov Fund • Council of Russian-Canadian Cooperation • Russian Congress of Canada 	<p>Media sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pro-Kremlin/Tehran/Beijing media and platforms set up by state intelligence services or people • Strategic Culture • 4th Media • Russia Beyond the Headlines • New Cold War • Lugansk Media Centre • New Eastern Outlook • Veterans Today <p>Types of individuals and groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals whose pro-regime advocacy is camouflaged by legitimate western academic credentials (such as Michel Chossudovsky) • Valdai Discussion Club • Systema KGB fight schools 	<p>Sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimate media outlets (unknowingly amplifying) • Social media (unknowing or paid amplification) • Hacked social media accounts • Government-controlled bots and social media trolls • Wikipedia edits/hacks • Agents of influence • Groups including Sons of Odin and Antifa • Cyber hackers and attackers • Wikileaks <p>Other forms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social movements (Ontario anti-sex education; anti-abortion; anti-immigration; anti-fascist; anti-nuclear; environmental; anti-vaccination)

Targeting, Development, and Execution of Information Warfare Campaigns

Information warfare and active measures are not new tools for the Kremlin and other adversaries. However, the intensification and effectiveness with which western democracies have been bombarded with Kremlin disinformation is particularly worrisome, as is the naively limited reaction by many western states to address this threat.

Many disinformation campaigns are run ad hoc, without any detectable strategy, while others deploy a complex range of platforms, proxy groups, agents of influence, and media to relay and amplify hostile narratives (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1: ILLUSTRATION OF A DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN



Source: author

The disinformation narratives that appear on various platforms and proxy groups have three general objectives: to generate support for Kremlin positions; discredit critics and opponents using all means available; and sow confusion and turn societies against each other in the West, while generating uncertainty for western positions.

Taken individually, these Kremlin initiatives often seem disconnected, undertaken as reactions to events or conditions. According to Mark Galeotti (2018), “there appears to be no master plan, but rather a broad strategy of weakening the European Union and NATO, distancing Europe and the United States from each other, and generally creating a political and cultural environment more conducive for Moscow and its interests” (2). Sometimes, strategies are developed at different levels of government, while at other times, disinformation is produced as a reaction to a provocation or incident – such as the doctoring of satellite evidence by Russian government agencies about the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 in 2014 (Kivimäki 2014).

After objectives are set, narratives are then communicated to the Russian state media and pro-regime propaganda media platforms – including conspiracy theory websites, proxy organizations, and agents of influence. These groups reinforce, support, and relay narratives. State-controlled social media bots and trolls are then tasked with amplifying narratives to a broader global audience. The ultimate success is when these narratives achieve broad global exposure and cause maximum confusion.

Such was the extreme case of the Columbian Chemicals plant explosion hoax in 2014. Employees of Russia’s Internet Research Agency – commonly known as the St. Petersburg Troll Farm – planted and amplified a story about a massive explosion at a Louisiana chemical plant. Screenshots of CNN’s homepage were doctored with images of a massive explosion, which were shared widely on Twitter and other social media platforms. Local Louisiana news websites were cloned and a YouTube video depicting a man watching local news reports of an explosion were created. According to the *New York Times*, the hoax “was a highly coordinated disinformation campaign, involving dozens of fake accounts that posted hundreds of tweets for hours, targeting a list of figures precisely chosen to generate maximum attention” (Chen 2015). Other hoaxes would follow, including one reporting the outbreak of Ebola in Atlanta.

Canada is not immune to such tactics. Recent Kremlin disinformation about the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in Latvia provides a raw example of the crudeness of disinformation campaigns. In the Latvian case, the CAF and NATO are targeted by local Kremlin-controlled Russian language media to turn local public opinion against the NATO mission. The campaign has been strategic and sustained. In one case, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan’s appearance, including his turban, was exploited by pro-Kremlin media to stoke anti-Muslim sentiments among Russian speaking populations (Fisher 2017). And in June, another Russian speaking outlet used photos of convicted murderer Russell Williams to promote a negative story that Canadian soldiers were promoting homosexuality in Latvia (Berger 2017).

Articles also appeared in the Canadian mainstream media that incorporated the anti-NATO sentiment presented on pro-Kremlin, anti-NATO websites. Some mischaracterized Ukrainian and Baltic freedom fighters who resisted Soviet occupation as Nazis (Taylor 2018c), a particularly popular Kremlin narrative that has been applied to many critics beyond the Baltic states and Ukraine. One recent article by Scott Taylor in the *Chronicle Herald* bears the headline “Missions a Massive Waste” (Taylor 2018d). Notably, the author is also the editor of an independent magazine, *Esprit de Corps*, which frequently echoes the anti-NATO views common on pro-Russian websites.³ Other mainstream journalists have also adopted similar views in their articles, which have only sowed doubts about the mission in the Baltics.⁴

“Alternative Media” Platforms: Apologists, pro-regime, and conspiracy media

Sophisticated state directed or supported actors craft and target false narratives to exploit our tendencies to favour information that supports our preexisting assumptions. A recent French government report on disinformation notes: “Disinformation exploits a natural intellectual laziness, characterized by the failure to systematically exercise critical thinking and choosing to relay information naively without looking for evidence to support that information” (Vilmer et al. 2018, 31). Those whose political views fall on the extreme left and/or right are exceptionally susceptible to disinformation that confirms their biases, which commonly include being anti-establishment, anti-Western, anti-NATO, anti-democratic, and pro-authoritarian.

These conspiracy theory websites add fuel to further agitate preexisting divisions. For the extreme left, hawkish imperialist conservatives and “fascists” are seeking to destroy the developing world and only Russia can stop them. On the extreme right, globalist liberals funded by George Soros and controlled by Zionists are trying to overrun the world with refugees.⁵ Often, the news produced by these conspiracy theory sites trickles up to mainstream media, sometimes on its own, but often through the help of various Kremlin proxy groups and agents of influence.

Global Research

Disinformation feeding into confirmation bias is not exclusively a problem of the extreme right; narratives are often sourced from extreme leftist websites too. In Canada, one notorious website is Global Research. Based in Montreal and run by Michel Chossudovsky, a retired professor of economics (emeritus) from the University of Ottawa, Global Research publishes articles that support Kremlin positions as well as those of many other authoritarian regimes around the world.

Extremely critical articles about NATO and the West’s foreign policy feature prominently on Global Research, alongside articles that support extremist views about Zionism, Freemasonry, and other global conspiracy theories.⁶ Chossudovsky’s website is part of a broader global online network called the “4th Media” (Chung 2014), which is a Chinese-registered website that includes various Kremlin state-funded outlets, including Russia Today, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), and others.

Chossudovsky is a contributor to the Russian extremist nationalist platforms geopolitica.ru and Katehon (Chossudovsky 2017). These sites are run by the extremist right-wing nationalists Aleksandr Dugin and Leonid Savin. Dugin, who is listed as a contributor to Global Research, is also famous for being the foreign policy advisor to Vladimir Putin, the so-called “Putin’s Rasputin” (Meyer and Ant 2017). The site’s author search tool also brings up other contributors to Canadian national newspapers who have supported the Kremlin’s positions in the past.⁷

Another noteworthy contributor to Global Research is John Helmer (Welch and Helmer 2018), who initiated the January 2017 media frenzy around Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland’s grandfather’s involvement with the occupying Nazi regime in Poland during the Second World War. According to *Maclean’s* columnist Terry Glavin (2017), the story can be traced “through a maze of cranks, propagandists and Putin fanciers” until it reached mainstream

Global Research

<http://globalresearch.com>

Location: Montreal

Founder: Michel Chossudkovsky,
Professor Emeritus,
University of Ottawa

Facebook Followers: 278,431

Twitter Followers: 31,768

Bias:

Extreme left, extreme right,
anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-Maidan,
pro-Kremlin, pro-Assad,
anti-Harper, anti-Freeland,
anti-western

Russia Insider

<http://russia-insider.com>

Location: Greenwich, USA

Founder: Charles Bausman

Facebook Followers: 241,243

Twitter Followers: 35,000

Bias:

Extreme left, extreme right,
anti-NATO, anti-Semitic,
pro-Kremlin

Strategic Culture

<http://strategic-culture.org>

Location: Moscow

Founder: Yuri Prokofiev /
supported by Russian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs

Facebook Followers: 22,792

Twitter Followers: 33,088

Bias:

Extreme left, extreme right,
anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-Maidan,
pro-Kremlin, anti-Freeland,
anti-western

based websites that justify the actions of the Kremlin include 21st Century Wire, Consortium News, New Eastern Outlook, Veterans Today, Counter Punch, and InfoWars.

Russia Today

Russia Today (RT) casts a wide net intended to confuse and manipulate a broad general western audience. In 2010, RT had limited availability, and broadcast was limited to major hotel chains on the US east coast and some cable television systems. In a Russian government-commissioned 2014 Nielsen survey of Washington, DC area viewers, RT was shown to be among the top-viewed international news programs, competing with the BBC. Subsequent surveys have apparently demonstrated growth in other markets, including in Canada (RT 2018a).

In 2008, Kremlin propaganda was considered a problem largely for post-Soviet nations, such as Estonia, Latvia, Georgia, and Ukraine. Western warnings about Russian propaganda were shrugged off as “Russophobia” or the “hysteric paranoia” of diaspora groups (Robinson 2018).

media. The story has been broadly identified as a Russian disinformation campaign. Recent articles on Helmer’s blog also promote other Kremlin positions, including the claim that the Skripal affair – which involved the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in the UK using the Russian Novichok nerve agent – was a UK government conspiracy to incriminate Russia (Helmer 2018).

Russian Government-Sponsored and Pro-Regime Platforms

John Helmer is also a regular contributor to a well-known anti-Semitic (Collins 2018), pro-Kremlin media platform called Russia Insider. In addition to promoting the Russian takeover of Ukraine, the website features a section called “The Jewish Question” (Russia Insider 2018). In 2018, Russia Insider’s editor Charles Bausman claimed that “the ones shrieking the loudest (about Russian election interference) are mostly Jews, and disproportionately female,” and that “the whole ‘Fake News’ phenomenon is fundamentally Jewish.” Of note, Bausman is a frequent guest on RT.

Strategic Culture is another noteworthy Russian media platform that is closely connected to the Kremlin, despite claims of being independent. According to publicly available documents, the Strategic Culture Fund is based in Moscow and its president is Yuri Prokofiev, a former Communist Party chief and one of the leaders of the attempted August 1991 coup against former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. Strategic Culture is also listed as a partner of the official journal of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *International Affairs* (2018). A selection of their articles clearly shows the platform’s anti-NATO and pro-Kremlin bent.⁸ Other conspiracy-

RT / Russia Today

RT.com

Location: Moscow/New York

Founder: Mikhail Lesin/
RIA Novosti/Kremlin

Facebook Followers: 5,339,624

Twitter Followers: 2,600,000 (approx)

YouTube Subscribers: 3,086,720

Bias:

Pro-Kremlin, anti-NATO, anti-EU,
anti-Maidan, anti-Freeland,
anti-western, extreme left,
extreme right

Canadian License is owned by Ethnic Channels Group, as well as Russian state media channels RTVi and Channel One/RTR Planeta (which has produced programs that promote hate towards minorities).

2017). Britain's OFCOM has opened several investigations into RT's broadcasts of false information and news over the past few years (Waterson 2018).

Truth and accuracy remain largely fluid concepts for RT's editors. While the organization makes every attempt to wrap itself in the veneer of a legitimate news organization, RT is largely focused on promoting views supporting the Kremlin's narratives. The world, viewed through the RT lens, is a confusing and upside-down world, where mass murdering dictators like Bashar al-Assad are heroes and 9/11 was an inside job. Those who question Kremlin policy are frequently labelled fascists or worse.

Avoiding or ignoring RT isn't as simple as it may sound. RT boasts 2 million YouTube subscribers and is available to most North American cable TV viewers on their basic news packages – in Canada it is on Rogers 177. Over the past years, RT has engaged in mass promotion of their content on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Solon 2017). Targeted advertising on social media is cheap and effective. For as little as \$15, ads can target up to hundreds of thousands of viewers. With a budget of \$100,000, tens and perhaps hundreds of millions of viewers can be exposed to messaging. While overall cable viewership of RT may be low, general exposure to Kremlin narratives online is high and dangerously unavoidable.

In Canada, RT is available on most basic cable news packages and is frequently made available on basic cable, including Rogers (until August 2018; see Rogers Community Forums 2018), Bell, and other major TV providers. According to the *Globe and Mail*, Canadian cable companies were reportedly paid to carry RT on their systems instead of earning money from subscribers (Robertson 2017).

Yet RT, with its millions of followers and blatant propaganda messaging, is a serious threat to the integrity of a healthy western information environment. Addressing this threat requires serious consideration by western governments, including raising media literacy rates, warning the public about the psychologically manipulative nature of RT's content, and producing effective alternatives.

RT was set up by Vladimir Putin in 2005 to counter what his regime believed was the West's hegemony in the global media environment. It receives nearly \$400 million in annual funding and serves 100 countries in Spanish, French, and Arabic, and with tailored North American and UK programming. Today, RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan has "described the outlet as an unofficial 'soft power' branch of the Russian Defense Ministry." She also went on to label RT as an "info-weapon" (Davis 2018). RT news programming is specifically crafted to provide a media narrative for the Kremlin's positions on foreign policy and to sow doubts about the governments, values, and democracy in the West.

In November 2017, RT had reportedly complied with a US Justice Department request that all media networks whose primary funding is by foreign states register under the *Foreign Agents Restoration Act* (Rudnitsky

WHITE HELMETS EVACUATION

The Syrian White Helmets are an internationally celebrated volunteer organization that operates in parts of Syria to help civilian populations with medical evacuations and other search-and-rescue operations after bombing or gas attacks by Kremlin-backed government forces.

Global Research and other pro-Kremlin and pro-Assad platforms have consistently published articles that are critical of the White Helmets and other humanitarian efforts to help Syria's civilian population. One such piece, titled "'White Helmets': New breed of mercenaries and propagandists, disguised as 'humanitarians' in Syria" (Beeley 2015), is a good representation of the general tone of these articles.

In mid-2018, the Canadian government led an international operation to rescue hundreds of White Helmet volunteers from Syria. When news of the operation emerged, a surge in disinformation about Canada and the White Helmets appeared on various conspiracy theory websites and official Russian State Media (Sputnik 2018b; RT 2018b; Tass 2018b; Tass 2018a). The goal of this disinformation campaign was to polarize international opinion in favour of Russia's position on Syria and to promote the rejection of Canada's decision to accept 250 Syrian White Helmet refugees.

Toronto mayoral candidate and media personality, which claimed that tourists visiting Toronto hotels were complaining about refugees (Sputnik 2018a). In other jurisdictions, the Kremlin has used its media channels to promote similar candidates in order to exacerbate divisions and disrupt political processes.

Canadian issues are covered by RT's local correspondent, Alex Mihailovich, who was once a reporter for the now defunct Canadian Sun News Network. In 2014, an online petition asked Sun News to fire the anchor "for violating Canada's hate propaganda law, by broadcasting hate speech and defamatory fact-twisting in relation to Russia's invasion of Ukraine" (Canadians for Truth and Transparency in Broadcasting 2013). Mihailovich frequently comments on Canadian issues for RT and his Twitter feed is generally biased towards supporting Kremlin positions.

One of RT's anchors, Sophie Shevardnadze (2014), hosts a talk program on the Russian network and recently had former Canadian Defence Minister Paul Hellyer on her show. Hellyer claims that extraterrestrial aliens live among us and insists that the government is keeping evidence of alien life on Earth secret, which reinforces the Kremlin narrative that our government should not be trusted. Hellyer's interview has nearly one million views on YouTube. Many will be shocked a former Canadian defence minister is publicly promoting such absurd conspiracy theorist nonsense.

For the Kremlin, the sophisticated, toxic mix of white and black propaganda creates a win-win situation. Such interviews reinforce the paranoid beliefs of those who are predisposed to believing conspiracy theories. For the broader audience, doubts are also cast about high-ranking government leaders and their positions.

Sputnik

The rebranded RIA Novosti press agency, Sputnik, has a considerably smaller audience than RT. Sputnik presents its propaganda as news, and for laypeople, the content may appear innocuous. A recent Sputnik article included a feature on Faith Goldy, an extreme right-wing

Authors who contributed to Kremlin-supported conspiracy theory platforms are also featured as “expert” commentators on Sputnik. During Ukraine’s Euromaidan protests, Global Research founder Michel Chossudovsky attempted to provide western credibility to the Kremlin position on Sputnik, telling them: “The *New York Times* has been spinning right from the beginning . . . that it [Ukraine] is the flowering of democracy. . . . Well, it’s a bloody lie . . . it’s the flowering of neo-Nazism” (Sputnik 2015b). Also of note, in October 2017, Sputnik published an article (Sputnik 2017c) criticizing Canada’s decision to adopt international Magnitsky legislation, which targets human rights abusers with targeted sanctions. Repeal of this legislation has become a Kremlin foreign policy priority.

Sputnik recently purchased a radio station in Washington, DC, which broadcasts throughout the Metro DC area and is also available on the Sputnik website. Sputnik claims to have made the radio station “available to listeners in DC so that they can form their own opinion instead of relying on rumors and stories spread by certain media outlets” (Sputnik 2017b). One example is the “Fault Lines” program, hosted by Garland Nixon and Lee Stranahan. Nixon claims to be a “progressive Democrat” but has a Twitter profile photo of him speaking on Fox News (Sputnik News 2017a). Nixon’s co-host, Lee Stranahan, has a colourful biography that includes several years at Breitbart and a background in erotic photography (Dickerson 2017). In 2017, Stranahan was quoted as saying, “I’m on the Russian payroll now, when you work at Sputnik you’re being paid by the Russians.” As he continued, “I don’t have any qualms about it. Nothing about it really affects my position on stuff that I’ve had for years now” (Gray 2017).

Russian Language State Media and Local Media in Canada

Aside from RT, Russian state media is available to most Russian-speaking communities in the western world. For many of the 400,000 people of Russian heritage living in Canada, Russian state media channels – NTV, RTVi, and Russia 1 (Planeta RTR in Canada) – are the primary sources of news. Moreover, this news carries a strong pro-Kremlin bias that is anti-western, anti-democratic, and anti-Canadian.

Russian state media actively demonizes NATO and other key western institutions and rejects the values of tolerance, moderation, and democracy fundamental to the core of the nation. For instance, Russian television news promotes discrimination against the LGBT community (York 2013; Cooper 2018). It also promotes completely fabricated news stories, including that the downing of MH17 was the fault of the Ukrainian armed forces. On the Euromaidan protests, historian Timothy Snyder has described how Russian state media “presented the protest as part of a larger gay conspiracy,” labelling it “Gayeuromaidan.” Snyder went on to say, “The Ukrainian regime instructed its riot police that the opposition was led by a larger Jewish conspiracy. Meanwhile, both regimes informed the outside world that the protestors were Nazis. Almost nobody in the West seemed to notice this contradiction” (Snyder 2014).

The Russian-speaking communities in Canada and the West have been bombarded by this outrageous and hateful propaganda, tainting their own perspectives and possibly contributing to them becoming unwitting relays for the Kremlin’s narratives. In Canada, this could, in part, explain the Russian community’s decision to rally around commemorations promoted by the Putin regime, to troll critics in the West, and influence Canadian policy-makers, media, and elections.

Real, independent alternatives to Russian state media exist. Independently-owned newspapers, radio programs, and television shows are printed and broadcast at the national level in Canada. However, they are not immune from Kremlin intimidation. An advertiser with a local

Russian-Canadian newspaper, *Russian-Canadian Info*, received death threats nailed to his office door in 2014–2015 for publicly supporting the Euromaidan protests. The threat of intimidation from Moscow and the Russian embassy in Ottawa always looms for any critics of the Kremlin’s policies, especially Russian-language reporters. These independent journalists and media outlets represent a real credible hope for a mainstream alternative for Russian-speaking Canadians. The Canadian government should support expanded and higher-quality third language news programming as a solution.

Social Media Amplifiers: Trolls and bots in Canada

Beginning in 2007, the Kremlin began experimenting with social media platforms as tools to amplify propaganda and force their foreign policy positions.⁹ Trolling and social media manipulation are not new Kremlin tactics. Vladimir Putin’s agents have had a decade to experiment and hone their expertise – most importantly to manipulate the domestic Russian debate, and secondly to interfere and disrupt foreign debates, policy, and democratic processes.

In 2013, members of Vladimir Putin’s inner circle, lead among them Yevgeny Prigozhin (Lister Sciutto and Ilyushina 2017), established the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, better known as the “Troll Factory.” The impact of these trolls on Canada in comparison to the United States is relatively limited. Of the 3 million tweets released, just 8000 mention Canadian issues. No tweets, according to a file linked from a CBC report, received more than one retweet, making their impact difficult to assess (Rocha 2018a; Rocha 2018b). However, closer analysis of the Twitter accounts linked to known Kremlin proxy groups operating in Canada paints a different picture.

Among the most active and largest trolling accounts in the Canadian Twittersphere is the Russian Embassy in Canada (@RussianEmbassyC). Its tweets are relayed to its 14,000 followers on Twitter and generally target Canadian policy-makers and critics of the Putin regime as well as NATO and other western institutions. Tweets by the Embassy seem to be retweeted by other Kremlin accounts, making the Russian Embassy in Canada a main social media propaganda hub for the Russian Foreign Ministry and Presidential Administration.

SAMPLES FROM 17,847 TWEETS EXAMINED



The Sinister Choreography of the MH17 Probe to Smear Russia
<https://t.co/15cIYkKsQ2> Jun 01, 2018



13 yo Russian girl raped by migrants in #Berlin, #Germany and kept in captivity for days
<https://t.co/TkP0rHKW4D> <https://t.co/...> Jan 18, 2016



Freeland and Bezan, Ukrainians in Ottawa, pressing @JustinTrudeau to push
Russophobic Magnitsky Act at G7, as a res... <https://t.co/ZGbhWEJAAO> Mar 20, 2018



RT @VeraVanHorne: New Canada’s Foreign Minister’s family record of Nazi war
profiteering & murder of Jews (alternative link): <https://t.co/...> Jan 25, 2017



Echoes of mid-century xenophobia in Harper campaign, say historians
<http://t.co/rVIU8kZ9Rg> Oct 14, 2015

In late 2018, we analysed the content of a number of high-profile Canadian (or seemingly Canadian) Twitter accounts connected to the Russian Embassy by using open source tools to download, cross reference and conduct keyword analysis on the tweets. In total, we examined 17,847 tweets from 14 accounts that demonstrated a clear pro-Kremlin bias; all are inter-connected with each other and with known Kremlin propaganda outlets. The accounts demonstrate a pro-regime bias in their tweets and have retweeted news from Russian state media and known propaganda outlets. At the time, the total aggregate number of followers for these accounts was 42,373. It should be noted that only the latest 2500 tweets from each account were available for download. Active accounts, where the user tweets up to 40 times per day, only go back to late spring and early summer 2018, while less active accounts go back to 2015.

Among the tweets are over 200 mentions of Justin Trudeau, 87 mentions of Chrystia Freeland, retweets of known false news, such as the debunked “Lisa” rape story from Germany – in which a Russian-German girl who had disappeared from Germany was falsely reported by Russian media to have been raped by Arab migrants – and multiple tweets promoting the falsification of

The reach of these tweets, in terms of impressions, are into the millions.

the downing of MH17. Not all the tweets directly targeted Canadian politicians or issues, but most were clearly directed at influencing policy direction and opinion. At least 40,000 viewers were exposed, given that the sampled accounts have an aggregate total of 42,373 followers (around 2000 of which are shared). Using publicly available tools, we can conservatively estimate that the reach of these tweets, in terms of impressions, are into the millions.

The activity of online proxies, bots, and trolls focused on amplifying pro-Kremlin narratives is equal, if not greater, on Facebook. At least 35 Facebook pages or groups are run by profiles that are ostensibly based in Canada and have posted content that is anti-western, anti-NATO, anti-Ukrainian, or that amplifies Kremlin narratives. These groups have such names as:

“Vladimir Putin - A Fighter & Strategist Against USA/EU/NATO Imperialism,” “Victory Day Canada,” “Russians in America,” “Russian Global Community,” “USA/EU Corporate Media Lies & Deception: Betraying Own People,” and others. Some of the groups exceed 20,000 members. Collectively, these groups have 94,789 members.

Many of these Facebook groups also seem to be linked to the Russian Congress of Canada in some fashion. Specifically, the most prominent and prolific administrator of these mostly Canadian groups is named Lina Kazakova. She is also the administrator to a group run by Russian Congress of Canada Facebook page (Russian Community of Canada 2018). Of note, the administrator also shares the name of a board member listed for the Russian Congress of Canada (Industry Canada 2018c). Profiles connected to the Russian Congress of Canada seem to control nearly half of the pro-Kremlin Canadian Facebook groups and pages.

Fascists and Zionists: Disfiguring historical facts to justify foreign policy

In 2016, Russian state media captured footage of a man covered with Nazi tattoos at an annual commemoration of Estonian soldiers who died on the Tannenberg Line. This event commemorated those who resisted against the Soviet Red Army as the Germans retreated in 1944. For Russian state media, these images were proof the event was, as the Kremlin always claimed, an Estonian neo-Nazi rally. However, in 2016, Estonian State Police (KAPO) revealed that the man was not Estonian at all, but rather sent from Russia to pose as a “local Nazi activist.” According to KAPO, “the Kremlin-controlled media was naturally eager to pick this up as an example of events in Estonia. As they had to send in an activist to play the role, it showed that the label was difficult to stick and the methods suggest desperation” (2017, 8).

The distortion and falsification of history is a critical component of Vladimir Putin’s domestic and foreign strategy. The Putin regime’s legitimacy depends on the presence of powerful enemies that, they claim, are seeking to undermine and destroy Russia; Putin is presented as the only Russian leader capable of protecting his country and its people.

A classic Soviet tactic was to label all western adversaries as “fascists”; a propaganda tradition revived and expanded by the Putin regime. The fascist label is an extremely useful tool. Russians see it as synonymous with “enemy.” When applied by the state, it requires little in the way of explanation and is simply accepted. In the West, the term has been used interchangeably with “Nazi” to better inflict the greatest amount of propaganda damage.

In the post-war era, Soviet propagandists labeled refugees who fled the Baltic States and other areas controlled by the Soviet Union as “fascists.” Community leaders who emerged in the diaspora were often characterized as “Hitlerites” and “fascists” (Leivat 2018). Today, the term is applied liberally to anyone who disagrees with the Putin regime. Ukraine’s Euromaidan uprising has been characterized as a western-supported “fascist” coup (and simultaneously as a Jewish and gay conspiracy) (Snyder 2014). Defending Russians against fascists (Oliphant 2014) was also used to justify the Kremlin’s illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine. Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia featured a similar justification (Economist 2008). Russia’s aggressive, neo-imperialist, crypto-Soviet foreign policy is then framed as part of Russia’s struggle against fascism.

To ensure its effectiveness, the Kremlin adopted a long-term strategy in the early 2000s to rehabilitate Soviet history, including the bloody legacy of Joseph Stalin. In 2007, newly-issued

Ukraine’s Euromaidan uprising has been characterized as a western-supported “fascist” coup.

Russian high-school history textbooks praised Stalin's leadership (Nemtsova 2010). In 2017, a poll of Russians chose Stalin as "most outstanding" figure in world history followed by Vladimir Putin (Filipov 2017). When asked by filmmaker Oliver Stone about the western perception of Stalin, Putin equated criticism of Stalin with an attack on Russia: "it seems to me that excessive demonization of Stalin is one of the means of attacking the Soviet Union and Russia" (Parfitt 2017).

Part of the Kremlin's strategy has been the manipulation of historic celebrations, specifically the defeat of Nazi Germany on May 9, 1945 (other allied nations celebrate on May 8). Putin's "Cult of Victory" (Prokopeva 2017) presents the Soviet defeat of fascism as an accomplishment beyond mythical proportions. As Russian sociologist Denis Volkov has said, "the use of the cult of victory for propaganda goals naturally adds up to the acquittal of Stalin" (Filipov 2017). In contrast to the somber and dignified events that take place among allied nations, Russia's Victory Day has been transformed into a mass choreographed rally for Stalinist imperialism, its triumph over fascism, and the Soviet occupation of much of Central and Eastern Europe.

The march of the "Immortal Regiment," which have become part of these Victory Day celebrations, is a Kremlin organized and funded event that takes place in cities around the world, including in Canada. Members of the local Russian diaspora dress in Red Army costumes and march in elaborate parades that include Stalinist and Soviet paraphernalia and symbols. At recent Toronto Victory Day rallies, for instance, small children were dressed in Red Army uniforms as props to glorify Soviet might.¹⁰ To the millions of victims and their families who suffered under Soviet repression, these events stir up unspeakable traumas passed from generation to generation.

These rallies organized in Canada, the US, and Europe are designed as propaganda events intended to manipulate our general understanding of history and our views on foreign policy. Local Kremlin proxy groups and organizers invite local politicians to attend. By participating, these politicians and dignitaries often unintentionally legitimize the groups that organize them and the false historical narratives that they promote.

Russian Victory Day and the associated historical propaganda fulfill key Kremlin propaganda objectives:

1. unify the Russian diaspora by tapping into emotional Soviet nostalgia and harnessing the influence of this group;
2. provoke Canadian victims of Soviet terror and discredit diaspora groups critical of Putin by labelling them "fascists";
3. delegitimize claims of sovereignty of those states formerly occupied by the Soviet Union and thereby undermine their participation in NATO and the EU;
4. legitimize modern foreign policy as part of the eternal fight against fascism;
5. legitimize domestic repression as part of the historic struggle against fascism; and
6. create a common label for the enemies of the Russian state.

A Common Cause to Unite Pro-Putin Compatriots

To help unify its diaspora, known as the "Russian World," the Kremlin supports worldwide events that focus on "historical trauma and nostalgic memories of Soviet greatness" (Lucas and Pomerantsev 2016, 8). This necessarily includes the rehabilitation of Stalin and denial of the Soviet occupation and repression across much of Europe. The Kremlin's present version of Russian history focuses on the military strength of Stalin and claims that the Soviet Union was a benevolent liberator and the tens of thousands of civilians deported to Gulag were, in fact, fascists.

Undermining Other Diaspora Groups

In Canada, there are around four million people of Central and Eastern European heritage. Many came to Canada fleeing Soviet and Nazi terror, and many have been critical of the Putin regime's foreign policies. These organizations, including the Central and Eastern European Council, the Baltic Federation, Ukrainian Canadian Congress, Polish Canadian Congress, and others, have raised awareness of the nature of the Putin regime in Canada and helped shape an effective foreign policy towards Russia that is consistent with Canadian values.

The Central and Eastern European community's support for the Euromaidan movement, criticism of Vladimir Putin's foreign policies, and the Kremlin's organization of Victory Day events have also earned them the label of "fascists" by pro-Kremlin media and trolls (Sanders 2017).

Delegitimizing claims of sovereignty

One of Vladimir Putin's primary foreign policy objectives is to undermine the cohesion of NATO and the European Union. Baltic membership in NATO and Ukrainian and Georgian aspirations to join the transatlantic organization are based on the fact that they are sovereign nations. Russian history highlights the factually correct Soviet liberation of these nations in the Second World War from Nazi occupation. However, this is where the truth ends and a toxic mix of denial, falsification, and propaganda take over.

In 2017 NATO produced a short documentary about the history of the Baltic Forest Brothers, a resistance movement against the Soviets (NATO 2017). The Russian government reacted immediately to discredit it, with Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova (2017) writing: "Forest Brothers were created on the basis of fascist remnants who collaborated with German occupational authorities." She went on to dismiss the freedom fighters as pawns of Western intelligence. Dmitry Rogozin, Russian Deputy PM and founder of the extremist nationalist party Rodina, referred to the Forest Brothers as "heirs of Hitler's remnants" (Barojan and Nimmo 2017).

Anyone who challenged or resisted the Soviet occupation is labelled fascist, in an effort to discredit them and the cause of Baltic independence. By denying the occupation of the former Soviet republics, Kremlin propagandists seek to legitimize renewed Russian claims of hegemony over the Baltic and former Soviet region. In the case of Crimea, Russia justified the illegal annexation through historic claims. The fabricated Russian narrative about the Baltic states voluntarily joining the Soviet Union in 1940 may one day also be used as a similar pretext.

Legitimizing Russian Foreign and Domestic Policies

The Putin regime's legitimacy and its domestic and foreign policies are largely dependent on the myth of Great Soviet power and its eternal struggle against fascism. As demonstrated in the case of the Russian neo-Nazi in Estonia, the Putin regime is so desperate to find fascist enemies that it is willing to create them if necessary.

An important Kremlin theme is the notion that "Western governments are fascists." According to pro-Kremlin media, foreign adversaries like NATO are imperialist organizations (Stryker 2017) run by the American fascists (Pear 2018). Domestic Russian human rights and anti-corruption NGOs that are critical of the Kremlin are viewed as "foreign agents" and shut down when funding from western entities is discovered (Human Rights Watch 2018). It can even be seen at annual political indoctrination summer camps for Nashi youth – a pro-Putin political youth movement that was encouraged by the Kremlin and considered a government-organized NGO. At a Nashi

camp in 2008, for example, effigies of the heads of leading Putin critics were placed on wooden pikes, each wearing a Nazi cap (Bäckman 2010). The intent is to discredit pro-democracy leaders as fascists in order to further legitimize Putin's hold on power.

Victory Day and its role in the Kremlin's information war against Canada

The unifying power of the “cult of victory” has not been lost on the Kremlin's proxy groups and propagandists in Canada. Annual Victory Day rallies have been organized in cities across Canada (and indeed around the world). Car rallies in Ottawa (Ruptly 2015), Toronto, Windsor (Rossotrudnichestvo, “Patriotic Motor Rally in Windsor” undated), and Hamilton feature vehicles adorned with Soviet flags and symbols, including the ultra-nationalist orange and black Ribbon of St. George. These events are closely coordinated with Russian government agencies. Victory Day rallies and the march of the “Immortal Regiment” are primary activities of the Kremlin agency responsible for Russian diaspora affairs, Rossotrudnichestvo (“Activities” undated). The events are also supported by the Kremlin's Russkiy Mir Foundation (2017c), which was created by presidential decree in 2007 and funded by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Putin 2007).

In Canada, publicly available web-based documents indicate that the initial organizer of the 2015 Victory Day event was a Canadian charitable organization known as the USSR Veterans Association (“Victory Day 70” undated), as well as the Council of Russian-Canadian Cooperation (Makarov 2015). According to the Canadian Victory Day websites, the organizing committees have also included members of the Canadian USSR Veterans association, the Russian Canadian Congress, and members whose social media profiles are linked to the Russian nationalist extremist group NOD (Nationalist Liberation Movement) (Toronto Victory Day 2018; Victory Day Toronto 2018). Both the Kremlin's Russkiy Mir Foundation (2017a) and TASS reported that 2017 Victory Day rallies in Toronto were organized by the Russian Congress of Canada.

In May 2018, staff from the Russian Embassy in Ottawa participated in the “Immortal Regiment – Victory Day” event (Rossotrudnichestvo, “Rally at the Museum” undated) that was held at the Canadian War Museum. After numerous complaints about the nature of the 2018 event, the National War Museum “concluded that it [Victory Day Celebration] is inconsistent with the mandate of the Museum and the purpose and use of its spaces” and that “the event will no longer take place in the Museum” (Ukrainian Canadian Congress 2018).

These events, organized by Kremlin proxy groups, are intended to unify the Russian diaspora in Canada and to rally them to a common historical cause – the defeat of fascism. They are intended to rehabilitate Stalinist history and undermine the Canadian communities whose nations suffered under Soviet repression. The Kremlin's manipulation of history is an important tactic in its attempts to influence the Canadian government and media to justify its foreign policy.

The Kremlin's Army of Influence: Compatriots, proxies, surrogates

Within a year of the Russian invasion of Crimea and Donbas, a number of Canadian-Russian “grassroots” community groups emerged, claiming to represent Russian community interests in Canada. Much like Kremlin state media, they echo pro-Kremlin narratives on an array of foreign

issues. They are also aligned with Vladimir Putin's stated view from March 2014 that the Russian policy was to protect all ethnic Russians throughout the world (Putin 2014b). In July, Putin clarified the policy by saying "our country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means" (Putin 2014a). The coordination of Russia's significant global diaspora aligned early on with Vladimir Putin's goals of reconstituting Soviet-era regional hegemony.

The first well-publicized effort by the Kremlin to deploy diaspora groups came in 2006, with the formation of "Nochnoy Dozor" or "Night Watch" in Estonia. The group's rationale was to protect a Soviet-era monument from being relocated from the centre of Tallinn. Claiming to be anti-fascist (Kross 2006), they publicly accused several Estonian politicians of being "Nazis" and the Estonian government of being "fascist." In late April 2007, the government decided to relocate the monument to a Soviet war cemetery. In response, the Night Watch called on ethnic Russians to take to the streets. The Estonian Security Police have since stated: "Estonian Russian community and its leaders were directed and supported directly from Moscow and via the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Estonia" (KAPO 2007, 13). Rioting in central Tallinn left one dead and over 100 injured, with the cost of arson, looting, and damage totaling over four million euros.

Clearly the Kremlin recognized the powerful potential of the Russian-speaking diaspora to carry out propaganda campaigns and even attacks to destabilize foreign governments. After 2007, the regime prioritized engaging with Russian communities in efforts to undermine and subvert foreign governments and democracies. Former Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Rogozin was a founding member of the Congress of Russian Communities, whose manifesto calls for "the unification of the Russian people and other peoples of Russia," presumably around the world ("Manifesto").

In 2008, Russian forces invaded Georgia and annexed South Ossetia and Abkhazia under the pretext of protecting Russian compatriots (Associated Press 2008). On August 7, as Russian forces were set to invade Georgia, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev stated: "Under the Constitution and the Federal law . . . I must protect the life and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are" (Reuters 2008). Yet, as US scholar Stephen Blank asks, "what constitutes 'ethnic Russians' in Ukraine? The Russians have played fast and loose with this: Sometimes they mean Russian speakers. Or there is also the new Russian citizenship law that says if your grandparents lived in Russia and Russian is your native language, you can be a Russian citizen" (Conant 2014).

Just as the Soviet Union had previously done, the Kremlin has once again been actively working to develop expatriate organizations beyond the Central and Eastern European region, including Western Europe (Russkiy Mir 2017b), the United States (Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots of the USA 2018), and Canada.

The Kremlin recognized the powerful potential of the Russian-speaking diaspora to carry out propaganda campaigns.

Rossotrudnichestvo and Russkiy Mir

Among the many Russian government organizations set up to support influence and disinformation operations abroad, two of the main funding and support agencies are Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) foundation. Ukrainian historian Dmitry Khmel'nitsky recently wrote that “in the USSR, ties with abroad traditionally were within the competence of state security . . . in post-Soviet times, this situation hasn't changed and therefore Rosstrudnichestvo if you will, can be considered a bureaucratic subdivision of the FSB (Sputnik 2017c)” (Goble 2018).

British researcher Dr. Andrew Foxall says that both Russia's Trade Delegation and Rossotrudnichestvo's offices in London are home to a number of undeclared intelligence officers (Foxall 2018). The Russian Federation also maintains similar offices in Ottawa. The Russian Trade Delegation is linked with a Canadian-Russian trade organization – the Canada Eurasia Russia Business Association (CERBA). Of greater concern is that many of those who were interviewed for Foxall's recent paper told him that “anywhere between a quarter and a half of Russian expats [in London] were, or have been, informants” for the Kremlin (Foxall 2018, 14). With an estimated 150,000 Russian ex-pats living in London, the sheer size of such an informant network is particularly worrisome.

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In an August 2017 report, the Swedish Defence Research Agency notes that Rossotrudnichestvo “is responsible for promoting a positive image of Russia abroad, primarily among Russians and Russian-speakers, but also in more general terms” (Pallin and Oxenstierna 2017, 13). The same report describes Russkiy Mir as being “funded through the federal budget, voluntary contributions and ‘other sources in accordance with Russian legislation...One of the missions of the foundation is to contribute to distributing objective information about Russia and Russian compatriots as well as forming a positive view of Russia among the public” (14).

In 2004, Alexander Chepurin, then head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department for Compatriots Abroad, stated that “the

Russian diaspora abroad provides social and humanitarian support for the implementation of the interests of the Russian Federation in post-Soviet countries” (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 19). Both of these Kremlin-founded, government-organized NGOs support foreign Russian expatriate NGOs and the Orthodox Church to exploit the openness of western liberal democracies in order to advance the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014).

In Canada, Rossotrudnichestvo has at least one officer working inside the Russian Embassy; they provide full time support for coordinating expatriate political activity in the interests of the Kremlin's policies. Other officials in the Russian Embassy were, at least until April 2018, tasked with undermining Canadian democracy and society with various forms of propaganda. Seven Russian propaganda agents were expelled from Canada, in April 2018, for “interfering with Canadian democracy” (Connolly 2018).

Council of Russian-Canadian Cooperation

In Canada, both Rossotrudnichestvo and Russkiy Mir work with the Council of Russian-Canadian Cooperation (CRCC). According to the Canadian Rossotrudnichestvo website, the organization's "active work is carried out with the Coordinating Council of Organizations of Russian Compatriots [Council of Russian-Canadian Cooperation]" (Council of Russian-Canadian Cooperation 2016b). The CRCC (2016a) website notes that the Council was formed in November 2007 when "representatives of the Russian-speaking community of Canada from the provinces of Ontario and Quebec were recommended to participate . . . at the suggestion of the Russian Embassy in Canada."

On its "partners" page, the CRCC (2016c) lists the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and several Kremlin-supported agencies, including Rossotrudnichestvo, Russkiy Mir, the Gorchakov Fund, and the Russian Embassy in Ottawa. The CRCC hosts occasional conferences for Russian compatriot organizations in Canada, where various issues affecting the Russian compatriots are discussed. Conference resolutions are posted on the CRCC website. One of the resolutions adopted at both their 2016 and 2017 national conferences included an unambiguous objective to promote Kremlin narratives in Canada. While the CRCC does not comment overtly on Canadian foreign policy issues, it does actively promote Kremlin narratives on history, including the organization of Victory Day celebrations (Makarov 2015).

It should be noted that the CRCC's sister organizations, like the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots in Estonia, is considered by Estonian counterintelligence to be an agent of the Kremlin and a tool to advance Russia's foreign policy. Russian diplomats frequently participate in the meetings of the CRCC (Rossotrudnichestvo, "Meeting of the Ambassador"), including its founding (CRCC 2016a). Similar organizations exist around the world, including in the United States (Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots of the USA 2018).

Russian Congress of Canada

While the CRCC shies from overt pro-Kremlin political statements, the Russian Congress of Canada (RCC) dives right in. One of its stated objectives is to influence Canadian policy and "nominating representatives of the Russian diaspora for public office in order to voice the interests of the Russian community as a whole." The RCC, formed in 2014, actively promotes the Kremlin's perspective on foreign affairs and attacks the Canadian government when they criticize Russian policy. Even the *New York Times* took notice of the RCC's activities in 2017: "Since it was founded in 2014, the Russian Congress of Canada and its members, including a priest at a Russian Orthodox church in Toronto, have promoted political views strongly aligned with the interests of Mr. Putin" (Levin and Becker 2017).

In an article published by a Kremlin agency, the head of the RCC Committee for Strategic Communications gave a revealing interview about the history and objectives of the RCC (Yefimova 2015). According to the interview, the idea of the RCC originated with Father Vladimir Malchenko of the Russian Orthodox Holy Trinity Church in Toronto, who was also elected as VP of RCC in 2015. Developments in Ukraine in 2014, says the RCC representative, "triggered the creation of the organization, and the changes in Canada's foreign and domestic policy, which took place in connection with this . . . Initially, there was an idea of an organization that had a political bias but over time we realized that it was not enough to engage in politics alone."

The RCC was extremely critical of the Harper government's support for Ukraine's Euromaidan movement, going so far as to accuse the Prime Minister of spreading "outright libel in the me-

dia” about Russia and Vladimir Putin. After the 2015 federal election, the RCC sent a letter to Prime Minister Trudeau that pointed out how a “considerable part of the Russian community made a deliberate choice and gave its vote for you” and “we trust that the Liberal government will improve the relationship between the two countries” (RCC 2015a). Much to the disappointment of the RCC and the Kremlin, the Trudeau government has maintained the Harper government’s positions on Ukraine, NATO, and Russia.

Political Influence Campaigns

In October of 2017, long-time Liberal MP John McKay stood up in Canada’s House of Commons to give a speech in support of Canadian Magnitsky legislation, which targets foreign human rights abusers with asset freezes and visa bans. The following is an excerpt of Mr. McKay’s speech where he mentions a letter he received from RCC’s president:

I received the following letter from the Russian Congress of Canada, dated June 15 and signed by Igor Babalich, president. It would be interesting to know whether the Russian Embassy saw this letter before it was sent . . . It states:

‘The Russian Congress of Canada calls upon the Canadian government to withdraw its support for the proposed legislation, . . . [as it] would set a dangerous precedent . . . further closing dialogue with Russia’ . . .

[Babalich] says: “The death of Sergei Magnitsky was unfortunate indeed.” It certainly was. He then analogizes to the fact that in Canada, 43 prisoners died in 2014 and says that “prisoners die in your facility as well”. As far as I know, none of them have died while being tortured.

This was not the first instance where the RCC had sent letters to Canadian politicians and media in order to influence Canadian policy. A 2017 *New York Times* article states that the RCC “has written scores of letters to Canadian politicians and articles that lobbied against Canada’s involvement in NATO; condemned Ottawa’s criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; and questioned the integrity of Ms. Freeland by citing claims that her Ukrainian grandfather was a Nazi collaborator” (Levin and Becker 2017).¹¹ Other pro-Kremlin positions supported by the RCC include painting Ukrainian-Canadians and the Ukrainian Congress of Canada as extremists (Molchanov 2016); criticizing Canada’s pro-Ukrainian positions and sanctions regime against Russian officials, oligarchs and organizations (Mokrushyna 2017); and promoting Kremlin-organized Victory Day rallies.

RCC, Facebook, propaganda, and nationalist extremism

Lina Kazakova is listed as a director of the Russian Congress of Canada, according to the Industry Canada website. She is named as the president of the 2017 Victory Day organizing committee in Toronto (Victory Day Toronto 2018) and also appears as the moderator of the Russian Congress of Canada Facebook group and several other groups that actively post news with dominantly pro-Kremlin narratives and other stories critical of the West.

Another Facebook group moderated by the same person is linked to the archived Canadian website of a Russian extremist nationalist movement, called NOD (the Nationalist Liberation Movement). NOD calls for the repeal of the current Russian constitution and the reinstatement of the Soviet constitution, which would legally recreate the Soviet Union. Several Russian extremist groups have emerged calling for the same. Members of the NOD have engaged in

xenophobia and violence (Yudina and Alperovich 2017) and the NOD Facebook page contains anti-Semitic content (Truth about Jewish Fascism – Zionism 2016). The movement has adopted the orange and black St. George’s ribbon as its primary symbol, which can be seen at all Victory Day and other Kremlin-supported events, including in Canada.

The apparent links between RCC, the Canadian Victory Day organizing committee, and various Facebook groups raise serious concerns about the anti-western messages that these groups are delivering to thousands of Canadians. These narratives are a direct threat to the cohesion of Canadian society and targeted to turn Canadian groups against each other. While marginal groups like RCC and their social media groups may not have a broad impact on Canadian society, their influence becomes more apparent when consolidated with other Russian state media outlets, organizations, and agents of influence.

RCC and the Repeal of Ontario’s Sex Education Curriculum

The repeal of Ontario’s updated sex education curriculum has been a topic of significant focus for the pro-Kremlin activists in Ontario. Indeed, the Russian Canadian Congress has actively promoted the repeal of Ontario’s sex education curriculum since 2014, when it organized a “scientific and practical conference” on same-sex education on the campus of the University of Toronto (RCC 2014). According to an RCC statement, the MPP for Lambton-Kent-Middlesex, Monte McNaughton – and current Minister of Infrastructure for Ontario – attended the conference (Petrenko 2014). Flyers available for anti-LGBT activists to download and produced by the Campaign Life Coalition list the RCC as an organization partner (Campaign Life Coalition). In April 2015, RCC promoted Russian community attendance at a rally against the curriculum at Queen’s Park (RCC 2015b).

As an organization with strong connections in the Russian Orthodox church, and whose website clearly states the need to “strengthen ideals based on traditional Orthodox values” (RCC, “RCC Manifesto”), the focus on same-sex marriage is consistent with its stated objectives. However, the fact that the repeal of Ontario’s sex education curriculum is the only domestic issue that RCC has focused on since 2014, and that a conference on the issue was the first event organized by RCC, raises serious questions about its objectives.

Influence or Infiltration? NGOs and Russian oligarchs

In 2015, a new human rights NGO, Highway Liberty (HL), emerged in the Toronto area claiming to support LGBT issues in Russia and Ukraine and later championing the cause of internally displaced peoples (IDPs) inside Ukraine. The group’s positions on the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin attracted several Canadian-Ukrainian activists who participated in HL-organized political rallies in Toronto and Ottawa. While the narratives it supported seemed to align with pro-Ukrainian positions, HL’s claims of being a “grassroots” organization were quickly questioned based on the group’s seemingly deep pockets.

In 2015, for instance, three months after incorporating as an NGO, Highway Liberty hired buses to transport pro-LGBT and pro-Ukrainian activists from Toronto to an Ottawa rally; their accommodations and food were paid for by the NGO. Modestly attended protests organized by HL in front of the Russian consulate in Toronto during the long 2015 federal election writ period were attended by MPs (Sputnik 2015a) as well as credible Ukrainian activists. Their participation added legitimacy to the organization. The following winter, HL organized an international conference about IDPs from Eastern Ukraine in Toronto at the Ritz-Carlton, one of the most expensive conference spaces in Canada (Highway Liberty 2016b).

HIGHWAY LIBERTY, SURETA, AND PUTIN OLIGARCHS

Industry Canada (2018b) lists Highway Liberty as being registered to an address in Oakville, Ontario (210-1540 Cornwall Rd.), which is identical to the address for another company, Sureta (2016).¹³ HL's federal corporate information shows only one director, Elena Rodionova, who also appears in Sureta Canada's Ontario corporate listing as Chief Operating Officer and director. The archived HL (2016) website says Artem Gurevich is "a co-founder, organizer and director for Highway Liberty," and "one of the donors of our organization." Curiously, Sureta Canada Limited lists as its president an Andrey Gurevich.

Sureta's archived website from December 2014 shows an address and registration number in Cyprus as the "main" contact. The same Cypriot address and registration number match publicly available information about offshore companies from the OCCRP (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project) website ("Sureta Limited"). The archived website also confirms that the North American address for Sureta is the same as Highway Liberty (Sureta Limited 2012b).

The archived Sureta Canada Limited site claims that the company was involved with several companies and projects in Russia, Moldova, Spain, and China. In 2008, the company became a partner in a massive cement plant, "Yuzno-Uralskaya GPK" with "12,000 employees" (Sureta Limited 2012a). Publicly available Russian corporate registration data confirms that Sureta Limited was a part owner of the company (Oxycom.biz 2018).

Sureta Canada's (2012a) archived website also mentions partnering with the Ural Metallurgical Company (UMK) in 2007. UMK is part of Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov's Metalloinvest

(UralMetCom 2011). Publicly available Russian corporate documents also list a company named UMK-OKHRANA as previous owner of UMK. In its description, UMK-OKHRANA, which ceased operations in 2006, is listed as a private security company that offered, among other services, personal bodyguards. Its primary owner was Evgeni Antonovich Ermolov - that name is very similar to the Evgeni Ermolov listed as Sureta Canada Limited's Chief Information Officer.

The archived Sureta Canada Limited website also mentions ownership of the Rybnitsa Cement Plant, which is also linked to Metalloinvest (Industry About 2018). According to a Russian government website, Andrei Gurevich, who is listed as Sureta Canada's President and Director (under "Andrey Gurevich"), was also CEO of a company, Ural Steel, which is directly linked to Metalloinvest (Ministry of Economic Development 2018; Russian Information Agency 2018).

These multiple, publicly-available links between Sureta Canada Limited and Metalloinvest raise worrisome questions. Metalloinvest's owner is Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov, who is regularly identified as having a very close relationship to Vladimir Putin. Usmanov holds assets abroad including ownership of the Arsenal Football club and a 30.5 percent stake in Toronto-based Nautilus Minerals (2018). Russian anti-corruption activist, opposition leader, and Putin critic Alexei Navalny has said that UK authorities should immediately target Usmanov with Magnitsky sanctions. In 2017, Usmanov sued Navalny over allegations that he was involved in bribing Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev. In January 2018, a group of US Senators, led by Senator Marco Rubio, formally requested that the Trump administration place Usmanov on the US "Oligarch List."

Antonina Kumka, a well-known Ukrainian-Canadian community activist and one of the founders of the Canadian Euromaidan movement, was recruited to join Highway Liberty as a director in 2015. According to Ms. Kumka, HL's positions initially seemed to be aligned with her own pro-democracy and pro-western positions. Yet Ms. Kumka soon found that HL's shifted towards "weakening the Ukrainian community." According to Ms. Kumka, the political messages at the Ottawa rally in August 2015 were very mixed, ranging from LGBT rights to Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea, which created conflicts inside the Ukrainian community. Ms. Kumka ended her role with Highway Liberty in late 2015.¹²

The rapid appearance of an extremely well-funded NGO, without any previous connections to the Ukrainian-Canadian community, is unique. HL initially claimed to advocate for human rights and LGBT issues. But just months later after the 2015 federal election, it switched to criticizing the Ukrainian government's treatment of IDPs from Eastern Ukraine. Notably, the narrative of blaming Kyiv for IDPs in Ukraine is frequently pushed by Kremlin state propaganda outlets (Sputnik 2015a). Indeed, a closer look at the connections between this ostensibly anti-Putin NGO and one of Putin's closest allies and oligarchs (see text box on page 32) raises serious questions about the ultimate objectives of Highway Liberty.

For one, it makes it very difficult to believe that human rights, LGBT, and IDP issues are the true focus of this organization. The confusing mixture of LGBT issues with Ukrainian sovereignty in Crimea and criticisms of Ukraine's handling of IDPs threatened to create rifts in the otherwise unified Ukrainian community – an outcome that fits with the goals of Russian active measures. This is also not the first time LGBT issues have been used by Kremlin propagandists. In an October 2018 court document, when US Federal prosecutors charged a Russian national with election interference, they noted that agents of the Russian Internet Research Agency "used social media and other internet platforms to inflame passions on a wide variety of topics, including . . . LGBT issues".

The Highway Liberty example¹⁴ demonstrates the need for Canadian politicians, community leaders, media, and activists to properly vet individuals and groups before engaging with those claiming to work on sensitive issues connected to Russia, Iran, China, and other authoritarian regimes.

Russian Active Measures and Intelligence

The Main Directorate of the General Staff (GRU), founded as the Registration Agency by Leon Trotsky in 1918, is the foreign military intelligence service of the General Staff of Russia's Armed Forces. The GRU has been characterized as the "'most aggressive and destructive' of Russia's three spy services" (Lucas 2012, 113). Unlike the KGB, which was split into a domestic and foreign intelligence agencies (FSB and the Foreign Intelligence Service [SVR]), the GRU never experienced any significant changes after the fall of the Soviet Union, and its operations have continued with little interruption.

The GRU answers directly to the Russian Ministry of Defense and is focused primarily on operations involving national security. The GRU's outlook has not changed much since the Cold War, as leading Russia expert Edward Lucas (2012, 113) explains: "GRU officers seem to assume that foreign countries have secret plans to attack Russia that must be uncovered . . . GRU officers are trained in the use of force and are quite capable of using it."

Recently, the GRU has made international headlines thanks to the tragically botched poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in the UK, the hacking of DNC and Clinton campaign servers, and the

recent attempted hacking of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) exposed by the Dutch authorities.

The Skripal poisoning is possibly the most worrisome recent GRU operation. It demonstrates that the Kremlin has no reservations about murdering critics on foreign soil nor exposing foreign nationals to deadly substances like Novichok. While the UK government always maintained that the poisoning was a GRU operation, Bellingcat – a UK investigative journalism collective – confirmed this by matching photos of the assassins with publicly available images of GRU officers. The same group found that the fake passport numbers used by the Kremlin agents were sequential, thus exposing countless other fake passports and even agents.

*There is no reason
to believe that
the GRU will not
attempt future hacks
or assassinations
on western soil.*

In July 2018, the Mueller investigation indicted 12 GRU officers in direct connection with hacking during the 2016 presidential election (Indictment, United States v. Netyksho). The 12 were accused of “hacking the email accounts of Volunteers and employees of the U.S. presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton . . . including the email account of the Clinton Campaign’s chairman.” The emails stolen through the hack of the Clinton campaign servers were later passed along to Wikileaks, which released them publicly to discredit Hillary Clinton and her campaign. This stolen data was later used to suppress Clinton voters in key states. Links have been made by journalists to Cambridge Analytica and Canada’s AggregateIQ.

A further seven GRU agents were indicted by the US on October 4 for their involvement in attempts to hack the OPCW in the Hague, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in Montreal, and the investigation into the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 by a Russian surface-to-air missile in 2014. The April 2018 hack of

OPCW was intended to access information and data regarding chemicals used by Russian-backed forces in Syria and the Novichok nerve agent used in the Skripal poisoning. Analysis of the equipment used by the GRU agents also demonstrated that WADA in Montreal had been targeted and so too were servers in Malaysia that contained detailed data regarding the MH17 investigation.

There is no reason to believe that the GRU will not attempt future hacks or assassinations on western soil, including Canada. Counter-measures, starting with cyber security awareness campaigns, must be developed. Close monitoring is also required to protect Kremlin critics living in Canada.

It is unknown how many GRU agents are currently working inside the Russian embassy in Ottawa. In the 1940s, according to Soviet defector Igor Gouzenko, the Red Army Colonel Nikolai Zabolin (Clement Consulting 2018) ran GRU operations and had some 14 agents stationed in Ottawa, along with some 14 assets across Canada (Tashereau and Kellock 1946, 20–22). Further information can be gleaned from the case of Canadian naval officer Jeffrey Delisle, who passed along Canadian military secrets to GRU officers working inside the Russian embassy in 2007. In response, the Harper government expelled four Russian “diplomats” believed to be GRU agents (Moore, Moore, and Baluja 2012).

To get a sense of the possible Russian intelligence presence in Canada, it might be useful to ascertain their numbers in other countries. In the UK, according to Soviet defectors, the Soviet Union had 39 intelligence officers, including KGB and GRU. This number remained largely unchanged as late as 2010. Yet more recent estimates place the number as being significantly higher – according to British researcher Andrew Foxall (2018), as high as 200 case officers handling upwards of 500 agents, and potentially far more informants within the broader Russian expatriate community (11). Swedish intelligence also estimates that one-third of the staff working in the Russian embassy in Stockholm are spies. That same general estimate can likely be applied to Canada, given Canada’s position of influence in the G7, NATO, and other international bodies (AFP 2015).

Systema Schools and Recruitment

Security experts have sounded several warnings about Russian Systema “martial arts” schools as recruiting stations for Russian intelligence and incubators of potential agents. Around the world, the schools have reported “links to the GRU military intelligence or FSB domestic intelligence services in Russia” (Rettman 2017). According to Dmitrij Chmelnizki, a Berlin-based Russian espionage expert, “the GRU’s fifth column there [in Germany] could number up to 315 recruits” based upon an estimate of “approximately three to five agents on average for a training group” (Rettman 2017). Systema groups in Cyprus, Greece, and Italy “openly use the insignia of Russian military or domestic intelligence” (Applebaum 2018).

A Systema school in Toronto is the world headquarters of a global network of 250 schools around the world. Notably, the school’s two founders are former members of Russia’s special forces.¹⁵ Experts have warned that the international Systema schools have been developing a system of Russian intelligence sleeper cells. According to German journalist Boris Reitschuster, who reviewed western intelligence documents about Systema, while the vast majority of students are completely innocent, several people in Germany have actually been recruited (Deutsche Welle 2016). The tactics aren’t new and were used widely by the KGB in Germany and elsewhere during the Cold War. What is most concerning about the Systema schools is that the Kremlin has used paramilitary forces to support their objectives in other conflict situations, including Ukraine.

Business and Civil Society

The considerable power of civil society on western discourse and policy debate has not gone unnoticed by Kremlin strategists. Well-organized civic groups have the capacity to connect and influence government decision-makers and media.

While we should view with a critical eye the discussion of Russia by groups and companies that have Kremlin connections or do business in Russia, there is no indication that the views of these organizations or their representatives are not honestly held, or that they would engage in any collusion, collaboration, or subversion. Russian proxies and agents of influence are dealt with in other sections of this paper.

The point is that the Kremlin seeks to influence Western institutions and media. Key among the Kremlin’s efforts to engage civil society was the Valdai Discussion Club. This group began in

2004, when the Valdai Club “was organized for the first time...on the initiative of the Kremlin” (Herpen 2016, 59).¹⁶ The club was meant to provide a group of international academics whose views might support the Kremlin’s, in what Carnegie Moscow Center’s Nikolai Petrov (2008) has called “a project used as blatant propaganda by the Kremlin” and the Brookings Institution’s Lilia Shevtsova has termed “Kremlin-staged ‘operas’” (Shevtsova 2013, 36).

Indeed, Lilia Shevtsova has noted that “experts who go to Valdai pull their punches when writing about Putin. Experts who go want to be close to power and are afraid of losing their access. Some might believe that they can use Valdai as a platform for criticism, but in reality their mere presence at the event means they are already helping legitimize the Kremlin” (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 21). According to Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss (2014), the Valdai Discussion Club is “less of a soft power tool to communicate Russia’s message and more of a decoy to foster an illusion” (21). Others, such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ Andrew Kuchins, who directs their Russia and Eurasia Programs, have called the Valdai Club “one of the most effective Kremlin PR projects” (Institute of Modern Russia 2012).

The Canadian member of the Valdai Club Advisory Board is Carleton University professor Piotr Dutkiewicz. The Centre for Governance and Public Management (CGPM) at Carleton University, which Professor Dutkiewicz has helped head, entered into a partnership with Valdai in 2012, according to a CGPM (2012) webpage.

In 2017 the Valdai Club was meeting at the same time that Canada passed its Magnitsky legislation, targeting Russian and other international officials who violate human rights. When Vladimir Putin spoke, Professor Dutkiewicz was given the lead Western question: “Are you not worried about the consequences of this process? Would you mind commenting on this fact?”¹⁷ The soft question led to Putin’s angry reaction to the sanctions (Blanchfield 2017). After the appointment of Chrystia Freeland as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Professor Dutkiewicz also warned about Freeland’s “anti-Russian” bias.

Members of the Canada Eurasia Russia Business Association (CERBA) can also be relied upon to provide positive spin on almost any Kremlin actions. Most members engage in some form of business in Russia. Among them is Bombardier, which is partnered with one of the most corrupt Russian state firms, Russian Railways, in a joint venture. A former Canadian diplomat, Christopher Westdal, also serves on the board of CERBA. In a 2012 interview, Westdal tried to polish Vladimir Putin’s image as a corrupt, repressive authoritarian. According to Westdal, “Russia is not going to hell, Russia has come from hell, Putin is genuinely popular in Russia . . . he is already one of the finest leaders Russia’s had in centuries” (Campbell 2012). This characterization is a bizarre contrast with the commonly accepted reality.

Business connections continue to help keep the ultra-corrupt former boss of Russian Railways, Vladimir Yakunin, off Canada’s sanctions lists (he has been on the US and Australia’s* lists since 2014). In 2015, the *Toronto Star* reported that “Yakunin’s business ties with Canada run deep . . . underlining his close personal friendship with Bombardier CEO Pierre Beaudoin, describing him as ‘family’ and someone he ‘likes very much and respects very much’” (Brewster 2015).

Canadian media and policy-makers should be well aware of which Canadian corporations, academics, former diplomats, and politicians are members of CERBA and exercise appropriate discretion when engaging with them on any Russia-related issues (CERBA, “Board of Directors”). The risk of compromising western alliances and foreign policy is illustrated by former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s reckless collaboration with Vladimir Putin and Gazprom on the Nord Stream projects. Canada cannot afford to allow similar compromises in the name of shared, narrow business interests that benefit Vladimir Putin and his corrupt oligarchs.

*Correction: Due to an editing error, an earlier version of the paper had mistakenly said US and EU lists.

Manipulating elections: 2019 and beyond

Statements by the Russian Ambassador to Canada after the 2015 election clearly betray the Kremlin's satisfaction with the outcome. On the website of the Kremlin's diaspora coordination agency, Rossotrudnichestvo (2018), Russian Ambassador Darchiev is quoted as saying: "the Liberal government that came to power last year decided to abandon the strange and very non-Canadian way of dealing with our country with frankly Russophobic positions." This is not to say that the Kremlin affected the outcome of the 2015 election, but they certainly tried, both through influence campaigns and, as noted by Trudeau, direct (albeit minor) attempts at interference.

According to a recent report by Canada's Communications Security Establishment, "in 2015, during the federal election, Canada's democratic process was targeted by low-sophistication cyber threat activity" (Canadian Centre for Cyber Security 2018). Indeed, the Kremlin appeared to have anti-Harper bias and a preference towards electing Justin Trudeau's Liberals – at least based on a search of known social media trolls and Kremlin proxy organization accounts, which was only amplified by pro-Kremlin proxy groups and influence agents.

In 2018, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau later confirmed to an audience at the Council on Foreign Relations that Canada's 2015 election was targeted with interference, though not "in the way that other countries have experienced" (Council on Foreign Relations 2018, 21:33:00). Yet, with Canada and other western nations having scheduled elections in 2019, we should expect an acute acceleration in attempts to manipulate national and provincial debates on issues including attempts to agitate issues that threaten to divide society.

Canada, and other western countries, should heed the lessons from the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 US Presidential elections. As the former top State Department diplomat in charge of US-Russia relations notes, Obama had failed to take "countermeasures" – both "overt and non-overt" – "that would have raised the cost" on Russia and possibly prevented further incursions. In part, she said, the US intelligence community delayed too long in responding. "The attribution from the intelligence community, frankly, came far later than it should have" (Glasser 2018).

The emergence of fringe right- or left-wing parties, especially those associated with xenophobic and libertarian causes, should also raise red flags in western nations. The Kremlin has tended to support such movements, such as with the French National Front, bankrolled directly by the Kremlin, Alternative for Germany (AfD), Hungary's Jobbik (Policy Capital 2015), Italy's Five Star Movement, Greece's left-wing Syriza and right-wing extremist Golden Dawn, and UK's UKIP.

Attacks on Digital Democratic Infrastructure

The greatest threat is that Canadian electoral systems and processes could be directly attacked, much as they were in the US presidential election. An anonymous source, familiar with security protocols with one of the major federal political parties, says that security protocols currently in place are quite weak; that reflects a lack of concern and fundamental understanding about the threats facing Canadian democracy. Party and voter lists can be hacked, accessed with little effort, and used to manipulate voter turnout and, in the most extreme cases, results. The objective for foreign hackers in 2019 will likely be to suppress voter turnout and deepen existing divisions by fueling debate around sensitive issues – much like the debate over the repeal of Ontario's sex education curriculum in 2018.

Voter Fraud

The city of Markham, north of Toronto, offered residents the ability to register as voters for the 2018 municipal elections online. Voters simply needed to fill out the online form with their name and address, and then submit a photo of three pieces of identification – one of which needed to be a utility bill. All three could be photographed at once. There is no indication that these forms of ID would be checked at a later date to verify their authenticity.

The current system is highly vulnerable to voter fraud, in that a motivated individual or group could forge documents in order to increase numbers on voter registration lists. An individual not living in the city of Markham could take a photo of an Ontario drivers' license, birth certificate, and utility bill, change the address and name in any readily available photo editing program, and submit the edited photo as evidence of ID. The voter would then be added to the voters list and be eligible to vote.

Electronic voting systems have also been proven vulnerable to hacking even when they are not connected to the Internet. Systems in several US states were hacked and manipulated in 2016.

FIGURE 2: STEP-BY-STEP EXAMPLE OF PHISHING

-  **1 HACKER PURCHASES A DOMAIN**
Hacker purchases a URL that sounds credible like a major email provider such as: "GOOGLE-PASSWORD-REST-3345.NET."
-  **2 HACKER ACQUIRES SERVER SPACE**
Hacker purchases server space to create a website using the acquired domain to exactly mirror the password reset page of a major email service provider (or any other service that has a password reset page). Users must believe that this is a credible reset page.
-  **3 HACKER DESIGNS FAKE PASSWORD RESET WEBSITE**
Hacker designs site and password reset page that will be sent to a targeted user. The page will ask user to submit their existing password and subsequently enter a new password. When submitted, the page saves the inputted information and is programmed to send an alert to the hacker that a password has been captured.
-  **4 HACKER DETERMINES TARGET EMAIL ADDRESS(ES)**
Hacker acquires email addresses of individuals inside an organization that is targeted (gmail, yahoo, outlook, etc).
-  **5 HACKER SENDS REPLICA PASWORD RESET EMAIL**
Using the domain in step 1 and server in step 2, the hacker creates an email that mirrors the password reset email used by the email provider of the targeted individual. The email might say something like: "We have detected that your account may have been hacked, please reset your password by clicking on the link below."
-  **6 USER TAKES THE BAIT AND REVEALS PASSWORD TO HACKER**
The targeted user, then clicks on the link in the email, and is prompted to type in their "old" password into a field. They are then asked to submit "new" passwords. Their email may have been hacked, please reset your password by clicking on the link below."
-  **7 ACCOUNT IS HACKED**
The hacker can now access the email account of the target and can
 - a) change the password
 - b) download all emails
 - c) use the account for nefarious purposes
 - d) use the account to reset passwords on other accounts including entire networks
 - e) spread malware to other unsuspecting users using the account.

Source: author

Hacking Voter and Party Lists

In June 2017, Vladimir Putin told reporters that a child could have easily hacked the US presidential campaign. We now know that he was fully aware of how his GRU agents performed the hack, and that the process was indeed remarkably uncomplicated.

In essence, the Russians used some easily created online tools to trick Democratic Party and Clinton campaign officials into giving up their email passwords in a process called phishing. This information was then used to access and steal emails from their accounts and access other systems, including analytics and voter data. Emails were stolen and passed to Wikileaks, who released them on behalf of Kremlin agents. Stolen voter data were used to suppress votes in key battleground states, Wisconsin and Michigan. See figure 2 for an infographic on the steps taken.

The same strategy and tactics used by the GRU in the US will undoubtedly be deployed again in other jurisdictions, including in Canada. Our election processes could be better protected with good security protocols, openly available security tools, and common sense; however they need to be deployed at all levels of our electoral system – including election officials, party officials, and campaign staff.

Party Lists and Campaign Data

Among the most important assets of any political campaign are its voter and supporter lists. With them, campaigns identify who their supporters are and where they need to do more work to raise their support. On election day, they use the lists they've compiled to get out the vote. National party staff often have access to supporter and donor databases and national analytics. In less secure environments, local campaign staff may have access to databases. In the least secure campaigns, canvassers who drop in might have access to electronic and physical lists and data.

If a rival, a simple hacker, or a state-sponsored agent obtained access to party or campaign servers and these lists they could use them in any of the following ways:

1. send supporters to the wrong polling place;
2. send false/fake news to supporters via phone or email to change their voting intention or to keep them from voting at all;
3. manipulate data to give false information to the campaign;
4. steal data and emails to release to the public in hopes of damaging candidate or party reputation; or
5. access national servers and carry out any of the above on a national level.

Developing an operation to obtain a password from campaign staff is simple and cheap. Even a highly intelligent and competent individual like Clinton campaign chair John Podesta fell for the GRU's phishing attempts. Once an email has been hacked, more sophisticated malware and trojan horse attacks can be undertaken using the compromised email account. From the compromised account, the hacker can attach a small program to a Word or Excel file, which will execute once the recipient of the email opens the file. Once the recipient opens the attachment, the hacker could gain access to the infected computer or record the keystrokes, giving the hacker information about other passwords and files – and access to critical servers.

To minimize this risk and close the vulnerability, all campaign staff at both the national and local levels need to be trained in proper security protocol. Some of the key measures that should be

put in place include two-factor security for all emails and systems with sensitive data and avoidance of software (such as Kaspersky) or devices (such as those made by Huawei) known to be compromised by foreign governments and agents. As fundamental and basic as these simple steps may sound, the vast majority of political campaigns, government institutions, companies, and other organizations with sensitive information do not use them.

Recommendations

As Canada approaches the 2019 federal elections, the government must pay closer attention to disinformation and influence campaigns that target Canadian media, decision-makers, civil society, and other groups. Ottawa should develop a Communications and Digital Democracy Strategy that brings together key Ministries – including National Defence, Public Safety, Global Affairs, and Democratic Institutions, as well as Canadian intelligence agencies – to actively monitor and develop measures to safeguard Canadian democracy against manipulation by disinformation, foreign intelligence active measures, cyber attacks, and influence campaigns.

The 2018 G7 joint statement to counter disinformation and election interference is a positive step. To build on this, Canada should work in consultation with offices and agencies of allied governments and supranational organizations that work on disinformation and anti-propaganda, such as the US Department of State's Global Engagement Center, NATO's StratComm Centre in Riga, and the EU's East StratCom Task Force, among others. A dedicated office, the National Centre for Strategic Communications and Digital Democracy, should be created and tasked with five primary activities:

1. Monitor, detect, and identify disinformation and influence campaigns via:

- media monitoring,
- mapping out proxy groups and organizations,
- analytics development, and
- monitoring and detecting cyber threats.

The identification and monitoring of disinformation and its sources requires resources and staff that understands how disinformation, propaganda, and active measures are developed and executed. This includes recognizing white, grey, and black propaganda, its sources, and spaces in which they are distributed and who are its intended targets. Understanding and mapping out proxy groups, networks, camouflaged civil society groups, academics, and others require staff who comprehend how state actors and intelligence agencies use such entities to help carry out their influence campaigns.

The Centre will need to work with organizations that have developed analytics systems, such as the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy's Digital Public Square, to better understand propaganda and radicalization dynamics online, to help guide and inform counter-narrative efforts, and to measure its effectiveness. In addition, it should draw from proven polling operations, target audience studies, and academic research. Working with the Centre's global partners, capabilities need to be developed to monitor and detect potential cyber threats against our electoral processes, including attempts to manipulate Canadian public opinion, media, and decision-makers.

Information collected and analysed should be made publicly available for media, decision-makers, the business community, and the general public, so as to help them understand which news is real, which is fake, and whose interests are represented when experts speak in the media.

2. Develop strategies to combat and disarm disinformation and influence campaigns:

- implement a national media literacy campaign for decision-makers, media, civil society, and the public including public service announcements and education campaigns;
- work with cable providers to ensure television-based propaganda platforms, like RT, are only available on a stand-alone basis and not bundled with basic cable packages;
- regulate propaganda programming with ratings and warnings – much like how sex, drug use, violence, and language are labelled;
- advocate for major search engines to add conspiracy theory and disinformation platforms, like Global Research, Sputnik, InfoWars, and Russia Insider, to their restricted search, like pornography sites;
- enhance the capacities of and empower positive third-party messengers, whether they are governments, NGOs, or other entities;
- rapidly develop content to respond to and dispel disinformation to media, NGOs, and other groups in multiple languages;
- cooperate with international partners where disinformation about Canada emerges; and
- promote the development of transparent domestic media channels (including CBC services, OMNI Television, and other existing domestic ethnic content and news organizations) that challenge state-sponsored media (Russia 1, NTV, IRNA, and so on).

Media literacy is the best defence against disinformation and propaganda. The Centre must develop a Canadian national media literacy strategy to promote greater critical thinking among all Canadians when consuming information. This same literacy strategy must be applied to Canadian communities that are targeted by third language news including Russian, Iranian, and Chinese. Public service announcements must be developed to explain how to identify disinformation and the platforms that promote false news, and the risks of relying on social media as a primary source of news. Starting media literacy education early is also important; campaigns that focus on school-aged children in provincial curriculums can use materials and education tools created by the Centre.

Cable and satellite providers should only provide access to RT and other forms of raw propaganda as stand-alone channels. Such channels should also be levied an additional charge as part of their license and labelling of content and channels through CRTC regulations should be considered. Viewer warnings must be placed on all foreign propaganda channels to inform unaware viewers of the nature of the information they're consuming, similar to what the CRTC already requires for content that contains sex, violence, language, and drug or alcohol use.

The Centre should help expand the capacity of Canadian media, NGOs, and community groups to dispel disinformation and propaganda with facts and the promotion of media fact checking. It can also support the development of transparent domestic media, including channels and platforms in communities at risk of being targeted by foreign disinformation including the Russian, Iranian, and Chinese communities.

3. Increase cyber literacy and security awareness

Our democratic institutions and processes are at risk of being attacked. This is not a theoretical risk. It is imperative that literacy and awareness about vulnerabilities are increased and simple measures implemented to mitigate risks. With the cost of hacking estimated to be \$3–\$5 billion annually, a national cyber literacy strategy that promotes personal security protocols could save Canadians and the Canadian government billions of dollars (Canadian Press 2017).

Personal and Corporate Cyber Security

Canadians should be made aware of the methods hackers and fraudsters use to access personal information – including phishing and malware attacks, phone scams, and web scams. Personal security measures, such as strengthening passwords and not providing personal information over email or the phone in response to unsolicited requests, are basic measures that can be communicated.

Political Cyber Security

All national, provincial, and local election officials and political party campaign staff should undergo cyber training in order to recognize and understand cyber risks and vulnerabilities. They should be familiarized with measures needed to protect their electronic accounts and communications from hacking, as well as their institutional infrastructure – servers, databases, and so forth. The measures below also apply for corporations and other large organizations.

Basic awareness training includes:

- recognizing potential phishing attacks designed to capture passwords;
- recognizing emails that could potentially carry malware intended to track keystrokes and take over computers, phones, and other devices;
- never clicking shortened links in emails or websites without knowing where they might lead;
- ensuring proper password protocols and appropriate roles and permissions for campaign staff who are working on servers and database lists, which means
 - local campaign staff should not have access to national databases or systems and only small number of staff should have the ability to manipulate data;
 - two-factor password verification for all accounts and systems that require user login;
 - using secure cloud-based systems (such as G Suite) to share documents and avoid sharing of documents via email; and
 - using secure email systems such as Gmail or ProtonMail.

4. Work with social media and other tech companies to:

- curb the spread of disinformation using their networks;
- identify troll and bot accounts;
- ensure that the privacy of users is protected;
- identify companies and individuals whose user information has been stolen and used to inappropriately target them with propaganda; and
- open dialogues with other jurisdictions and governments that are working on strengthening privacy and coordination with social media firms, including Australia, where the Assistance and Access Bill is being debated (Department of Home Affairs 2018).

5. Expand existing and develop new international partnerships with various domestic and international organizations to help carry out monitoring, detection, and counter-disinformation activities, such as:

- domestic civil society groups including ethnic community and religious leaders;
- Canadian and allied intelligence gathering organizations;
- international civil society groups, including think tanks and academic organizations;
- supranational groups such as NATO and the EU; and
- international allied governments, including the US State Department and the UK government.

Conclusion

When developing strategies and policies to combat foreign disinformation, governments must do so with the fundamental understanding that it is our democracy that is being targeted for subversion. The information warfare that the Kremlin is currently engaged in against Canada and its allies is *total*, and its objective is to tear apart our society and undermine our trust in our government, media institutions, and each other.

Election outcomes are not the primary focus of this warfare, but a measure of the overall success of the Kremlin's disinformation and active measures campaigns. The rot and decay of our democracy and the trust we have in our media, leaders and allies is what Putin seeks to cultivate and grow. The threat is one that is ongoing and persistent. It does not start when an election writ drops, nor does it end after the final ballots are counted.

The Canadian government, in concert with its allies, must address this relentless campaign, not only by monitoring disinformation, but by actively raising awareness and educating media, policy-makers and all Canadians about the threats and how to recognize them. As western societies continue to limit their media consumption to social media platforms, we must promote diversification that includes traditional professional media. We must also support the development of credible media alternatives to state run and supported platforms, especially third language domestic media. A credible and professional Canadian alternative to state media can help ween local ethnic communities away from the state spun narratives that are aimed to manipulate viewers.

Social media platforms are being effectively exploited by state actors, trolls and other supporters in order to manipulate Canadians and local ethnic communities. Western governments must work with owners of social media platforms in order to develop coordinated strategies to promote media literacy among users so that they can recognize disinformation and false news and make an informed decision about consuming it. While legislation that requires groups that purchase political advertising on social media platforms to be named is welcome, policy-makers must recognize that nefarious state actors will likely use false identities, domestic proxies and proxy groups to circumvent any such regulations and that social media will continue to be a primary platform used to distribute false news.

As long as Vladimir Putin remains in power, so too does the menace of information warfare and the escalating danger of allowing our own democracies to spin into the venomous political dysfunction that we have see in the US and elsewhere. Canada's response must be robust and take into account all sources and methods of how foreign information warfare and democratic interference are conducted. Most importantly, we must be prepared for a very long fight.

About the Author



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Marcus has a focus on communications and media strategies as tools of foreign policy and defence, and continues to write commentary for national and international media including the Globe and Mail and Toronto Star. He is the co-founder and publisher of UpNorth.eu, an online magazine that features analysis and political and cultural news from the Nordic and Baltic region. He frequently com-

ments on Russian, Eastern and Central European issues on North American radio and television and at foreign policy conferences.

Marcus is involved with international human rights organizations and national political organizations. In 2008 he spearheaded an effort to make August 23rd, the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a Canadian national day of remembrance for the European victims of Nazism and communism – Black Ribbon Day – by drafting a parliamentary resolution that was introduced and passed by Hon. Bob Rae. In 2015, Marcus was awarded the Estonian Order of the White Star by President Toomas Hendrik Ilves.

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Endnotes

- 1 Former Putin campaign strategist Gleb Pavlovsky has noted that in Soviet times, Kremlin propagandists took great care to ensure that the facts they presented to domestic and foreign audiences secured at least the perception of truth. According to Pavlovsky, truth has been completely abandoned as Kremlin propagandists create new realities to manipulate public discourse and foreign policy. See Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, 2014, *The Menace of Unreality*.
- 2 *Historical Dictionary of American Propaganda*, s.v. “disinformation.”
- 3 A list of recent articles (which are republished by the *Halifax Chronical Herald* and *Hill Times*) demonstrate Taylor’s overall direction: 2018, “On Target: Defence dollars spent in Latvia better spent at home in Canada,” *Esprit de Corps*, February 5; 2018, “On Target: No denying Latvia’s Nazi past,” *Esprit de Corps*, March 12; 2017, “Nazis, NATO, and Canada’s Latvian Love-in,” *Canadian Dimension*, March 19; 2018, “Canada Should Denounce Those Who Glorify Latvia’s Nazi Past,” *Hill Times*, March 14; 2017, “On Target: Nazi connections: Minister Freeland deflects and Latvia openly celebrates,” *Esprit de Corps*, March 13; 2017, “On Target: Latvia deployment unnecessary, wasteful,” *Chronicle Herald*, May 14; 2017, “Nazi Monuments Uncomfortable Canadian Truth,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 2.
- 4 For articles that have been critical of Canada’s support for states targeted by Kremlin aggression, including Ukraine and Latvia, and have essentially parroted the Kremlin’s tailored narratives about those nations being neo-fascists, see David Pugliese, 2018, “Canadian Government Comes to the Defence of Nazi SS and Nazi Collaborators but Why?” *Ottawa Citizen*, May 17; David Pugliese, 2017, “Why Deny the Ukrainian Nazi Connection?” *Ottawa Citizen*, October 27; David Pugliese, 2014, “How NATO Backed Russia Into a Corner,” *Ottawa Citizen*, September 4; David Pugliese, 2018, “NATO General Says There Hasn’t Been Any Russian Aggression Against Baltic States,” *Province*, March 9; David Pugliese, 2017, “Chrystia Freeland’s Granddad Was Indeed a Nazi Collaborator – So Much for Russian Disinformation,” *Ottawa Citizen*, March 8.
- 5 For instance, among the three million Kremlin troll tweets recently analysed by US researchers, some were found to stoke fears of refugees “flooding in” to Canada. See Robert Rocha, 2018, “Data Sheds Lights on How Russian Twitter Trolls Targeted Canadians,” *CBC News*, August 3.
- 6 Among some of the titles of recent articles appearing on Global Research are: Brian Cloughley, October 10, 2018, “Britain and NATO Prepare for War on Russia in the Arctic,” Peter Korzun, October 5, 2018, “US Openly Threatens Russia with War: Goodbye Diplomacy, Hello Stone Age,” Carla Stea, January 22, 2018, “The Social and Economic Achievements of North Korea,” and Garikai Chengu, March 9, 2018, “Libya: From Africa’s Richest State Under Gaddafi, to Failed State After NATO Intervention.”
- 7 Good examples include David Pugliese and Scott Taylor. See <https://www.globalresearch.ca/author/david-pugliese> and <https://www.globalresearch.ca/author/scott-taylor>.
- 8 Among the recent stories on this regime platform are: “Why Canada Defends Ukrainian Fascism,” “Lament for Canada,” “NATO Coordinates Information War on Russia,” and “Paving the Road to the End of NATO.”
- 9 This author experienced this firsthand, having endured several troll attacks. The first took place following Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia. Several years earlier, the author had directed and produced a documentary film about his grandfather’s experience in and escape from Stalin’s

Gulag slave labour camps in 1941-1943. The full documentary can be found at <https://vimeo.com/116824266>. In 2008, the trolls created a false Facebook profile of the author's grandfather, using a photo found on the Internet, and proceeded to post neo-fascist content on the profile before Facebook finally removed the account. The entire episode came to an end with a death threat against the author.

- 10 An archive webpage that depicts these children in Soviet uniforms can be found at https://web.archive.org/web/20181207012253/https://www.victoryday.ca/wp-content/gallery/celebration-in-downtown-2017/AUA_9672_w.jpg.
- 11 The piece refers to a 2017 letter that was sent from the RCC to the Prime Minister titled, "Appeal to Prime Minister Trudeau to question Minister Freeland's integrity." In it the RCC attacked Minister Freeland's qualifications, and attempted to smear her as being sympathetic to Nazis. See Igor Babalich 2017.
- 12 A Russian-Canadian human rights activist, who prefers to remain anonymous for safety reasons, was also recruited to join Highway Liberty in 2015. The activist was called in for an interview and first asked to name other lead activists in the Ukrainian and anti-Putin community in Canada. "They offered me \$40 per hour to be at their office full time and write content for their social media including other responsibilities," says the activist. He declined the offer, but the organization continued their recruitment efforts.
- 13 Both Google, the company website, sureta.ca, and Sureta Canada's Ontario corporate listing confirm this address. A visit to the building also confirms that Sureta Canada occupies that address in Oakville. The author can personally attest to this fact.
- 14 Highway Liberty was dissolved in October 2017. As a footnote to this saga, a former Highway Liberty member registered another non-profit human rights organization, the Foundation for Human Rights for Eastern Europe (Industry Canada 2018a). Its registered address, as well as its directors, among whom is Maxim Tyulenin, is listed as 163 Chartwell Rd., Oakville - the same address listed by the director of Highway Liberty and Chief Operating Officer of Sureta Canada Limited, Elena Rodionova. An Internet search of the address brings up various real estate listings for a palatial mansion, which is listed for sale at \$11,388,888 (Luxury Real Estate 2018).
- 15 Vladimir Vasiliev was a member of the elite Spetsnaz, whose responsibilities, according to Vasiliev, were "counter-espionage, to remove something, to steal a piece of information or an object. Or to kidnap a person or to kill" (Hooper 2002). The school's other founder is Moscow-based Mikhail Ryabko, whose biography states he holds the active rank of Colonel and has served as a Special Adviser to the General Prosecutor of the Russian Federation (Systema Downtown, "Founders;" Systema 2013). Russia's Prosecutor General heads the Investigative Committee and is generally viewed as the most powerful element within the Russian judicial system. Current Russian Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika was placed on the US Magnitsky Human Rights Sanctions list in December 2017.
- 16 Critics may claim that the Valdai Club was ostensibly created by independent entities. But one of the first co-organizers was the state-owned RIA Novosti news agency and it is absurd to argue that a club with such high profile participants would be created without full Kremlin sanction. For more on the Valdai Club, see: Herpen 2016; Institute of Modern Russia 2012; Petrov 2008; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014; Shevtsova 2013.
- 17 A transcript of this session can be found at <http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/putin-meets-with-members-of-the-valdai-club/>.



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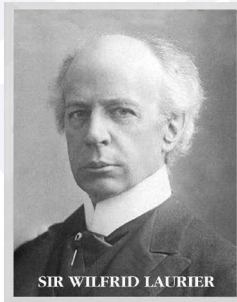
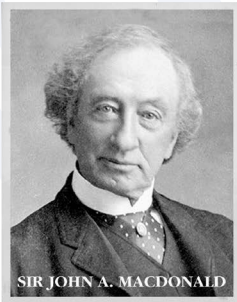
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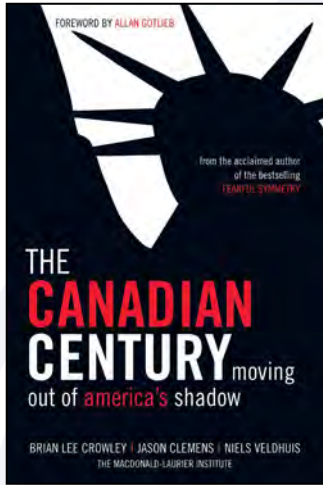
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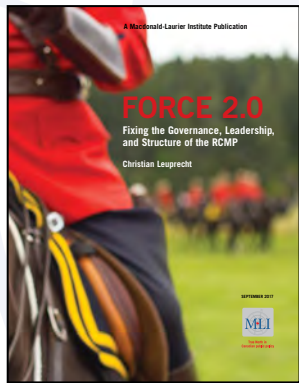


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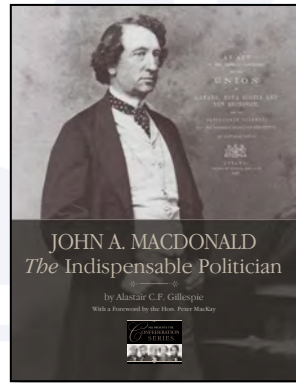
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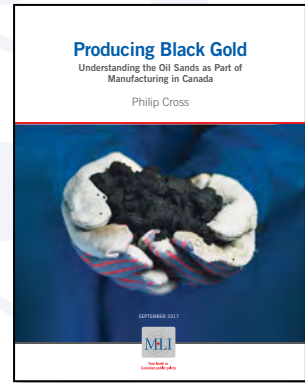
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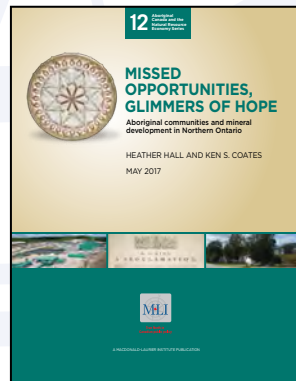
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