



True North in
Canadian public policy

Commentary

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Russia's Actions Are a Direct Attack on US and Allied Democracies

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The first thing I should tell you is that I don't represent the views of the United States government. I'm here speaking in my own capacity and from my own views. With that out of the way, the first thing I would say about Russia's challenge – it's not just a challenge to the United States or the Baltic States, it is an all front attack on the West.

But I'm sorry to say that I think there is no single view from America. There are several views from America about this issue. Some Americans see this whole issue of a Russian attack against the West as nonsense, as politically motivated, primarily as a means of trying to undermine the Trump administration. The President himself encourages this thinking, when he says, "Would it be so bad if I got along with Russia and Putin?" Right off the bat, there is a segment of the American public that just does not take this threat very seriously, and I think that's unfortunate.

There's a second view that sees this as somewhat important but not crucial. Talking with this segment of Americans, you will get an answer like, "Well, of course the Russians meddled, but that's just Russians doing what Russians do. It wasn't particularly effective or important. It's just another day in the big jungle." There are concerns here that you can never separate this from the extremely sharp and divided partisan situation in the United States right now. And so, again, for a lot of these folks, the answer is that yes, the Russians are always out there causing mischief but it did not affect our elections.

Now, I actually take a third view that I think is shared by most of the people I know in the community of Russian scholars and Russian experts in the United States. That view is that Russia's recent activity in the past

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few years has been unprecedented, approaching an act of war, and is a direct attack on American and allied political institutions. And so far, they've gotten away with it. Now, again, it's difficult to pull this apart from the partisan situation in America.

I have resisted for quite a while the notion that the Russians, despite my sense that this again is essentially an act of war, had gone over the line. Now, I should say a bit about my own background. I came up as a young Soviet expert. I grew up as an early trained Cold Warrior, but I also argued for better relations between the West and Russia during the Yeltsin years, and even the first few years of the Putin regime, before I was finally talked out of that by Vladimir Putin and his actions.

Nonetheless, I too resisted the notion that the Russians had somehow changed the American election outcome, until I see better evidence. Now there's a book that has just been released from Oxford University Press called *Cyberwar*, in which Kathleen Hall Jamieson makes the case that it's highly likely Russian propaganda actually swung the American election.

I have not read the book yet. I haven't reached a judgment about this. But I don't think you need to reach that conclusion to accept that what the Russians have done was functionally an act of aggression against the West - one that really went beyond the kind of hijinks that we pulled on each other during the Cold War. There were limits during the Cold War. There were lines that could not be crossed during the Cold War, and what strikes me about the current Russian situation is that they see no limits whatsoever. The Russians seem to see no restraining influence on their activity, and this worries me. I suspect that before the next few years are out, they will test us not only politically in the cyber realm and in the espionage world but also militarily somehow, probably through a terrible miscalculation about whether or not we're capable of responding to them.

I try to take a larger view about this. I think Americans have become obsessive about the one issue of whether the Russians meddled. I don't like the word meddle. I prefer the word attack - did the Russians attack American political institutions, not just our electoral system, not just working through propaganda and falsifying stories and other disinformation efforts? Did they attack our political parties, which to me are part of our political institutions? I think the answer is undoubtedly yes.

(One interesting change to see in America is the growing view that WikiLeaks is essentially a subsidiary of the Russian Intelligence Service. A lot of people didn't like hearing that years ago, and it's nice to live long enough to see your outrageous opinion become the conventional wisdom, but it took a little while.)

But I think we've become overly obsessive about this notion of an attack on our political institutions, and we've forgotten that this is actually a full spectrum attack on us and all of our allies, and throughout the West, even beyond NATO. And I think this is again lost in the immense insular inward-looking partisan bickering that is consuming Washington and the American people right now, and I think that's unfortunate.

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The question to me is what the Russians are trying to achieve. I think that the original Russian intent was to undermine what they thought was going to be an incoming Hillary Clinton administration. I think initially they weren't trying to swing the American election or affect its outcome. I think they saw themselves as weighing down an incoming Clinton administration with scandals and questions and classified materials and stolen emails and all that other stuff. For the Russians this was a kind of low-cost moderate payoff move. Then things started to get out of control. And I think that their goal moved from undermining a Clinton administration to seeing if they could move the American public back and forth and whipsaw them between these candidates.

Now, with that said, I think the goal is not to actually promote a Russian line. This is one difference I think between the current Russian approach and the old Soviet approach. One thing that was almost reassuring about the Soviets was how predictable they were. Their propaganda was so bad, and it was so predictable, I could have written it myself. I don't think there is any Russian line that they're pushing. I think rather Putin's goal and the Russian goal is not to convince Western societies of something, it is to convince them of nothing. It is to paralyze them. It is to completely overwhelm the critical faculties of the average Western citizen to the point of incoherence.

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I did a few speaking tours in the Czech Republic over the past few years working with the State Department, and if we think it's bad here in the United States and Canada, and here in North America, go to Central Europe. As I'm sure as our Baltic colleagues can tell you, the amount of Russian disinformation and general information interference is staggering. I mean, it makes what's happening in the United States look almost like a rehearsal. To go to Central Europe is to be in an environment where Russian disinformation falls out of the sky constantly like acid rain. And talking to young people in places like Central Europe, it's having an effect that young people increasingly, both here and the United States and in Europe, say things like, "Well, you know, a lot of things can be true, and maybe nothing is true. And, you know, the Russians, well, they lie, but everybody lies. And there's really no reason to believe in anything."

To me, this is the goal of the Russian effort - to completely annihilate the civic engagement of a coming generation of young people in our democracies. It is to make them pull away from public life and civic engagement, and to throw up their hands and to say, "Nothing matters. Anything could be a lie. Anything could be true. Information has no provenance, it simply exists."

This is a problem in general that I wrote about in my last book, *The Death of Expertise* - that young people in particular think that things in cyberspace and on the Internet exist in the same way that planets and stars and asteroids exist, because they're just there. They're not the result of any kind of human agency.

And I think that serves three Russian purposes. First, it makes the Russian regime seem not so bad. It makes the Russian regime seem normal. Well, you know, Putin's a bad guy, but we've heard terrible things about Hillary too. As someone told me when I was in the Czech Republic, "Well, what about Hillary Clinton running a child prostitution ring out of a pizza restaurant?"

That was an interesting moment too because I told the young man who asked me it, “We’re not going to talk about it. It’s a fake story.” And I looked at him, and he kind of smiled, and I said, “And you know it’s a fake story, don’t you?” And he said, “Well, I’m just asking questions.”

“That is the eternal dodge of the propagandist,” I said, “Look, you’re a very intelligent young man. You know the story is fake.” He says, “Well, could be, but...” He later came up to me, and I told him, “You were just trying to see if you could link the word Hillary Clinton to the word pedophile enough times.” And cleverly, the young man nodded, and he went, “Yeah. I just don’t like her.” In this Kremlin narrative, Putin might be bad, but you have a bunch of racists, pedophiles, or whatever running Western governments.

The second purpose is to split apart the Western Alliance and drain the values away through this kind of disinformation. Freedom, liberty, what does all that mean? These are all just words. Words don’t mean anything. I have plenty of freedom. I am an autonomous person. I can go to the Internet or turn on a radio station. I don’t really need to believe the notion that one system is better than the other. I don’t really need these Canadians or Americans clomping through my town. Having them there just puts me in danger, and I don’t really have any issue or beef with anybody else. And I think it’s meant to pull apart the Western Alliance by dissolving the values that underlie it.

Finally, on a very practical level, I think the goal is to paralyze the West so that the Russians have greater freedom of action to do whatever it is they want to do. It’s to create an open space or an open playing field. Again, it’s not because the Russians are the old Soviets. The Soviet Union had a globe spanning ideology, and it worked very hard to spread that and to gain new adherents. Every new allied state to the Soviet Union was one more piece of evidence that the Soviet idea was legitimate.

The Russians, I think, want greater latitude to act, in part because they are a completely transactional regime. Almost all of that regime’s activities are based on the fact that it is run by a mafia family whose boss needs to stay in power, and there are many ways that boss stays in power. Primarily, he does that by providing goods and services to his lieutenants. Partly, it’s by keeping his own people scared of him or, in classic mafia fashion, keeps part of the population afraid of him and the other part grateful for his largesse. And I think he is limited in his activity. He’s limited in what he can do in places like Crimea, Ukraine, or Syria.

I should pause here for a moment and say that I don’t believe that Putin is a Russian nationalist or a neo-Soviet Bolshevik or any of those things. I think there are two ways to think of Putin. On one hand, he is a Soviet nostalgist. That doesn’t mean he wants the old Soviet ideology back; he just wants 1975 back. Those were good days for him, and if you think back to 1975, the Soviet Union was on the ascent and its power was practically equal to the United States. The United States was led by a president and a vice president that no one had elected and had just been defeated in Vietnam. Our economy was a shambles. I think Putin just looks back fondly on that period. This is a guy who tears up when he hears the Soviet National Anthem. So I think we’re dealing with a man who’s having perhaps the most dangerous mid-life crisis in history.

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That's part of it. But, on the other hand, I also think he is a man riding the tiger. I would be remiss if I did not mention that around 2001/2002, I made perhaps the worst professional mistake I ever made, as I said "You know, this Putin guy, he might not be so bad." I think there were a lot of us at the time who said, "Seems like a kind of a bureaucrat. Might be the type of person to bring order on the Federation and repair some of the damage that Yeltsin's improvisation had done." I think, by the time he ran for a third term and came back to power, he had effectively said "I don't feel safe unless I'm in charge." And he's not going to leave. That's the end of it. He has decided he must rule for the rest of his life. And, to use that wonderful expression, he is riding a tiger from which he dare not dismount now. That is why he's after the freedom of action in the international community.

So now that I've been completely depressing about all of this, let me make it worse. I do not believe there is a government or official political remedy to this. In the United States, in particular, I am very concerned about how the Americans talk about government solutions that are straight up violations of our First Amendment Rights. The view that government has to control Facebook, has to control Twitter, has to control social media. As a limited government conservative, and there are very few of us left, I find that appalling. When people ask me, "What should we do about people being lied to on Facebook?" My answer is simple: "Stop getting your news from Facebook. Tell your friends not to get their news from Facebook."

Look, I have a Facebook account. Everybody has a Facebook account. It's like having a credit card now. I also have a very active Twitter account, as some of you may know. But I think the only thing that will stop this social pressure and peer pressure is for public intellectuals to finally take on their responsibility to shout back at the crowd. Public intellectuals have been loath to do so, because the charge of becoming an elitist, and particularly in the United States, is now worse than being called a communist.

I think there has to be a return to the notion of civic virtue - through schooling, education, and universities stepping up and taking their responsibility to talk about what makes the West worth defending. You cannot solve this by having the government censor Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or any of those things. The information sphere is simply too porous to control, and every effort to control it will result in a decline in our civil liberties. It's big problem. There's a saying: "We just have to become better people, and raise a better generation behind us."

But, just as during the Cold War, we cannot become the thing we're fighting against. We really have to take care not to let that happen. I don't think this situation is irretrievable, but I think we are in for a long slog here, just as we were during the Cold War. We're in this second strange Cold War, which will require us to rely on our values as members of Western democracies.

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About the Author



Tom Nichols is a University Professor of US Naval War College, and an adjunct at the US Air Force School of Strategic Force Studies and the Harvard Extension School. He is a specialist on Russian affairs, nuclear strategy, NATO issues, and a nationally-known commentator on U.S. politics and national security. He was a staff member in the United States Senate, a fellow at CSIS and the Harvard Kennedy School, and previously taught at Dartmouth, La Salle, and Georgetown. He is also a five-time undefeated 'Jeopardy!' champion, and was noted in the 'Jeopardy!' Hall of Fame after his 1994 appearances as one of the all-time best players of the game.



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