

Questions for the Record
From: Senator Dianne Feinstein

1. One of the Russian strategies discussed in *The Kremlin Playbook* is the erosion of “public confidence, trust, and credibility in mainstream political parties and democratic systems,” which enhances the popularity of extreme parties. The report also notes Russian support for national groups and efforts to create factions within societies as strategies for undermining internal cohesion in democratic states.

1. a. Please describe some of the specific tactics used to achieve these goals?

The Kremlin exploits weaknesses that are present within our societies. Russia’s strategy is tailored to a specific weakness or weaknesses. If partisanship is a central weakness, they will find ways to exploit and deepen it. If immigration is an issue that divides society, false stories about immigrants committing violent crimes will be disseminated which puts pressure on government officials. This was the case in Germany in January 2016, after it was revealed that a Russian-German 13-year-old girl who had claimed she was kidnapped and raped by migrants admitted she made up the story – but not before Russian state TV and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov had relayed the allegations and claimed they were being ignored by the government.¹ If a population’s greatest fear is future conflict, the Kremlin will nuclear saber-rattle to gain concessions. If a society fears too-rapid social and economic change, the Kremlin will fund media stories about the decadence and decay of the West and will support political parties that champion traditional, conservative values. As the EU struggles with sustained economic growth, the Kremlin will disseminate media stories about the EU’s inability to foster more prosperity after years of integration and highlight the positive benefit of Russian investment.

Once the weakness is identified, a variety of tools are at the Kremlin’s disposal. Prior to a national election, hacked e-mails may be released to embarrass a candidate who supports maintaining sanctions against Russia. A fictitious non-governmental organization may collect signatures for a referendum which will distract a government or publicly call for a demonstration against a particular government policy. A fictitious think-tank may release a report with false information that looks like an authoritative source. Algorithms and automated bots may be skewed to push a reader toward news stories that are sympathetic to Russian views. What is fact and what is false? If leaders and institutions are discredited and discounted, public opinion is more pliable to Russian and/or other malign foreign influence.

While discrediting government leaders and institutions, there is also an attempt to make Russia a more attractive model and an alternative to the West. Russia effectively uses historical and/or cultural elements it has in common with target countries, specifically the Russian Orthodox Church, as the defender of traditional, conservative and Christian values. It funds political parties and leaders that share these traditional and highly nationalist views. Through its efforts to establish the Russian system as a credible alternative to liberal democracies, the Kremlin is inspiring a new generation of European leaders who are attracted to the Kremlin’s illiberal “sovereign democracy” and so-called strongman tactics as Europe is under duress and the U.S. withdraws from international engagement.

1. b. How might a campaign like this manifest in the United States?

¹ Ben Knight, “Teenage girl admits making up migrant rape claim that outraged Germany,” *The Guardian*, January 31, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/31/teenage-girl-made-up-migrant-claim-that-caused-uproar-in-germany>.

The Kremlin Playbook only examined the methodology of Russian economic and political influence in select European countries; however, we highlight in our report that no country is immune to Russian influence. A campaign would likely manifest through Russian financial transactions and linkages in key sectors such as energy, banking and real estate with a variety of U.S. figures who play a role in shaping either future economic or national security decisions. A campaign would also include the shaping of the media landscape either through automated bots or other forms of media manipulation, such as leaked e-mail communications in an effort to shift public opinion and political attitudes against current government policies.

1. c. What steps should be taken to address these strategies?

In my oral testimony, I outlined three steps: bipartisanship, transparency and trust which are crucial to strengthen our societies against malign influence.

Bipartisanship. The more unified the U.S. leaders can be on key issues of national security, the less room there is for the Kremlin to exploit differences. It is essential that Congress remain bipartisan in its approach to the allegations of Russian influence.

Transparency. Russian influence hides in the shadows but can be used at an opportune moment to tactical influence a situation for strategic effect. Financial transactions and beneficial ownership must be transparent. Corrupt practices at all levels – but particularly at the highest levels – must be exposed regardless of political cost. An essential element of transparency is a free media with strong investigative journalism. Political party, NGO and think-tank financing must also be transparent.

Restoring Trust. Bipartisanship and transparency will begin the process of increasing trust and confidence in democratic institutions and democratic leaders. Russian influence is aimed at undermining the confidence and the credibility of the U.S. and Europe. The only way to counter that strategy is to develop a positive agenda which restores and renews public confidence that government authorities are working on behalf of citizens' interests and not their own.

Finally, we can continue to learn a great deal about Russian influence tactics where they have been deployed the longest and have had the greatest effect: Europe. The U.S. must improve its understanding of Russian influence in Europe as it is a laboratory for Russian experimentation which has grown bolder over time. The U.S. should enhance its efforts to expose Russian influence and illicit financing in Europe as a way to weaken Russian influence elsewhere.

2. Another Russian strategy discussed in *The Kremlin Playbook* is the advancement of “fake news” and Russian state-supported propaganda campaigns. We experienced both during the 2016 election. We also continue to see attacks on the credibility of established media outlets (including, for example, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *CNN*), in an apparent effort to discredit and discourage unfavorable reporting. At times, journalists who have reported in a manner that the White House considers unfavorable have been denied access to government press briefings.

2. a. What are the consequences of these types of criticisms and exclusions for an effective, free press?

A free and independent press is a foundational pillar of democracy. When that pillar is weakened, democracy itself is weakened. It is vital that journalists maintain the highest ethical standards of their profession despite the non-stop, instantaneous news cycle. Robust investigative journalism is also essential to enhance transparency. While there have been historic tensions between the White House and

the press, even during the most turbulent political times, the invaluable role of the press has always been reaffirmed and, most importantly, renewed.

2. b. What is the impact on the public's confidence in, and on the credibility of democratic institutions?

It is difficult to assess this impact as the way Americans receive “news” has dramatically changed with the advent of social media and the proliferation of news outlets and analytical blogs that hew to a specific worldview or ideological framework and dilute fact-based reporting. However, one antidote to this increasingly toxic landscape is bipartisanship and a public effort to generally agree on basic facts. While there will be so-called news outlets that will assert and spread false news, the more one can establish a minimum common understanding of key national security issues and increase public knowledge, the less success there will be in exploiting division and eroding public confidence. Another very important step to take is increasing public awareness and literacy regarding the identification of false news. Public service announcements should be developed to check facts and educate communities on how to verify elements of a story and its origin.

2. c. What steps do you recommend to combat the rise and exploitation of “fake news”?

As mentioned above, we encourage a robust public literacy campaign to help readers discern new sources and getting facts. The Baltic States have engaged in educational awareness programs that could be replicated in the U.S., such as a national information influence identification and analysis ecosystem project in Lithuania, which helps counter disinformation attacks and understand the pattern of Russian influence activities. Financial disclosure laws also contribute to a more transparent media landscape in which special interests and ownership that may influence coverage are more easily highlighted. Finally, public figures and elected officials should continue to be vocal about the importance of a free press and investigative journalism, particularly when the press may be negatively reporting about them.