How to Lose the Information War

Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict

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For the truth tellers

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Preface

January 20, 2021

At noon on January 20, 2021, Joe Biden was inaugurated as the forty-sixth president of the United States.

Under normal circumstances, the event would be a hopeful display of the peaceful and democratic transfer of power. This year, it also carried the weight of over 400,000 American lives lost to Covid-19. It was colored with a patina of uncertainty and unease, on the backdrop of a militarized Washington that had been on high alert for the last 2 weeks, since armed insurrectionists stormed the Capitol with the intention of overturning the democratic process on the basis of a lie.

I am an optimist by default, but as President Biden takes office, the United States is losing the information war. At the beginning of the Trump administration, we were assaulted by foreign adversaries and select domestic disinformers. Four years later, after the widespread normalization of disinformation as a political tool, the information space is a charred, pockmarked battlefield on which America has lost significant ground. With a convergence of conspiracies related to the pandemic and the legitimacy of the new administration, in a polarized, vitriol-ridden country, the outlook for winning it is grim indeed.

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It was 11 months ago—on February 20, 2020—when I recognized that the coronavirus pandemic would provide the ideal conditions for the fast and fatal transmission of disinformation. Around the world, the severity of the disease was sinking in. Thirteen million residents of China's Hubei Province, where the virus originated, had been subject to a strict lockdown since January, but it was too late. Covid-19—as we had just learned to call it—had already hitched a ride around the globe. Ukraine, one of the countries I tracked in this book, decided to evacuate its citizens from Wuhan, where the virus was still raging. The evacuees were flown home and bused into the town of Novi Sanzhary to undergo a 2-week quarantine. Today, quarantines feel routine for anyone crossing borders, but in those charged, confusing, early days of the pandemic, the measure sparked violence.

The accelerant on the fire of falsehoods in Ukraine was an email alleging to be from Ukraine's Ministry of Health that claimed the country had five active coronavirus cases; it went viral just as the evacuees returned home. The dubious message made Novi Sanzhary's residents worried that the evacuees put them at greater risk of contracting Covid-19. They blocked the road to the medical facility where the group was to be housed, fought with police, injuring ten, and even broke the windows of buses carrying their travel-weary, undoubtedly frightened fellow citizens. The Ukrainian government quickly debunked the message and asserted it originated "outside Ukraine"—the language Ukrainian officials often use when they suspect Russian involvement—but that fact-check didn't stop the Novi Sanzhary riots or the proliferation of copycat protests around the country. This was a clear example—along with a host of others outlined in these pages—that online disinformation has offline consequences.

Despite efforts by the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and some proactive national governments, the coronavirus pandemic soon became an "infodemic" as well. The fear, uncertainty,

and widespread distrust that characterize the Covid-19 era have left the entire world's informational weaknesses exposed, and grifters of all sorts—from adversarial foreign states to domestic snake-oil salesmen—have taken note. With the emergence of the pandemic and the riots at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, the world is beginning to understand firsthand the consequences of disinformation. It is not just a problem that exists on the internet. It shakes the bedrock of democracy, and it can be deadly.

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When I learned this book's hardcover edition would be published July 9, 2020, at the height of the American presidential campaign season, I couldn't imagine a more apt time for its release. What would the 2020 election be, if not a referendum on the truth? And it was, of course—though not only for the reasons I anticipated. The year 2020 was not just replete with disinformation about the election, or Joe Biden and his son Hunter's work in Ukraine, or the severity of foreign interference. We encountered a novel category of falsehoods, a list so long and strange it is difficult, if not impossible, to recall its full contents.

Early in the pandemic, Shiva Ayyadurai, a man whose 2018 Senate campaign I linked to a small-scale disinformation operation described in this book's final chapter, posted a video that claimed the Covid-19 virus could be killed by aiming the hot air from a hairdryer down one's throat. Others with far larger audiences floated their own miracle cures. President Trump wondered aloud at White House press conferences whether UV light or bleach might cure the virus: "So, supposing we hit the body with a tremendous—whether it's ultraviolet or just very powerful light," Mr. Trump said. "Supposing you brought the light inside of the body, which you can do either through the skin or in some other way," he continued, suggesting to the

White House Coronavirus Task Force his theory be tested. But it was his final observation that required health officials around the world to issue special warnings: "I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning?" The year 2020 became the year we had to remind people not to drink bleach.

There was smaller-scale deception, too. Facebook was forced to ban ads for bogus medical face masks and coronavirus cures when it became clear hucksters were using them to exploit people's panic. But that wasn't enough to mitigate the spread of information that endangered public health, public safety, or democracy. The algorithmic recommendations on which social media platforms thrive—leading users to new groups, new videos, and new ideas—had always been vectors for indoctrination and extremism. Now that the world was forced to socialize, shop, work, and live almost entirely online, an uninitiated audience of fearful, vulnerable people with a sudden influx of time on their hands was primed for their induction into the conspiratorial corners of the internet.

Yoga moms interested in natural health remedies were suddenly sucked into a Facebook-induced vortex of medical misinformation. In one click, they could navigate from a group discussing chakra alignment and dubious Ayurvedic remedies to one that erroneously claimed the Covid-19 vaccine would include a microchip to enable the government to track its citizens. From there, they were only a click or two away from white supremacist content, or content that claimed the September 11 attacks were a false flag conspiracy theory. When protests erupted in response to the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers, the groups were replete with theories about the activists involved—"They were funded by George Soros! Floyd was a crisis actor! Anti-fascists hid pallets of bricks around US cities to throw at law enforcement!"—and the conspiracy convergence

was complete. On the eve of the November presidential election, a poll found that half of Trump supporters believed the QAnon conspiracy theory, which, among other outlandish, disproven narratives, alleges that leading democrats are part of a Satanic child sex trafficking cabal.

They embraced their new identities. On more than one occasion, individuals inspired by these theories took to the streets and statehouses, maskless. They threatened first responders, poll workers, and journalists. Some of them planned to kidnap the Governor of Michigan. They converged on cities around the country, draped in Confederate flags and QAnon paraphernalia, flashing "white power signs," and brandishing assault weapons. These early disinformation-driven events were a tragic prelude for what was to come on January 6, but until then most Americans remained woefully unconvinced of disinformation's debilitating effect on democracy.

In mid-October, I testified—virtually—before the House of Representatives' Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, chaired by Representative Adam Schiff, who rose to national prominence raising awareness about Russian election interference and leading the first impeachment case against President Trump. The topic of the hearing was "misinformation and conspiracy theories," and not a single Republican Member of the Committee showed up, citing "security concerns," despite the hearing proceeding entirely according to Congressional Covid protocols. Even a few of the Democrats assembled expressed skepticism of the thesis of my testimony: that disinformation was dismantling democracy. Representative Jim Himes said, "I am violently allergic to the inclusion of the words 'information' and 'government' in the same sentence. . . . [If] we start going down that path and we're not just breaking democracy, we're breaking classical, enlightened liberalism. . . . What evidence is out there that [disinformation] is dismantling democracy?"

On January 6, as insurrectionists stormed the Capitol building, inspired by the Trumpian disinformation campaign about a "rigged election" that had raged for months, I thought of Representative Himes and his question. At that moment, he was sheltering in place on the House floor, while the rioters searched for Members of Congress to take hostage or worse. I wondered if Representative Himes was finally satisfied with the evidence of disinformation's destructive effects.

Unquestionably, it was disinformation that brought the rioters to the Capitol, and disinformation that encouraged them to storm the building in an attempt to "stop the steal" of the election from President Trump. The bones of the disinformation campaign were laid months before, when the president and his allies began to express concerns about the safety of mass mail-in balloting during the pandemic. They were compounded when President Trump repeated baseless allegations of voter fraud, like his allegation at the first presidential debate that ballots marked for Trump were found in a Wisconsin river. At an Election Night press conference, with the race too close to call and Biden gaining ground in key states, Trump doubled down. "This is a fraud on the American public," he ranted.

> *This is an embarrassment to our country. We were getting ready to win this election. Frankly, we did win this election. . . . So our goal now is to ensure the integrity for the good of this nation. . . . This is a major fraud in our nation. . . . We want all voting to stop. We don't want them to find any ballots at four o'clock in the morning and add them to the list. Okay? It's a very sad moment. To me this is a very sad moment and we will win this. And as far as I'm concerned, we already have won it.*

A Facebook group called "Stop the Steal" appeared just after the election, quickly growing to over 300,000 members before Facebook removed it. Its members began to show up at ballot counting centers, harassing poll workers. A recent college graduate working his first

job out of school and a senior citizen volunteering to run the election were implicated in baseless online conspiracies and received death threats. When it became clear that Biden had an insurmountable lead and the Associated Press projected him as the winner, President Trump refused to concede, launched countless fantastical court cases, and threatened the Georgia Secretary of State. In late December, after the Electoral College certified Biden's win, Trump encouraged his supporters to converge on Washington to overturn the results. "Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election," he tweeted. "Big protest in DC on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!"

And wild it was. In addition to the disinformation-inspired threats against lawmakers' lives, January 6 saw a gallows erected outside of the Capitol as crowds chanted "Hang Mike Pence!" for the vice president's role in the confirmation of the Electoral College results. Insurrectionists rifled through members' briefing binders and desks. They left trash and cigarette butts throughout the historic building. One stole a laptop from Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's office, with the intention of selling it to Russia. "We love you," tweeted President Trump, among other messages encouraging his supporters. Social media platforms promptly locked down his accounts, as if the disinformation and incitement to violence stemming from them was new.

For too long, our political leaders did not take the threat of disinformation seriously, politicized it, or falsely presented potential solutions to our nation's disinformation problem as a binary choice between censorship and freedom of expression. As I laid out in these pages, well before the fertile climate of 2020's disinformation took hold, it was our own internal fissures and our inaction that allowed false narratives to begin to spread. Yes, foreign actors—namely Russia and China—opportunistically embraced conspiracies, polarization, and homegrown disinformation in order to further weaken their Western adversaries in 2020. But as the Kremlin had done in the United

States since before the 2016 election, and indeed, as it had done across Central and Eastern Europe throughout the Soviet period, it was not creating these problems; it just weaponized them. And the pandemic, American political crises, and Trump's homegrown disinformation campaigns presented a rich harvest of exploitable narratives. Of course, foreign actors exploited them, but our biggest obstacles were within our borders.

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As Biden takes office, he inherits a divided country, rife with disinformation. A recent poll found that seven in ten Republicans believe Biden was not legitimately elected, allegations that have been repeatedly refuted by election administration officials, courts, hand recounts, and audits. The Biden-Harris administration can, and should, take up many of the solutions outlined in this book, from robustly funding information literacy programs, to making investments in public media, to stamping out the murky financial schemes that allow disinformation to flourish.

But defeating disinformation is not just about presidential pen strokes; it will take leadership at every level of government. The very evening of the insurrection at the Capitol, 147 Republicans still voted to overturn the results of the election, upholding the very lie that had just endangered their lives and American democracy.

Now, a newly inaugurated President Biden is seemingly addressing those members of Congress, and certainly an America divided by disinformation, as he says: "There is truth and there are lies—lies told for power and for profit. And each of us has a duty and a responsibility, as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders, leaders who have pledged to honor our Constitution and protect our nation, to defend the truth and defeat the lies." Perhaps now we can begin the hard work of winning the information war.

Prologue

It was nearly one in the morning in Ukraine, and I was about to tell a roomful of people in Washington that Russian disinformation was keeping me up at night. They had gathered after months of volunteering for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, acting as a brain trust and sounding board for her foreign policy ideas. From thousands of miles away, I was dialing in from Kyiv. The mood in the room seemed to be one of cautious excitement and relief that the rancorous campaign would be over in a few days. Now, just before the fateful 2016 vote, we discussed the future; how should American foreign policy look in the next administration?

I told the group that Russian online warfare posed a critical threat to the future of democracies around the world. Since moving to Ukraine that September, I had watched as the country attempted to defend itself against Russian attacks, not only on the physical battlefield, but in the information space as well. These attacks showed no signs of letting up here in Ukraine, or across Europe. If anything, online warfare was intensifying. It seemed that every day a Ukrainian was telling me the United States ignored Eastern and Central Europe's struggles at its own peril. Information warfare does not respect international borders. It would reach us soon, too.

It's not just Ukrainians' Soviet past that gives them clarity about the Kremlin's intent, nor is it something that only a nation at war with Russia can understand. Most Estonians, Georgians, Poles,

Czechs, Ukrainians, and others in Central and Eastern Europe will tell you that Russia meddles in their domestic affairs. All of them will tell you that this phenomenon is nothing new. The Russian influence campaigns that took the United States by surprise in 2016 have been going on in Eastern Europe for decades and have only been amplified by social media and digital technologies that allow information to spread faster, farther, and with more precision.

The West has finally recognized this threat but has yet to do much about it. In June 2018, more than a decade into Russia's information war and nearly two years after the election of Donald Trump, when the Senate Judiciary Committee asked me to testify before them about preventing election interference, most of the Republican senators other than the committee chair, Chuck Grassley of Iowa, cleared out of the hearing room before the witnesses began their presentations. The Democrats weren't much better. By the time I finished my oral testimony, in which I praised countries like Estonia and Ukraine for their efforts to "put citizens at the heart of [their] responses to disinformation," just Senator Grassley and Democrat Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota remained on the dais for the question and answer session. Disinformation and election interference were enough of a problem to be put on the Senate agenda, but the United States and its organs of power did not seem to grasp the scope of Russia's interference across scores of other countries. We have ignored the nuances on the battleground of the information war, casting aside all that the countries in the vanguard have learned—and how often they've failed.

But I know that solutions exist, having found myself on the front lines of Russia's information operations from the beginning of my career. My first job out of graduate school was at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), a nongovernmental organization based in Washington, DC, that was founded in 1983

"to promote openness and accountability in government by building political and civic organizations, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation."[1] I worked on the Russia program team. When the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was asked to leave Russia in 2012 after the Russian Foreign Ministry accused it of meddling in Russia's political processes (a charge that is even more ironic in hindsight), NDI decided to move its Russia program—which trained election monitors, political parties, and civil society organizations of many different political backgrounds—"offshore" to the nearby Baltic states.

A few years later, despite having closed its office and de-registered its presence in Russia, NDI was added to a list of "undesirable foreign organizations" that, according to the Russian parliament, threatened the security of the country. For Russian nationals, interaction with so-called UFOs carried a hefty fine or a jail sentence.

NDI had always been the target of hit pieces by Russian propagandists. But as propaganda about our addition to the UFO list reached a fever pitch, a curious political cartoon appeared on vKontakte, the Russian version of Facebook. In it, four anthropomorphized spheres are speaking to each other. The largest one, emblazoned with the Russian flag, shouts: "Go home, you sons of bitches!" to two very forlorn spheres bearing the logos of NDI and the National Endowment for Democracy, one of NDI's funders, also targeted by the UFO law. A very small, scared American sphere floats in the background, pleading with Russia to "not offend my foundations." The cartoon is not particularly witty, nor was it especially successful; the "Studio 13" page that shared it had only about 50,000 followers on vKontakte. But among the cartoons praising Putin and his illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, it struck me that an event of much less significance was given the same stature. Whoever was behind this account wanted to make sure the "patriotic" Russians

who followed the page knew that their government was protecting them from the "national security threat" that NDI posed through its trainings on participatory democracy. It was clear to me that social media had already become a new battleground for influence. Russia was testing its toolkit at home and in its backyard, and soon it would be ready for prime time, influencing the discourse in the American presidential election.

A year and a half later, in September 2016, I moved to Kyiv, Ukraine. Under a Fulbright Public Policy Fellowship, I worked as a strategic communications adviser to the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mariana Betsa, the first woman in a position of new significance. For three years, Ukraine had been at war with Russia and Kremlin-backed separatists in the country's east. Mariana headed up the Ministry's informational offensive. Her Twitter account was under constant bombardment by pro-Russian trolls. She tweeted her daily update about events on the front lines:

> Russia continues escalation in Donbas to destabilize UA. 83 attacks by Ru&militants, tanks, mortars used. 1 UA KIA.[2]

Later, she was stunned and disgusted when she received a reply from Graham Phillips, a British citizen whose "reporting" from Ukraine's conflict zone for propaganda network RT (formerly known as Russia Today) included the intimidation and berating of Ukrainian political prisoners. Phillips wrote: "Mariana—are you a liar because you are a political prostitute? Or a prostitute because you are a liar?"[3]

Interactions like this were a fairly typical occurrence. Other accounts would pile on, yelling into the digital ether that the Ukrainian Euromaidan protests in 2013 and 2014 were a fascist coup and the new government was driving the country into a hole. Only Russia could save Ukraine, they wrote. The cycle—and the tired pro-Russian narratives it contained—was repeated with every tweet that

Mariana, other Ukrainian officials, and even ordinary citizens sent. "Useful idiots" like Phillips, who happily amplified the Kremlin's messaging without understanding its provenance or consequences, started some of these Twitter wars. Other online instigators weren't real people at all; the Internet Research Agency, St. Petersburg's infamous "troll factory," had an entire arm dedicated to undermining the new Ukrainian government.[4]

Relentless, offensive, and misleading tweets were just one facet of Russia's information war against Ukraine. Pro-Russian media both inside and outside Ukraine's borders reported patently false stories, so much so that Ukraine was home to the first fact-checking operation founded in response to Russian disinformation, created not long after Russia illegally annexed Crimea. Other elements of civil society joined in, using the power of social media to push back about Russian claims of peace on the peninsula, where the native Tatar population was being persecuted; or about the human rights situation in the Donbas; or to mobilize support for troops on the front. Still, the Ukrainian government struggled to match the Russian Foreign Ministry's superior funding and organization, not to mention the narrative power of their lies. These were designed to target weak points in Ukrainian society, exploiting divisive issues like poor governance, corruption, and ethnic and religious tensions, and were repeated by the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson and parroted by Russian media on a weekly basis.

Ukraine was the frontline of the information war, but Ukrainians weren't the only ones fighting disinformation in Kyiv. Western governments had peppered the city with countless other communications advisers like me and funded technical assistance programs geared not only at helping Ukraine, but also at helping others victimized by Russia's war of words in the region. They were all valiant projects with important goals, but it was clear that

the entire anti-disinformation space was characterized by a lack of coordination. In Kyiv alone, there were no fewer than three major fact-checking initiatives, all funded by multiple Western governments. The number ballooned if the post-communist space was considered holistically, including countries beyond the former borders of the Soviet Union to the former communist bloc, such as the Czech Republic. Under my Fulbright fellowship, I embarked on a mapping project, attempting to discern which governments were funding what types of projects.

However, as I conducted my research, a new administration settled into the White House, Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election came into greater relief, and my ambitions for the mapping project grew. The US Intelligence Community presented to Congress and the public a unanimous assessment that Russia had interfered in the democratic process on behalf of Donald Trump. Election meddling wasn't the only reason Donald Trump won the election, but it was a significant contributing factor. And yet the issue divided the American public, because Russian interference had become part of a highly polarized political environment, built and perpetuated by the president himself. Discussion of Russian disinformation was viewed as relitigating the results of the election. It was clear that if the United States was to counter Russian propaganda, it needed to start with the basic step of recognizing the challenge and learning from the many responses that Central and Eastern European states had been pursuing for years.

Although their efforts were sometimes uncoordinated and duplicative, our allies in Europe were several steps ahead of us, recognizing, for example, the Russian interference in the Dutch referendum on Ukraine's Association Agreement with the European Union, vilifying a proliferation of fake news sites in the Czech Republic and considering ways to better integrate the ethnic Russian population in the Baltic states, to name just a few examples. I wanted

to bring this experience to bear in my work, so rather than just offering a roadmap of projects and tips for coordination, I started to consider what made societies vulnerable to Russian disinformation in the first place. After discussions with those fighting Russian influence operations as well as those that bought and spread their narratives whole cloth, I understood not only that the West's coordination was lacking, but that the United States needed to recognize the problem itself. Collectively, we were all focusing on the wrong thing.

Despite the preferred imagery of most major news outlets that cover Russia—hammer and sickles, red and black color palettes, and misappropriations of the colorful onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral as "the Kremlin"—Russia's modern information war is distinct from the one its Soviet predecessor waged.

Unlike Soviet propaganda, which sought to promote a specific, communist-centric worldview, the Kremlin divides and deceives populations around the world with one goal in mind: the destruction of Western democracy as we know it. Russian deceptions exploit fissures in targeted societies to sow doubt, distrust, discontent and to further divide populations and their governments. The ultimate goal is to undermine democracy—and, in particular, the American variety, that Reagan-era "shining city on a hill"—and drive citizens to disengage. When we stop debating and protesting, stop critically engaging with the news, stop holding government accountable, and stop making our voices heard at the ballot box, the Kremlin has achieved its goal. In a backward way, this gives Russian President Vladimir Putin a seat at the proverbial negotiating table; if the most powerful countries in the world are having trouble functioning, busy with their own issues, Russia's status improves. More importantly, Putin gains a comparative advantage, particularly at home. "Look," he can say when Russians complain about the quality of life in their country, "it's not like democracies are handling themselves much

better." He points to police brutality and race relations in the United States, economic disparity in the UK, and the immigration crisis in the European Union—all themes Russian disinformation has targeted—as examples. Few Western governments expected such a departure from Soviet tactics, or one so sophisticated and targeted to each country's weaknesses, so the response to Russian information warfare across the West has been characterized by malaise. When the new playbook became clear, it was already in use, and the issue too politicized to mount an incisive response.

Estonia was the first to realize the threat. For years, the tiny Baltic nation of just over a million people, nicknamed "e-Stonia" for its innovations that allow citizens to vote and pay taxes online, had been clamoring for the West to pay attention to its complaints of bullying by its much larger eastern neighbor. In 2007, Russia fomented anti-government protests among the ethnic Russian community and launched a crippling cyberattack against the country's internet infrastructure. The West barely noticed.

The next year, Russian tanks rolled across the border of Georgia, another former Soviet Republic located in the South Caucasus mountain range. Cyberattacks brought down government websites. And the Kremlin launched an all-out disinformation war to gain control of the international narrative surrounding the conflict, attempting to place all of the blame for the aggression squarely on the Georgian government. The West merely chastised Russia for its use of force and violation of Georgia's sovereignty; the Kremlin's influence operations went largely unchecked, continuing to seep into Georgian politics, culture, and trade for the next decade.

Only with Russia's war in Ukraine and the disinformation surrounding the downing of a passenger airliner over the Donbas in July 2014 did the threat of Russian influence operations in Europe come into full relief. But even then, it was seen as a problem "over

there," in "other" Europe, never in the West, and certainly not in the United States. Meanwhile, as the Kremlin's tactics in Ukraine became better understood, Western European governments—Poland, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands—began to see signs of Russian meddling in their political processes and started to formulate responses.

The West's response was also delayed by a lack of common definition of the problem. Buzz words like "propaganda," "information war," "hybrid warfare," "active measures," "influence operations," "disinformation," "misinformation," and "fake news" are used interchangeably across policy spheres and the media, with little regard to what precisely is being discussed or what problem needs solving. But we need to clearly define and categorize these phenomena if we are to successfully understand and counter them. Here's how I look at this confusing landscape.

All of the tactics Russia employs to angle for international notoriety can be categorized as "influence operations." To exert its influence over foreign governments and their populations, Russia might undertake old-fashioned spying and military operations, but the case studies in this book will focus on the overt, civilian-sphere influence operations. Sometimes these actions fall neatly into the category of disinformation—"when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm"—or malinformation—"when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere."[5] These include the now-infamous Russian ads purchased by the St. Petersburg "troll farm" in the 2016 US election, which pushed misleading and inflammatory narratives in order to widen polarization between Americans and increase dismay and distrust between citizens, the media, and government. The ads—and the even more successful organic content on the originating pages—attempted to widen divisions in every corner

of the political universe. They argued for Texas secession, spread anti-immigrant vitriol, pitted Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter activists against one another, and even distributed "buff Bernie Sanders" coloring books. They were "fake" not because their content was falsified—although they included plenty of false or misleading information—but because they misrepresented their provenance. The posts' authors weren't activists at American grassroots political organizations; they were Russian operatives in St. Petersburg who had carefully groomed their online personae for years.

In many cases, including in Estonia, where the Russian government instigated protests over the removal of a Soviet statue, or in Poland, where Russia withheld the wreckage of the plane crash that killed the Polish president to fuel conspiracy theories, Russian policies create informational chaos without the deployment of cut-and-dry "fakes." In fact, fake news encompasses just a sliver of Russian influence operations. The most convincing Russian narratives, and indeed, the most successful, in both Central and Eastern Europe and the United States, are narratives grounded in truth that exploit the divisions in societies. These truths can be undisputed facts or the perceived realities of life for marginalized populations that Russian operations target. As such, total fabrications gain notoriety much less often than those that contain a kernel of truth.

Moreover, although the term "fake news" appears in the subtitle of this book as a signpost for curious readers, I do not condone its general use. Nearly four years since it was first thrust into the broad American consciousness, it has all but lost meaning. Politicians and pundits from President Trump to the Philippines' Duterte employ it to describe any narrative they find politically inconvenient. It has become a pejorative in politicians' descriptions of the free and independent media—in 2019 Presidents Trump and Putin even bonded over their shared battle with the "fake news" in their respective

countries—and it is increasingly a punchline for jokes. Misstatements, misunderstandings, and mistakes are met with a flippant quip of "fake news!" and laughter. As the countries profiled in this book demonstrate, the problem is broader than fake accounts and fake information. Online influence operations involve the weaponization of emotion, of technological innovation to better capitalize on those emotions, and of a keen understanding of the growing distrust in democratic societies and how it can be manipulated for political gain. And while "fake news" may be the mental file under which many store the information in this book, the effect of disinformation and online influence campaigns on the democratic project is anything but fake.

Since 2016, Americans have been forced to reckon with the idea of Russian influence for the first time since the Cold War. As pundits breathlessly weigh on the sophistication and the efficacy of Russia's efforts and some, including the president himself, doubt their very existence, this book is an attempt to help Americans and other Westerners understand what Russia is capable of and what can be done to stop it. It explores events related to Russian influence operations that changed the course of history in five European countries, and investigates the nascent efforts—and the people behind them—that each government mounted to fight back.

The case studies I chose to profile are far and away not the only places in Central and Eastern Europe where Russian interference has affected politics and policy. The influence of Russian disinformation and propaganda reaches back decades, and evidence of Kremlin interference in elections across Europe old and new, and beyond the continent in countries like Venezuela and the Central African Republic, continues to mount. But the countries I describe in this book show the genesis and evolution of Russian disinformation and influence campaigns in the internet era. They highlight the online and offline polarization and societal discord that Russia weaponizes

to its advantage, the overarching pattern of Russia's manipulation of authentic local actors for its own gain, as well as the gradual shift in awareness of these tactics and best practices in response. I selected cases that are important either because they are the first of their kind or because they have other complicating factors that offer interesting lessons for the United States and the West as a whole.

Beginning in Estonia in 2007, I describe the "beta" version of Russian influence operations with which we are so familiar today. During this crisis, the Kremlin and its operatives used hyper-partisan Russian-language media to amplify a narrative of disenfranchisement and discontent within the Russian-speaking population, resulting in mass protests and a widening rift between the ethnic Estonian and Russian populations. More than a decade later, the Estonian government has learned that disinformation and Russian interference mean more than correcting false narratives in the Russian-language press; they are also working to meaningfully integrate the Russian-speaking population into Estonian society through language, education, and economic opportunity.

Next, I analyze Georgia's five-day war with Russia in 2008, which represents the first modern "hybrid" conflict, combining kinetic warfare with disinformation. In its aftermath, the Georgian government sealed itself off from all forms of Russian influence—economic, political, and informational—but after a change in administration, these responses were rolled back. Using cultural and economic vectors, Russia crept into the empty space. Georgia's challenges show that Russian information operations reach beyond trolls and bots; they are multifaceted campaigns across many sectors and require a generational solution to address them.

Then I turn to Poland, a country that, according to many of its citizens and even its high-level officials, is "inoculated" to all manner of Russian ills, from propaganda and disinformation to soft power

and direct political influence. The rise to power of the ruling Law and Justice party on a magic carpet of conspiracy and misdirection has left Polish society fragmented and polarized. Its information ecosystem is in shambles. Some in the Polish government recognize that this leaves the country more vulnerable to Russian information operations, of which there is plenty of evidence. But until the ruling party stops engaging in the very tactics the Kremlin employs, little can be done to stem the Russian threat.

Next, I explain Russian influence in the 2016 Dutch referendum on Ukraine's European Union Association Agreement. It is a textbook example of Russia's use of preexisting societal fissures to manipulate political outcomes; the disinformation campaign in the Netherlands was Russia's attempt to influence not only Ukraine's future, but the future of European democracy. From fake videos purporting to show Ukrainian "terrorists" who would wreak havoc in Dutch cities, to the manipulation of expatriate Ukrainians and Russians as surrogates for the anti-Ukraine campaign, Russia amplified negative opinions about Ukraine in the Netherlands. Ukraine's response—a ragtag counter propaganda campaign—was unique in its abject failure; it should be a warning to governments and political parties that believe winning the information war is as simple as identifying and delivering a compelling narrative to a population that does not care to engage with it.

I close the book's European case studies with the Czech Republic, a country that is far ahead of most Western nations in its response to Russian disinformation. It recognized the threat of conspiracy-touting fringe media outlets owned by murky figures and created the first domestic institution to address foreign influence through information warfare, but the resulting "Center against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats" has been at the center of a political struggle since its inception. Hesitant to attract unwanted attention to itself, it focuses on surface-

level solutions, struggling to address the societal fissures that caused Czechs to seek out alternative narratives in the first place.

Throughout the book I draw parallels with the United States, my own country. My perspective on my own government's response to the information war is often one of an outsider, given the time I've spent living and working abroad. The distance I've cultivated from US counter-disinformation policy means I can honestly rate our response, and despite a massive shift in understanding and awareness of Russia's information war, the truth is we have barely begun to formulate one. I describe how Russian influence campaigns continue to target America and the tools and tactics it uses to do so. I tell the story of Ryan Clayton, a progressive activist who co-organized a 2017 protest that was boosted by advertisements placed by the now-infamous "troll farm," Russia's Internet Research Agency. Like the campaigns I've described across Central and Eastern Europe, Russia's influence campaigns in the United States manipulate local actors to deliver a divisive message, increasing its viability, believability, and making the problem much more challenging to solve. These homegrown actors—present in every case study in this book—amplify discord and emphasize that simply deleting fake accounts and posts is only a small part of winning the information war. To guard against future influence campaigns, governments need to equip people with the tools they need to detect and resist this pernicious form of online manipulation.

Through these human stories, I not only explain how to solve the problem, but why it is worth solving to begin with. Online and in person, I often encounter polite but insistent hecklers who ask why it matters that a foreign government is inserting itself inauthentically into our democratic discourse. The United States, they point out, has interfered in foreign elections before. It has its own propaganda. Isn't

the United States the proverbial pot calling the kettle black? Why is "the West" good, while the Kremlin is portrayed as a villain?

First, I should explain that this book isn't—and I am not—Russophobic. Russian culture and language fascinate me. I love the Russian people, and the time I spent in Russia as a student shaped my worldview and my career path more than any other experience I had until I lived and worked in Ukraine. But the Kremlin and the man in it do not afford Russians the basic freedoms that many Westerners take for granted. Activists are arrested and beaten at government-sanctioned protests and arrested and beaten by the thousands at unsanctioned ones. Political candidates who attempt to run for office are barred from the ballot for "improperly" stapling their paperwork or accused of falsifying the signatures they collected in support of their campaign through hours of door-to-door canvassing. People are jailed for their social media posts. Elections are falsified on a massive scale. Journalists, human rights activists, and opposition politicians are murdered for their work.

These government actions are not in line with democratic ideals, but since 2016, we have observed the slow erosion of those principles in several Western countries, including the United States. In part, it has been hastened by a weakened commitment to truth that has been devastating to witness. When journalist Jamal Khashoggi, an American green card holder, was brutally murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, the Trump administration put its financial relationship with the Saudi government above uncovering the truth about Khashoggi's murder and holding those responsible to account. When President Trump grew tired of criticism from four popular, newly elected women of color in Congress and told them to "go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came,"[6] he put his personal popularity before the truth about their backgrounds (all but one were born American

citizens) and their duty as duly elected Members of the US House of Representatives to constructively criticize the actions of their government in search of a more perfect union, no matter how recently they immigrated.

I could describe similar examples from inside and outside the United States for pages, or I could say, simply, that these incidents—like the ones I described in Russia—are not representative of democratic ideals. What the West has, however imperfect, is worth fighting for. Our governments' blunders are reported on, criticized, investigated. Officials are, for the most part, held accountable for their mistakes. And most importantly, if citizens believe those errors are irreparable, they have recourse, not only through the right to peaceful protest, but through the democratic choice they are regularly afforded in the voting booth. So when a government of human rights criminals with no respect for the rules-based international order influences the democratic discourse surrounding our most sacred institution, direct elections—or when domestic disinformers employ those very same tactics, leaving our societies more vulnerable to outside manipulation in the future—we should be angry. And we should fight back.

In the course of writing this book, I read many accounts of work behind the walls of the St. Petersburg troll factory and endlessly scrolled through Twitter threads and Facebook groups with caustic comments from accounts clearly manned by trolls or, worse, by the Kremlin's Western "useful idiots." I learned about, observed, and even helped implement some of the responses to disinformation Western governments have launched. But most importantly, I spoke with dozens of people on the front lines of the Russian information war—including current and former government officials, journalists, students, public intellectuals, and ordinary people—to understand how they view Russian influence, having lived it for the past decade.

While some efforts described in these pages found more success than others, one thing above all else stands out; while we in the West have been slow off the starting block, unable to recognize the dividing lines in our societies, and unwilling to admit that our fellow citizens draw them, Russia has us lapped. Although its goal is increased global influence, Russia's disinformation campaigns operate on an undeniably human level, often employing local actors to cast a spell of plausible deniability and increase the authenticity of their message. Our response, however, exists almost entirely in two realms. The government realm, so far, has consisted of classified briefings, of sanctions, of taskers and talking points, while in the tech realm, executives believe in content curation, fact-checking, and furious games of Whack-a-Troll—removing fake accounts created by malign actors only to see others pop up. Like the carnival game of Whack-a-Mole, Whack-a-Troll is all but unwinnable; neither tech platforms nor governments nor journalists can fact-check their way out of the crisis of truth and trust Western democracy currently faces. Keeping people at the heart of Western policy on the Kremlin's influence campaigns is critical not only in responding to Russia's online offensives, but in repairing the cracks in our democracies that allowed them to begin in the first place. If we don't, our efforts will become another cautionary tale and another example of how to lose the information war.

1

United States: Playing Whack-a-Troll

In early July 2017, I was in Ukraine, nearing the end of my Fulbright grant. During the first six months of Donald Trump's term as president, I watched from another continent as the political culture of the United States grew increasingly charged. For the first time in my life, a majority of my friends and family were regularly attending protests and more passionately following politics. And it seemed that because of Trump and scrutiny over his connections to Putin, for the first time in my career, Americans suddenly had an increased interest in Russia and Eastern Europe.

So it wasn't a surprise—more of a curiosity of the new era, I suppose—that a highly niche group in my orbit was protesting and politicking, too. While scientists I knew marched in opposition to the administration's assault on reason and my lawyer friends camped out at airports to offer help to visitors affected by the new travel ban on people from predominantly Muslim countries, the theater people in my life were getting ready to raise their voices against the administration as well. But true to their roots, they did it in song.

I've done theater—mostly musicals—since I was a kid. When I moved to Washington, I was surprised to find a robust community theater scene in the area. It turned out the high-powered, obsessive,

hardworking group that made the nation's capital run could also put on a damn good show. The leading lady might be a top aide to a senator. In a production of *Chess*, a musical about the game as a Cold War proxy battle, a Republican opposition researcher played the American political operator trying to secure a Russian chess grandmaster's defection. (The similarities between their characters were lost on no one, including the actor.) Sadly, we produced the show in 2015, a little over a year before caring about Russia was back in style.

After moving to Ukraine, I was on a forced hiatus from the DC theater scene for nearly two years. I was still friends with many of my former castmates and followed the local theater chat on Facebook, though, ever eager to live vicariously through those still onstage back at home. In early summer 2017, an event appeared in my feed for a protest outside of the White House on July 4, inviting "resistance activists, show tune lovers, and karaoke fans to… sing a song of freedom and demand Trump's impeachment."[1] Hundreds of people were planning to dress in colonial attire at the height of Washington's muggy summer to sing a parody of "Do You Hear the People Sing?," the famous revolutionary anthem from the musical *Les Miserables,* in front of the so-called people's house.

I chuckled and rolled my eyes at the idea of such a spectacle. "Everything's a performance opportunity for theater people," I thought. The protest didn't cross my mind again for more than a year, until I read about it in a criminal complaint against the Internet Research Agency (IRA), Agency, the infamous troll factory in St. Petersburg, Russia.

In an entirely unexpected collision of my two great loves, it seemed that Russia had weaponized show tunes.

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At the conclusion of the US investigation into Russian interference into the 2016 US presidential election, Special Counsel Robert Mueller

closed his one and only public press appearance by "reiterating the central allegation of [the investigation's] indictments: that there were multiple, systematic efforts to interfere in our election, and that allegation deserves the attention of every American."[2]

Since revelations of Russia's on- and offline influence campaign came to light, and even since Mueller's May 2019 warning, the United States still seems not to grasp the complexity of what has befallen our country. When newscasters, commentators, and politicians describe Russia's interference, they rely on a wide swath of vagaries—fake news, bots, trolls—that they not only often fail to use correctly, but also fail to accurately describe the depth and breadth of Russia's interference in the United States and other countries before, during, and after the 2016 election. The problem is presented as either a curiosity of technology or the unforeseen capriciousness of an adversary, but in reality, neither more democratic social media nor better foreign policy forethought would have solved it entirely.

What makes this information war so difficult to win is not just the online tools that amplify and target its messages or the adversary that is sending them; it's the fact that those messages are often unwittingly delivered not by trolls or bots, but by authentic local voices. When taken together with an understanding of the way Russia has operated for more than a decade in Eastern Europe, the Mueller Report makes it clear that this challenge is far greater than winning a game of Whack-a-Troll.

Russia's information warfare offensive against the United States began as early as 2014, intensified after the 2016 election, and continues to this day. It involves many layers and components and is more intricate than the purchase of $100,000 in Facebook ads or the simple activation of a few lines of computer code and a network of fake Twitter accounts to make topics trend. Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg was not entirely wrong when he said "the idea that fake

news on Facebook… influenced the election in any way—I think it's a pretty crazy idea." Zuckerberg goes too far, of course, by saying that Facebook did not influence the election in *any* way; Facebook and Facebook-owned properties such as Instagram were the main vectors that Russia used to influence the discourse surrounding the election. But social media relies on user engagement with content to function, and Americans were quite happy to interact with and share sensationalist, divisive, and unfounded information they saw during the course of the election and beyond. What they didn't know is that they were sharing content produced and posted from accounts run out of Russia's Internet Research Agency.

Like the Eastern European Kremlin-sponsored influence operations that came before them, Russian online interference surrounding the 2016 US presidential election had the goal of "provok[ing] and amplify[ing] political and social discord in the United States."[3] During the 2016 US presidential election, the operation had the more explicit goal of denigrating Hillary Clinton and promoting Donald Trump. Whether or not a single vote changed as a result of Internet Research Agency operations, the IRA's use of several interdependent components of online influence campaigns altered the content and tone of discourse during the election and beyond, in addition to changing day-to-day behavior; IRA campaigns got people across the political spectrum to show up to protest actions all over the country. This fact is not repeated nearly often enough, so I will restate it: by creating and tending to trusted communities of hundreds of thousands of individuals over the course of several years, Russian operatives were able to encourage some Americans to show up to protests. They changed behavior.

The IRA's Facebook operation began with the cultivation of fake social media profiles in 2015, having monitored American social media groups "dedicated to US Politics and social issues" for the

previous year.[4] The monitoring had an in-person component as well; two IRA employees, Aleksandra Krylova and Anna Bogacheva, obtained visas on false pretenses and, on a whirlwind tour that would later get them indicted for conspiracy to defraud the United States, traveled to America for three weeks in 2014, visiting Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Texas, and New York.[5] Another IRA employee traveled to Atlanta. Later, the IRA put these intelligence-gathering operations, as well as the information it had gleaned from monitoring social media pages and groups, to good use. Russian "specialists" at the Internet Research Agency posing as American activists created and curated their own inauthentic groups and pages around social issues, including some targeting "anti-immigration groups, Tea Party activists, [and] Black Lives Matter protestors."[6] By the middle of 2016, the IRA's unit targeting the US election had a staff of at least eighty individuals and a monthly budget of over $1,250,000.[7]

Far from simply regurgitating links to Russian propaganda outlets or outright fake stories, at first these groups sought to capitalize on positive emotion and build community. Two groups—Blacktivist, which had more followers than the official Black Lives Matter Facebook page, and Being Patriotic, a right-wing page that channeled the spirit of Americana to the point of jingoism—frequently employed this tactic. While building community on the Blacktivist page, the IRA regularly shared articles and memes that telegraphed pride in African American history and contributions to society. Being Patriotic shared pro-gun, pro-America content that was fairly inane, including my personal favorite: a picture of a smiling Golden Retriever wearing a red bandanna with white stars and "holding" an American flag. The text read, "Like if you think it's going to be a great week!" Who would think twice before liking that patriotic dog or sharing their pride in their history with all of their Facebook friends? There seemed to be

nothing malicious about it, but this was how the IRA built trust and cohesion on its social properties.

The IRA used the same tactics to target the LGBT community, American Muslims, and other groups situated around the fissures running through the US sociopolitical landscape. Race, religion, sexual orientation, and other sensitive areas that capitalize on distrust in government or the proverbial American "other side" were lurking behind a facade of positivity and community. Through this generally apolitical content, the Internet Research Agency built users' trust in the pages, increased engagement, and grew their followings to hundreds of thousands of people each.

On other social media platforms, including Instagram and Twitter, the IRA attracted five- and six-digit follower counts. One popular IRA-run Twitter account claimed to represent the Tennessee Republican Party (@TEN_GOP, and later, after its original account was deactivated, @10_GOP), while other accounts in the IRA's portfolio represented themselves as Republican anti-immigration activists. These fake accounts gradually gained notoriety, earning media mentions in legitimate and well-respected outlets, as well as replies and retweets from high-powered users, including Kellyanne Conway and the Trump family. Then candidate Donald Trump himself replied to a tweet from the fake Tennessee Republican Party account that had highlighted a Trump event in Florida: "THANK YOU for your support, Miami! My team just shared photos from your TRUMP SIGN WAVING DAY, yesterday! I love you—and there is no question—TOGETHER, WE WILL MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!"[8] The tweet has since been deleted.

Whether on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or beyond, these communities were built on emotion, not through the purchase of online advertising. Not only had IRA operatives created fake

profiles and fake groups, they had duped real, sometimes influential, Americans into interacting with them.

The operation did not end with enticing patriotic dog pictures. IRA employees had been instructed to instigate "political intensity" by "supporting radical groups, users dissatisfied with [the] social and economic situations and oppositional social movements."[9] As trust within their inauthentic communities grew, the IRA operatives' asks of community members did as well. They began by initiating armchair activist campaigns based on easy tasks that furthered the sense of community in the group. The very first Facebook advertisement the IRA purchased "explicitly endorsing the Trump campaign" encouraged followers of the "Tea Party News" Instagram account to "make a patriotic team of young Trump supporters by uploading photos with the hashtag #KIDS4TRUMP."[10] Another ad on "Black Matters," a Facebook page targeting African Americans, encouraged followers to "Wear black, fight back!" as part of a national day of protest against "police brutality, repression, and criminalization of a generation." It solicited pictures from people who attended the protest event and promised to post them on the page "so that the whole African American community will know about you and your efforts." Across other pages, IRA specialists implored users to change their profile pictures in support of a cause or sign petitions about political issues.

The IRA also purchased 3,500 advertisements on Facebook to boost the engagement and reach on their posts. According to information that Facebook disclosed, the advertising campaign cost about $100,000. Journalists and politicians who focused American discourse on this part of the operation were shocked to find that Russians could use rubles to purchase an ad that would influence the American election the same way cigarette company might place an ad

to target vulnerable potential buyers. While this concern does bring up valid questions about the regulation of online advertisements in election periods, it's misplaced with regard to Russia; the operation was already successful without them.

This became clear in May 2018, when Democrats from the House of Representatives' Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence released a library of the IRA's ad purchases. It was the first largely unredacted public look at the type of content the Internet Research Agency had been creating and amplifying. Some of the posts were riddled with English mistakes. ("Black lives matters!" read the text of one ad.) Others were just odd; the IRA advertised an Instagram account called "Liberty Rising" which targeted followers of the popular online comedy outlet College Humor. According to an ad, Liberty Rising claimed to share "all the funniest memes and actual news. Read us or die suffering." Several of the ads, which were released with their engagement metrics, performed extremely poorly. As a result, some journalists and commentators brushed off the IRA's ad purchases as unsophisticated and ineffective. If these bumbling efforts were the extent of their interference, how could they possibly have changed any Americans' votes, they asked. But this wasn't the full extent of the Russian online influence campaign; contrarians chuckling at the IRA's alleged ineffectiveness ignored that the promoted posts performed well on their own, completely organically, without help from ads, thanks to the engaged communities that the IRA built over a period of several years. A post that might have only been clicked a few times by those to whom the ad was served would boast hundreds or sometimes thousands of engagements from the groups where the content was initially shared.

Researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute confirmed this trend. With access to the House-released advertisements and

another dataset of accounts of IRA origin that the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence provided them, the researchers found that of 67,502 organic Facebook posts across eighty-one different pages, and of 116,205 organic Instagram posts across 133 different accounts, organic content—not advertisements—drove the bulk of IRA activity and engagement on Facebook-owned platforms.[11] The organic Facebook posts in the dataset "were shared by users just under 31 million times, liked almost 39 million times, reacted to with emojis almost 5.4 billion times, and … generat[ed] almost 3.5 million comments."

All of these details are more or less accepted today. But a detail that deserves more attention, and one that scares me, is that the IRA operation also had an offline—or as internet users sometimes say, an "IRL" (in real life)—component. It combined online advertising with the IRA's intimate knowledge of the fissures crisscrossing the American political landscape to turn armchair activism into real rallies on the streets of the United States.

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On October 19, 2018, a criminal complaint in Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election was unsealed. It lays out how the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency funded and implemented its online influence campaigns in the United States. The level of detail is astonishing. The complaint uncovers the budget of the so-called troll factory, or, as Mueller refers to it, "the Conspiracy." It reveals the Conspiracy's organizational structure. It details communications between employees of the IRA. But one detail in particular stood out to me. "On or about July 1, 2017," the complaint reads, "a member of the Conspiracy … contact[ed] the Facebook accounts for three real US

organizations to inquire about collaborating with these groups on an anti-President Trump 'flash mob' at the White House, which was already being organized by the groups for July 4, 2017."[12] The Internet Research Agency, it seemed, had spent $80 to promote the *Les Mis* flash mob I had seen making the rounds on my Facebook feed from Ukraine.

When I read this detail, I immediately contacted my most left-leaning theater friends. Were they at the protest? Did they see anything strange there? They were out of town that holiday, it seemed. So I turned to the internet to find a record of what happened. In the age of live-streaming, it wasn't difficult. A few activists posted videos of their experiences, forever preserved on Facebook and YouTube. In the videos, several hundred people gathered in front of the White House on a sunny, sweaty Washington Independence Day. A young guy in a Revolutionary War getup complete with tri-corner hat and a waistcoat addressed the crowd:

"Hear ye, hear ye, citizens!" he began, ringing a handbell. "Resist the rule of the treasonous King Donald"—the crowd interrupted him, cheering—"who has betrayed the republic and offered his soul and conscience to the Tsar of Russia and consigned American welfare to ruin. Declare your independence from this … stupid, stubborn, worthless, brutish man! God save the United States!" The crowd waved their American flags and cheered.

Another costumed man led those gathered in a call-and-response. "We are here to demand the immediate impeachment of Trump!" he started, with the crowd repeating him every few words. "We are singing songs of angry men and nasty women in celebration of revolution on American Independence Day! We declare independence from this authoritarian who does not respect us as citizens, as women, as people of color, as people who think differently or speak a different language."

And then came the moment the musical theater dork within me had been waiting to see: the group launched into a ragtag version of "Do You Hear the People Sing?" The rendition wouldn't make it onto American Idol, nor would it secure any of the participants a role in a local production of *Les Mis*, but it was boisterous and energetic. The words were largely the same as the familiar Broadway lyrics, with one difference. At the end of the refrain, the crowd sang, jubilantly: "when the beating of your heart echoes the beating of the drum, there is a life about to start when impeachment comes!"

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Ryan Clayton, the leader of Americans Take Action (ATA), a progressive activist group that was one of the core organizers of the flash mob, is one of the "revolutionaries" behind the July 2017 protest. After nearly two decades working in politics as a campaign manager, political advertiser, and *bona fide* political rabble-rouser, the Trump era did him in. When he protested at an event for right-wing activist James O'Keefe, several attendees put him in a chokehold and pushed him down a flight of stairs, an incident that he says left him with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. He left the country in search of solitude.

I seek Clayton out when the Mueller complaint reveals Russian support for the flash mob. His group's website seemed defunct, but I send out an interview request anyway, throwing in details about my own musical theater background and my story of having seen the event on Facebook while I was in Ukraine. A few hours later, Clayton replies. "Holy shit," he writes. "Thank you for bringing this to our attention."[13]

Our meeting happens a few days later, in a Washington, DC, coffee shop, just before the 2018 midterm elections. I catch Clayton on one of his trips home to the States. He had just suffered a near-

death experience; after being on the road in Asia for a few weeks, a rip current swept him out to sea when he was swimming off the coast of Bali.

"I was lost in the water and I thought I was dying," Clayton tells me.[14] As he floated for twelve hours and contemplated what he was sure would be his imminent demise, he says he mostly thought about how grateful he was to have led a full life. But politics did cross his mind once. He remembered a protest he had organized, when he threw Russian flags toward President Trump after he left a meeting with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in the Capitol building. "Ryan," he remembers thinking, "if you're brave enough to throw flags at the feet of the president, you're brave enough to confront death." He wasn't forced to drift any closer to it, though; a few hours later, a local fisherman rescued him.

Since then, he committed his organizing and fundraising skills to rebuilding the area, which a tsunami had subsequently destroyed. The clean-shaven lanky, thirty-something guy leading call-and-response in the protest video is gone; the man who strolls into the coffee shop has a bushy beard and longer, wavy hair, his skin browned by months in the Southeast Asian sun. Clayton had no idea one of ATA's protests had been described in the criminal complaint until I emailed him, he says. "When I heard about that, I was like 'Jesus, I'm glad I got out when I did, because *Twilight Zone* politics just turned into, like, *Inception*.'"

Clayton and a few progressive friends started ATA right after Trump's November 2016 victory. They were in New York, standing "outside of Clinton's Victory Party," he says, using air quotes, "and I'm like, look, he's going to win … We can literally be the first people protesting during his victory speech." Clayton and his friends headed to the Trump Victory Party. "We are the first people protesting Trump, on the timeline. Everyone else is drinking their tears and

shell-shocked and in hiding." ATA's protests continued; they secured tickets to Trump's inauguration and stood up and linked arms as the President-elect was taking the Oath of Office, revealing blue T-shirts with red-and-white letters that spell out "RESIST." Clayton wore the letter T. He and his friends were arrested; the picture of their protest became an icon of the Trump era.

At the Conservative Political Action Conference that year, Clayton and ATA handed out Russian flags emblazoned with Trump's name in gold letters during his address to the attendees. They were found out and ejected from the speech, but not before hundreds of audience members, unaware that they were holding the Russian standard, blissfully waved the flags while chanting "USA! USA!" Later that year ATA attended the Washington Nationals baseball home opener and dropped a "RESIST" banner from the upper levels of the stadium. In short, creative protest is what ATA built their movement around.

The July 4 *Les Mis* flash mob was no different. ATA wanted to create a positive environment where people could protest on Independence Day, Clayton says. "Sometimes protests are so angry … this was like 'Fun! Singing!' Every successful social movement in America has had singing." A few hundred people attended, which he describes as an "outlier" for their events. "We were really shocked that people showed up. We were like, 'Okay, that's awesome!'"

They chalked up the high attendance to the creativity of the event. "A lot of people like karaoke, a lot of people like showtunes … A lot of people had off work. It was July 4. It was on the National Mall. We thought that that's what" brought people out, Clayton says. "We definitely had no idea there was somebody sitting in the IRA social media unit, drilling psychographically targeted ads to people like us."

They did know, however, that someone was advertising the event. Several progressive Facebook activist groups came together at the last minute to organize the protest—ATA, Singalong Solidarity, Americans

Against Trump, and Re-Sisters. The groups got on a conference call before the flash mob, which Clayton vaguely remembers. Someone on the call mentioned that an offer of free advertising had popped up in their Facebook messages. Clayton recalls saying, "Hell yeah, I want free advertising!" But there was a hitch; in order to advertise the event, the group offering the ads needed to be made an administrator of the event page. Clayton hesitated, albeit only a little. "I remember thinking, 'What's the group? It's not like, 'Politicians for Killing Puppies' or something?'" He thinks it had the word "resistance" in it in some form. Given that "most progressive organizations function in operational poverty," the group decided they would allow the ads to run.

According to Mueller's criminal complaint, the organizers were actually communicating with an Internet Research Agency employee posing as "Helen Christopherson," one of the IRA's carefully cultivated fake profiles. Created in May 2015, the Christopherson account claimed to live in New York City. Her hometown, she said, was Charleston, South Carolina. "While concealing its true identity, location, and purpose," the October 2018 criminal complaint says, "the Conspiracy used the false US persona 'Helen Christopherson' to contact individuals and groups in the United States to promote protests, rallies, and marches, including by funding advertising, flyers, and rally supplies."[15] Christopherson wrote to one of the individual organizers of the July 4 *Les Mis* flash mob in off-kilter, but not entirely incorrect English: "I got some cash on my Facebook ad account so we can promote it for 2 days," adding, "I got like $80 on my ad account so we can reach like 10000 people in DC or so. That would be Massive!"[16]

Clayton doesn't think these messages were addressed to him; he remembers finding out that an outsider was offering free advertising through the group phone call. If his memory is murky, he has no way to correct his internal record; the Christopherson account and related

chats have been removed from Facebook. Even the flash mob event page has been removed. The criminal complaint says the proposed targeting for the ad, which put individuals "within 30 miles of Washington, DC, including significant portions of the Eastern District of Virginia" in its crosshairs, reached 29,000 to 58,000 people.[17] And Clayton thinks it was impactful.

"Frankly, it worked," he says. The turnout far exceeded the organizers' expectations, and he doesn't remember seeing anyone suspicious at the protest ("Besides us, dressed as American revolutionaries, singing French showtunes," he quips). Of course, he can't definitively say the event was well attended simply because of the $80 in advertising the IRA purchased, but he still thinks the Facebook ads brought some people out. Clayton worked for a time in political advertising, and believes that even if he himself had placed Facebook ads for the flash mob, "there wouldn't [have been] two or three hundred people there."

Clayton's political background also makes him apprehensive, and perhaps even frightened about what the Internet Research Agency and the Russian government did in 2016, and continued to do after the election: divide the American people. At first, Clayton was confused about why the Internet Research Agency bought ads for his event. "It would be like the Democrats running ads for the Republicans," he says, incredulous. "We are one of the leading voices in the country talking about foreign influence in the election and the illegitimacy of the Trump administration … because of foreign influence from Russia. I hope whoever spent their rubles on those ads at the IRA got fired for it."

But the $80 spent to drive showtune-loving, progressive, DC-area residents to the White House to protest the president in song on July 4, 2017, wasn't a mistake. The Russian government is "as much in favor of Rand Paul as they are of Bernie Sanders," Clayton tells me,

"because if they can create a cacophony of volume and sound around those that really pull at the middle … if you can weight the sides, you can really pull at the fabric of society. You can pull it apart."

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Russia's investment in the *Les Mis* flash mob is not unique. The Office of the Special Counsel "identified dozens of US rallies organized by the IRA" on both sides of the political spectrum, beginning with a so-called confederate rally in Houston, Texas, in November 2015.[18] In 2016, the rallies generally focused on supporting the Trump campaign and opposing the Clinton campaign. In Pennsylvania, a series of pro-Trump rallies targeted coal miners. "How many PA workers lost their jobs due to Obama's destructive policies?" an image advertising the event asked. "Help Mr. Trump fix it!" The IRA created a robust network of activists of all political stripes to promote and share their online content. They also engaged people to help the content make the leap from the internet to real life. They hired one individual based in the United States to "build a cage on a flatbed truck and another … to wear a costume portraying [Hillary] Clinton in a prison uniform."[19] Targeting the black electorate, they "hired a self-defense instructor in New York to offer classes sponsored by" an IRA-run page that taught "African Americans to protect themselves when contacted by law enforcement."[20]

Within the inauthentic communities they created, IRA employees found real Americans who truly held the beliefs espoused in protests they sought to organize. Like Ryan Clayton and Americans Take Action, there was nothing "fake" about those Americans; they simply thought the power of social media was bringing together like-minded individuals around their cause, whether opposing Trump, like ATA and Clayton, or supporting him, like the Being Patriotic Facebook group.

Both the volume of inauthentic social media posts that the IRA created and shared and the protests it sponsored increased after the 2016 election. Trump's victory presented the IRA with fertile soil where insidious, fast-spreading seeds of discontent could be planted. The election was not the end of IRA operations; it was simply one stage. The Internet Research Agency spent $12 million on its US-focused project in 2016, and $12.2 million in 2017. By June 2018, the organization had already spent $10 million in that calendar year alone.[21] Throughout the US midterm elections and, indeed, as America careens toward another acrimonious presidential contest, Russia and the Internet Research Agency continue their online influence operations. And why shouldn't they? The United States has given them no reason to stop. Mueller's indictments, complaints, and even his report may serve to correct the public record after high-level politicians, including the president himself, have cast doubt on the veracity of Russian interference. But those charged in Mueller's indictments will not be punished. They may no longer be able to travel to the United States, but they are unlikely to see a day in US court. (In October 2019, Anna Bogacheva, one of the IRA trolls named in Mueller's indictment, was briefly detained while vacationing in Belarus; its Kremlin-friendly government freed her soon after.) And despite the publication of the Mueller Report, President Trump himself continues to treat Russian interference as if it is a joke, not a pattern of behavior that has been repeated across Eastern Europe for more than a decade.

Each of the countries we will visit in these pages has dealt with Russian interference. Outside of the individual historical and cultural peculiarities, countries as disparate as Estonia, Georgia, and the United States have in common that an outside actor has identified and capitalized on the tears in the fabric of their societies. In every case, authentic, local voices like Clayton and his

group are aiding and abetting—sometimes knowingly, sometimes unwittingly—the Kremlin's goal of fomenting large-scale distrust in government and democracy. In Estonia, Russian-language media fed ethnic Russians a narrative that capitalized on feelings of post-Soviet disenfranchisement. Russian-speaking Estonians—likely instigated or supported by Russian security services—rioted. In Georgia, the Orthodox Church and right-wing, traditionalist political parties use Russian money to rail against the contaminating influence of the European Union. In Poland, the country's strong alliances, such as with Ukraine, and its greatest tragedies, including the Smolensk plane crash, have been weaponized to turn Poles against each other. However, it is local actors, including the ruling political party, who create most of the country's disinformation, not Russia. In the Netherlands, when the Dutch voted on the ratification of Ukraine's EU Association Agreement, bad actors used local Ukrainian and Russian voices and Dutch EU critics to lend credence to their narrative of Ukraine as a corrupt and lawless state that did not deserve to be a part of the Western community of democracies. And in the Czech Republic, shady forces control fringe media outlets, preying on anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and anti-EU beliefs within the older, more rural Czech population, increasing distrust in government and the democratic process.

Although Russia supported and benefited from these actions, it's incorrect to conceive of them as entirely Russian in their provenance and genesis. And unless we recognize and address the areas that make our societies vulnerable to Russian—and other foreign—manipulation in the first place, we will never be able to address the problem.

This, I fear, is where the United States' consciousness still resides. Robert Mueller conveyed a similar exasperation while testifying before Congress in July 2019. "They're doing it as we sit here," he

said of Russian interference. The United States is handicapped by its political situation, in which an objective discussion of Russian influence campaigns is impossible, for fear it would cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Trump administration. Rather than approaching the problem holistically, considering how to both address root causes and mitigate immediate effects, we do what's easy: we play a never-ending game of Whack-a-Troll, deleting offending accounts that keep cropping up like mechanical creatures in a carnival game across social media platforms. We blame technology companies for their inaction. We blame lawmakers for their technological ineptitude. Meanwhile, while furiously waving our digital truncheon, we attempt to hermetically seal our information environment from all manner of foreign ills, such as foreign political advertisements.

As the countries we'll meet in these pages have learned, there is no one solution—technological, political, or sociological—that will erase online disinformation. But it's clear in Ryan Clayton's case and beyond that Russia's operations are more than trolls carefully exploiting modern technology; they're inherently human, and so humans must be at the heart of our response.

2

Estonia: Divided by History

In November 2018, the day I arrive in Tallinn, a suspected Russian spy is arrested.[1] The details of the allegations are hazy; the Prosecutor's Office confirms only that a Russian citizen was preparing a computer crime and his target was the Estonian state. In Estonia, as in the United States, James Bond–style intrigue has been replaced with hackers and hard drives.

Although Estonia is home to just 1.3 million people, news like this is common. Located on the Baltic Sea south of Finland, east of Sweden, and just a five-hour drive west of Russia's "northern capital," St. Petersburg, Estonia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. By 2004, it had democratized, reformed its economy, and joined NATO and the EU. But its Western political alignment is not armor against Russian interference; "since 2008, six individuals have been convicted of treason by Estonian courts and another twelve of committing crimes against the state by collaborating with Russian special services."[2] Spy exchanges on a bridge over the Narva River, which separates the two countries, are regular occurrences, and in 2007, Estonia was the first front in the modern Russian information war.[3] Today, it's one of the only countries to mount a coherent

response. It's a response that offers the West a roadmap emphasizing not just kinetic actions—sanctions and cyber operations—but the engagement of individual citizens in the fight against disinformation.

I've been to Tallinn a few times before. It is by nature a sleepy town, situated on the brooding Baltic Sea coast. More often than not, the city is cloaked in gray (when the sun is up, that is; its northerly geography means that it only gets a few hours of sunlight in the winter months). A colleague from Texas who lived here for the better part of a year couldn't reconcile southern hospitality with the unsmiling nature of Estonians as they scurried from tram stops to their homes and offices, eager to escape the bone-chilling cold, not speaking to anyone along the way. Eventually she left for a warmer, friendlier place.

And yet when the sun does escape its cloud-cover prison, Tallinn's European character shines, too. The colorful wooden houses in Kalamaja, the former fishing quarter, look like they might belong on the English Coast. Nearby, hipsters organize craft markets. The capital's perfectly preserved medieval city center sits atop a hill a short walk from here, surrounded by a mix of square Soviet structures and the glass skyscrapers built after Estonia's European integration. In the spring, tourists and locals alike sip champagne in courtyards overflowing with fragrant blooms. If you walk into a *kohvik*—one of many inviting cafes and coffee shops lining the old town's winding streets—you're often greeted in three languages. "*Tere! Privet!* Hello!" the clerk will chime from behind the counter in Estonian, Russian, and English.

More than many of its post-Soviet brethren, Tallinn straddles past and present, and as on bridges where its notorious spy exchanges take place, it links East and West. So as the country began its rapid Western integration and a gap between Estonia's Soviet past and its European future started to widen, Russia moved to keep its influence over its former satellite.

Ask any Estonian adult where they were or what they were doing during the weeks of the so-called Bronze Soldier Crisis of 2007 and much like Americans who lived through JFK's assassination, the Challenger disaster, or 9/11, Estonians can recount in minute detail their personal stories from that charged period. For the young nation, it was the defining event of their modern state. For Putin's Russia, it was the country's first foray into modern information warfare. Just as it was an early indication of the tactics that would be unleashed on the United States within a decade, Estonia's experience offers ideas for how to combat them as well.

The short version of the Bronze Soldier story often told in international media goes like this: the Estonian government relocated a statue honoring Soviet war dead from the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery on the outskirts of town in spring 2007 (Figure 1). Ethnic Russians, many of whom moved to the country during the Soviet era, rioted, and for weeks afterward, cyberattacks connected to Russia seized the country's banks, government services, and media. Estonia prevailed against the attackers and became a Western leader in cybersecurity and internet technologies. Its citizens voted online, paid taxes online, and did their banking online, all long before such practices were commonplace. It gave the world Skype, pioneered "e-residency" for foreigners, and earned the eye-roll-inducing nickname "e-Stonia."

The long version is a bit more complex; when Estonians tell it, they start not with the events of spring 2007, nor with Estonia's accession to the EU or NATO, but with the Second World War.

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"To understand the Bronze Soldier, you must start with history," says Jaak Aaviksoo, who served as minister of defense during the Bronze Soldier Crisis but is a physicist by training. He meets me in his office at Tallinn Technical University (TTU), where he now serves

as rector. To get there, I walk by an enormous engine on display in the foyer, wondering if current TTU students, who were children in 2007, know about the rector's involvement in what was the most consequential event for Estonia after the end of the Soviet occupation.

Aaviksoo is bald with bespectacled blue eyes. He speaks with the tempo and careful timbre of a practiced teacher. I ask about the lead up to the crisis, the early indications of what might have been brewing, but he brushes my questions away. He might as well be pacing in front of a chalkboard in a lecture hall, hands clasped behind his back. "I actually think it's wise to start from—'what is the Bronze Soldier?' It's a Second World War Memorial. Or at least that's the story that has been created around it."[4]

Before the Second World War broke out, Estonia had long been dominated by Swedish, German, and Russian rule, gaining independence only in 1918. Like many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, it found itself a casualty of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: a secret protocol in the agreement between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany divided Europe and maintained peace between the two powers while they carved up the rest of the continent and plunged it into war. Originally, Estonia fell under Soviet control, but Germany eventually occupied the country. When the tides of war turned against Germany three years later, the Soviet army returned to Estonia, "liberating" Tallinn from Nazi rule and incorporating Estonia into the USSR. The West never recognized the Soviet annexation of Estonia or its Baltic neighbors, Latvia and Lithuania.

The Bronze Soldier was erected in a park in the city center to commemorate the Soviet soldiers who died "liberating" Tallinn, explains Aaviksoo. But there was no liberation. "The truth is that there was no battle," to free the city, he says. "There was no fighting because the German army simply went away … There were no fallen soldiers. But of course, some people got lost or killed for whatever reasons.

And we know that some Soviet military [personnel] were buried somewhere there, where the monument stood." The monument, known then as the "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier," was based on a false narrative. "From the very early days," Aaviksoo recalls, "there was at least two-thirds propaganda and one-third reality."

The Kremlin pursued an aggressive Russification policy in Estonia after annexation, resettling many ethnic Russian military families in Tallinn, where the USSR's Baltic fleet would be based. When Estonia finally regained independence in 1991, Russians accounted for more than 30 percent of the population.[5] Relations between ethnic Russians and Estonians post-independence were charged; new citizenship laws that included Estonian language proficiency stipulations made it difficult for Russians to gain citizenship and access to services like public education, creating and perpetuating de facto segregation between the two groups. These concerns would later form the basis for the Kremlin's information operations targeting the Russian population.

The country had a complicated physical legacy to deal with as well: it was dotted with memorials commemorating its former occupiers. "We had the German memorials, and the Swedish ones, and the Polish, and the Russian ones. We are basically used to liv[ing] peacefully among these symbols of different external policy," explains Aaviksoo. Other than monuments to Lenin, the memorials stayed put, reminding Estonians that their sovereignty had not been easily won. The same was true of the Bronze Soldier, which the new government re-dedicated in honor of all soldiers killed in Estonia during the Second World War. "We lived peacefully until the Putin era," Aaviksoo says ominously.

Harrys Puusepp—a spokesperson for the Estonian Internal Security Service, the country's main vehicle for fighting foreign influence operations, known by its Estonian acronym, KAPO—agrees. "People

couldn't care less about the Bronze Soldier after independence," he tells me in a windowless conference room in the KAPO headquarters, sitting in front of a display case full of ceremonial swords.[6] The swords are hardly the strangest part of KAPO HQ: to get in the building, I had to go through a series of space-age gates that resembled what I imagine teleportation devices would look like if they existed. I waited for Puusepp in a barren foyer, void of any human activity except a two-way mirror. I'd been through all manner of government security from the United States to Ukraine and across the former communist space, but these precautions felt next-level in a place as small as Tallinn.

Puusepp is blond and clean-shaven; I'm surprised to find out he is in his early thirties and a father of two. Despite his apparent youth, he is fixated on Russia's use of history in order to reawaken and reinvigorate its post-Soviet diasporas abroad. He tells me about an article published in 1992 by Russian political scientist Sergei Karaganov in Russia's *Diplomatic Herald*. In it, Karaganov claims that Russia must serve as the protector of ethnic Russians abroad, particularly in the Baltic States. The policy prescription—now known as "Karaganov's doctrine"—was later used to argue against the removal of Russian troops from Estonia so the forces could protect ethnic Russians against discrimination.

Part of Russia's protection and outreach to its diaspora in the near abroad included the use of history as a means of connection, and much of its historical narrative is centered around the Second World War. While the Soviet state was much more fixated on holidays that celebrated workers' contributions to society, such as Labor Day, in the post-Soviet era, de-communization meant that Russia needed to rally its population—and ethnic Russians abroad—around a different narrative. When Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, his inauguration was followed by the return of the modern Victory

Day parade. The symbols of the Soviet victory were reinvigorated by Putin in the near abroad, says Puuseep, and as vestiges of the USSR's greatness were being replaced, ethnic Russians in Estonia, who had no attachment to local culture, language, or lore, were happy to celebrate and adopt the reborn symbols as their own.

"Russian propaganda tried to take advantage of those who died in the Second World War," Puuseep says. KAPO thought the trend important enough to include in their 2007 Annual Report, a yearbook of Estonian spycraft's greatest hits that Puuseep bestows upon me as I leave the building. According to the report, the renaissance of Soviet symbols among the Estonian-Russian community and its leaders "[was] directed and supported directly from Moscow and via the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Estonia. As a result of propaganda, [the] Russian community started to celebrate former Soviet red-letter days more actively and provokingly since 2005."[7]

Russia's reach back into former Soviet republics and satellites was not a coincidence; it was an active answer to the EU and NATO's westward expansion, which President Putin made clear in his historic February 2007 address to the Munich Security Conference, a high-profile gathering on international security that has been taking place since 1963. Putin railed against the United States ("it has overstepped its national borders in every way," he claimed. "This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?" he asked).[8] He criticized the emergence of a post–Cold War unipolar world, arguing for a more democratic international order while slamming the United States and the West for what he viewed as unfounded meddling in Russia's affairs. "Incidentally, Russia—we—are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves," he said.

Putin's closing remarks packaged Russia's aggressive tactics over the next decade as an answer to Western—and, in particular, American—interventionism in an area he viewed as his country's inheritance:

> The stones and concrete blocks of the Berlin Wall have long been distributed as souvenirs … and now [the West is] trying to impose new dividing lines and walls on us … Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy. We are not going to change this tradition today.

Russia's "independent foreign policy" would become clearer to all those in the room in just a few months, as it launched its first modern information operation—seeking not only political influence, but the erosion of Western democracy—in Estonia. It would continue beyond the borders of the Baltic States and the former Soviet Union in the years to come.

Russia had prepared for this shift in policy through two outreach mechanisms. One may be familiar to many Americans; Russia Today, now known as RT, Russia's foreign-language propaganda network, was founded in September 2005 to "reflect the Russian position on main issues of international politics and inform the wider public about the events and phenomena of Russian life."[9] Press coverage of RT's launch describes it as an effort to improve Russia's image abroad. Svetlana Mironyuk, then CEO of RIA Novosti, Russia's federal news agency, which founded RT, lamented Western conceptions of her homeland: "In the West, Russia is associated with three concepts: communism, snow, and poverty. We would like to introduce a more nuanced picture of life in our country."[10] Kremlin-critical media, including Lenta.ru, an independent outlet from which the entire editorial team was sacked a decade later, immediately saw RT for what

it was. "Russia creates a propagandistic TV channel for foreigners," a headline announced.[11]

Meanwhile, the Russian-language media pumped out divisive stories to incite feelings of discontent in the ethnic Russian population in Estonia. Estonia's ambassador to Russia at the time, Marina Kaljurand, herself of Russian origin, described the difficulty she faced trying to correct the Russian-language public record in Moscow in a recent interview on the ten-year anniversary of the Bronze Night:

> The Russian media were very, very biased. The Estonian government was portrayed as a fascist government that does not honor the fallen, and wants to demolish the Bronze Soldier. As the Estonian ambassador, I tried to explain and set the record straight. It was very difficult, almost impossible. I was never allowed to speak on air on any Russian TV channel.[12]

Overall, the goal of Russia's foreign media outreach through RT and other mouthpieces, as described in the KAPO Annual Report in 2007, was to "continue reasoned and aggressive position [*sic*] toward the Baltic States in order to prevent anti-Russian moods and secure increase in Russian influence in the world."[13] In other words, Russia was testing—on a small scale, with a small community—the political influence strategy it would later deploy in Ukraine, Western Europe, and, eventually, the United States.

I meet Raul Rebane, an Estonian journalist who got his start covering sports and reported from twelve Olympic games. An internet search for his name turns up a Soviet passport-style photo of a young man with dark hair and one eyebrow gently raised in skepticism. Rebane describes himself in an email before we meet, as if expecting that this photo might lead me astray. "I'm 64, tall, too heavy, and very grey," he writes. These days, he's traded the Olympics for communications and strategic consulting. Although he's not "too

heavy," as he wrote, I nonetheless spot Rebane installed behind his computer in a hotel cafe just outside of the old city walls.[14]

Like many Balts, Rebane is a bit bemused that he's sitting across from a young American woman in 2017, rather than in 2007, or even earlier. I get the feeling I'm ten years too late. "It's very difficult to explain to … Western people … what the hell is going on," he begins. Westerners didn't believe Baltic warnings about Russian actions until recently, Rebane says, "because they thought that, you know, there's no end to democracy." The West collectively considered the Balts Russophobes. They woke up a little after what happened to Estonia in 2007, but they didn't really wake up until after Brexit and Trump. "People finally understand that probably, we were right," he tells me, a sardonic twinkle in his eye.

The Balts watched warily as Moscow launched a war of symbols in the lead-up to and after Putin's speech at Munich; Rebane watched from his window, which looked out over Tõnismägi Square, home to the Bronze Soldier, where ethnic Russians began gathering years before the crisis erupted. It was one of the symbolic spots in the city where former Soviet Red Letter days—in particular Victory Day and the Day of the Liberation of Tallinn (although Estonians disputed this as a historical event)—were celebrated and war dead commemorated. Veterans dressed in their uniforms traditionally gathered at the monument on Victory Day. Beginning in 2005, they were joined by teens from a new Kremlin-funded nationalist youth group, Nashi, itself an extension of Russian compatriot policy and an attempt to create a new generation of Russian loyalists. Young children carrying flowers were led to the square by their parents, orange-and-black St. George's ribbons—a new commemorative symbol of Russia's Second World War victory—pinned to their lapels. Kadri Liik, then the Director of the International Centre for Defense Studies, a Tallinn-based think tank, wrote that "pro-Soviet demonstrations

were most likely inspired by the active and official nostalgia for the Soviet period in Putin's Russia, which reached the Estonian Russians via Russian TV channels."[15]

On Victory Day in 2006, the war of symbols—until then fought on the pages of newspapers, on the airwaves, and in hearts and minds—became an open confrontation, driven by Moscow. "The issue [of the Bronze Soldier] became a noisy one when Moscow made it so," wrote Liik. "Serious problems emerged [around the statue] when it started to attract small but fairly extremist groups of pro-Soviet demonstrators in addition to its regular visitors, the majority of which just wanted to honor their war dead."[16] In 2006, Soviet veterans celebrating at the statue were met by a small group of Estonian nationalists, bearing an Estonian flag. The group had mobilized because Estonians "felt danger," Rebane tells me. "We felt that some kind of change of symbols" was underway, "that what is ours, something important, like the flag, would be insulted." Many Estonians had living family members who suffered under the Soviet regime. Some, like Rebane's grandfather and four brothers, had been deported to Siberia. To see the Soviet flag being celebrated in the center of the capital of their newly independent country was an insult to the legacy of Estonia's collective suffering. Confrontation loomed.

Aaviksoo, who was not yet defense minister, also recalls Victory Day 2006 as a turning point. "The internal security services were very aware that there was enough material for provocation, so the Estonian police intervened." Rather than try to arrest the thousands of Russians who had gathered, they escorted the less numerous Estonian protesters away in a police vehicle. "The Estonian flag was deported and the Red flag was left standing in the Soviet center of Tallinn. That was an issue of political effect," Aaviksoo says of the public relations blunder. Aaviksoo's Reform Party made eliminating the struggles over the statue a major campaign promise.

After Victory Day 2006, when the government began to discuss the Bronze Soldier's future in central Tallinn, a group of ethnic Russians that called themselves *Nochnoi Dozor*, or Night Watch, stood guard at the monument in case any attempts were made to dismantle it overnight. They wrote of their self-imposed duty on their now-defunct website:

> In the 20th century, the people of Europe found themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea, the opposition between fascism and communism. We invite you to find solutions to the controversial issues without the help of Hitler and Stalin's methods, but in a way which is accepted in civilized society and the European Union, which respects the history, culture and traditions of all people.

Conveniently copying the narrative that had prevailed in Russian media for years prior, the Night Watch emphasized that the Bronze Soldier "symbolizes the victory of Europe and the whole world over fascism, and also belongs to the history of our grandfathers and parents."[17]

In *Bronze April in the Eyes of Russians*, a 2011 Russian propaganda film that focuses on the work of the Night Watch, the group is described as a patriotic, necessary component of Estonian society to preserve the memory of those who had saved the world from fascism. The film focuses on footage of protesters who carried signs with fascist accusations, such as "Parliament, don't touch our soldier with your dirty brown law!" and labels Estonian counter-protesters who were far less numerous and less active than the ethnic Russians "radical nationalists." Its most sweeping and absurd claim is that "the Estonian government had done all it could to divide society into two separate ethnic camps" by removing the statue; the film gives no consideration to the mounting public safety concerns surrounding the monument.

Estonian security services claim that the Night Watch's activities did not spring up from the grassroots of Estonian-Russian society as the group asserted; in fact, Russian Embassy and intelligence figures met with the leaders of the group "secretly in Tallinn Botanical Gardens and in a shashlik-bar right before the April riots, and not in vain."[18]

When Aaviksoo and his governing coalition took office in April 2007, with just over a month until the next Victory Day celebration, one of the first orders of business was to ease the simmering tensions surrounding the Bronze Soldier statue. The coalition set out to find what—if anything or anyone—was buried under the monument, so that both the monument and any remains might be honorably and properly relocated.

War memorials were in the Ministry of Defense portfolio, so Aaviksoo led the operations surrounding the statue. "Lucky me," laughs Aaviksoo, recalling the beginning of his term. With Night Watch on guard overnight, the Ministry of Defense decided that it needed to "carry out, let's say, a 'focused operation,' so that we [could] start the excavations and avoid a possible provocation around the monument," Aaviksoo says.

In the early morning of April 26, the Ministry jammed communications around the Bronze Soldier so that members of the Night Watch would not be able to alert other members of their group of the government activity in the area. The government erected a fence and tent surrounding the monument. Interfax, a Russian news agency, reported that excavations had begun. By seven o'clock that evening a crowd had gathered on Tõnismägi Square and started to riot.

Poring over video and photos from the 2007 riots, Tallinn is barely recognizable as the gingerbread medieval city where I've come to feel at home. The footage is tinted with an orange glow as fires

burn throughout the entrance to the Old Town. Shop windows are shattered and cars overturned. Shots ring out. The air is thick with tear gas. Rioters shout expletives as they engage with police, resulting in the arrests of 237 before the events conclude forty-eight hours later. One rioter who attempted to loot a nearby bar got into a fight with its patrons was beaten, stabbed, and later died in the hospital.[19] With no evidence but an unattributed quote, RT and Nashi youth activists blamed the police for the protester's death, calling him "a hero and victim of the Estonian government."

The city had never experienced such unrest, Rebane underlines. "During a hundred years—a century!—one person was killed. Go to France, go to Germany. [Estonia is] a common, peaceful country." Aaviksoo agrees. "Maybe Paris has seen more after a failed football match," he tells me, eyes wide, but for Estonia this was an "unprecedented conflict." He was summoned to a middle-of-the-night cabinet meeting, and recalls Prime Minister Andrus Ansip discussing the government's predicament; "[Ansip] couldn't go on TV and say, 'Hi friends, everything in the city center of Tallinn is smashed up. The only thing the Estonian government was able to protect was the Bronze Soldier.' It [was] a farce." So at about 2:00 a.m. on April 27, the government decided to remove the statue.

The decision was only half the battle; for hours afterward, the government dealt with legal and logistical battles as the riot police tried to quell ongoing unrest in the center of the city. The statue was on city land, and the Tallinn city council was semi-sympathetic to the ethnic Russian narrative; a predawn legal battle ensued, with the Ministry coming out victorious. Then there was the question of the physical removal of the statue in the middle of the night. Estonia's size came in handy in clearing this obstacle, Aaviksoo remembers with a laugh. "Estonia is small and … basically the Prime Minister knew somebody who was in a construction company and who had

equipment. So he sent people to wake him up, personally talked to the owner of the company, and then at 6:23, the soldier was gone."

The government made one optical mistake, however, by dismantling the soldier under a tent, away from the view of those gathered. "Nobody believed it," Aaviksoo remembers, despite a press conference and a government-organized press tour. The Russian propaganda machine began spinning, claiming the statue was unceremoniously demolished and graves desecrated. The Russian government went as far as to send a delegation of four parliamentarians to examine the statue and investigate the Russian propaganda claim that it had been cut into two halves.

These were all blatant lies, but, like all of Russia's disinformation campaigns, they found fertile ground because they were based in public fears and sentiments that were very real. During my conversations around the country, I've almost forgotten this; the idea of manipulation dominates discussion of the Bronze Soldier without so much as acknowledgment of the fact that the feelings Russia exploited in order to amplify conflict—disenfranchisement, disillusionment, and dismay with the post-Soviet reality for Russians in Estonia—were not manufactured; they had been brewing since independence. The Bronze Soldier and the manipulation of history aren't unique to Estonia, either; Russian agitation around the 2016 election included references to and imagery of the American Confederacy. Even after the 2016 election, the Internet Research Agency amplified racial and historical discord through tweets during the August 2017 violent clashes in Charlottesville, Virginia, surrounding a neo-Nazi rally at the city's monument to Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

Olga Sõtnik reminds me that Russia is practiced at identifying and amplifying authentic societal discord. She is a former politician and, as her Twitter bio explains, a "Mother, wife, liberal, feminist, ex-MEP (E stands for Estonian;)," who "tweets in english, estonian, russian." I

wanted to meet Sõtnik because she works at the Ministry of Culture on issues related to ethnic and cultural integration, but between her thoroughly modern European online persona, her Russian first name juxtaposed with a last name topped with an Estonian diacritic governing pronunciation in ways I can't fathom, and her former political career working as a voice of the Russian population, I'm not sure where the conversation will lead. We meet on an early summer day in 2018 at a sidewalk cafe in Tallinn's historic center, a short walk from where the Bronze Soldier once stood, and around the corner from her office at the Ministry.

Sõtnik—now in her late thirties, dirty blonde and athletic—was a newly elected member of the Estonian parliament when the Bronze Night shook Estonia, having previously served Tallinn as deputy mayor from the Center Party, which to this day attracts many Russian voters. But despite her former political affiliation, she is quick to explain that she is technically not an ethnic Russian: "My mother is Finnish, and my father is half Ukrainian, and there are some Mongolian and Russian roots. At home we speak Russian … so I call myself a Russian-speaking Estonian, because I'm not ethnically Russian, but I'm Estonian. I'm a citizen of Estonia."[20]

Despite her background and vehement support of the Estonian state, a few weeks into her tenure in parliament, Sõtnik found herself criticizing the government's handling of the Bronze Soldier crisis. The government ignored the efforts of the Center Party, which had tried to negotiate with the veterans' association and other ethnic Russians about the future of the monument, she says. "Of course now … you understand that maybe it was the only way [for the government] to treat the situation," Sõtnik admits, acknowledging that she feels the Russian government and its affiliates had a role in organizing the protests and riots themselves. But at the time, "the way [the government] handled it in the middle of the night, it was like a special

operation, and the way that some people were treated by the police was very unfair."

Sõtnik was so incensed that one of her first speeches on the floor of parliament was charged with the emotions felt by many other Russian speakers in the days following the removal of the statue. The decision, she said, "was driven like a roller coaster over the people," and inspired by the new government's campaign promises. "Why was my dear hometown, the peace and property of its inhabitants, sacrificed to the ambitions of one man?" she asked, referencing Prime Minister Ansip.[21]

But the most emotional part of Sõtnik's speech was centered not on a loss of property or political civility, but a loss of progress. "The relationship between the [the Russian and Estonian] communities has been destroyed," she lamented. "These past 15 years of hard and difficult integration have been obliterated overnight. On April 20, integration suffered a painful setback. A government that does not really want a split in society could at least hear all the parties and wait for judgment." She claimed to speak for all Russians when she closed her speech, asking, "How can we live in a country where the government spits on us?"

Sõtnik represented a rushing current of feeling in the Russian community. It was supported by Kremlin media; no outreach or protestations from the Estonian government could make a dent in the Russian-language news coverage of the crisis. The supposed treatment of the statue and the ensuing investigation were firmly entwined with the narrative—which rang true with many Russians—of the treatment of minority populations in independent Estonia. "This was not about the monument and the conflict," Aaviksoo said of the news coverage and the way the sentiments of Russian population were manipulated by the discourse. Russians felt the handling of the statue's removal "was meant to humiliate, to desecrate the Soviet Red Army, to create

emotions that were clearly against not the decision, but the people involved in it." Protests days later called for an international tribunal against Aaviksoo and other members of the Estonian government.

Estonia was even forced to close its Moscow Embassy after activists from Nashi, the nationalist Kremlin youth group, set up a tent city surrounding the entrance to the compound. Estonian Ambassador Marina Kaljurand recalls that the Nashi activists papered the center of Moscow with her picture, "with text saying 'wanted: ambassador of a fascist country.'"[22] The campaign escalated from in-person trolling to physical attacks when Kaljurand left the embassy to give a press conference about the ongoing tensions; protesters screamed "Let's get her!," forcing her bodyguards to use pepper spray to fend off the would-be attackers. To this day, Kaljurand is convinced of the Kremlin's puppeteering hand above all the events surrounding the Bronze Night. The youth protesters were paid by the Kremlin, but there's a deeper legal indicator of Kremlin involvement. Kaljurand told an Estonian news outlet:

> Under international law, all states are obliged to guarantee the immunity and safety of diplomats and diplomatic premises. In other words, you don't attack diplomats, on the contrary, you are obliged to guarantee their working conditions, safety, privileges, and immunity. A group of young people—whatever their political views—can't stage a siege of an embassy without clear support and instruction by Kremlin … The Russian authorities could have ended the violation of international law in minutes, but they didn't, because they didn't want to. They intervened and ended the siege only after strong statements of the international community.[23]

Private citizens, too, were affected by the events, even if they didn't take part in the protests themselves, as Russia's influence war moved from the streets to the internet. A bit more than ten years prior to

our first meeting, Raul Rebane, the Olympic-journalist-turned-communications-consultant, was running an IT training seminar for Swedbank, the largest financial institution in the Baltic region. (Coincidentally, the training venue was the very hotel where we met for coffee.) In the middle of a session, Rebane looked up from his notes to a room full of attendees furiously checking their cell phones; the IT systems of the second largest bank in the region had gone down. The seminar tenuously carried on, the participants' attention clearly divided, until the phones started buzzing again. This time, it was SwedBank's systems that had succumbed. "The seminar ended in 15 seconds," recalls Rebane.

Raul Rikk was studying in Washington, DC, at the time of the attacks.[24] He is a cybersecurity expert who now leads Estonia's e-Governance Academy, an institution that assists states aspiring to Estonia's level of technical prowess. Its offices are an image in miniature of Estonia's modern stereotype, striving to be hipper and sleeker than the hippest in Scandinavian design, with globular light fixtures, lots of glass, and a colorful, open floor plan. We sit in a fishbowl conference room, and after showing me a slick slide deck about his work, Rikk tells me about his experiences during the Bronze Night. He tried to access his bank account online—although in 2007 many Americans were still balancing their checkbooks by hand, Estonia launched online banking in 2001, and more than 97 percent of Estonians used the services—but found the system was down.

Estonia was the target of a "massive distributed denial-of-service [DDOS] attack that emanated from up to 85,000 hijacked computers and lasted three weeks."[25] The attacks "came from 178 countries, even from the United States and the Vatican," but as Rikk points out, this wasn't a terribly sophisticated cyberattack; DDOS attacks essentially overload a server by sending many requests to access a given website or service at the same time. The website is unable to handle that

amount of traffic and shuts down. Fifty-eight websites were affected, including the country's largest newspaper, several banks, and many government services. Rikk regained access to his account after the bank provided him a second, secret IP address from which to log in. The government walled off the country's IT systems from any requests not originating in Estonia, and after three weeks, the attacks stopped. Some Estonians didn't initially notice the disruption in service until it was reported in the news.

When researching the computer network used to conduct the attacks, it appeared that the same bot network had also been used to attack the online presence of Kremlin oppositionists including chess master Gary Kasparov.[26] The justice minister, Rejn Lang, went as far as to say that some of the IP addresses involved indicated that the attack was carried out from inside the Russian government.[27] Activists from Nashi also took responsibility, and instructions detailing how to participate in the onslaught as a hacker activist were posted online in Russian. While the attack has never been directly and publicly blamed on the Kremlin, today, if pressed to attribute the attack, most Estonian and Western officials will use a cheeky analogy, as former Defense Minister Aaviksoo does with me. "If somebody barks like a dog and bites like a dog and looks like a dog, there's a high probability that it's a dog."

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Compared to events like the 2016 hack of the Democratic National Committee, which plastered the private communications of party officials across the internet and poisoned the discourse surrounding the 2016 Democratic primary election, the 2007 attacks in Estonia may seem to be of little consequence. But for Estonia, and even for the West at that time, they were momentous. Rikk, the leader

of the e-Governance Academy, admits that "we can say that [the cyberattacks were] not a big deal these days. But when you have riots on the streets, your embassy is attacked, we didn't know how big it was going to be. That was the problem. We were afraid they might have the potential to do more." So Rikk and others across the government and private sector went to work shoring up Estonia's defenses, both online and off.

Rikk had already been working to establish a NATO Cyber "Center of Excellence"—a structure that is NATO-branded but member-state-operated on an issue of strategic importance to the Alliance—since December of 2003. NATO was interested in promoting Estonia's great strides in the technology sector since independence. For three years, the country readied the center's infrastructure and awaited official accreditation and partnerships from fellow members. After the 2007 attack, "it was much easier to [attract] members to the center and then we were able to establish it officially," says Rikk.

Aaviksoo puts it more simply. "The cyberattacks made us famous," he says. "We had a lot of friends. I mean, the Estonian government or the Ministry of Defense would most probably never be in a situation to have so much publicity, so the PR service that was delivered was excellent. I mean, thank you. Really." He's only half joking; the Estonian government model of public-private partnerships in dealing with cyberattacks, its expertise in responding to cyber warfare, and its e-Governance systems have all become renowned throughout the transatlantic community and beyond; Rikk's e-Governance Academy delivers trainings and programming in Africa and Asia.

But beefing up Estonia's cyber expertise and spreading the gospel of cyber defense was the simplest of the challenges facing the Estonian government after the Bronze Night; creating contingency plans to fight angry zombie computers controlled by a foreign power was

much easier than reversing the effects of malicious influence among the country's dispirited, disconnected Russian minority.

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There is a single current common to all my conversations in Estonia, no matter whether I'm speaking to an intelligence officer, defense sector official, politician, or activist: education is directly tied to Estonian national security, the future cohesion of the Estonian state, and its ability to repel Russian influence. In addition to being separated by status within the country—15 percent of residents of Estonia have "undetermined" citizenship;[28] that is, they possess neither an Estonian nor a Russian passport, a relic of the early and restrictive Estonian citizenship measures—Estonians and Russian speakers are geographically segregated. In Tallinn, they live in the Lasnamäe, a populous district of the capital dominated by high-rises and the E20 highway. The road stretches across Estonia's northern coast to the border with Russia and Ida-Virumaa county, where a high concentration of Russians live in the cities of Kohtla-Järve, Jõhvi, Sillamäe, and Narva. This physical segregation can lead to further social and economic segregation as a Russian speaker's life progresses, mostly dependent on whether a person has learned Estonian by the time they reach secondary school.

Creating a level playing field for Russians in Estonia is something that Irene Käosaar, the director of the Integration Foundation, has made her life's work. The child of a mixed Estonian-Russian family in which it was typical to switch between languages at the dinner table, Käossar popularized Estonian-language immersion programs and now runs the foundation because, she tells me, "It was my dream that we could be in a society … where we could be with Russians and Estonians and use both languages."[29]

With short-cropped blonde hair and a kind face, Käossar buzzes as she explains her background. But Käossar's is not a dream that's so easily fulfilled, she explains as she spreads the Ministry of Culture's latest integration survey results on our small table in a Tallinn coffeehouse. "The main problem is [physical] segregation," she says. "[Russian speakers] start their childhood in different kindergartens, then different basic educations. Twenty percent of children study in Russian schools," and university may be the first time they study side by side with ethnic Estonians, but only if their Estonian is fluent enough to study in the country's Estonian-language universities. This is a goal still unattainable to many; with nearly all of their early education in Russian, 41 percent of ethnic Russians in Estonia believe that higher education in the country is "definitely not" or "rather not" equally accessible to young ethnic Russians as compared with young Estonians.[30]

This translates to a striking disparity in the labor market as ethnic Russians enter the workforce. Käossar rattles off a barrage of statistics, indicating charts on her "employment" fact sheet with a purple fingernail as she speaks. Unemployment among Estonians sits at just 4 percent, while 7 percent of Estonian-speaking ethnic Russians are unemployed. That number doubles among ethnic Russians with no Estonian skills. Russians make up the majority of service industry, as well as unskilled and technical labor jobs, but only fill about 2 percent of jobs in government ministries and 6 percent of managerial positions.[31]

Segregation of Russians from an early age also leads to different information environments, beginning in schools, where many teachers were Soviet-educated and might teach different versions of recent history, similar to how schools in the American North and South teach the legacy of the Civil War. Information segregation dominates the media sphere, where Russian speakers view Russian-language news

sources like Kremlin mouthpiece Channel One as most important, and social media, where the Russian population is more concentrated on Russian social networks, as opposed to Facebook.

This hole in the fabric of Estonian society is one that Russia used to its advantage during the Bronze Night and one the Estonian government has worked hard to repair since then. Käossar believes what she calls the "contact hypothesis" can mend the gap; Estonians and Russians, she says, "don't want to be together because they are afraid … if Russians speak about Estonians, or vice versa, they have some stereotypes. But when they speak about concrete people, a neighbor, friend, coworker, it changes the situation." The Integration Foundation, which she leads, aims to increase these contacts by providing support to Estonian-language learners and those preparing for the country's language test, a requirement for naturalization. Financed by Estonia's Ministries of Culture, Education, and Internal Affairs, the Integration Foundation focuses on the human side of this tendentious political issue, offering its services to anyone, of any age or background, seeking to bolster their Estonian skills, and this is a departure from the past, Käossar tells me. "Today, we don't speak about Estonian language or citizenship [using] 'why?' No. That's not the point. We speak about how; how to do it, how to be better in language teaching, in citizenship [requirements], in the media sphere, and I think this is a huge change. This is changing thinking."

Along with that change in thinking comes a change in location; in 2018, Irene and the Integration Foundation moved east, to Narva, a city on the Russian border with a population made up of more than 95 percent ethnic Russians.

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The road from Tallinn to Narva is straight and flat, with one lane in each direction extending to the horizon for most of the trip. Estonian drivers carefully adhere to the speed limit. The bouncy cadence of the Estonian language rolls out of the radio along with the countryside out the window. Gradually, as you coast closer to the Russian border, more Russian-language stations pepper the dial. They play Russian rap and hip-hop covers of Soviet classics; one station has an hourly news broadcast that discusses developments in Estonian and international politics. I wonder if it is government sponsored. Today, it discusses Donald Trump's remark at the G7 summit that Crimea—illegally annexed from Ukraine by the Kremlin in 2014—is part of Russia. "It's unclear if the President was telling an unfortunate joke or has made a decisive about-face in US foreign policy," notes the anchor.

Joke or not, I laugh. It's appropriate that the news includes a nugget about Crimea today, as I drive to Narva. After Russia's illegal 2014 annexation of the peninsula, where, like Narva, a majority of citizens speak Russian, the West began to fret that Narva might meet the same fate. Within the Estonian government, the annexation had a different meaning for Narva; it was a sign to continue to pursue its work mending the gap between Estonians and ethnic Russians, as it had tried to do since shortly after the Bronze Soldier. After Crimea, its efforts were redoubled.

Unlike Tallinn, Narva does not have an arresting Old Town skyline. Its own silhouette was heavily damaged during the Second World War and is now dominated by blocky Soviet-era buildings, although it isn't completely stuck in a bygone era; shopping centers with European and American brands dot the drive into the city. A medieval fortress straddles the Narva River; one side is Estonian, the other, Russian, located in the town of Ivangorod. Between them is a highly fortified bridge—the very same bridge on which Russian-Estonian spy exchanges take place—pulsing with foot and vehicular traffic.

Next to the city's seventeenth-century town hall, the only baroque building to have survived bombardment during the Second World War, and among rows of the famous five-floor Soviet-era apartment blocks called Krushcheviki for the era in which they were built in the thousands, stands Narva College. It's an outpost of Tartu University, the most prestigious university in Estonia, with its main campus two hours south of here.

The building that houses the college embodies reinvention. A baroque-style facade ices a modern brick structure with an angular overhang. Passing through the main arched door, I enter an airy auditorium with built-in rows of stadium seating constructed of rich wood and dotted with oversized bean bag chairs. A coffee shop is tucked in the corner. Lights projected through stencils onto the floor direct visitors around the building. It is modern and welcoming, a comfortable gathering space for any college student. Narva College isn't for anyone, though; it exists for the express purpose of serving the higher education needs of Estonia's Russian-speaking population.

I head to the second floor, where I'm meeting the director of the college, Kristina Kallas. Her office is the epicenter of activity in the otherwise subdued building; this morning was graduation, and the staff who remain in early afternoon seem to exhale with the golden knowledge that another academic year is closed. We sit in Kallas's high-ceilinged office (complete with modern, "Scandi-Baltic" furniture—a colorful mid-century modern meets Ikea look), where Kallas describes her view of Narva College not simply as an educational institution, but a socioeconomic investment, a communications tool, and a geopolitical instrument.

Eleven years after the Bronze Night, tension between Russians and Estonians, she says, is still "one of the most controversial cultural encounters in the Northern European context. Estonians don't have problems with … mixing and contact with Latvian culture, Finnish

culture, or Swedish. But this constant feeling of threat from Russian culture is a substantial part of Estonian identity."[32] Kallas would know, having occupied both sides of the narrative; she has a Russian background and grew up in a bilingual family not far from Narva. As a student at Tartu University, she was driven to study history and political science and "the Russian minority question, starting with Estonia but expanding it to the whole post-Soviet space."

Kallas spent the better part of two decades researching issues of post-Soviet identity before she was named director of Narva College in 2015. The college is just approaching its twentieth anniversary after being established in 1999 after what Kallas describes as a political decision to bring high-quality education that met European standards to the country's Russian-speaking region. Prior to the college's establishment, the only higher education opportunities available to Russian-speaking students were to pursue their education in Russia or to attend a low-quality private university in Estonia. Kallas looks outside to the sunny square, where just a few hours before, about 100 students and their families celebrated after receiving their degrees. "Today, when they graduated, they got diplomas from Tartu University, which is very important for them."

But the establishment of Narva College had implications outside the educational realm. In 1992 and 1993, the early days of Estonian independence, "our society was divided ethnically, politically, and the divisions were deep and serious… they ran into geopolitical divisions and conflict," says Kallas. It wasn't out of the question that Narva and its Russian-speaking population might become Eastern Europe's next breakaway republic, following in the footsteps of Moldova's Transnistria and Georgia's Abkhazia, both regions that, with the monetary and informational support of Moscow, declared independence and to this day exist as so-called frozen conflicts and islands of Russian influence within their respective countries.

In 1993, Narva went as far as to hold a referendum on autonomy, with 97 percent of voters casting their ballots in favor after voting for independence from Russia less only two years earlier.[33]

Leading up to the referendum, Kallas explains, the citizens of Narva had a host of legitimate grievances. They wondered, "What is this new country called Estonia where I'm supposed to be living now? Who told me I have to live in this country, and why did nobody ask me? I'm not even a citizen of this country, and now they tell me I have to speak Estonian to feed my family and get an income?" Although politicians warned that riot police might be sent to the city if the referendum was held, the vote happened, its results unacknowledged.[34] Today Narva continues to exist with no special status. In fact, today's conversation is the first time I have heard about this vote, despite traveling to Estonia and studying its integration struggles for the better part of a decade. Kallas and others believe this is only the case because unlike in Transnistria, Abkhazia, or, to use a more recent example, Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, Russia did not interfere in the referendum. "Yeltsin was too distracted," she tells me, referencing the 1993 Russian coup attempt and negotiations surrounding Ukrainian independence.

Twenty-five years later, the citizens of Narva do not walk around bearing the scars of the failed vote. They have a growing self-confidence, based in part on the Estonian government's efforts to repair the gaps in trust and crises of identity that have characterized the country's Russian-speaking population and made them easy targets for Russian influence campaigns. Like Irene Käossar of the Integration Foundation, government officials are spending increasing time in Narva. In autumn 2018, several government departments, including the Presidential Administration, moved their operations to the city for a month. The city is competing to become the 2024 European Capital of Culture—an EU program that brings tourism and drives regeneration in Europe's smaller cities—and playing host

to a litany of music festivals, advertisements for which are hung throughout the city.

"The government realized its own responsibility in integrating," Kallas admits. "It used to be that the government's only rule was not to stop Russians from integrating." But after the Bronze Soldier crisis, the 2008 economic downturn which hit Russian speakers especially hard, and Russia's annexation of Crimea, "the government realized … they have to invest, they have to provide opportunities, they have to create the opportunities. There is a change in mindset."

There is also recognition that these efforts are generational, perhaps because they are starting to bear fruit. For the first time, young Russian speakers are staking their claim on Estonian identity. Although their parents may feel more affinity toward Russia or the former Soviet Union, the younger generation of Russian speakers in Estonia has known no home but Estonia and no affinity but a global European one. Kallas tells me, bemused, that this generational rebranding has had a boomerang effect on Estonians themselves. "Being Estonian has always meant being ethnically from that community, and now suddenly you're ethnically, culturally from another community, but you claim you're Estonian. So it's like, 'alright, now I have to rethink'" what it means to be Estonian. The result, aided by Estonia's internet-driven e-everything post-Soviet culture, is that Estonia is no longer a "nationalist closed state. We are part of the global world." The Ministry of Culture's research on integration supports this opening of Estonian identity; 86 percent of Russians were found to have an "intermediate" or "strong" Estonian state identity, outranking even ethnic Estonians, among whom 79 percent of respondents were found to have the same affiliations.[35] Rather than attaching themselves to Soviet Red Letter days and celebrations of a bygone era, Russian-Estonians are not only claiming a new identity; they are shaping it. I leave the interview wondering if the United States can reach out

to its own disenfranchised populations, the people most susceptible to narratives of historical revisionism. One thing that's clear from Estonia's experience is that simply making policy without engaging these communities, or lecturing them that the authentic feelings Russia has exploited to manipulate them are somehow incorrect, won't generate trust and won't build a new identity in which all Americans can take pride.

Kallas is headed back to her family in Tartu on this Friday afternoon, so I walk down to Narva's famous embankment and stroll along the river, with the Estonian and Russian fortresses and the infamous bridge, full of traffic, towering above me. At one point, and perhaps even still, many Western media might depict the Russian town of Ivangorod to be "glowering" back at Narva. The truth is, it's just as sunny over there; a dog wanders lazily on the grassy riverbank below the fortress. A man in uniform—presumably a border guard—smokes a cigarette.

On the Estonian side, with its paved embankment constructed with EU funds, a children's train ride heads up and down the river every few minutes, playing Russian kids' songs. A bride, groom, and their families toast in the parking lot in front of a car decked out with two giant rings before embarking on the quintessential Russian wedding tradition of taking questionably posed photos in front of the city's landmarks. Small groups of friends sit under umbrellas enjoying hot dogs and fries and cold Estonian Saku beer off a menu written in Estonian and Russian, no English in sight. I order a cold one (in Russian) and sit at a table in the late afternoon sunshine. Maybe it's the weather, maybe it's the beer, but it's hard not to feel hopeful as I consider how drastically Estonia's situation has shifted over the past ten years. Eight months earlier, I visited the Bronze Soldier in his home of the last decade in the city's military cemetery, ironically located right next to the NATO Cyber Defense Center of Excellence

that to some degree has the Bronze Soldier to thank for its existence. It was a dark November morning, and the rain was coming down in sheets. Members of the diplomatic community were gathered for the British Embassy's wreath-laying ceremony on Armistice Day. Among them was a Russian military attaché; he laid a wreath along with his colleagues but didn't walk over to the Bronze Soldier in the center of the cemetery before leaving. I did. A few bouquets of fresh flowers lay at the Soldier's feet, and a few more, along with a St. George's ribbon, were placed in his helmet (Figure 1). He seemed clean and well cared for, standing watch not far from many other gravestones with Cyrillic inscriptions. But more than anything, he seemed to represent a closing chapter of history. That history once divided this small country, but rather than try to rewrite it, or shout louder than the propagandists peddling it, Estonia had finally settled on actively reuniting its population through outreach and opportunity.

It's an opportunity that is making its way east to Narva, through those who represent the new global Estonia, like the fiery politician Olga Sõtnik, the Integration Foundation's Irene Käossar, and Narva College's Kristina Kallas. It's coming to the city along with the Presidential Administration, when it temporarily moves to Narva the next fall. It's an opportunity that will be tested in years to come after a nationalist party gains representation in the country's next parliamentary elections. But it is still exemplified—and hopefully will be preserved—by the young Russians who claim Estonian identity and embodied by the capital city, where late one evening at the end of my time in Estonia, I watch as a soccer fan in a sombrero, who had evidently been at a local pub rooting for Mexico in a match against Germany in Russia's World Cup, ambles through the flower-covered square where the Bronze Soldier once stood.

3

Georgia: Creeping Borders, Creeping Influence

Expectation hangs in the air as heavy as the humidity in Tbilisi on a hazy Thursday afternoon in June 2019. Restless young men sit on benches surrounding the blocky, sand-colored parliament building on Rustaveli Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare. In a few hours, Georgians will protest in front of the nexus of electoral power. They are livid. Earlier today, a Russian lawmaker attending the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodox Countries in Tbilisi was allowed to chair the body's plenary session from the seat usually occupied by the speaker of the Georgian parliament. For Georgians, still enraged over Russia's continued occupation of over 20 percent of their country's sovereign territory for more than a decade, this latest step in the Kremlin's creeping occupation, which affects the mind as well as borders, was a step too far.

"I'm furious," one friend tells me. "I thought the picture was Photoshopped when I first saw it," referencing the photos many Georgians shared on social media that showed a Russian lawmaker in the seat of Georgian parliamentary power. A group of former

colleagues ask to reschedule a happy hour we had set up earlier in the week; "it is very important for us to be at the rally today," one of them messages. "Every one of us will be there."

I join them as they troop down the hill from their office to stand before parliament with thousands of other Georgians. One pins a sign that says "Putin is a dick" to her toddler, whom she carries strapped to her chest. Oblivious to the sign's meaning, the child is delighted with the attention she's getting, and it's just as well. Comparatively, hers is one of the tamer posters in the crowd. Among EU and Georgian flags and placards that say "Russia is an occupier," others have a simpler message. One ponders on poster board how the Georgian government allowed such an offensive spectacle to occur. "Are you fucking kidding me?" it asks. Hundreds of others simply read: "Fuck Putin" (Figures 2 and 3).

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Like a lot of things in Georgia, an ancient nation that prides itself on the uniqueness of its language, its storied and dramatic history, its decadent cuisine, and its contributions to the art of winemaking, the roots of today's protest and tensions between Georgia and Russia date back centuries. Particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union, bloody conflicts in the South Caucasus have fueled Russian-Georgian ire. But the occupation that many of the signs in the crowd reference began in 2008, when, for the first time since the USSR's disintegration, Russian tanks rolled into a sovereign nation, resulting in a destructive five-day conflict.

In foreign policy circles, debates and scholarship about the so-called Five-Day War that erupted between Russia and Georgia in August that year focus mostly on who is to blame. Did the Russians fire the first shot? Was Georgia's then President Mikheil Saakashvili responsible, too enamored with the idea that the West might come

to his aid in the event of an invasion and deal Putin a glancing blow, making him too eager for conflict?

These questions, while important, are a result of a different plane of conflict during the 2008 war: the informational one. The conflict was about more than just tanks; it was also an extension of the nonmilitary intervention that the Kremlin tested in Estonia through cyber warfare. Later, the media—both in the West and in Russia—were enlisted in the effort, and the airwaves became important proving ground for Russian information warfare on an international scale. By all accounts, plucky little Georgia gave Russia a run for its money, and like Estonia, it became one of the early warning signals in international fora that Russia's tactics were changing. In the West, those signals were mostly ignored.

Regardless of the origins of the 2008 war, which this book deliberately makes no attempt to relitigate,[1] the Georgian people have since then represented a resiliency to Russian trickery. They were clear-eyed about their massive neighbor to the north and its intentions; after all, 20 percent of their country now lay behind razor wire fences. Families were separated. Livelihoods were ruined. And by 2017, when I began researching this chapter, Russian forces were moving those fences a few feet further into Georgian territory every week. In parallel, Russian influence was creeping back into the Georgian economy, civil society, and political discourse.

That's what Georgians were protesting on Rustaveli Avenue. The offensive image of a Russian Member of Parliament in their speaker's chair was representative of a wider disease: the coziness of Georgia's new government, in power since 2012, with the Kremlin, the polarization of society, and an increasing drumbeat of traditionalism and nationalism that malign actors were keen to utilize in their favor. That Russia's influence extends beyond trolls and bots and into the murky offline world of cash flows and cultural alliances is something

few Western governments truly recognize and something Georgia's experience should caution us to do all we can to stop.

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Most Georgians were on vacation when the war broke out in 2008. It was the beginning of August, high time for heading to the nearest body of water, to grandmother's country house, or to somewhere more exotic, if you could afford the flight. The Beijing Summer Olympics were about to open. Tensions had been mounting between Russia and Georgia for months. Both sides were building up military installments around South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two rebellious minority ethnic regions in Georgia over which Tbilisi and Moscow had long struggled for control. Putin, then prime minister of Russia (a change in position in name only; he still ran the country), had recently begun negotiations with the separatist regimes there. Saakashvili, heading into his second term as Georgian president, had also made his share of antagonizing statements, posturing that he would hold his second inauguration in Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, or perhaps move the Georgian capital there.[2] In July, Russia staged a military exercise just across the border from South Ossetia, cruising its fighter jets through Georgian airspace "to establish the situation" and "cool down Georgia's hot-heads," as *The Economist* reported in 2008.[3]

Still, no one in Georgia—even those in the national security establishment—expected or was prepared for the outbreak of war. Batu Kutelia, the then deputy minister of defense, was waterskiing on the Tbilisi Sea, a reservoir northwest of the capital, when he got the news. Tamar Kinsturashvili, who advised Saakashvili on the integration of ethnic minorities, had sent her children to a village near Gori, a city that Russia would occupy in a few days' time. Giga Bokeria, deputy foreign minister, and his wife Tamara Chergoleishvili were vacationing in Southern Europe.

Exactly how the hostilities unfolded is still the subject of debate even more than a decade later. In the five days of the conflict and months immediately following, blame was the main narrative around which the Georgian and Russian sides attempted to mobilize public opinion. At 11:35 p.m. on August 7, Georgia began bombing the capital of South Ossetia, Tsinkhvali. Georgia maintained that the advance of Russian troops through the Roki Tunnel, which linked North and South Ossetia through the Caucasus Mountains, necessitated its actions. (It is unclear whether the Russian advance began before or after Georgia's bombing raids.[4]) Moscow, however, claimed that "Georgia was a reckless and dangerous aggressor and Russia had an obligation, as a peacekeeper in the region, to protect the victims."[5] What emerged from this battle for blame was an early form of the emotion-based disinformation operations with which we're acquainted today. As Batu Kutelia, the waterskiing deputy defense minister, told me in 2017, "I remember the arguments of the Russian threat that we were telling [Western officials] in 2006, 2007, 2008 … We were considered to be crazed in Brussels and NATO headquarters, and now everybody [says] the same thing after eight years or nine years as if it's something new."

In 2008, Georgia became a training ground for information warfare.

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It's hard to believe Kutelia has already served as deputy minister of defense, followed by a stint as Georgia's ambassador to the United States, and is now a respected professor of diplomacy. His biography would suit someone at least thirty years his senior; at the time of the Georgia-Russia war, however, he was thirty-four. Kutelia, like most Georgians, is personable and energetic, seemingly running on an inexhaustible supply of love for country. I meet him for the first time

in the lobby cafe of one of Tbilisi's trendy hotels. It could easily be in London or New York, replete with leafy indoor plants, plush chairs, and staff in white shirts and bowties. Elegantly dressed Georgians and international visitors chatter throughout; a large real estate deal is being pitched across the floor. Kutelia presents me with a book the US Congress issued during Georgia's first brief era of independence in 1918–21 on Russian influence in the south Caucasus.

"[Russia views] democracy as a challenge to its regime … that's why I brought you [this book]," Kutelia begins.[6] "This kind of thinking is not new when we are speaking about the new hybrid challenges. It's an old story with a different technological complication." He starts to describe Georgia's remarkable transformation from a mismanaged post-Soviet state to one of the beacons for other countries making the transition to democracy. "Georgia was on the verge of being a failed state," before the 2003 Rose Revolution that brought a new spirit to Georgian reform efforts and brought Saakashvili to power, Kutelia says. Russia was happy with this; it could maintain control of its former vassal. "We had Russian military bases on our territory. We had Russian so-called peacekeepers … key security ministers were appointed by consent of Russia or directly by Russia," Kutelia continues, shaking his head. Georgia's sovereignty was so threatened, Kutelia says his country was essentially "not a state."

The Rose Revolution—the first of three "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet region that upset Moscow's preferred balance of power and the predictable machinery of post-Soviet political succession—and the reformers it ushered into government allowed Georgia to "rapidly start getting traction as a state, building its institutions and getting a democratic reputation," Kutelia continues. Georgia had set NATO and EU membership as the destination of its path to reform. Moscow was not happy with Georgia's progress toward that goal. A state it could not control was a nuisance; a state actively courting

Western political and security structures was a threat. When coupled with Saakashvili's increasingly belligerent rhetoric toward Russia, the Kremlin began to lash out. Georgia was entirely dependent on Russian energy, and two suspicious blasts disrupted gas and electricity flows to the country in January 2006.[7] The Georgian government claimed Russia was to blame. "Russia thought [this] would bring people in the streets against the government, saying, 'okay, because of your harsh rhetoric against Russia, we are now freezing,'" Kutelia remembers. "But the opposite happened … Georgia was resilient and we were moving in the right direction."

The cutoff of the gas supply was followed by an official energy embargo and a full-on economic embargo. With these tactics of Russian political influence becoming more and more common, Georgia's resilience was transformed into an aggressive campaign to win NATO membership, complete with the start of the political and military transformations necessary to join the alliance. In its bid, it explicitly identified Russia as a threat. "We had a clear understanding that Russian-threatened coercion was really taking effect," Kutelia remembers. Russia was meddling in the "economy [and the] domestic political [situation, using] military provocations, like their 'peacekeeping forces' shelling villages [in South Ossetia]." Georgia, bullied by Russia, felt it necessary to "start defense planning for future threats that would be diminished after" the country was offered NATO membership, he says.

NATO was squeamish. They worried that Russia might invade Georgia, which, if granted membership, would trigger the Article 5 defense guarantee: "an attack on one is an attack on all." In early April 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, Georgia did not get an offer of membership, known as a Membership Action Plan. Instead, NATO leaders agreed in the summit's closing communiqué that Georgia would eventually be among their ranks. Moscow responded

by establishing government-to-government relations with the separatist regions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia; protracted frozen conflicts involving neighbors with large militaries are not looked upon kindly within the world's strongest military alliance. Four months later, after a tense summer in the South Caucasus, open hostilities broke out and Russian troops rolled through the Roki Tunnel and into Georgian territory, invading a sovereign country for the first time since the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan in 1979.

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Tamar Kinsturashvili remembers the first night of the war vividly.[8] Her children were enjoying their summer vacation with their grandparents near the city of Gori, Stalin's hometown, located an hour and fifteen minutes outside of the capital, near South Ossetia. Kinsturashvili was about to leave on her summer holiday as well; after she published the government's new plan on civil integration of ethnic minorities—an important policy priority for the Saakashvili administration, given the tensions in the breakaway regions—she was heading to the seaside. Then the war broke out. Tamar, along with all government staff, was called to the National Security Council to support the government's nascent outreach efforts. The goal was to get as many facts out as they possibly could, "especially [to] foreign partners," Tamar recalls. "We were translating, we were making [video] footage and a timetable of developments."

And then—silence. Georgia was the victim of a cyberattack that brought down key government websites. Social networks were not yet ubiquitous, so the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and Presidential Administration lost their ability to communicate. "It was a terrible night," Tamar remembers, "the first night when you were out of the world, and there was no connection, no communication. It was very scary."

As in the cyber offensive against Estonia the previous year, Georgia faced DDOS attacks, with thousands of computers attempting to reach Georgian government websites at once. Unable to handle such an extraordinary amount of traffic, the websites crashed. Later, Georgian media, including the two largest television stations, "financial institutions, businesses, educational institutions, Western media (BBC and CNN) and a Georgian hacker website" were added to the list of targets.[9] The websites were also defaced; pro-Kremlin online graffiti covered their landing pages. One even compared Saakashvili to Adolf Hitler. The way the DDOS attacks and defacements were carried out was also reminiscent of the Estonian experience; although the attack was in large part conducted by "civilian hackers" who used instructions posted online, given the timing of the attacks, it appears the organizers had advance notice it would be taking place.

Kutelia, the former deputy defense minister, called the attacks "the biggest in scale and the biggest in intensity and effect to ever happen to Europe." When I ask him about attributing the attack to Russia, Kutelia references Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula. Russian military personnel were behind the operation, but given the lack of insignia on their green uniforms, international media took to calling them "little green men." Kutelia says with a laugh, "whether it's a green soldier or a green computer, " then winks and trails off. It's clear he has no doubts about the provenance of the attack.

Kutelia and Kinsturashvili say the cyber assault was devastating to Georgia's ability to counter the Russian narrative that it was protecting the citizens of South Ossetia. Tamara Sartania, a friend and colleague from the National Democratic Institute who was born in Abkhazia, agrees. She was working in Kazakhstan when the war broke out and was forced to rely on Russian media reports to follow what was happening at home. That made it clear, she tells me, that the

goal of the attacks "was to make sure that Georgia was not spreading its word to the outside world."[10]

The Georgians were not deterred. The first night of the war, Kinsturashvili recalls her colleagues desperately sending information to foreign partners from the offices of NGOs around town that still had working fax lines. Later, the government moved their websites to servers in countries that would be less vulnerable to DDOS attacks; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs used Blogspot, Google's blogging platform, as well as Polish President Lech Kaczyński's website to push out its press releases.[11] The Estonian government, having so recently endured similar attacks, supported the Georgians and helped them burnish their cyber defenses.

Kinsturashvili's children in Gori were safe while their mother worked through the night in Tbilisi. She tells me that her daughter, then six, launched a mini information operation of her own, when the sound of the nearby Russian bombardment was making her family nervous. "Don't worry, Krishkheti is not on the map," she told her grandparents, referencing the small village where they were spending the summer. "They can't bomb us."

With their connection to the rest of the world temporarily repaired, it was time for Georgia to begin its defense against a challenge much more difficult to address: disinformation, with sides of pernicious cultural and economic influence. It was one the nation would deal with for eight more years before the West would take notice.

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David Uchadze and Erekle Shubtidze were just finishing high school when the war broke out. Now in their late twenties, they are early-career employees at the Georgian Ministry of Defense. Without the 2008 war and the government's attempts to counter disinformation during and after it, it's likely their jobs wouldn't exist: both work for

the MOD's Strategic Communications Division, founded in 2016. The 2008 war framed their entry into adulthood and their worldview, as well as their approach to their work.

David grew up in Zugdidi, a city close to the border with the breakaway region of Abkhazia. In 2008, Zugdidi saw Russian tanks rolling through its streets and Russian soldiers buying cigarettes from local shops. He considered this a form of psychological operation; if Georgians saw Russians acting civil, or even polite, or if they were forced to do business with them, they might see them as less of a terrifying occupying power, he says. In Tbilisi, where Erekle grew up, and which did not encounter ground forces in 2008, there was "complete panic." He remembers that "phone lines were busy, money in the ATM was not available … [People] didn't have any evacuation plan so they started coming out of their houses and started running."

Beyond the psychological plane, Russia was also manipulating the media space. "Large numbers of Russian journalists started arriving in South Ossetia to cover the violence" from a Russian perspective.[12] The main goal of the campaign in both the international and domestic arenas was to "present Russia as a powerful country which was strong, assertive, had clearly defined its interests, and was determined to defend them."[13] To further this goal, Putin and Medvedev granted interviews to a variety of Western media outlets, and the Russian government used its newly minted propaganda arm Russia Today to target the West with specific anti-Georgian talking points. Government officials and television personalities used terms such as "genocide," "ethnic cleansing in South Ossetia," "peace enforcement in Georgia," and "humanitarian catastrophe in Ossetia" to drive the narrative that Russia was a guarantor of peace and not an aggressor in the region.[14] Russian-language blogging was also an important tool in publicly litigating the conflict; the

Russian blogosphere attempted to neutralize any dissenting opinions about the morality of Russia's conduct, blaming Georgia for the start of hostilities.[15] Throughout both Russian media and grassroots publications, the United States was implicated in the conflict for its cooperation with and support of the Georgian Army as it reformed in hopes of joining the NATO Alliance.[16] Russian media furnished many of the first images of the war for Western audiences; being on the informational and military offensive, with greater resources and fewer hurdles—like incapacitating cyberattacks, for instance—it was easy to do so.

Still, Russia eventually found itself playing catchup in the information war. David and Erekle are getting into their meat and potatoes as they tell me what Georgia did right in 2008; it's something they try to harness every day in their jobs. Despite the obstacles that Russia threw its way, despite being a small country that most Americans might confuse with a US state, Georgia managed to gain a foothold in the international media, they say. Part of its success capitalized on Saakashvili's personality. "We had a young, energetic president that liked being on TV and liked talking about stuff," Erekle tells me. Other officials were involved as well; Kutelia was in the thick of the media onslaught. He grants that the government was putting out a lot of information but could have done a better job if they had anticipated the conflict. "We were unfortunately reactive, but … our embassies were working with our partners and with the media and the journalists. I was on the phone with CNN and with the US officials" constantly, he recalls.

Dato Sikharulidze, who served as Georgia's ambassador to the United States, Canada, and Mexico during the conflict and later became minister of defense, admits that international outreach at this scale was completely new for Georgia. But Tbilisi still had an advantage: Putin "was not the most trusted source in the world."[17] Georgia had credibility and a compelling message on its side. While

Russia was concentrating on driving home one message—that "Georgia started the bombing of civilians"—Sikharulidze maintains that Georgia was interested in one thing: the truth. It's "a powerful thing," he says.

As inspiring as that sentiment is, Georgia's high-level officials did not offer the whole truth and nothing but it throughout their information defensive—scholar Charles King noted in an article on the war that Saakashvili made "the bizarre allegation that Russia was plotting to start forest fires"[18]—but they had a compelling narrative. Georgia and its people represented a democratizing nation, striving for freedom from the bully's shadow in which it had grown up. I ask Erekle and David if they think that narrative gained traction inside and outside of Georgia. "Hell yeah!" Erekle exclaims, barely allowing me to finish my thought. "There were seven or eight presidents coming to the capital during the war. European presidents. That's probably the biggest diplomatic achievement" in Georgia's history, he says. In reality, it was five presidents who stood in front of parliament, hand in hand, deep in a sea of EU and Georgian flags: the leaders of Ukraine, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, all countries which had experienced Kremlin aggression and influence in the recent past. Before flying to Tbilisi, they issued a "joint statement urging the European Union and NATO to 'stand up against the spread of imperialist and revisionist policy' by Russia."[19] Kinsturashvili—the government official whose children were in Gori at the start of the war—agrees with Erekle; Western countries' support—both verbal and physical—was a powerful tool in boosting morale inside and outside of Georgia. Kutelia distinctly remembers how Senator John McCain—who was in the midst of running for president in 2008—issued a statement when the conflict began that said, "Today we are all Georgians." Taken together, these public shows of solidarity supported Georgia against what the

Saakashvili government viewed as an explicit Russian campaign to discredit Georgia's democratic aspirations.

Five days after the war began, and Russian troops halted their advance toward Tbilisi, French President Nicolas Sarkozy flew to Moscow to negotiate a ceasefire between the two sides. Russia and Georgia agreed to withdraw their forces to prewar positions; Moscow never met this part of the agreement. The conflict left about 850 dead, thousands wounded, and tens of thousands internally displaced. The Georgian economy suffered a blow.

Russia had clearly won the military conflict, but in the information war, Georgians feel they achieved a draw, if not outright victory. Erekle says that Georgians "sometimes refer to 2008 as a training ground for Russia … You can observe that they were not as prepared as they would have liked" on the information front. Although Russia worked hard to establish Saakashvili's and Georgia's culpability in the conflict, they never fully achieved that goal. Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of Russian propaganda network RT, cites the Georgia conflict as inspiration to improve Russia's information warfare tactics. In one interview with Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, entitled "There Is No Objectivity," she lamented Russia's lack of English-speaking talking heads and said, "Russia looked so pale compared to the Georgians, it broke my heart." To Simonyan, Russia's performance in Georgia justified RT's existence: "In 2008, it became absolutely clear to everyone … why we need such a thing as an international television channel representing the country. This is in itself a lesson."[20] The head of the Russian Military Forecasting Center Anatoly Tsyganok laid out that lesson for an op-ed for the Russian government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta:* "For Russia the informational war has become World War III. It was lost by Russia in August 2008, during the first five days of the hostilities in the Caucasus." In his own bit of information warfare, he lambastes the West for what he calls "downright deception"

for its coverage of the war; unlike Russian coverage, which focused only on the Georgian government and its unfounded aggression, Western news featured images of the consequences of Russia's own hostility. And in a recommendation that seems to have been fulfilled in the intervening decade, Tsyganok calls for the creation of "informational troops … [comprising] diplomats, experts, journalists, writers, columnists, interpreters, operators, communications specialists, web-designers, computer specialists, etc.," who would prioritize "strategic analysis, informational impact, and informational struggle."[21]

Georgia also learned lessons from its early foray into countering disinformation. Batu Kutelia, the young deputy minister of defense, says the government began to institutionalize its response to Russian information warfare after the ceasefire. They blocked Russian state TV on Georgian airwaves and built a Russian-language TV network for the entire Trans-Caucasus region. The government divested itself of Russian economic interests. It used the international legal system to bring attention to Russian crimes during its invasion. In policy, it began to conceive of national security more holistically, so that seemingly disparate sectors—defense, energy, technology, culture, intelligence—were not walled off from one another within government. And these institutional changes mirrored a larger shift in the Georgian way of thinking about Russia as an adversary of information and influence. "We had to … make the country more resilient not only to military threats, but internal threats." Kutelia did not mean cut-and-dry propaganda and cyberattacks; he meant political subversion, a trend that would make its way to the West in 2016, through Brexit, Trump, and beyond.

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A decade after the war ended with the French-negotiated ceasefire, Russia still occupies one-fifth of Georgian territory and props up the

separatist regimes of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. What is different? A new political party—Georgian Dream, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Georgian billionaire with close ties to Moscow—has run the country for just over five years. In 2012, the new government shut down the country's Russian-language TV station ("I think it was a mistake," says Tamar Kinsturashvili, the former civil integration official whose children were outside of Gori during the war. She's now the head of the Media Development Fund, a Georgian journalism watchdog group). The Georgian Dream government is implementing a dual-track foreign policy: on one track, it continues its dogged pursuit of NATO and EU integration. On the other, it attempts dialogue in an open-door policy with Russia.

I meet Zurab Abashidze, the man Ivanishvili appointed to be Special Representative for Relations with Russia, in a sunny, high-ceilinged room in Georgia's Chancellery, which overlooks all of downtown Tbilisi, with rolling hills and the city's iconic TV tower and ferris wheel behind it. A former ambassador to Russia, Abashidze oversees the so-called Karasin-Abashidze Format, under the auspices of which he meets with Russia's deputy foreign minister, Grigory Karasin, in Prague every few months. Karasin and Abashidze discuss trade, transport, and humanitarian issues, among others, on a surprisingly busy agenda for two nations that haven't had official diplomatic relations in years.

Although Abashidze is entrusted with representing his country's interests in negotiations with Russia, he is openly critical of the Saakashvili administration's handling of the 2008 war. "Our attitude at that time was quite irresponsible," he told me. "It was a major miscalculation to misunderstand how dangerous Russia [is. The Saakashvili government] had a very infantile approach."[22] What Abashidze and the Georgian Dream government favor is what he calls "a pragmatic approach" in which Russia and Georgia are able

to maintain dialogue on issues like culture and trade. "Having trade," Abashidze emphasizes, "does not mean we have good relations with Russia … We have to take care of the situation inside the country."

When I ask how the Georgian Dream government has changed the country's response to Russian hybrid warfare and disinformation, Abashidze launches into a monologue about this pragmatism. On "the issues of territorial integrity and sovereignty," he begins, "there is no change. We stress everywhere that we're not going to compromise on that. We are not going to get used to the so-called new reality that the Russian side wants to impose on us." But his next points seem completely at odds with these unequivocal statements. Abashidze discusses the reopening of trade with Russia. More Russian tourists are vacationing in Georgia, enjoying prized Georgian wine, mineral water, and abundant sunshine. "Having trade does not mean that we have good relations with Russia," he repeats, ultimately concluding that "a small country like Georgia cannot afford to have a war with Russia." It's unclear what type of war he's referring to—on the ground or in the economic arena.

As for Russia's information warfare, Abashidze has a flippant attitude. He shrugs off a suggestion that the Orthodox Church might be used as a soft power vector and all but ridicules me for asking if Russian-language media outlets, back on the Georgian airwaves since 2012, might be amplifying disinformation. "Maybe my wife is a Russian spy; she's watching Russian television twenty-four hours" a day, he says. Suddenly, the Georgian Dream government's commitment to defending the occupied territories seems less ironclad to me.

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My discussion with Abashidze is a microcosm of the new reality in Georgia, where a sharp divide has overtaken politics. It's hard to have

a conversation here without your friend, acquaintance, colleague, or bartender slinging mud toward the current or previous government, or without an attempt to relitigate the past or bemoan the present. In short, it is a situation that is ripe for outside manipulation. And with a government so eager to maintain cordial relations with Moscow on all but one front, Russian influence—in television waves, on the internet, in support for political parties, through investment, and through cultural organizations—has been pouring across the border since Georgian Dream took office in 2012.

In 2019, I meet up again with David Uchadze, the young official working on Strategic Communications in the Ministry of Defense. His colleague Erekle has since left the Ministry to go to graduate school. David disagrees with my assessment of the situation—that the shifts in Georgian Dream policies toward Russia have brought more Russian influence into the country—although he is always careful not to engage in political commentary.[23] "No matter the government," David tells me, "Western policy, integration into Western institutions, Euroatlantic institutions … this foreign policy has been declared and is unchanged … at the official level."

Within the general population, support for the EU and NATO remains strong; a 2019 National Democratic Institute poll showed that 77 percent of respondents approve Georgia's EU integration and 56 percent strongly approve. NATO support is also strong: 74 percent approve, with 54 percent voicing their strong approval. However, among those that do not support Georgia's Euroatlantic integration, many cited the desire to avoid conflict or create closer ties with Russia as reasons why.[24] David sees this sentiment reflected in his hometown of Zugdidi, close to the border with occupied Abkhazia. "People are saying, 'we don't want a war with Russia,'" he tells me. "They cannot ignore that this government managed to avoid any major clashes with Russia, where the previous

government could not." Then he lays out a Maslowian argument that many of his hometown acquaintances make. "Security is important. You can have a high salary but if you are not safe, then God, who cares about salary, right?" For these groups—many of whom suffered during the 2008 war—it's hard to imagine how NATO or EU membership might affect their daily lives. But they remember quite distinctly what armed conflict looks like. This is the conundrum for David and others working to counter Russian influence in Georgia. "If your own people don't trust you, don't believe in your narrative," he asks, "then how you can move forward?"

Still, the government tries to—at least on paper. Each year, the State Security Service (SSG) issues a report outlining the national security threats the country faced each year. In 2018, the SSG explained in great detail how Russian hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns operate in Georgia. Curiously, it did so without referencing the Russian Federation itself, instead referring to "countries interested in enhancing their influence in Georgia."[25] Other government departments are more explicit; the Defense Ministry's Strategic Defense Review for 2017–20 states that "using political, economic and information tools, Russia continues its attempt to limit international political support for Georgia and weaken cooperation directed at strengthening Georgia's defence capabilities."[26] Unsurprisingly, the Defense Ministry's Strategic Communications strategy, which David had a hand in drafting, is straightforward in its indictment of Russian influence operations, naming both information operations and the tools of "soft power" as threats to Georgian national security. "The number of pro-Russian non-governmental organizations and media outlets opposing Euro-Atlantic integration is significantly growing in the information space … In this context, dealing with Russian 'soft power' has become the main task for Georgia,"[27] the communications strategy reads.

But "disinformation is just one of the elements of Russian information warfare," David cautions, a lesson that politicians in many Western democracies who are still focused on the difference between a troll and a bot could stand to learn. "Sometimes I feel that in Georgia disinformation is overemphasized … most Russian information warfare is not based on disinformation, it's based on [a narrative that attempts to demonstrate] how immoral the West is."

Batu Kutelia, the former US ambassador and deputy minister of defense who is now spending his time teaching and working in think tanks, has been focused on the threat of Russian soft power for years. Despite the focus on Russia in some Georgian Dream administration policy documents, Kutelia is not satisfied. "Frankly, this government is doing nothing," he continues, and the biggest problem is that underneath these words, the real policy "is not to upset Russia because the guy who controls everything is afraid of the Russians," he says, referencing Georgian Dream party leader Bidzina Ivanishvili, who has close ties with the Kremlin. Still, Georgians are quite resistant to Kremlin narratives, Kutelia believes, describing this trait as a power of near-mythical proportions. Georgia's "biggest strength … [is] not the willingness of the government or smartness, it's public opinion … the pro-Western mood in Georgia is very high, that's why Russia tries to target [it], because it is the only way to … derail Georgia."

But that should not generate complacency or convince anyone the information war is won; there are still sectors of Georgian society—like those willing to trade Western integration for security—that are susceptible to Russian influence, which the government is not doing much to address, according to Kutelia. Rather than divest from all Russian influence across sectors, Kutelia says the opposite is happening thanks to Georgian Dream's open-door policy; as ties between the governments grow stronger, so does Russian influence. Where Kutelia believes the best thing for Georgia to do would be

to "strategically decrease … dependence [on Russia], including the Russian economy and Russian money," Ivanishvili's party is increasing that dependence.

Russia's creeping influence has permeated political parties, the media, and the cultural sector. Tamar Kinsturashvili's media watchdog, the Media Development Foundation, issues a yearly report on anti-Western narratives in the Georgian media; Tamar says that the Georgian Dream government often legitimizes these outlets. She mentions *Asaval-Dasavali*, which she calls fascist. "Ivanishvili praised this newspaper and called it the most national and worthy-to-read newspaper." Georgian Dream leadership also increases the influence of outlets like *Asaval-Dasavali* by giving interviews to and signing advertising contracts with them. "This is more problematic," she says. "When people in regions" who are often more susceptible to malign Russian narratives "listen to an influential person like Ivanishvili saying, 'Look, *Asaval-Dasavali* is the most important newspaper in our media market' and he attacks [opposition television channel] Rustavi 2, this shows his attitude and the [wider] problem."

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At the Rustavi 2 headquarters in October 2017, the channel's position on Russia was clear: on a desk in the middle of the newsroom, where an office worker might normally hang picture of a family or dog, is a sign that read "Journalists Against Russian Occupation!" Clearly used to the attention it garners, the two employees sitting behind the sign smiled as I snapped a photo.

I was on a tour of the newsroom with Nina Nakashidze, the station's deputy director general and spokesperson. A former Saakashvili administration official who served as ambassador to the Czech Republic within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and as a Member of Parliament, Nakashidze is in her early fifties and cut

a commanding figure as she whisked me through the newsroom in her high heels. Like Nakashidze herself, the station had close ties to the former government and was sharply critical of Georgian Dream. But she was unapologetic about the station's political leanings. "We clearly and openly declare that our ideology is giving support to all pro-European parties, non-governmental organizations, people who are furthering … and popularizing this idea in Georgia,"[28] she said.

It was obvious she thought that Georgian Dream doesn't belong among the list of pro-European parties, and since Georgian Dream entered government in 2012, Rustavi 2's European ideology encountered increasing obstacles. Because of its critical view of the ruling party, the channel "has been under political and financial pressure," Nakashidze told me in her opening salvo. In 2017, a Georgian court attempted to transfer ownership of the station to a businessman with ties to the Georgian Dream government. The US embassy in Tbilisi criticized the decision, as it might "effectively limit the access of opposition voices to Georgian broadcast media. A pluralistic media environment is essential for Georgia's democratic growth and Euro-Atlantic aspirations."[29] The European Court of Human Rights ordered a temporary suspension of the order, but in August 2019, as this book was being written, the court rendered a decision in favor of Georgian Dream. Rustavi 2's editor-in-chief was fired; its main evening news anchors resigned in protest and created a new opposition news network, already the third most-watched in the country.

Outside of legal difficulties, Nakashidze said Rustavi 2 and other media in the country struggle to compete among outlets in the country that peddle Russian narratives. She believes "Russian propaganda and fake news … has been flourishing in Georgia," although the challenge she faces is a bit different than in other former Soviet republics. "The problem here is not Russian-speaking media,"

she told me, "but Georgian-speaking media that are on the Russian payroll, so they are spreading Russian information, duplicating it, but in Georgia." This information ecosystem would later be recreated with Russian state-sponsored media and fringe outlets in the United States, where narratives from RT and Sputnik would be repeated on outlets, including the right-wing Breitbart news.

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Among the media that Nakashidze referred to as "disguised" Russian outlets are those associated with political parties. Many parties, including the far-right Patriots' Alliance, which is openly pro-Russian and has a growing stature in parliament, also operate their own outlets, including newspapers and television channels that deliver disinformation. Tamar Kinsturashvili and the Media Development Foundation call this the "deflective source model;" disinformation is presented in a seemingly legitimate local source, and the original source of the information is obscured to make it seem more trustworthy. In this case, Georgian sources are repeating narratives plucked directly from Russian airwaves and Russian officials. Across the thousands of "anti-Western" comments that Media Development Foundation (MDF) tracked in 2017, the pro-Kremlin voices repeated familiar refrains, threatening war, the loss of territories, bio-subversion, or the deterioration of Georgian identity in relation to further Western integration.[30] In 2018, MDF observed a more than 20 percent increase in such commentary.[31] The United States' alleged role in undermining peace and prosperity in Georgia was the primary narrative. One outlet claimed the United States was preventing Georgia from pursuing dialogue with Russia: "The US Embassy forbade the government [of Georgia] to use the potential of dialogue because this may lead to reconciliation with Russians, Ossetians and Abkhaz, which does not fit in with the strategic objective of the USA."[32] Many narratives also

claimed the West would impose its unacceptable values on Georgia by spreading homosexuality, pedophilia, obscenity, and attacking the Orthodox Church. Even the US ambassador was faulted for his purported role in this alleged scheme: "During the tenure of Ambassador Ian Kelly in Georgia the propaganda of anti-national, liberast, homosexual ideology and pro-drug abuse movement reached unimaginable scales, pursuing the ultimate aim of moral and physical genocide of the Georgian nation!"[33]

The content on pro-Russian media does not always slap the reader in the face with its narrative, however. David Uchadze, the young MOD official, says that Russian outlets write less frequently about politics. "Mostly what they are disseminating is cultural ties: what kind of sportsman [Georgia] used to have in Soviet times, Russian literature, how good it is," he says, rolling his eyes a little. "That's how they build their media campaigns." It may sound ridiculous, but this "gateway tactic" is one of the most important in the Russian disinformation arsenal and the reason RT can claim to be the most-watched news channel on the internet. Rather than posting videos only about their reporting, the RT YouTube channel is filled with so-called disaster porn—videos of mass destruction such as the 2011 Tsunami in Japan—and instantly viral videos of cute animals. This allows the channel to build viewership and trust so that when the RT logo is emblazoned on a dubious news story or editorial take, viewers are more likely to give it a chance. Of the top twenty-four most-viewed videos on RT's YouTube channel at this writing, only one includes political content: a video about a transgender individual who regrets their gender reassignment surgery. The rest of the videos, racking up millions of views, are of air travel disasters, the power of nature, and a homeless man with an incredible voice.

David also notes that the peddlers of disinformation in Georgia are "smart with content, but smarter with forms." They know they cannot

rely on automation to amplify content in Georgia, a country where emotional arguments are all but part of the national identity. Instead, they rely on "real people" to act as mouthpieces, as MDF's deflective source model asserts. "In Georgia nobody cares about bots!" David exclaims. "They want some real people to speak to them. It's a cultural characteristic. In our country, personality matters. Who the messenger is matters."

Russia finds some of those messengers in the ranks of otherwise unassuming groups. The Russian government has openly established links with Russian religious and cultural organizations through the *Russki Mir* (Russian World) Foundation in Georgia, which counts forty-six Georgian entities as partners. These organizations claim to organize educational activities such as Russian language schools and cultural days. But many are involved in far more political activities, such as the annual "Immortal Regiment" march on May 9, Victory Day, which celebrate the Russian victory over fascism and, as in Estonia, attempt to paint the Soviet Union's actions during the war as an unblemished force of good. Russian language, too, is a political issue in the former Soviet space, where the defense of Russian-speaking populations has been used as pretext for invasion and occupation, as in Ukraine. Georgian Dream doesn't simply allow the foundation to operate; Cartu Bank, founded by Bidzina Ivanishvili, funds some *Russki Mir* partners' activities.

People like Batu Kutelia look at the proliferation of pro-Russian media in the country, *Russki Mir*-supported activities, and the incongruence between the Georgian Dream government's written policies and actions, and they scratch their heads. How could this creeping influence—as real as the creeping razor wire fences lining the South Ossetian and Abkhazian "borders," separating Georgia from the occupied territories—be allowed to roll further into the Georgian consciousness?

As if in direct response to my earlier conversation with Zurab Abashidze, the Georgian Dream government's Special Representative for Relations with Russia, Kutelia, tells me, "Even today," after awareness of disinformation has gone global, "you hear some people say culture is not politics. Everything is politics. Everything has been weaponized. That's the Russian strategy. That's part of hybrid warfare." This wide-reaching view of disinformation as just one gear in the foreign influence machine is one to which the West has been slow to respond. We may play Whack-a-Troll, but we've yet to close off the other avenues of influence that further exacerbate the societal fissures that disinformation exploits.

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I meet Kutelia again the day protests break out in Tbilisi, in June 2019. We sit in the office for his "Statecraft Lab" at Tbilisi Free University, where he and a few other former officials teach. His phone rings every few minutes; journalists want to hear his take on the day's events and find out whether he'll be with the crowds in front of parliament tonight. He will.

Despite the exciting circumstances, this conversation is remarkably similar to the one we had nearly two years earlier. Kutelia dismisses the Georgian Dream government's open-door policies. He tells me that "being pro-Western doesn't necessarily mean you're anti-Russia," and the events in parliament today make it clear that it's time for a change in Georgia.[34] "The Russians are building a digital wall" between fact and fiction, he says, "and we have to break it down. We're in a virtual Cold War."

If he were still in government, Kutelia would start his crusade against Russian influence by isolating the Georgian economy from Russia's. "The only way for Georgia to be independent from Russian money is to be integrated with the Western economy,"

he tells me, worrying that Georgian Dream's encouragement of Russian investment has already closed doors for Georgia's continued Euroatlantic integration. But Georgia also needs to start investing in individuals; in order to win the information war, "you have to work and educate people," Kutelia says.

Kutelia, for one, is turning toward entertainment as the key to reaching average Georgians and bridging the gap in awareness and comprehension between Georgian civil society, which is steeped in the language and practice of countering hybrid warfare, and normal people, who might not understand how it operates or even that it exists. For the last two years, he has conducted small-scale messaging trainings with Georgian actors, musicians, and comedians, teaching them about how disinformation and hybrid warfare operate. The entertainers take what they've learned, turn it into art, and perform, usually in their home communities, where they can incorporate the local nuance into their shows. "With humor, with a more expressive way of communicating, they are saying things we want to say. And it really works," Kutelia says. According to him, it's even become prestigious within the show business community to attend his trainings, despite entertainers' busy schedules. The program is still small—they've trained under a hundred Georgian entertainers—but Kutelia believes it can be replicated.

Rustavi 2, the former opposition TV channel, also used entertainment as a vector to counter disinformation, including false stories targeting Euroatlantic integration and Western values. "We've come to the conclusion that 'infotainment' works much better than just simple talk shows where people are preaching and teaching," Nakashidze told me. The channel produced travel shows like *European Tour*, which highlighted one EU member state and two "Western values" per episode. The program was supported by the EU and discussed delicate issues for Georgia, including

minority, religious, and LGBT rights. "Once we even interviewed homosexual couples in Sweden," Nakashidze proudly reported. She's right to be proud; the religious right routinely threatens gay activists in Georgia. Another program, *Transliterary Triangle*, funded by a German foundation, featured well-known Georgian writers discussing their experiences traveling and studying in Europe in the context of current events. Rather than attempt to directly debunk disinformation in this format, the program focused on reporting the truth about the episode's featured event. Then trusted voices put it into context. But this programming is imperiled; outside of the channel's legal troubles that have eliminated its editorial integrity, funding to produce quality, compelling television is increasingly hard to come by. It's a challenge familiar to the West, where news coverage is now driven by clicks and salacious headlines more than quality, educational content.

Inside government, officials like David Uchadze at the Ministry of Defense are engaging their target audience—the media—by putting them on the ground with the military itself. One of the Ministry's top strategic communications priorities is to engage journalists through a variety of on-the-ground experiences. It organizes media tours to observe military exercises and NATO cooperation events, targeting journalists from regional and local news outlets outside of the capital who may not be as well versed in defense lingo in particular. It has become the backbone of their outreach. "That [program is] our ABC," says David, smiling. More recently, the MOD has spun up a five-day training for journalists and journalism students that includes some classroom instruction, crisis simulation, and time in the field. After learning the basics about disinformation and conflict scenarios in the classroom, trainees head out to the field, where they encounter "real tanks and real soldiers with their real guns." The Ministry even puts journalists in flak jackets as they navigate their way through a

truly hybrid conflict simulation, involving disinformation as well as ground activity. "It's pretty exciting for journalists," David says. "We want them to be our allies in identifying disinformation, to be our allies in peace, crisis, and war. And we want them to stay alive during [conflict] situations." Critics might call activities like this cut-and-dry counterpropaganda, but they benefit journalists and government officials alike. They build relationships between the two groups so that in moments of crisis, a journalist can easily call an official directly rather than being routed through a press office. Similar lines of communication between the Georgian government and international journalists were critical during the 2008 war.

The Defense Ministry is also trying to fill gaps in local language coverage and increase public awareness of disinformation in rural areas. Although television reigns supreme in Georgia as the top source of news, followed closely by social media and trusted relatives, newspapers are still quite popular, particularly among minority populations including ethnic Azeris and Armenians. People in these communities are more likely to speak Russian than Georgian and rely on Russian-language outlets for news. The Defense Ministry responded to this imbalance by creating a monthly newspaper on disinformation and propaganda. Every month, it disseminates 10,000 copies of the paper in three languages—Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani. It's also available online. "People like it," David says. "It's not just dry facts. It's explaining what propaganda is, how it operates, and debunking" the latest claims of Russian disinformation. It disproved the so-called Lugar case, a favorite rumor spread by malign Russian actors, in which Russian disinformation outlets claimed the United States was developing biological weapons or conducting experiments on Georgian citizens in the US-funded Lugar Laboratory in Georgia. In reality, the lab treats Georgians suffering from hepatitis C.[35]

One of the main amplifiers of the Lugar case was politician Igor Giorgadze, a former minister for state security during Georgia's early independence who has remained active in politics. He advocates for closer ties with Russia, one of a growing group of such politicians across the political spectrum in Georgia. Members of Patriots' Alliance, the far-right party, openly travel to Moscow and meet with their counterparts in the Russian parliament. Their justification for the trips is similar to Georgian Dream's; dialogue with Russia is important. Patriots' Alliance, like Giorgadze, repeats Russian disinformation about the threat the West purportedly poses to Georgia's culture and values.

At a dinner with Giga Bokeria, an opposition politician and former deputy foreign minister, and his wife Tamara Chergoleishvili, the editor-in-chief of a popular magazine, *Tabula*, I ask how they would solve the disinformation crisis if they were back in government. As Tbilisi twinkles below us, Giga answers without hesitation: "I would politically eviscerate all of these people. I would make them political pariahs."[36]

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The next day, as the sun sets behind the hills and people gather in front of parliament, awaiting the start of the protest, I see Chergoleishvili standing on a concrete step, scanning the crowd, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the face of Maro Makashvili, a young woman who was killed during the 1921 Red Army invasion of Georgia. Resentment of Russia runs deep here. "Ah, so you're here too!" she says when she spots me. It was a refrain that is repeated throughout the night as I bump into many of those I had interviewed over the past two years throughout the crowd. Tamara Sartania, who had been in Kazakhstan during the war, is there with my former NDI colleagues. Cameras from all the major outlets, including Nina Nakahshidze's Rustavi 2, months away from its

government takeover, broadcast the events. I don't see David Uchadze, the young Ministry of Defense official. Given his government position, protesting is risky. But later he writes to me on Twitter: "Don't say you don't enjoy the timing of your visit to Georgia." Batu Kutelia is there. So is former defense minister Dato Sikharulidze.

The next afternoon, Sikharulidze meets me, wearing a gray shirt that accentuates the visible bags under his eyes. He was up until five o'clock in the morning after the protests last night. After midnight, police had tried to disperse the gathering. Some protestors tried to storm the parliament building, and police responded by indiscriminately firing tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets into the crowd. Over 240 people were injured. Two people—a teenage girl and a journalist—lost eyes after being shot in the face with rubber bullets. Georgians watched these events unfold in horror. Sikharulidze was dismayed to see the event take such a disturbing turn after the protest earlier in the evening had been so peaceful; "I loved the evening yesterday, in the beginning [of the protest]," he tells me. "I saw young people there, more than people my age. It was mostly accomplished young people. They weren't on the payroll of one or another political party." Neither were the members of his family, who all decided to show up independently of one another, simply because they felt the need to be there. Sikharulidze was particularly surprised to see his daughter at the protest; she doesn't care much about politics, he says, but "she was offended" about what went on in parliament. The previous night's events are an extension of a movement decades in the making, Sikharulidze explains. "We were demanding independence for Georgia [in the 1980s] and we [still] need to accomplish that," he says with a smile. "We always wanted something special for our country."

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Countering disinformation—like participatory democracy—is not an end unto itself. Malign actors, be they foreign or domestic, will adapt to the circumstances at hand to continue undermining and exploiting emotion and lapses in trust. If a country which has been striving against Russia and toward democratization for years is susceptible to Russian disinformation and political influence, then vulnerabilities exist in even the strongest democracies.

The Georgian Dream government has increased these vulnerabilities to Russia. On paper, it recognizes the potential danger posed by Russian-backed NGOs and Russian investments but opens the door to them anyway. The country's public servants soldier on but cannot print enough minority-language newspapers debunking anti-Western narratives to compete with the wider Russian disinformation machine, which, ironically, was born, in part, in Georgia in 2008. Then it made its way Westward, to Ukraine, across Europe, and later, to the United States.

Thousands turn out night after night to demand the government do more to counter Russia's political and informational influence in Georgia. As I'm leaving Tbilisi, the city is still protesting. People have begun carrying signs that say "Occup-eyed," in solidarity with those who lost eyes after being shot with the security services' rubber bullets the week before. The speaker of parliament has resigned, and the Georgian Dream government has committed to holding proportional parliamentary elections four years earlier than scheduled, but protestors are still demanding the resignation of the interior minister for the violence that occurred on the first night of the protests and demanding a change in the way the government handles relations with Russia.

I'm hailing a cab from Freedom Square in the middle of the night, because, like most flights from Georgia, mine departs in the early hours of the morning. Police cars sit silently with their lights flashing,

ready to move if tensions should rise down the street at parliament. Over the weekend, in the countryside of Georgia's winemaking region, the host at my bed-and-breakfast told me his son drove three hours to join the protests in the capital. If he hadn't had guests, my host would have been in the passenger seat, he says.

We pull up to the airport; taxis stacked two or three deep park akimbo in the departures zone. My driver lays on his horn and shouts at a nearby car. He parks, and as I pay him, he asks under his breath "When will my country be normal?" gesturing to the hubbub around him. "After I'm dead?"

"It seems like it's on its way," I answer, indicating the city and the protests a few miles away.

"Maybe," he says. "Maybe."

4

Poland: When Vaccines Don't Work

On April 10, 2010, I was sitting in a cafe in Vyborg, Russia, drinking tea and eating pie with a few classmates. We were a few months into our semester of Russian-language study in St. Petersburg, and after buying a few new spring blouses—45 degrees Fahrenheit felt too hot for the thick sweaters we had been bundled in all winter—we got on a local northbound train to the city near the Finnish border. A thick layer of ice still covered the inlet of the Gulf of Finland, but we were excited to be out of the city anyway, thrilled to feel the sun on our skin and see grass—however brown, abused, and waterlogged—peeking through the snow melt.

The optimism of that spring morning was shattered by horrific images on the cafe's small TV. The dismembered, charred carcass of a plane lay among leafless trees, flames crackling throughout the crash site. Firefighters sprayed water across the area. The chyron announced that a plane carrying the Polish president, Lech Kaczyński, and nearly 100 other members of the country's political elite had crashed in Smolensk, Russia. All were believed dead. They had been on their way to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of another tragedy: the Soviets' murder of 22,000 Polish military officers in the Katyń forest during the Second World War.

When I returned home that evening, my host mother, Alla, a St. Petersburg native in her late sixties, met me at the door with a somber expression. "Did you see the news?" she asked, ushering me into the kitchen and forcing a cup of tea into my hands. "Are you okay? What a terrible tragedy." It was a scene that would be repeated over the next week, as my Russian professors and friends checked in on me, the girl with the obviously Polish last name. Since I arrived in Russia, when asked why I, a Polish-American, had chosen to study Russian, of all languages, I always told my family's Second World War story, or what I began to think of then as my origin story; without it, not only would I not study Eastern Europe or disinformation today, I wouldn't be an American citizen.

The short version is this: my maternal grandfather lived an idyllic childhood in an eastern Polish village outside of Lviv, now part of modern-day Ukraine. When he was ten, in February 1940, Soviet forces deported his entire family to a work camp in the Arkhangelsk region, near the Arctic Circle. Their crime? They were Polish. My great-grandfather, like many others who had served in the First World War, had received a government land grant to resettle his family in the east. Because of their ethnicity and their political sympathies, my family was packed into cattle cars and shipped away to forced labor camps along with hundreds of thousands of other Poles over the course of the war. When the Soviets joined the Allies, the camps were "liberated," and my family trekked across Russia and Central Asia to Persia, where they boarded a ship for England. There, my grandfather, now grown, met my grandmother. They emigrated to the United States in 1952. The rest, as they say, is history.

On top of the cultural eccentricities of living in a Polish-American family—after Easter one year, when every Polish household is drowning in leftover cured meats, my father sent me to school with a packed lunch of *kielbasa* on a cinnamon raisin bagel, and when

I complained about it to my grandmother, she said, "What's wrong with that? Sounds good to me"—I learned the details of my family history in elementary school. Before a trip to Ellis Island, every fourth grader completed a project on their heritage and immigration story. I interviewed my grandfather, who relived his deportation with me despite suffering from cancer at the time. Learning about the saga—and there is no other word for it, really—that brought me into being, hearing about places like Kazakhstan for the first time and considering the ways that the great power games of history affect individual lives, my Polish-American identity grew beyond school cafeteria embarrassment to a source of intellectual curiosity and pride. My grandfather died when I was thirteen, but the gifts he gave me persisted through college, when I took Russian and studied the politics of Eastern Europe, landing me in St. Petersburg in 2010.

I told my origin story in my then rudimentary Russian over and over until I could recite it in near-perfect idiomatic speech, so it was only natural that Russians who knew me checked in on me after the plane crash in Smolensk. Ninety-six members of the Polish political elite, including sitting President Lech Kaczyński and his wife, Maria, died on that day. It was devastating for Poland, a sick and ironic twist of fate, and a reminder of how much the country had suffered in the past century. Russia had only just publicly admitted Soviet responsibility for the Katyń massacre, and in an eerie echo, another tragedy had occurred not far from that hallowed ground.

My memories of the next few days are ones of unity and support. When my Russian acquaintances checked in with me, I politely thanked them but said that I was more of an interested and informed bystander to this tragedy: I am, after all, an American citizen, not a Pole. Beyond their reactions, I felt like all of Russia was mourning along with Poland. Channel One, Russia's most-watched state-run television network, broadcast Polish director Andrzej Wajda's film

Katyń on the evening of the crash. Putin and Medvedev—then prime minister and president, respectively—made all the correct public statements. Poles were upset when President Obama, whose flight had been grounded after a volcano in Iceland sent clouds of smoke into the atmosphere above Europe, played golf on the day of President Kaczyński's funeral, but Medvedev made it there. It felt like Russia and Poland, which had been adversaries for hundreds of years, might finally be moving toward a careful reconciliation.

There was a shift in Poland, too. Leaving behind domestic politics, which were growing increasingly polarized ahead of the upcoming presidential election, the entire Polish population mourned together. Thousands held vigils across the country and in Warsaw outside the Presidential Palace. The courtyard in front of it was packed with votives, flowers, and other offerings for days after the crash. It seemed like the tragedy might dispel political animosities in favor of solidarity, not only within Polish society, but between Poles and Russians as well. Ten years later, none of that solidarity remains. The Poland I visit today is fractured, partisan, and petty. It is gripped by conspiracy theories or else obsessed with disproving them. It's difficult for me to watch, difficult to experience in person, and even more difficult to describe; this case study is the last I'm tackling as I write this book. It hurts, but it's unmistakable; the Smolensk disaster, an unspeakable tragedy that should have inspired cohesion and unity, has instead been used to drive division and a pandemic of partisanship in the country. Nothing is better fuel for political influence and disinformation than societal rifts. And in Poland, they power campaigns originating not only in Russia, but in Poland itself.

Poland, as a result, has earned the dubious distinction of being a country of incongruities. It has a clear-eyed view—thanks to history, both more recent and less so—of what Russia is capable of doing. But its government, benefiting from some of the same tactics,

is taking precious few steps to address it. Across the Atlantic, the United States is fighting a similar battle, one where polarization is exploited and extended not only by foreign actors, but by domestic politicians as well. Both countries neglect the homegrown elements at their own peril.

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Russia never needed to plant the seeds of disinformation about the Smolensk tragedy; the conspiracy theories in which its memory is now entangled were grown and tended by Poles themselves. Tomasz Kiersnowski, who worked as an assistant to Acting President Bronisław Komorowski in the days after the tragedy, recalls the patently political environment that he entered after the crash.[1] We meet for breakfast in Warsaw in summer 2019 just before he leaves on a vacation. I'm grateful to speak with someone so directly ensconced in those stunned days directly after Smolensk, when Poland had to repopulate rungs of the government and to keep the lights on; it's typically difficult to get Poles to discuss those days—and especially their aftermath—on record. What happened on April 10, 2010, similar to Brexit in the UK, or the 2016 election in the United States, has divided the country. Few want their opinions about it memorialized in a book.

Kiersnowski, now thirty-six, spent his early career working for nonprofits. The day before the crash, he was visiting Warsaw from Barcelona, where he was working at the time. As he walked around the city, he noticed the early signs of the upcoming 2010 presidential election and thought, "How great that I'm not involved in politics … that I'm not managing the country." He returned to Spain on the day of the tragedy and recalls speaking with fellow travelers about his shock, explaining to Germans, French, and Spaniards what the crash meant to Poland. Three days later, he got a call from a friend and colleague, Jacek Michałowski, who now found himself Acting

Chief of the Chancellery of the President. His predecessor had been on the plane in Smolensk. Would Tomasz come back to Warsaw and serve his country? Jacek asked.

The first order of business, handed down from Acting President Komorowski himself, was to separate the upcoming electoral campaign from the resources of the state within the Chancellery. This mix of the political and official was fairly typical practice in Poland, Tomasz said, but the political climate meant the Komorowski administration wanted to separate the two. It should be clear to the public that no one in the organization—from former Kaczyński staffers to the new Komorowski group—was abusing administrative resources during this delicate period before the election. In the wake of the tragedy, the vote would now be held in the summer. Gruesome though it was, the political viability of the late Kaczyński's political party, Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawedliwość* in Polish, abbreviated as PiS), was imperiled after his death. PiS had lost its candidate, but as Tomasz tells me, they had also lost the opportunity to use the Chancellery as an unofficial campaign headquarters. PiS still found a way to use the tragedy to its advantage. The late President's twin brother Jarosław now led the party. He is a strange figurehead; he never married and lived with his mother well into adulthood, never owned a computer, and resisted opening a bank account until 2009. Tomasz says after the death of his brother, Kaczyński "learned there must be more emotion" to influence Polish politics. As he took over the party, Smolensk became a key part of the PiS identity.

Multiple investigations have concluded the crash was a result of pilot and air-traffic control error during heavy fog that caused poor visibility; as the plane attempted to land, a wing struck a birch tree. The plane crashed and broke apart. Despite the investigative conclusions, the Russian side has still not returned the wreckage of

the plane. And why should it? As a Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) official from whom I expected obfuscation, not candor, told me in early 2017, "The return of the presidential plane wreckage is the biggest issue in Polish-Russian relations today. Russia is retaining the wreckage to heat the internal debate in Poland."

The official is right. Although the *New York Times* reports that in the days after the Smolensk tragedy, Jarosław Kaczyński told an aide, "Don't think for even a second that I believe this business about it being an assassination," he soon began to see the political utility of the crash.[2] Tomasz, the Komorowski aide, remembers first noticing the feelings of creeping politicization around the disaster when the new Presidential Administration tried to move a cross that had been standing among commemorative offerings in front of the Presidential Palace since the days after the crash. During the election campaign, the cross had become a gathering place for fringe conspiracy theorists who believed that Prime Minister Donald Tusk and other members of the opposition had collaborated with the Russians to bring down the President's plane in retaliation for his staunch support of anti-Russian governments, including in Georgia. The Presidential Administration, together with the Catholic Church and the Polish Scouts, who had erected the cross, agreed to move the monument to Warsaw's St. Anne's Church to avoid its further politicization. But like in Estonia, the cross's so-called defenders guarded it around the clock, resulting in clashes between the defenders, police, and protestors. It was an issue that occupied much of Tomasz's time and a large part of the nation's emotions the summer after the tragedy. The tear in the fabric of Polish society that the crash had made grew wider.

The events at the cross didn't go unnoticed or unused. PiS had endorsed the "defenders," and in the same square where the cross stood, every month from May 2010 to April 2018, Jarosław Kaczyński

gathered his devotees in front of the Presidential Palace to mark the "monthiversary" of his brother's death. What might seem an overly sentimental but ultimately understandable act of grief was overshadowed by Kaczyński's embrace of a conspiracy theory he lifted from the "defenders of the cross." At the "monthiversary" commemorations, Kaczyński would rail against the "elite" in the opposition party, Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO), who he said colluded with the Russians to bring down the plane. Jacek Kucharczyk, an analyst at the Institute of Public Affairs, a Polish think tank, told the *Financial Times* that the events were "a successful way of institutionalizing what people called the Smolensk 'religion' … Any religion needs its founding act and then it needs rituals … to carry on as time passes by, and that is what the monthly marches were about."[3] By 2012, as the reality of the mistakes that caused the crash became clear, Kaczyński called for an extraordinary parliamentary session to investigate the crash. "The murder of 96 people, including the President and others, is an unprecedented crime," he said. "Anyone who had something to do with this … should suffer the consequences."[4]

This refrain was part of the campaign promise that Kaczyński and PiS rode to victory in 2015, winning a slim but absolute parliamentary majority, as well as the presidency. At the first "monthiversary" march after Law and Justice took office in November 2015, the unofficial commemoration was supported by the presence of a respected official body: the Polish Army Honor Guard. The government soon removed the original crash investigation report from its website, officially reopened the investigation into the crash, created a new commission to explore its causes, and exhumed crash victims, searching for traces of explosives on their bodies. What was once a fringe conspiracy theory was now official policy, funded by taxpayers, pitting Polish citizens against one another and drawing, at best, raised eyebrows,

and, at worst, flat-out criticism from allied governments. In 2013, a group of European psychologists and sociologists found that "conspiratorial explanations of [the Smolensk tragedy] undermined social cohesion: People endorsing conspiratorial accounts of the Smolensk catastrophe expressed the desire to distance themselves from conspiracy non-believers, whereas people opposing conspiracy explanations preferred greater distance to conspiracy believers."[5] Even ten years after the crash, a full 26 percent of those surveyed in a nationwide poll believed it may have been a planned attack.[6] Without creating any false news stories or employing bot armies, the specter of Russia changed internal Polish discourse and put the government's conspiratorial ineptitude on display.

With a decade of hindsight since the crash, "it is clear now that Russian influence in Poland is indirect," the same clear-eyed MFA official later told me. Heating up Poland's internal debate caused the country to lose credibility in the eyes of its Western partners and focus inward as the Kremlin meddles in less direct ways in Poland's neighborhood and within the country itself. This is a tactic that Russia would roll out in the United States in the Trump era, hoping America would be too focused on problems at home to be active abroad, particularly in areas where Russia wanted to increase its influence.

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When I first started researching disinformation in Poland beginning in 2017, Poles seemed to have a chip on their collective shoulder about their understanding of the Russian threat. I heard repeatedly that due to its historical experience and centuries of animosity toward Russia, Poland was unique. It was "inoculated" to Russian propaganda and disinformation. The Kremlin could never peddle a pro-Russian narrative in Poland; it would be immediately rejected. If there's

one thing that unites Poles—and indeed, these days, precious little does—it is a deep mistrust toward Russia. But in seizing that mistrust as an electoral tool, the Law and Justice Party split Polish society wide open, leaving it more vulnerable to outside manipulation.

The new government's policies also increased that vulnerability. One of the party's first actions was to weaken judicial independence through changes to the country's Constitutional Tribunal, triggering an unprecedented—and as of this writing, unresolved—European Commission probe on rule of law in the country. Law and Justice also immediately moved to transform Poland's media landscape. A 2017 Freedom House special report, unambiguously entitled "Pluralism under Attack: The Assault on Press Freedom in Poland" details how PiS sought to reshape Poland's "lively but highly polarized media environment" to one that would be more supportive of the new government.[7] Law and Justice immediately gained control over Polish public media, including public television, one of the most consumed and most trusted information sources in the country. In the face of protests from opposition politicians and international observers, a PiS-controlled parliament pushed through a measure to "terminate the mandates of the current members of the national television and radio broadcasters' management and supervisory boards, and fill their positions through direct appointment by the treasury minister … until a 'new national media organization' could be created."[8] As described in the Freedom House report, lawmakers including PiS MP Elżbieta Kruk "argued that the public media had been ignoring their mission by spreading 'ideological and social fashions not accepted by most of society' with journalists who 'often sympathize[d] directly with opinions unfavorable towards Poland.'"[9]

The law reverberated throughout the state-owned media before it was officially on the books. At least 235 journalists fell victim to the PiS "purges of the public media" in 2016, according to a liberal Polish

journalist's union.[10] "Not all of the [victims] were simply dismissed from work," the union writes. "Many of them resigned, not wanting to participate in the political pacification of the media."[11] Ordinary citizens, too, were dismayed. Over 20,000 people gathered outside the public television studios in January 2016, soon after the measure was passed. Still, the station, as well as its popular evening news magazine, *Wiadamości,* fell into lockstep with the PiS government.

In Poland in August 2019, I ask a number of journalists across the political spectrum to discuss media and disinformation in Poland with me. Wojciech Kość, a tall, wiry man in his forties who writes for a number of publications including *POLITICO* Europe and *OKO Press*, a liberal Polish outlet that conducts in-depth investigations and fact-checks politicians' public statements, jokes when I invite him to get coffee to discuss disinformation. Law and Justice politicians in the sitting government are "big creators of disinformation themselves," he writes. I've followed Kość on Twitter for years to stay abreast of narratives in the Polish right-wing media, which he monitors. Just this week, he's sharing covers of two right-wing weeklies, famous for their homophobic headlines. One, *Do Rzeczy*, shows a young, well-dressed man in sunglasses—presumably meant to look "gay"—speaking in front of a line of rainbow flags. "If anti-PiS won," this would be Poland, screams the title.

We meet for breakfast in central Warsaw, a few blocks from the site of Pawiak Prison, which served as a Gestapo jail during the Second World War. Kość calls the public television takeover under PiS "blatant," categorizing it as "the most crude propaganda [in Poland] that seems to be working."[12] Moreover, he said that PiS's manipulation of the media sphere contributes "to the current [politicized] atmosphere" as well as the "periodic frenzies that grip Poland." They're becoming more frequent over the last decade, he says, and the Smolensk tragedy is central to that development; "conspiracies were marginal" until

the crash was politicized. Poland's public television station now appears to endorse them; in 2017, it broadcast a "documentary" that described PiS attempts to restrict press access to the parliament as the successful vanquishing of an opposition coup against the party.[13] On the anniversary of the Smolensk crash in 2018, it broadcast the eponymous propaganda film, which depicts the tragedy as a result of a conspiracy. "This is a film that simply speaks the truth," said Kaczyński at its 2016 premiere.[14]

Even conservative commentators worry about the forced polarization of the Polish press. This includes Łukasz Warzecha, who writes for *Do Rzeczy*, the weekly that Kość tweets about for attacking Poland's LGBT population. Warzecha has also written for Poland's largest tabloid, *Fakt* and another right-wing weekly *wSieci*, with which he parted ways because of the management's "rapprochement with the ruling party."[15] His support of PiS is on the positive side of cautious, and certainly not absolute, so he'd prefer to be at a magazine where he can levy mild criticism if he so chooses, he says. Still, he recognizes the polarization of Polish television is an obstacle to fighting disinformation in the country. But the biggest problem, in Warzecha's opinion, is people. "How many people consciously look for unbiased news?" he asks. "If they watched [the public broadcaster] during the PO days," when the current opposition party was in power, "they still do." Habits reign supreme.

Disinformation appears to be one area where Warzecha is comfortable criticizing PiS. My theory about Poles believing they are "inoculated" to Russian interference is "to a large extent still valid," he says, and it blinds Poles to the true challenge plaguing the country. "We have in Poland a problem with differentiating a real attempt at using disinformation by outside powers [from] using the pretext of disinformation as a political tool in political fighting inside Poland."

As America's next presidential election nears, it's a sentiment that could increasingly describe the United States, too.

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I've had intimate encounters with the political use of disinformation and sniping within the Polish media that Warzecha describes. Seven years after Smolensk, I spoke on a panel at the Krynica Economic Forum, an annual conference meant to be Poland's answer to Davos. The Polish government hosts it in a mountain resort town famous for its mineral springs. I was one among thousands of guests, and the panel I participated in—"Fake news is an oxymoron!"—was one among at least twenty other options in the same afternoon time slot. A respectable hundred or so people filled our conference hall to capacity. I was the only woman and the only American on the panel, stacked with Polish men. My goal in my opening remarks was to lay some guardrails for the discussion. I defined disinformation, discouraged the use of the term "fake news" (at that point, it had already become synonymous in the United States and abroad with politically inconvenient information), and described some potential solutions.

I barely spoke during the rest of the discussion and my lexical pleas were not heeded. My fellow panelists, who included the editor-in-chief of Poland's biggest tabloid, a representative from a right-wing weekly, and a director from Polish public radio, immediately launched into veiled critiques of each other and their colleagues in the Polish media environment, more interested in scoring political points and labeling each other "fake news" than discussing the bigger picture, not to mention possible solutions. The entire panel—from its title to the discussion—was endemic of Poland's approach to the problem of disinformation: polarized, flippant, lacking substance, and nearly

devoid of forward-looking responses. Many of the discussions in the United States take the same tone.

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Although you wouldn't guess it from the discussion in Krynica, or from Polish "inoculation theory," the country *does* have a problem with Russian disinformation; it's simply not as overt as many expect when they think of "fake news," conjuring up summarily false articles or doctored photos that can be laughably debunked and dismissed. Polish versions of RT and Sputnik, the Kremlin-funded news outlets, as well as a Sputnik-edited radio broadcast called "Radio Hobby" are nowhere near the most popular news sources. In order to circumvent Poles' disinclination toward overtly Russian sources, disinformation in Poland is exercised through calculated decisions, like the retention of the Smolensk crash wreckage, fueling partisan rancor in Poland. It also seizes upon the most delicate, destructive, and difficult elements of Polish discourse. And in large part, Polish actors drive it.

Just as memory of historical trauma drove conspiracies and distrust surrounding the Smolensk tragedy, since 2014 it has also buoyed Russian disinformation narratives about Polish-Ukrainian relations. Since Poland rejoined the European community in the early 2000s, it has been an active advocate and supporter of other post-communist states working toward the transition to a democracy and market economy. Particularly after the Euromaidan revolution, Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, and its instigation of a war in Ukraine's Donbas region, supporting Ukraine was a strategic policy priority for Poland; the two countries share over 300 miles of border, centuries of history, and many cultural and religious ties. But the history of the Polish-Ukrainian relationship is also a troubled one. Among a host of incidents that continue to cause diplomatic and political consternation in Kyiv and Warsaw is the Ukrainian Insurgent

Army's (UPA) 1943–4 massacre of tens of thousands of Poles in Eastern Poland and Western Ukraine. The post-independence Polish government condemned the events as genocide, while in recent years the Ukrainian government has celebrated UPA and one of its leaders, Stepan Bandera, as the first fighters for a modern, independent Ukraine. Kyiv even renamed one of the city's main thoroughfares after Bandera.

My description of the events above is an oversimplification of a long, complex, and nuanced relationship. In spite of, or perhaps because of, that complexity, Poles and Ukrainians react viscerally to any development relating to their recent shared history. In 2016 and 2017, when I lived in Ukraine, my Kyiv apartment was just around the corner from the Polish Embassy; more than once during my year in Ukraine, protestors holding the red and black flag of the UPA gathered outside of the embassy in response to events or decisions taken in Poland. And with visa-free travel to the EU bringing an influx of Ukrainian labor migrants to Poland, Polish-Ukrainian relations are forced further to the forefront of Polish public consciousness.

Polish-Ukrainian relations are clearly fertile ground for Russian disinformation operations. In the early days of the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine, when thousands of protestors gathered in Kyiv to reject the government's decision to not seek further integration with Europe, thousands of online counter-protestors in the form of inauthentic Russian accounts appeared on popular Polish information portals,[16] attempting to discredit the actions of democratic protestors in Ukraine. This trend would continue as the Russian incursion into the country did; according to a study conducted by a Polish civil society organization, InfoOps Polska, Russian narratives about Ukraine on the Polish language version of Sputnik from 2014 to 2019 attempted to paint "Ukraine as an unfriendly country to Poland," using claims of Ukrainian nationalism and "negative

aspects of [Polish-Ukrainian] relations" as key rhetorical devices.[17] The narratives portray the post-Maidan government in Kyiv as fascist "Banderites," as Stepan Bandera's supporters are often called. InfoOps's monitoring finds that mention of "Banderites" in the Polish information space has been increasing steadily since 2014. These narratives correlated with a strong rise in anti-Ukrainian sentiment among Poles as more Ukrainians began to work in Poland. Moreover, InfoOps finds that while these narratives begin on blatantly Russian websites such as Sputnik, they are amplified by the homegrown Polish media ecosystem. Stories are republished on online forums and by influential bloggers, making the content seem more trustworthy as it is laundered through Polish-language outlets and increasing the sheer number of sources "reporting" a story that initially appeared on a Russian government-sponsored website. The report makes no assertion whether this laundering of information and influence is something Russia deliberately orchestrates or if it happens naturally; either way, the effect is the same. As in Georgia, local voices are spreading divisive narratives and hastening the polarization of Polish society. It's a phenomenon that plagues the United States as well; news outlets on the fringes of society echo Kremlin narratives, and activist groups like Ryan Clayton's Americans Take Action are unknowingly used as homegrown amplifiers.

Kamil Basaj, the CEO of InfoOps Polska, is well versed in this trend. He spends his days combing the Polish-language internet for evidence of Russian manipulation. Basaj has friendly blue eyes, and unlike others in his open office, who favor the typical tech uniform of T-shirts and jeans, he is always dressed in a crisp suit with his hair slicked back when I meet him for coffee in Warsaw. His research is prized by the government and civil society alike, which makes him a rarity in Poland. Basaj stays far away from any political topics, he tells me.[18] "Our goal is to hit the false narratives about, for example, the EU."

He also runs a Polish-language Twitter account, @Disinfo_Digest, mostly focused on debunking Russian narratives related to NATO, and has closely followed disinformation about Polish-Ukrainian relations. Basaj, along with other Ukrainian and Polish analysts and diplomats, believes Russia's online campaigns are supported by offline activity and suspects a Russian hand in various violent flashpoints in Polish-Ukrainian relations over the past several years.

The offline activity Basaj references includes a number of defacements of Polish and Ukrainian Second World War cemeteries and memorials; the Polish consulate in the Ukrainian city of Lutsk was shelled in 2017; and arson allegedly committed by Poles partially destroyed a Hungarian cultural center in 2018. One of the Poles convicted of setting the Hungarian cultural center on fire claimed that Germans with connections to the Alternative for Germany political party, which the Kremlin openly supports, had financed the operation.[19] Activities like this unsettle Basaj, who, like me, believes the Polish perception of the Russian information warfare threat is too narrow. "We are not fighting Russian influence because we are not fighting the whole spectrum," he says. "A lot of NGOs and the whole society of analysts and journalists which are fighting with this Kremlin propaganda, they are focusing only on propaganda, fake news and nothing else."[20]

Without attention to the spectrum of threats beyond disinformation and an understanding of the fact that local actors are being manipulated, the Kremlin wins. Divisive narratives about Polish-Ukrainian relations clearly benefit Russia: they undermine Western support for a democratizing Ukraine, create tension between two strong anti-Russian allies in a region where Russia seeks greater influence, and make Poland look hysterical in the eyes of its Western partners. But at its root, Basaj says what Poland needs to address is "the polarization of society. This is … one of the results of not only

propaganda or disinformation campaigns but the whole spectrum of influence to the information sphere." Whether they are created in Russia or within the borders of Poland, influence operations have increased polarization in Poland and left the country more vulnerable to disinformation in the future.

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As in Georgia, Poland's conservative tendencies, fed by the Catholic Church, are also a disinformation breeding ground. When I visit Poland in August 2019, the eastern city of Białystok has just held its first gay pride march. Revelers were met by Catholic counter-protestors who violently attacked them and shouted filth down the length of the parade route. Jacek Dehnel, a novelist and gay rights activist, wrote about the vitriol he encountered there, including "a woman with a toddler, aged about two or three, both of whose tiny hands she was posing to show the middle finger, while she said: 'This is how you do it!' And then she chanted: 'Fuck-off-fag-gots! Fuck-off-fag-gots!'"[21] It's hard not to see a direct link between this behavior and the government; in March Jarosław Kaczyński announced at the PiS party congress that he viewed the protection of LGBT rights as a "great threat" to the Polish state.[22]

The next week, Poland's right-wing weeklies spewed homophobic messages on their covers. Poland's LGBT community responded with an outpouring of solidarity on Twitter; using the hashtag #JestemLGBT (#IAmLGBT), they described their highly ordinary Polish lives. Just like other Poles, they eat pierogi, go to school or work, and are frustrated with public transit and traffic.

Although Poland is a traditional Catholic society, this animosity toward the LGBT population did not always exist, says researcher Anna Mierzyńska, herself a resident of Białystok. "In Poland, [the anti-LGBT] narrative was not widely popular until it was used by PiS,"

Mierzyńska tells me. Mierzyńska has studied Polish politics and the internet since 2017, when she discovered that "30 percent of Facebook reactions on the posts of the most popular Polish politicians are from fake accounts, and half of the most active commenters on politicians' fanpages were fake."[23, 24] As anti-LGBT rhetoric ramped up in Poland, Mierzyńska tracked its rise online. She found a curious connection; some of the staunchest purveyors of this new wave of homophobic disinformation had connections to Russia. One highly active anti-LGBT organization had a long list of connections—including funding, speakers, and cooperation on events—with the World Congress of Families, a Russian organization known as a vector of traditional values and political influence. "I do not know to what extent and whether PiS was aware at all that the narrative has links with Russia," Mierzyńska wrote in an email.

> For PiS, this narrative is politically beneficial today, during the parliamentary election campaign, as it strongly polarizes society, engages the Catholic Church (which is in favor of PiS), creates a false enemy, and makes other topics less important. This is precisely why PiS uses this narrative. Unfortunately, it leads directly to increased aggression between Poles, which was very visible during the Equality March in Białystok.

As with Polish-Ukrainian relations, Kremlin narratives were seeping through the cracks of Poland's anti-Russian vaccination.

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Authentic Polish voices are amplifying divisive narratives, and Russia seems to be working to widen Poland's divide. But more worryingly, the PiS government or, at the very least, PiS supporters appear to be using some of the same tactics to stoke division as the Kremlin itself. A 2017 Oxford Internet Institute Report on

computational propaganda in the Polish information environment describes how a single communications firm "created more than 40,000 unique identities, each with multiple accounts on various social media platforms and portals, a unique IP address, and even its own personality, forming a universe of several hundred thousand specific fake accounts that have been used in Polish politics and multiple elections."[25] These tactics are eerily similar to those employed in the Russian Internet Research Agency's campaigns during the 2016 US presidential election. The Oxford study's analysis of 500 likely inauthentic Twitter accounts in a dataset of over 10,000 total accounts shows that "there [were] more than twice as many suspicious right-wing accounts as there [were] left wing accounts. These accounts were highly prolific," accounting for over 52 percent of tweets in the dataset in a three-week sample.[26] The study concludes that "the Polish right has been more effective [than its rivals] online, having implemented a variety of new tools and practices."[27] It makes no value judgment of the effect of such tools and tactics on a democracy, so I will: any government that claims to fight disinformation originating outside its borders cannot do so while it embraces the same methods within them, no matter the age of its democracy or its geography, up to and including the United States.

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Whenever I'm in Warsaw I make time to see Grzegorz Rzeczkowski, an investigative journalist with one of Poland's most popular weekly magazines, *Polityka*. Educated at Jagiellonian University, Rzeczkowski is tall and handsome, with a full head of dark hair and eyes that always seem to be smiling behind his hip, thick-framed glasses. He knows Warsaw's gems—where you can get surprisingly good Mexican food, for instance—as well as Warsaw's secrets.

Rzeczkowski's investigations focus on the PiS government and the shadowy ways that Moscow supports it.

When I see him in July 2019, he is celebrating the release of his new book, *In a Foreign Alphabet*. It's selling well; I see it on "new and noteworthy" tables at bookstores, and even in gift shops at Warsaw's Chopin Airport. The book makes a shocking but not yet fully substantiated claim: for a year, Russian intelligence operatives eavesdropped on the opposition party Civic Platform politicians' private conversations in two elite Warsaw restaurants to bring down the government they led, and PiS politicians conspired to use the recordings for political gain. Four Civic Platform ministers resigned as a result of the scandal, in which they were heard speaking frankly about allies, including the United States, for waffling on their commitments to Poland and to Europe. Radosław Sikorski, then foreign minister, was recorded saying: "The Polish-American alliance is not worth anything. It's even damaging, because it creates a false sense of security in Poland." If a PiS government were to be elected, he surmised, "we're going to think that everything is great, because we gave the Americans a blowjob. Suckers. Total suckers."

Rzeczkowski told a Civic Platform–led investigative committee on national security threats in July 2019 that "Waitergate," as the scandal is often called, "was aimed at weakening, and consequently breaking up the then-ruling camp, opening the way to the contemporary authority: the anti-Western, anti-liberal, and unfortunately, one could say anti-democratic PiS government."[28] Beyond domestic politics, the operation suited Russia's wider goals of further dividing Polish society and driving a wedge between Poland and the West. As Rzeczkowski told me more simply in 2018, Russia wants to "show foreigners that Poland is crazy," he said, twirling a finger at his temple.[29] In helping to install a government that many Western partners see as moving toward authoritarianism, Russia has achieved its goal. This, too, is

an aim in Russia's operations in the United States; when American democracy is undermined, it cannot serve as an aspirational model around the world.

As of yet, Rzeczkowski's evidence is circumstantial and revolves around connections between the management of the two Warsaw restaurants where the recordings were made and Russian-organized crime. Those tarnished by the scandal—including former Foreign Minister Sikorski and Donald Tusk, a former prime minister who later went on to serve as president of the European Council—also suspect Russian involvement. And although there was no cybercrime element to this operation, Rzeczkowski believes that Waitergate was a precursor to the Kremlin's 2016 hack-and-leak operation targeting the Democratic National Committee. "They are the same," Rzeczkowski tells me. "We are [both] infiltrated."[30]

It's these connections, along with PiS's implementation of the very tactics that the Kremlin employs, that make a coherent response to Russian disinformation and influence operations in Poland impossible, Rzeczkowski believes. "Our authorities pretend that Poland could not be the target of actions controlled by the Kremlin," he writes in his book. "Traces of Russian services' activity can be seen in many European countries, meanwhile we live in the belief that we are a lonely island, somehow miraculously bypassed by a powerful neighbor."[31] No one except the waiters and two businessmen involved in the wiretapping scandal has been officially implicated. Rzeczkowski is furious and offended that in the five years since the tapes were made public, the state institutions meant to protect national security have not investigated the connections he uncovered. The government's response to the broader problem of Russian influence, he says, "is just words, words, words, and nothing more than words. What the government does and what it says are something different in Poland."

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I am familiar with Rzeczkowski's frustration with his government. Each time I've visited Poland since 2016, the situations in Warsaw and Washington—in our media landscapes and our attempts to address Russian disinformation and influence operations—seem to be converging. We are both increasingly polarized. Foreign powers are manipulating both countries' political discourse. Domestic actors are engaging in the tactics of disinformation themselves. But there is another similarity that does not necessarily emerge during discussions with journalists like Rzeczkowski or even those on the conservative side, like *Do Rzeczy*'s Warzecha: there are people in both governments bumping their heads on a daily basis against the low ceilings of counter-disinformation policymaking that have been set for them.

I met Łukasz Wielocha, a young civil servant who works in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, at a conference on disinformation in Prague in 2017. We've kept in touch over the past few years, running into each other at discussions across Europe. Finally, in 2019, after a few years of prodding, he agrees to be interviewed, along with his boss, Paweł Jabłoński, the Deputy Director of the International Projects Coordination Department within the Prime Minister's Office.

We meet in Jabłoński's office on a sweltering day in late July. Like many buildings in Poland, the Chancellery doesn't have central air-conditioning, so the window overlooking the courtyard is wide open to catch some of the gentle breeze stirring the trees outside. He and Łukasz—in their late and early thirties, respectively—are dressed in dark blue suits with patterned ties and matching pocket squares, undoubtedly overheating. Cork boards hung around Jabłoński's desk boast achievements and mementos from his time so far in the PM's

office: a clipping from the front page of the *Financial Times* in which the prime minister warns the EU of a coming Euroskeptic surge in European parliament and a Trump-Pence 2016 sign. I wonder if the latter is an expression of support or simply a memento from a diplomatic visit or election observation trip.

Jabłoński is a lawyer by training, and his primary focus since joining the Chancellery has been supporting Poland's ongoing struggles against the EU's rule of law inquiry; the *Financial Times* clipping over his shoulder makes more sense now. He also advises the prime minister on international projects and serves as a coordinating point for other ministries, ensuring their communication is joined up. In theory, the same is true for Poland and the Chancellery's work on disinformation and foreign influence—it is coordinated through the Prime Minister's Office. Last year, Jabłoński made sure that Poland seconded an employee to the EU's East StratCom Task Force, a body that tracks and debunks disinformation directed at the EU. Now, he says the primary focus for the office with regard to Russian influence is to debunk disinformation in the international press about the Russian NordStream2 gas pipeline, which Poland has publicly opposed for years.

Beyond that, specifics about Poland's counter-disinformation strategy are hard to come by. Officials across government—in the MFA, in other parts of the Chancellery, the Ministry of Defense—declare that Russian disinformation is a "matter of national security." The MFA is supporting the creation of trustworthy independent content in countries in the region to which it offers assistance, such as the "Eastern Partnership" countries—former Soviet states that are not yet EU members. Officials report that they attend semi-regular cross-governmental meetings to coordinate with their colleagues. The MFA and MOD are training journalists and civil servants on how to recognize foreign disinformation. All have units that track the flow

of falsehoods. But compared to other countries I have worked in and studied, the response seems feeble and closeted, likely because of the country's polarized politics.

Jabłoński and Wielocha recognize that many of the demons Poland faces are internal. Jabłoński lists Poland's media environment as one of the key challenges in the country's fight against Russian disinformation and influence. "Polish media are very divided in terms of describing how the political spectrum functions," he says. "They present the same things with a completely different angle. This is not a typical case of disinformation but rather a biased narrative, biased reporting from both sides."[32]

Jabłoński describes the changes that have occurred in Polish media since PiS assumed control of the government with alarming nonchalance. "Public media is of course, let's say, supervised by the government, so it's pro-government," he says, juxtaposing the public broadcaster with a private television station, the US-owned TVN, which is critical of the government. "It's a little bit like Fox News and CNN," Łukasz adds. Both men agree when I say it seems like the media exacerbates the divisions on which Russia can prey. The elephant in the room, of course, is that PiS itself hastened those social divisions through its politicization of the media.

Poland has also struggled with identifying the right structure for its disinformation response. Łukasz, who was hired by the government after completing a competitive public service degree program more than nine years ago, pushes back on the idea that a central hub in the country's highest government offices will change its approach to disinformation. "Since I've been working here for so many years and this is my fourth prime minister," he begins, carefully, "I would say we should look for a more ambitious, stable, systemic solution, because prime ministers change." Dutifully, he adds, "I hope this PM will be responsible for the government for many years, but I don't

decide these things. It's really difficult to build a systemic structure here if the leader is not fully aware of the problem." He has a point. We in the United States have seen how little gets accomplished in an environment in which the commander in chief does not believe disinformation is a threat and even engages with it himself. Is this the analogy that Łukasz is trying to draw?

Łukasz certainly recognizes that the Polish response may seem scattershot to some. "Most of the people that you interview are probably bitching on that," he laughs. But it's what the Polish government has to work with. It's better than nothing and maybe even worth defending, Łukasz tells me. "Our model of fighting disinformation is like Warsaw: it's spread out. It's not centralized … I would come up with a controversial thing: maybe that's not such a bad thing for Poland specifically."

And, Łukasz earnestly reminds me, Poland and its civil servants need to tread lightly *because* of their charged political climate. Like Kamil Basaj, the information operations researcher respected inside and outside of government, Łukasz is hesitant to even touch disinformation of a domestic political nature. Given that Russia uses domestic actors and homegrown messages to sow division, the problem facing Polish civil servants like Łukasz becomes more and more intractable. "This is a delicate, a very delicate issue," he says.

The root of that delicacy took hold the day the Polish government's plane crashed in Smolensk, Russia. "The 10th of April, 2010 has done so much bad and evil for our society. It has divided us so much," he says, leaning across the table. "It's nine years now, and if you really dig into it, Smolensk has done a lot to divide this nation. It should have unified the nation, but instead it really divided it." Łukasz believes the Russians pulled off a massive disinformation operation by holding onto the wreckage and controlling the narrative about the disaster for over a decade.

"I think that Russians back then didn't even imagine how successful they would be," he says, utterly grim. "It's like you have a wound and you keep on scratching it."

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Poland's Ministry of Digital Affairs—an agency established in 2015 and tasked with "creat[ing] a digital boost for the development of Poland … and promoting digital competences among citizens," in addition to developing digital infrastructure—claims to be trying to heal that wound.[33] I hadn't heard the Ministry mentioned much in conversations until the beginning of 2019, when the PiS government appointed Adam Andruszkiewicz, whom critics labeled a "far-right figure," as deputy minister. His function, the government said, would be to deal with rampant online censorship of conservatives on social networks. Given my public criticism of initiatives in which governments put their own political preferences over freedom of speech, I'm surprised when I'm able to secure an interview with Minister Marek Zagórski, who assumed leadership of the Digital Affairs Ministry in 2018. We meet in the morning of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, when the city is draped in the red and white of the Polish flag to commemorate the destruction of the capital and loss of 200,000 lives at the hands of Nazi forces in 1944 (Figure 4).

The foyer of the Ministry of Digital Affairs is a departure from the stuffy, staid entrance halls that greet visitors in most Central and Eastern European government buildings. Entering the Ministry's foyer, visitors encounter clean white walls, boxy furniture, and an LCD television hanging over the reception desk. That they're striving for—but not quite achieving—a Silicon Valley vibe becomes clear when we arrive at the Minister's office, a more typical two-room government suite. There, in an anteroom with plush leather chairs,

Figure 1 *Estonia's Bronze Soldier in its new location in a military cemetery on the outskirts of Tallinn, November 2017.*

I'm greeted by a team of women—a secretary, press officer, translator, and staffer—and we sit in uncomfortable silence for a few moments until Minister Zagórski emerges from his office and invites us to gather around one end of the long mahogany table inside.

Figures 2 and 3 *Georgians protest outside of parliament in Tbilisi, June 2019.*

We start with the usual inquiries about my Polish heritage, my language skills—no, I tell them in Polish, I'd rather do the interview in translation, since my Russian is embarrassingly way better than my Polish—and begin a conversation that is characteristic of the Polish information environment: astute in its description of the problem, but

Figure 4 *Poles mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, August 2019.*

ignorant of its causes and, therefore, effective responses. I ask about the response to disinformation in Poland and if the government is working with social media companies on the problem, since both Facebook and Google have large offices in Warsaw. Zagórski is the first government official I've met in Poland who provides concrete, if cautious, answers to these questions. He mentions the government's "Safe Elections" (*Bezpieczne Wybory)* website, created with a cross-government, cross-sector team that included social media representatives, launched ahead of the 2018 local elections. "The target was to inform people about potential threats that might happen and spread awareness [about disinformation], and also to give them a mechanism, if they notice anything strange, to notify [the government] through this portal."[34]

In its opening salvo, the site asks, "Are you worried about disinformation in the pre-election period? Then you are in the majority who recognize this threat. According to Eurobarometer, as many as 73 percent of internet users in [EU] member countries have similar concerns."[35] The Safe Elections portal contains basic information about elections and mis- and disinformation for voters and electoral committees, as well as NGOs and media. What votes are coming up? How can internet users spot bots? How do they report false news or suspicious activity? And several times within the many paragraphs of text that visitors encounter, the site reminds visitors that not everything you read on the internet is true.

Speaking to Zagórski, it is clear why his Ministry chose to emphasize that point. "A major problem here," he says, is that Poles "are not able to distinguish between communication and opinion, and this has been shown in focus studies," which his office and the Research and Academic Computer Network (*Naukowa i Akademicka Sieć Komputerowa*, abbreviated NASK), a government research agency overseen by the Ministry of Digital Affairs, conducted. "As an effect," Zagórski continues, "it's quite easy to influence people's views, because … we have a situation in which a majority of social media and internet users are not able to see a difference between an opinion and just news or informative content."

The Safe Elections site aims to help voters draw that line. But when I ask Grzegorz Rzeczkowski and other colleagues if they've heard of the website, I am met with blank stares. Zagórski admits he wished it performed better during the local elections. "There haven't been too many visits," he says, but "it's rather an investment for the future." Zagórski says the site will be maintained for upcoming elections; spreading awareness among ordinary citizens all the way to the zenith of the political pyramid is his Ministry's first priority. He understands that educational campaigns "need to target [everyone].

They need to be massive actions which are very expensive and they need to be permanent."

But Zagórski realizes such efforts' limits: "We can put things on the internet for finding fake news, but the demand shapes the supply. If people are likely to fall for this kind of information … it could lead to destabilizing whole countries and societies." So the Ministry of Digital Affairs—responsible for the civilian and business sectors of Poland's counter-disinformation activities—works with the Ministry of Defense and the Polish intelligence services, responsible for national security issues and public administration, in order to mount a multipronged effort to counter "our Russian friends." Here, Zagórski is lighter on details but mentions that the bodies coordinate their monitoring activities and all feed into joint projects like the Safe Elections website. The Ministry also oversees NASK, the research institution that assisted with the Safe Elections project. It supports the Ministry's research agenda as well as provides cybersecurity expertise to government and the private sector.

What critics are unsure about, however, is the independence of such initiatives given the perceived politicization of the Ministry. Wojciech Kość, the journalist from opposition outlet OKO Press, was satisfied with the Safe Elections website and the work that NASK and the Ministry have done to raise awareness about the threat of Russian disinformation since 2018. But he worries about their independence and wonders how much influence PiS has on their editorial integrity and their work with social media platforms to counter Russian information operations. "Why would [PiS] not be tempted to influence [these efforts] especially with what they did to public media?" he asks. "Why would they be serious in countering disinformation when they do it themselves?"

Zagórski is aware of these criticisms, it seems. He is careful when he talks about the government's efforts to restore pro-PiS content that

has been removed from social media platforms and does not mention Adam Andruszkiewicz, the right-wing deputy minister who was appointed to lead the charge. "There have been many complaints from both right-wing media and groups about the fact that platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, often block their content," he says, calling the ongoing struggle over content moderation a "side note" to our discussion about disinformation. But it is hardly tangential to our conversation. In Estonia, in Georgia, here in Poland, and beyond, the most credible disinformation is delivered by trustworthy local actors, whether wittingly or not; discussions about whether or how to moderate those local voices are critical to the wider response, particularly when the government is spearheading them.

Zagórski reports that Poland is "the first country globally to introduce a contact point which is the official way to appeal against Facebook's decisions" to remove content. The Ministry set up an online form through which people can file complaints; Facebook's office in Warsaw analyzes and processes the requests within seventy-two hours. So far, Zagórski says the form has fielded a few hundred requests, over 50 percent of which have resulted in Facebook reversing their initial content moderation decision. Zagórski and others I've spoken to this week have only mentioned conservative or right-wing groups involvement in these efforts, and I'm wondering if, like his colleagues in the MFA and Chancellery, Zagórski recognizes the obstacle that political polarization has created to Poland's nascent fight against disinformation.

"Yeah," he answers quietly, in English, before switching back to Polish.

> Polarization means that people stick to their views more and more and won't budge an inch. This leads to increasing tension every minute. If you belong to one of the sides, you are more willing to

> accept content that matches your views … It's easier to reach such people to get their attention, especially if you publish something totally fake. It has been seen on both sides, many examples of it. This … leads to increased radicalization. Education is, in fact, the only thing [to be done about it].

I can't agree there; education is undoubtedly vital, but pushing for greater media freedom and a pledge to commit to democratic communications tactics—not those that mimic the Russian playbook, parroting conspiracy theories and exploiting societal divisions—would go a long way toward decreasing polarization and increasing trust in government and media throughout the country, making it more resilient to foreign interference. It has taken me three years to decide how to accurately describe Poland's information environment and the challenges it faces fighting disinformation, both foreign and domestic. By 2019, it is clear that Poland could be doing worse; over the past three years, it has set up projects and working groups to build awareness of and share information about the threat. Their utility, however, is ultimately undermined by the fact that the Law and Justice government cannot recognize that by weaponizing conspiracy theories and choking the editorial independence of the public broadcaster, it has deepened societal divisions and thus given Russia an upper hand. In short, Poland has become self-aware, but not self-critical; it can describe the problem as well as any expert but cannot see where its roots lie.

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Later that day, I meet Łukasz Wielocha once again. After our conversation at the Chancellery of the Prime Minister earlier in the week, he invited me to join him to commemorate Godzina W, the "W Hour," when on August 1, at five o'clock in the afternoon, all of Warsaw stops to mark the moment when the Warsaw Uprising began. We walk

from the Chancellery to Rondo Charles de Gaulle, where two of the city's main streets intersect. A statue of the former French leader and an artificial palm tree, a monument to the city's lost Jewish population, mark the roundabout, which is surrounded by several popular bars. On the way, Łukasz tells me how this day has changed during his lifetime. He used to commemorate the anniversary with his grandparents, survivors of the Uprising, at a cemetery. It was a dignified, quiet event. The whole city certainly didn't stop to mark the occasion.

Today, at five o'clock, police block the main thoroughfares. Everyone at the roundabout faces the center of the city, where the Palace of Science and Culture, a Soviet monolith that was Stalin's "gift" to the newly communist city as it rebuilt after the Second World War, towers above the skyline. Hats come off. Flares are lit. A lone, loud siren—the signal that started the uprising—wails. It is moving, but complex to witness. In recent years, not only has the day become commercialized—you, too, can buy your Home Army arm band at kiosks in the city's underground passageways—but far-right groups have claimed the commemoration as their own, glorifying the Warsaw Uprising as a reason to defend Poland's conservatism. Politicians use it for political gain. Like the tragedy in Smolensk, an event that ought to unite Poles has become charged, simmering with the misgivings and rifts that are now characteristic of Poland. Some in the government recognize and strive against them, but without an understanding of what caused them in the first place, repairing them in hopes of countering disinformation from inside and outside of Poland will be extraordinarily challenging, if not impossible.

A few weeks earlier, at home in Washington, DC, President Trump held his first politicized Independence Day celebration, complete with armored military vehicles on the National Mall and a speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, during which the President uttered confusing falsehoods. A typically jubilant day, in

which people across the political spectrum gathered to celebrate a love for and pride in their country, was marred by political spectacle. Like Poland, the US government has also been slow to mobilize its resources against the threat of Russian disinformation, but in contrast, not everyone at home acknowledges that threat.

When I leave Warsaw, although I worry that Poland's near-sightedness is leaving it extremely vulnerable, I recognize that even today's Polish government, built on a decade of conspiracy, is in a better position to protect itself from disinformation than the United States.

5

Ukraine: Dutch Disinformation

It's November 1, 2016, and I'm sitting in the darkened room that constitutes the Press Service of Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). I have been living in Kyiv for two months. Under the auspices of the Fulbright Public Policy Fellowship, part of the storied exchange program that sends Americans abroad and foreigners to the States in order to build mutual understanding, I am one of a group of twenty or so energetic minds sent to government ministries in foreign policy hotspots for an exchange of experience and expertise.

In that spirit, my colleagues organize an after-work party for a uniquely American holiday: Halloween. We're gathered around the office coffee table, plunked down in aging maroon sofas, holding wine in plastic cups, and nibbling at a spread of fruit, cheese, cured meats, and chocolate. A jack-o'-lantern glows on the table. As seems to be inevitable at social gatherings in Ukraine, the conversation swiftly evolves from lighthearted chitchat to a somber philosophical debate. I precipitate this one, innocently asking my colleagues about their experiences on the Maidan two years earlier, when popular protests seized Ukraine's capital for months, causing the country's corrupt president to flee to Russia, bringing about a fresh round of elections and a new urgency to reform.

The only man in our small team of women describes how he felt obligated to walk the youngest member of the team home through the square one night after the protests became violent, worried that she would get caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Another colleague who has worked in the press service for nearly twenty years saw friends injured and killed on Maidan when pro-government forces opened fire on the protestors in February 2014. These are young people, the oldest among them no more than forty-five, and they have already experienced more upheaval, unrest, and violence than many Westerners will in their lifetimes. Visitors to the Ministry—including the many Westerners in charge of aid to the budding democracy—are confronted with this reality when they walk through the marble columns of its atrium to the vaulted lobby, where photographs of the Maidan protests hang next to the elevators. One picture shows a smiling protestor, draped in Ukrainian and EU flags and wearing a hard hat with a sign that says in Ukrainian: "People: you are amazing!"

It might sound corny, but this is the spirit that keeps my colleagues coming to work every day. They are understaffed, underfunded, and competing against Russia, a government with seemingly unlimited funding and few moral scruples, to set the record straight about Ukraine. As public servants, they make a few hundred dollars a month, at most. They deal with arcane bureaucratic procedures—legacies of the Soviet Union that would literally take an Act of Parliament to change—in order to obtain clearances on the information they push out. But pride in their country and a belief they can contribute to its future in the West drive their commitments to their often bureaucratic, tedious work.

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Dmytro Kuleba embodies that pride and belief as one of Ukraine's fiercest international advocates. In 2016, when I got to Kyiv, he

seemed to be a towering figure in the world of Ukrainian diplomacy. Having joined the MFA in 2004 as the legal division's third secretary—the diplomatic bottom rung—he was sent to Vienna as part of the team representing Ukraine at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. He rocketed through the ranks and was running a department within a decade, later becoming an advisor to the prime minister. And after Ukraine's 2013–2014 "Revolution of Dignity" that deposed corrupt President Viktor Yanukovich and ushered in a fresh, digitally focused style of politics and diplomacy, the new foreign minister appointed Kuleba Ambassador-at-Large for Strategic Communications; Ukraine was going to need someone to tell its story to the world. Kuleba, thirty-three at the time of his appointment, became Ukraine's young, smiling, digitally savvy, bespectacled chief storyteller.

I "meet" Kuleba for the first time on Skype in 2018, two years after I had first heard his name reverently invoked in the halls of Ukraine's MFA as the man to consult and cooperate with on any and all matters related to Russian disinformation. In 2016, by the time I was in residence at the Press Service, Kuleba had departed for Strasbourg, where he was Ukraine's representative to the Council of Europe but was still involved in the MFA's strategic communications efforts. Earlier that year, he had endured what he told me was "the first and biggest loss I have suffered in my career:"[1] Ukraine's ill-fated attempt to quash a 2016 referendum in the Netherlands that threatened to jeopardize Kyiv's Association Agreement with the EU. The agreement was not an ordinary diplomatic document; it was a symbol that represented Ukraine's European aspirations. President Yanukovych's decision not to sign it in 2014 triggered the protests on the Maidan that my colleagues and thousands of others attended. It was a document for which Ukrainians gave their lives on the streets. Later, in support of that same goal, some would give their lives on

the battlefields of the Donbas, the eastern region of Ukraine that would go on to be occupied by Russia and the separatist forces that it supported.

Kuleba coordinated a characteristically Ukrainian effort—that is, one that enjoyed little funding but had lots of heart—rallying a passionate group of Ukrainians in Amsterdam and Kyiv to try to change the Dutch mentality toward Ukraine through a public relations campaign, a mission that was likely always impossible. A colleague in the Foreign Ministry who was not prone to exaggeration told me one day over tea that their effort was "a disaster."

A disinformation campaign amplified on the fringes of Dutch politics and the pages of Russian propaganda—the predecessor to Russian involvement in Brexit and the US presidential election—made sure it was.

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Ukraine was no stranger to dealing with the so-called fake news phenomenon; to some extent, the beleaguered term itself was popularized there during the Euromaidan protests, when a group of journalism professors and their students formed "StopFake News," a fact-checking initiative that sought to debunk Russian disinformation about the ongoing popular protests, the new government, and the political renaissance Ukrainians had ushered in. The Internet Research Agency, the infamous St. Petersburg troll factory that would change the discourse in the 2016 US election using inauthentic accounts, misleading memes, and the mobilization of discontent, tested its tactics in Ukraine before using them on Americans.[2] And of course, Ukrainians were well acquainted with Russian tactics from decades spent under Soviet rule. They regard every statement that politicians or media outlets make with a healthy serving of skepticism, an integral part of the post-Soviet news diet.

Ukrainians were savvier than their Dutch counterparts about the unfounded stories claiming that their country was full of terrorists who shouldn't be closely associated with democratic Europe, but they were scenery, not actors in the Russian-directed spectacle that was the referendum. A seemingly harmless 2015 law allowed Dutch citizens to call a nationwide vote on most matters under parliament's consideration, so long as they gathered a certain threshold of signatures. For the publishers and followers of the anti-EU blog *GeenStijl*—in English, "*No Style*," a reference to the group's disregard for what is acceptable political behavior—as well as provocateurs on the left and right of Dutch politics, this was an important opportunity. For years, they had been searching for a way to mobilize against the EU. Now they had found a way to conduct a sort of plebiscite on European integration by turning a tool of direct democracy into a populist weapon. They aimed to influence the Dutch parliament's vote on ratifying an Association Agreement with Ukraine, which would deepen trade ties and cooperation between Ukraine and the EU, and in theory incentivized Kyiv to clean up its act by adopting Western regulations for doing business in Europe.

But in Ukraine, the Association Agreement was more than just a few hundred pieces of paper slowly making their way through the inscrutable EU bureaucracy. Alina Frolova, a public relations professional who joined the group of Ukrainians Kuleba rallied in his pro-Ukraine public relations campaign, tells me it was the first step on a pathway to Europe and a dream for which many Ukrainians were willing to risk their lives. The cold practicality with which Ukrainians are willing to endanger themselves in the face of a threat to their budding democracy is still something that shocks me, even after having lived and worked there. Frolova, who is dressed in a crisp, modern suit, has spiky bleached-blonde hair, red lips, and

quirky jewelry. She seems miles away from conflict and death in the corner fishbowl office of her plush PR firm. But the Maidan ethos that fueled her and many other Ukrainians to push back against the Dutch referendum on their EU Association Agreement continues to fuel their work today.

After former President Yanukovych reneged on his promise to sign the agreement and instead chose to pursue closer ties with Russia, thousands flooded Kyiv's main square in the dead of winter, ultimately causing Yanukovych to flee to Russia and launching a new era of "dignity" in Ukrainian politics. Showing up to protest night after night—or even occupying the square around the clock, as many did—wasn't a decision Frolova or her fellow protestors took lightly. "Especially in the beginning, most Europeans were thinking we were fighting for entry into the EU," but the protests and years of work that followed meant more, she says.[3] "We were fighting for our own freedom … It was a decision for everyone whether we stay there under the shooting," on the Maidan, where over 100 protestors were killed when the Yanukovych government opened fire in an attempt to disperse the movement. It was a pivotal moment. "We clearly understood that that was it, either you stay [on the square] for these freedoms and you die, or you go. And for us these values became very important in life." In so-called old Europe, which has enjoyed an era of peace and prosperity since the Second World War, these values seem to have been misplaced.

The Dutch will tell you they didn't forget about freedom; the 2017 referendum just offered them a different variety. In the Netherlands, for *No Style* and its fellow travelers, attempting to put down Ukraine's Association Agreement was not about democratic freedoms embroiled in protest and strife. It was about freedom from the EU, which impinged on the free-spirited Dutch way of life. It was a convenient issue that a wide range of EU-skeptics on both the right

and left of Dutch politics could use to demonstrate their commitment to the anti-EU project ahead of a contested parliamentary election. The Kremlin, ever seeking to exploit societal fissures, especially those that undermine the West, seems to have helped the campaign along, just as it would in the United States later that year.

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I meet one of the "no" campaign's most active adherents, Harry van Bommel, a former Dutch parliamentarian and member of the Socialist Party, on a brisk November day in an Amsterdam suburb in 2017. Like many Dutch people, he's tall and fair. His light, thinning hair flops in the blustery wind. Van Bommel turns up to our meeting in a leather jacket; he says he plans to go for a motorcycle ride later. As we walk to a cafe in a nearby shopping mall, children in Renaissance costumes and blackface fling candy and gingerbread at us. Van Bommel notices the bewildered look on my face and nonchalantly explains the Dutch tradition of children dressing up as *Zwarte Piet* or "Black Pete," Santa Claus's Moorish helper who arrives in the Netherlands to usher in the Christmas season.

We find a table at the shopping mall cafe and order coffee while more costumed kids whiz through, shrieking as they make their way to the street. They are compounding my nervous energy; the vehemently anti-Ukraine, anti-Europe attitude I've encountered in the Netherlands so far has astounded me. While I was on a tour of the city center the previous day, I told my college-aged tour guide (who seemed rather stoned, unsurprisingly for Amsterdam) why I was visiting. He immediately dropped his easygoing demeanor and animatedly explained all the reasons he felt Ukraine did not belong in Europe.

If a tour guide reacted that way, I worried what this interview had in store. Van Bommel was one of the most visible "no"

campaigners, and his reputation among the Ukraine crowd is one of an evil mastermind; most mention him by name when discussing the referendum. He was interviewed in most news coverage about it, spouting lines that could have been aired on any state-funded Russian television network. "With this treaty," Van Bommel wrote in 2016 for the news site *Joop.NL*, "far from banishing corruption from Ukraine, we'll be bringing it into the EU."[4] A *New York Times* piece about his contribution to the campaign asserted that he used Russian citizens posing as Ukrainians to boost his group's legitimacy. As I set up the interview, I worried that he wouldn't treat someone who had worked as a special advisor to the Ukrainian government too kindly.

Van Bommel's reputation in the Netherlands precedes him. Twelve years earlier, while he was leader of the Socialist Party, he had been an active campaigner against the adoption of the EU Constitution in Holland. ("People blamed me personally for being in the same boat as fascists … but, you know, sometimes people for the wrong reasons come to the right conclusions,"[5] he said of the constitutional referendum, which the Netherlands rejected in another show of disdain for the EU.) The early organizers of the anti–Association Agreement referendum more than a decade later felt they needed just such an anti-EU firebrand involved in their campaign, so they "came to Parliament to hear [Van Bommel's] opinion about the referendum, the [Association Agreement] treaty … [and] for advice on how to get public interest, how to start a campaign." He wasn't, Van Bommel cautions, involved with the far-right campaigners from *GeenStijl*, although "they drew far more attention … some people even called it a *GeenStijl* referendum."

Still, his opposition to Ukraine's Association Agreement, even today, more than eighteen months later, is unmistakable. "This is the most comprehensive association treaty" ever put forward, he says. "This is not just about association, it's about getting a country ready

for a next step … One could actually see it as a new phase in the enlargement process of the EU," and that enlargement—particularly in Ukraine's case—is something Van Bommel vehemently opposes. Unlike many Europeans with preconceived opinions about the country, Van Bommel has actually been to Ukraine. He traveled there first in 1999, he says, when he first noticed a "difference in orientation" between two halves of the country. He compares ethnic Ukrainians, who in his view wanted to be associated with Europe, with ethnic Russians, who wanted closer integration with Russia. "This whole difference of opinion … eventually led to hostilities in the country itself," Van Bommel adds. He conveniently omits that the Russian Federation—not ethnic Russians or Russian sympathizers in Ukraine—illegally annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula in 2014, provided the missile that shot down passenger airliner MH17, which was filled with Dutch citizens, and continues to this day to finance forces that occupy Ukraine's Donbas region, where Europe's only hot war claims lives on a weekly basis. Still, Ukraine's security situation clearly makes him uneasy. "If you want them to join your club, your league of nations, you have to have some security as a guarantee."

Van Bommel's apprehension about admitting a country with an open conflict into the EU would be understandable if the Association Agreement dealt at all with security measures or assurances. It does not; it focuses entirely on economic and trade issues. And Van Bommel has more talking points that would be curiously at home on a Russian television network for these topics, too. "The treaty, as it was presented, was to make trade easier and enhance the volume of trade between Ukraine and the EU. In Ukraine, the system is not *affected* by corruption. Corruption *is* the system. Therefore doing business with Ukraine would automatically mean that our companies would have to get involved [in corruption]." Bringing European

standards of doing business to Ukraine wasn't necessary, Van Bommel added—the EU was already investing in anti-corruption programs there.

Armed with a narrative about how Ukraine would bring conflict and corruption to the Netherlands' orderly society, only one thing was missing from Van Bommel's campaign: a Ukrainian. "We only needed one face to publish in our magazine, in our leaflets." He identified Elena Plotnikova, a Ukrainian citizen who had been living in the Netherlands for years, to be just such a face. "Look," he tells me, completely unapologetically, "we found a Ukrainian who is not completely stupid and against the treaty, so the idea that everybody in Ukraine wants this treaty is nonsense." Plotnikova became the Netherlands' more active, more vocal, more witting Ryan Clayton.

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Back in Kyiv, once the movement for the referendum gathered the 300,000 signatures necessary to hold the vote, Ukraine's Dmytro Kuleba became alarmed. As the signature-gathering campaign had gained steam, he received "messages from official [Dutch] partners that we shouldn't be concerned, that it's not something serious, that it wouldn't happen. The Dutch government underestimated the threat at that moment, and the … emotional temperature of society." About six weeks before the referendum was due to take place, polls began to reveal some "very unpleasant things," according to Alina Frolova: the sentiments expressed by figures like Van Bommel were starting to take hold in society.

Russian-backed media in the Netherlands, including the Dutch versions of Kremlin-funded propaganda networks RT and Sputnik, began pushing out anti-Ukraine narratives to provide fodder for the campaign. The *GeinStijl* blog, which led the campaign, greedily lapped them up. It distributed videos and text describing corrupt

Ukraine, where politicians were "lynched" in parliament; claimed that Ukraine shot down Malaysian airliner MH17; warned that Ukraine would require EU financial support; and asserted that Ukraine might even require EU troops to defend its borders, should the Association Agreement be approved.

A March 2016 poll showed that awareness about the referendum was growing, a startling indicator for the Dutch government and its Ukrainian partners, who knew that if turnout were under 30 percent, parliament could disregard the referendum's result. The poll also showed that 30 percent of Dutch voters self-reported that they had no knowledge at all of the Association Agreement or what it contained. Among likely voters, the "no" camp was growing and the "yes" camp was shrinking. They listed three reasons to vote against the agreement: 61 percent viewed Ukraine as a "corrupt land," 46 percent saw no benefits to the agreement, and 43 percent planned to vote against it because the agreement brought Ukraine's accession to the EU closer.[6] In Kyiv, panic set in. "We needed to do something," Frolova tells me. "We have one and a half months [to go] and nothing prepared but figures." Kuleba, with an acerbic smirk, says that as Ambassador-at-Large for Strategic Communications, he had "the honor and pleasure of being entrusted with this challenging and exciting task."

But any campaign Kyiv launched would be limited. Campaign laws in the Netherlands meant the Ukrainian government's participation was curtailed, and, moreover, the Dutch government viewed the "yes" campaign as their project, not Ukraine's. Kyiv could only focus on promoting a positive image of Ukraine through cultural ties, not responding to the "no" campaign's disinformation or mischaracterization of Ukraine or the agreement. And it had to do it all in coordination with the Dutch leadership, which had been reluctant to push too hard on the referendum question. Kuleba

recognized that the Dutch government "had to play first violin" but laments the structure in retrospect. "I don't think any political strategist would agree to become part of such a [campaign.] You can't even design a strategy that you can [use to] win with because you are part of somebody else's strategy." At the time, Dutch politicians were also quite open about the fact that, with a parliamentary election approaching, they didn't want to risk being too vocal about an issue the Dutch people found so distasteful.[7] It could affect their approval ratings.

Kyiv was also limited by its knowledge of the Netherlands. "Imagine you have to run an electoral campaign abroad," says Kuleba. "That's exactly what we had to do. Impossible to do in a short period of time." And even with reliable knowledge of Dutch political behaviors and full editorial and legal license to run the "yes" campaign of Ukraine's dreams, the government would still have been stymied. With a hot war being fought in the east and an administration still trying to dig itself out of the economic disaster zone created by the conflict, Ukraine had no money to launch a flashy effort. Instead, Kuleba solicited input from within Ukraine's robust civil society, business, creative, and nongovernmental sectors, and made his office within the MFA the nucleus of activity.

Among the contributors was Svitlana Zalishchuk, a former activist elected to parliament in the wave of political change that swept the country after Euromaidan. As an attractive young woman in Ukrainian politics who is not afraid to raise her voice, she's quite used to ugly rumors and disinformation being spread about her. Not long ago, after she made a speech at the United Nations, an online campaign appeared claiming she would run naked down Kyiv's main boulevard if the Ukrainian Army lost a key battle. It photoshopped her face onto a number of naked women's bodies or showed what

appeared to be her sunbathing in highly suggestive poses. The most repulsive and brazen of the memes replaced her mouth with a vulva. The campaign gained so much traction that Zalishchuk says a German reporter from a reputable newspaper once asked her if she had actually promised to run naked in the capital. The photos first appeared on pro-Russian message boards and websites; Zalishchuk suspects a Russian hand in the rumor.[8]

I meet Zalishchuk after dinner in a cafe in the heart of Kyiv in late October 2017. She's had a busy day; earlier she rescheduled our meeting because the authorities had detained and threatened the extradition of a Kazakh investigative blogger. Zalishchuk was lobbying for her release, which she later secured.[9] When I arrive, she's sitting in a back corner of the cafe, sipping tea and scrolling on her phone.

Zalishchuk's activism during the Netherlands referendum is well known within Ukrainian civil society; everyone I've spoken with about the event mentions her. In late March 2016, when all the polls began to indicate a negative result for Ukraine, Zalishchuk says, she "knew she wanted to go there."[10] She wanted "to talk with people, to let them know what Ukrainians are thinking about and to give them arguments, to maybe work with their myths that have already been spread." As a Member of Parliament, she had connections with the Ukrainian embassy and the governing party in the Netherlands, which was leading the "yes" campaign. So without any funding source but her own pocket, and without an exact travel plan, she set out for the Netherlands. "When you feel that something important is there, you have to participate, and I'm an MP, you know, sitting in the committee for foreign affairs, so I kind of feel like this is my mandate: to be involved. To engage."

Zalishchuk engaged as much as she could. For about two weeks, she traveled around the country, speaking with as many Dutch voters as possible. She attended events, debates, film screenings, and conducted

old-fashioned canvassing in the streets, asking passersby, "Hey, are you going to vote in the referendum? Would you like to learn more about Ukraine?" Most people, she says, were pleasant, and she felt like she made a small shift in the country's understanding about Ukraine. Along with the Dutch Foreign Ministry, the Ukrainian campaign also engaged members of the Ukrainian diaspora in the Netherlands, including actress Victoria Koblenko, who took active part in the "yes" campaign, interviewing the Dutch and Ukrainian foreign ministers in public events on Dam Square.

But the efforts of individuals like Zalishchuk and Koblenko weren't enough. "We didn't have access … to most of the population," Zalishchuk remembers. "I talked to maybe thousands of people, but it was not meaningful." Her attempts to get on national television went nowhere; channels seemed not to be interested in Ukraine. And among her allies in the Dutch government, her activism was often overlooked. "I understood that even those leaders who were in favor [of ratifying the Association Agreement], they were not so much eager to … lobby, because of their [internal] political debate. [The referendum] was about electoral support" for the upcoming parliamentary vote, she noticed, just as Kuleba had.

Ukrainians attempted to get around this media and political blockade by activating their digital communicators. "There was a strong enthusiasm from the non-governmental sector" to create online content, Kuleba tells me. "Everything that was done was a result of huge enthusiasm and energy." Hundreds of Ukrainians from across civil society were creating content and talking points and sharing and coordinating their contributions in a Google group.

But the amount of material being produced soon became too much for one man with no budget to oversee. Kuleba called Alina Frolova for assistance in organizing and managing the many contributions that were flowing in from their countrymen. She did so under the umbrella

of a campaign called "Like.U" that sought to underscore Ukraine and the Netherlands' shared values and goals. Its logo—a Ukrainian trident stylized to look like a Dutch tulip—was accompanied by the slogan "More in common. More to share" and aimed not only to remind Dutch voters of commonalities between their countries, but also to inspire a positive feeling about "U(kraine)." They filmed and distributed a series of videos profiling Ukrainian expats in the Netherlands. "They were telling their story about why they were there," Frolova tells me, and "why they consider Ukraine and the Netherlands [to be] close nations."

Another arm of the Ukrainian effort created an online flash mob called "#TakIsJa!" The series title means "yes" in both Ukrainian and Dutch, as well as "This is Me" in Ukrainian. ("Ja" is also the word for "I.") The series aimed to gather 5,000 video messages from Ukrainians and members of the diaspora in the Netherlands to explain why the Dutch should vote yes. A teenage girl from Chernihiv, wearing a *vishivanka*, the embroidered shirt that is Ukraine's national dress, said, "We are proud to be Ukrainians, and we want to see our country independent, developed, and prosperous European country. Ukraine is Europe." Two of her young classmates held hands and declared, more simply, in rhythmic English: "I love my city! I love my country! Ukraine is a part of Europe! Vote for Ukraine!" A group of musicians interpreted the Dutch national anthem for the *bandura*, a Ukrainian stringed instrument. Celebrities also participated; Koblenko, the Dutch-Ukrainian actress, recorded a video, and Serhiy Zhadan, an internationally celebrated Ukrainian writer from the eastern city of Kharkiv, made an emotional appeal to Dutch viewers. "Europe is not just an abstraction. It is not just territory depicted on the map," he said, standing in front of a darkened stage. "It is millions of people, fates, and lives. People who have principles and are ready to defend those principles, in particular democracy, human rights, and justice … We need your support. We count on your wisdom and solidarity."

Despite their heartfelt requests and clever branding, the digital campaigns still struggled to gain traction. Zhadan's video was viewed only a few hundred times. Some of the more popular videos—including the *bandura* players and football fans—received tens of thousands of views. Before the referendum, the #TakIsJa Facebook page claimed to have reached 400,000 Dutch Facebook users and racked up 280,000 video views on Facebook and YouTube. Perhaps anticipating the result of the referendum, the organizers wrote: "Good relationships between nations and countries don't appear overnight. They can't suddenly arise thanks to government decisions and diplomatic protocols. For good relationships, we need to build human contacts."[11] Frolova's "Like.U" campaign had a similar outcome; only around 10 percent of viewers engaged with the series by clicking, commenting, liking, or sharing it on social media platforms. And because the referendum was approaching quickly, "we were trying to push everything in three weeks. We had too much content, so even with all the subscribers, the reach wasn't very big." In the end, without clickbait or sensationalism, armed only with positivity, the campaign only reached a few hundred thousand people in a country of more than 12 million registered voters.

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The barrage of content and lack of interest from Dutch politicians and media were not the campaign's only obstacle. Kuleba noticed a strange pattern: every time his team "publish[ed] a good piece on Ukraine, it [was] followed with [a piece] on corruption or killing stray dogs." Along with most of his countrymen, he strongly suspects Russia was directing this coverage, supporting the "no" campaign and figures like Van Bommel, who Kuleba says used talking points that "were nothing but a copy paste" of the Russian narrative. Other evidence went beyond mere suspicion.

On January 18, 2016, a video of six men in ski masks and military fatigues was uploaded to a brand new YouTube channel named "Patriot."[12] The men in the video claimed to be members of Ukraine's Azov Battalion, a far-right group with a wing that has since been labeled a "nationalist hate group" by the US State Department.[13] Brandishing assault rifles in a dark, bunker-like room with fake wood paneling and a dirt floor, the men rail against the Ukrainian government as the blue-and-yellow Ukrainian flag hangs behind them. They claim that those in power "call themselves national and democratic, [but are] showing their weakness" and that the ongoing referendum campaign in the Netherlands is an assault on Ukrainian independence. They will do everything necessary to make sure it does not go through, they say, including "activities on the territory of the Netherlands."

After speaking Ukrainian for nearly two minutes, another voice begins to speak in heavily accented English peppered with mistakes. "Dear Dutchmen!" the voice says.

> Don't you dare going against Ukraine. It will end very bad for you. We will bring chaos not only in your brains, but in your very homes. You will see to regret this. We will find you everywhere: in a movie, at work, in your bedroom, public transport. We have our guys in the Netherlands and they are ready to obey any order.

The video closes with the masked men declaring "glory to Ukraine"—an old nationalist catchphrase that had been repopularized since Euromaidan—while burning a Dutch flag.

The video gained some traction among Eurosceptics. Jan Roos, a popular Dutch columnist, wrote on Twitter: "Again armed Nazis from Ukraine threaten us with death because of the referendum. Fortunately, we are protected by the government. *cough*."[14] *No Style*, the blog behind the referendum campaign (called "*GeenPeil*" in Dutch) and one of the Netherlands' top ten news sites, dedicated

a whole post to the video. "Now it gets freaky," the article, entitled "WTF. Armed Ukrainians Threaten *GeenPeil*," begins. "Forget about the colonial CIA hoax that *GeenPeil* is being investigated for (non-existent) Russian connections. We have received a genuine threat video from the Ukrainian side."[15]

But the video was not genuine. Immediately after it was released, the Azov Battalion's leadership issued a video statement denouncing it. "This video is a pathetic provocation and poor-quality fake that has nothing to do with our battalion … Anyone who is familiar with weapons will see immediately the actors hold airsoft weapons," the Azov response stated. "Unlike these actors, Azov fighters are well-trained soldiers who will never hold weapons like the actors do in this cheap video."[16] A similar video depicting men in identical uniforms bearing automatic weapons and standing on the Dutch flag was released two weeks later.

Several days before the April 6 referendum, the open-source investigation team at Bellingcat, which was instrumental in establishing Russian culpability in the downing of passenger airliner MH17, exposed that the video was likely created and promoted by the infamous St. Petersburg "troll factory," the IRA.[17] The digital fingerprints of fakery were all over the upload. Bellingcat noticed that a network of accounts connected to the IRA amplified the video just minutes after its publication. Further, they noted that "the video, uploaded to a brand new YouTube channel and without any previous mentions online, would have been near impossible to find without searching for the video title. Thus, it is almost certain that … the troll network … is connected with the creation of this fake video."[18] Bellingcat also surmised that screenshots used in an attempt to "prove" the video originated with the official Azov Battalion YouTube channel were faked based on an analysis of the images, which show evidence of editing. Finally, Bellingcat found that the administrator of a site that

covered the release of the video was the same as the administrator of another shady site already confirmed to be run and curated from the troll factory. Together, the two fake videos garnered at least 100,000 views, in addition to the flood of professional propaganda spewing from Kremlin-sponsored outlets RT and Sputnik. Kuleba's team and their positive, feel-good contributions to the discourse could not stand a chance against the frightening promises of an imminent Ukrainian invasion.

Videos weren't the only form of disinformation during the referendum campaign, Kuleba recalls. "The Dutch have a beautiful tradition of electoral debates," he says, remembering several that he attended as the referendum neared. Kuleba noticed there "were these funny 'Ukrainians' there, holding meetings, speaking to the media, holding rallies, and complaining about the 'ugly Ukrainian state.'" But Kuleba had doubts about their identities or, at the very least, their loyalties. They seemed to "have nothing to do with Ukraine at all, and yet they spoke so emotionally and strongly about Ukraine and how they had to flee the 'massacre in Donbas by the Ukrainian government.' They were the talking heads which played a role" in public discourse around the referendum, says Kuleba, and they were attached to none other than Dutch Member of Parliament Harry van Bommel.

Kuleba's instincts seem to have been proven right; a *New York Times* investigation in early 2017 found that "the most active members of [Van Bommel's] Ukrainian team were actually from Russia, or from breakaway Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine, and parroted the Kremlin line."[19] One of Van Bommel's "Ukrainian team" was Elena Plotnikova, a Donetsk native who moved to the Netherlands in 2000, according to her public online presence. Her Facebook profiles (she has two: an older profile with the Russian spelling of her first name and a short-lived, disused profile with the Ukrainian spelling,

Olena) read like a ticker tape for Russian state-sponsored propaganda outlets RT and Sputnik. One of her favorite online pastimes is sharing conspiracy theories about why Ukraine, not Russia, is culpable for the downing of passenger airliner MH17, despite an international investigation that proved otherwise. On her Twitter profile, where she describes herself as a "Russian from Donetsk (used 2b Ukraine)," her avatar is the old Soviet hammer and sickle insignia. She often retweets an account that updates the Twittersphere about the conflict in the Donbas region from the "separatist" perspective. In 2013, during the early stages of the Euromaidan protests, she shared a post from Sputnik that read "Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has described the EU's reaction to the Ukrainian decision to reject an economic association agreement with the union as 'bordering on hysterical.'" She captioned the post with a winking emoji; perhaps she understood the irony of someone who had for over a decade enjoyed the benefits of life within the EU criticizing those who wanted to enjoy a similar quality of life.

For Van Bommel, Plotnikova was the perfect "not completely stupid" Ukrainian whom he could use as a prop. "We brought her to the stand and we had her interview for a magazine and for our leaflets because her Dutch is good which is helpful … She also did go if necessary on TV or radio." I requested an interview with Plotnikova through a direct message on Twitter. She declined, writing in response: "I am sorry, but I have read your work and I can tell you that you do not qualify as a journalist. Propagandist—yes, but journalism rests on objectivity and integrity you lack." When I asked her to identify what I've written that she would label propaganda, she never replied.

Let me be clear: Plotnikova was born in Ukraine, so her representation of herself as Ukrainian to Dutch voters was not entirely incorrect, just misleading. She self-identifies as a "*Russian*

from Donetsk," a description I've never heard anyone in Ukraine use. She lovingly shares pro-Russian propaganda as if it is her job. She recognized Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and welcomed the ascension of Russia-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine. And Plotnikova was one of the most active "no" campaigners, leading Dutch voters to believe the narrative of Ukraine as a country divided neatly down the middle into two parts: one more Russia-oriented and the other more Europe-oriented, just as Van Bommel described to me. What kind of person would bless an Association Agreement with a country that seemed to be locked in a bloody civil war?

Van Bommel, for his part, called the *New York Times* investigation into his "Ukrainian team" "fabricated." His biggest gripe with the article is that it seems to label two other Russian-born activists—a student and the director of a one-man think tank—as part of his team. Van Bommel maintains that their presence at his events was nothing suspicious. They were looking at the events page on his party's website, he says, and turning up where he was. "They know that where I would be there would be media, there would be a room full of people," so they followed him around. Van Bommel claims not to have coordinated with them, and as for his "Ukrainian team," he told the *Times* he didn't "check their passports." Columnist Bert Wagendorp of the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* wrote of the group: "Under the guidance of tour leader Uncle Harry, [Van Bommel's team] were selling snake oil to the people who came to their meetings. That is pretty hilarious; suddenly you also understand why Van Bommel put an end to his political career,"[20] referring to Van Bommel's decision not to seek reelection later that year.

Van Bommel admits the two Russian activists may have been influential. They "played a prominent role, they *tried* to play a prominent role," he says, correcting himself. They "were obviously well organized," he admits, "because they were there very often,

very often. But that's only two guys, and I don't see how they could have had anything near an important role in the debate or in public perspective or public opinion."

As of yet, there is no public evidence that Russia directed or financed these individual activists. But the Dutch security service placed special emphasis on Russia's malign activities in its 2017 annual report. "Russia revives traditional influence operations," reads the section headline. It continues, in an obvious nod to the referendum:

> The Russian intelligence services have their sights firmly set on the Netherlands … Their cyberattacks drew the most attention in 2016, but the Russians also still use intelligence officers to recruit human sources. There is a permanent presence of such agents in the Netherlands … Russia's espionage activities seek to influence decision-making processes, perceptions and public opinion. In this clandestine political influence, the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda plays an important role. This is an area in which Russia and its intelligence services have a long and colorful history, but the rise of the internet has made it far easier for them to extend their reach and the impact of this can be substantial. In the Netherlands, too, there are issues and processes where Russia has vested interest in the outcome and so may well resort to covert influence and manipulation.[21]

Kuleba sees the lack of public attribution to the campaign as part and parcel of the Russian influence playbook. "The most difficult thing was to catch Russia in hand," he says, clearly having made this speech many times. "This is the case with every attack they launch. You have all [the] reasons to believe it's Russian, you have indirect evidence, but the lack of hard evidence helps them manipulate and insist they have nothing to do with it." Kuleba is right; the Kremlin is famous for using non-state actors, including criminal hackers, pseudo-experts,

and nominally nongovernmental entities like the IRA, to maintain plausible deniability when confronted with its bad behavior.

The cast of characters around the referendum is beginning to look more suspect today. In 2018, after KGB defector Sergei Skripal and his daughter were poisoned in Salisbury, England, Bellingcat's open-source investigators uncovered something peculiar; the operatives involved in the poisoning had flown to the Netherlands two days after the vote concluded.[22] And the toolkit Russia employed in the referendum—misleading articles, fabricated videos, authentic local voices—was already activated in the United States, exploiting societal fissures ahead of the presidential election.

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In the end, Ukraine lost the referendum. The vote was held on a working day, and the weather was miserable. "If a person [did not] have this aggressive attitude" toward Ukraine, says Alina Frolova, the public relations specialist, "most of them just did not come." Turnout was 32 percent, just high enough to force parliament to officially consider the result, and it wasn't a pretty one: over 61 percent of voters rejected the agreement. "We failed," she tells me, flatly. A colleague in the MFA agreed; Ukraine's entire referendum campaign was a "disaster."

Kuleba remembers the day of the vote was "like a roller coaster. Until three or four in the afternoon, turnout was too low for the referendum [result] to be recognized, so we had hope." That hope was quashed when people voted on their way home from work. As the results came in and it was clear the campaign had been a failure, one Dutch colleague who had organized the civil society groups campaigning in support of the agreement sent Kuleba a text message that he says encapsulates Ukraine's experience with the campaign. "I'm sorry. You don't deserve it," it read. "But this is the Netherlands."

This is how disinformation—whether Russian or domestic, in the Netherlands or elsewhere—functions. It preys on real misgivings, fears, and societal fissures, and heightens emotion, ensuring that reason is overwhelmed. In his 2019 book *The War for Truth,* Kuleba writes about foreign actors' manipulation not only of the information space, but of social media platforms' complicity, and even participation in that manipulation. "The communicators of aggression and temptation know that sex, the internet, and drugs are one in the same. They're an intermediary between the human brain and the pleasure it seeks."[23] Speaking with me, Kuleba notes with an air of defeat that during the referendum, "emotions always prevailed . . . . It was uncommon for European political culture at that point. It's not so uncommon anymore."

Attempting to pin the blame for the widespread disinformation about Ukraine during the campaign squarely on Russia or on individual Dutch politicians and activists is futile because we know the best disinformation is usually grounded in kernels of visceral personal truth. How can you fight against the fear and protectionism that motivated voters who were so recently shocked by the unspeakable shoot-down of a passenger airliner filled with Dutch citizens? How can you work against the widespread feeling that a foreign country is being hindered, not helped, by the political grouping of which it is a part, one with which you and your country have worked for years to increase contact? And how do you do it from the seat of a government viewed as corrupt and mired in a bygone, antidemocratic era?

This—not the countering of a specific campaign of Russian or Dutch disinformation—was essentially the task before Kuleba and his team. Even Harry van Bommel admits the referendum was not about Ukraine itself; "it was about the position of Europe," he tells me. Despite the lies, the fabricated stories, and the warning signs of

Russian interference, "in general, people were voting with their guts," Van Bommel says.

I ask if there's anything else he'd like me to know before we wrap up. "Well, the whole debate on fake news," he begins, somewhat cautiously. I nod, encouraging him. "Fake news might be a new term but it has been there all the time throughout history." He mentions the fabricated intelligence about "Weapons of Mass Destruction" the United States used to justify the Iraq War: Touché. "So yeah, let's talk about fake news, but let's not act as if Russia invented fake news." I can't disagree, and really, it's the perfect encapsulation of how Russian disinformation works: take something that people are already mad about, pollute the information ecosystem, and get them so frustrated they start to distrust institutions and disengage.

As I end my conversation with Van Bommel, the sky darkens, the wind picks up, and a driving rain starts. Wearing the same grimace he had when describing Ukraine, a country he sees as corrupt at the core, Van Bommel sighs. "That means I can't ride my motorcycle," he complains and dashes out of the cafe into the downpour.

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Fortunately for Ukraine, the Dutch referendum was consultative, not binding, and through months of diplomatic maneuvering, the government was able to pressure the Dutch parliament to ratify the Association Agreement along with a signing statement meant to address the Dutch public's concerns. The statement said that the agreement "does not confer on Ukraine the status of a candidate country for accession to the Union, nor does it constitute a commitment to confer such status to Ukraine in the future." It also addressed the Dutch public's unfounded concerns about security, guaranteeing that the agreement "does not contain an obligation for the union or its member states to provide collective security

guarantees or other military aid or assistance to Ukraine."[24] It was a far less than celebratory outcome for a country that counts joining the EU among its greatest aspirations.

Outside of the halls of diplomacy, the effects of the anti-Ukrainian disinformation campaign on Dutch and European opinions about Ukraine were lasting; more than three years after the referendum, as I write this book, when I search "Ukraine Netherlands referendum" on YouTube, seven out of the top ten results are from Ruptly, a company with the slogan "news that expands views," owned by Russian propaganda network RT. No clever communications campaign or human appeal can change the fact that to this day, Russian disinformation is poisoning the global narrative about Ukraine's European aspirations, aided and abetted by unfeeling algorithms.

Whether we attribute the disinformation surrounding the referendum on Ukraine's EU Association Agreement in the Netherlands to the Russian Federation, Ukraine's campaign to counteract it is still a cautionary tale. Alina Frolova, whose communications agency expended so much volunteer time creating videos and graphics for the campaign, isn't sure if their effort mattered. In fact, she worries it may have been detrimental. "I think that it [made] things even worse because it [made] some noise, so I think that we increased the numbers. We cannot prove this, but we think that this kind of active information flow just increased the aggressiveness of those who were against [ratifying the agreement]." The materials Frolova and her team helped produce have no potential to correct the online record today, as the referendum begins to be relegated to history; the Like.U YouTube channel has been deleted, the content lost to memories of the few hundred thousand Dutch citizens who may have interacted with it. Videos from the "#TakIsJa" online flash mob are still scattered around YouTube and Facebook, quietly seeping desperation.

Despite the results of the referendum, former Member of Parliament Svitlana Zalishchuk still sees her participation as productive. She fondly recalls her conversations with Dutch citizens and feels certain that the impact she had on the image of Ukraine in their minds was positive. And the importance of organizing the "yes" campaign among civil society figures was integral, she says. The way information was exchanged and the amount of support the activists involved gave one another were "unique for Ukraine. We substituted the state function to some extent." It created a new model of cooperation for a sometimes dysfunctional and competitive activist class that has been called upon to a lesser degree as Ukraine seeks to gain international support in other fora.

Even Dmytro Kuleba finds the silver lining in what he dubbed the biggest loss of his career. "I am proud of … the scale of the project … the number of people, and how we found ways to manage this enthusiasm pouring at us from all corners." Kuleba contextualizes just how enormous this project was for Kyiv; according to him, it was "the biggest undertaking of this kind that Ukraine has taken since gaining independence in 1991. We never had this level of synergy between the government and non-government sectors, and we never had this focus on one specific issue on promoting Ukraine abroad. It was even bigger than 2012 promo campaign for Euro Cup … in [terms of] size and number of people involved compared to budget spent," he says, referencing the European soccer championship that Ukraine hosted jointly with Poland before the revolution.

He still recognizes they came up short, however, in communicating the limitations of their efforts to the Ukrainian population. "When we speak about the scale we can be proud. When we speak about the outcome, any PR professional would say 'you produced a ton of content'," but what happened to it? It was stifled by the restrictions of the government's involvement in the Dutch campaign and by

the political environment in the Netherlands itself. If he could have changed something, Kuleba says, he "would have invested more from the very beginning in explaining to the public [the campaign's] limitations." Ukrainians' expectations were too high. But Kuleba rejects the notion that the campaign was a "disaster" or that the government and its enthusiastic civil society partners should have left well enough alone. "We had no choice to get involved," he tells me. "Of that I am absolutely certain."

I sympathize. When faced with the challenge of telling your nation's story in a high-stakes environment that will determine its future chapters, how can the government's chief storyteller, its Ambassador-at-Large for Strategic Communications, shy away from the challenge?

In the same vein, however, there is a dangerous tendency among governments and civil society activists who are involved in countering disinformation to place undue stock in the magical powers of "StratComms," as strategic communications is often abbreviated. There is a fervent belief—one I witnessed in the halls of the MFA and in many subsequent conversations, conferences, and meetings on both sides of the Atlantic—that if the West could only tell a more compelling, more strategic, more coordinated story, we could grapple with state-sponsored disinformation like the content that Russia produces.

But this ignores realities of human nature and psychology. A press release, no matter how well written, cannot fully correct a salacious story. A fact-check, even if verified beyond a shadow of a doubt, will not convince a conspiracy theorist to give up his fervent speculations. In fact, since the 1970s, psychological studies have shown that when people hear false information and are later corrected, they are more likely to remember the false version of events than the truth. Today, warnings about untrustworthy information placed on malign or misleading social media content seem to make users more likely to

interact with the content but seem not to make them more cautious about what it says. For example, in the early days in Facebook's fight against "false news," as the company dubs the phenomenon, a Yale University study found that labeling content "disputed" on the platform had little effect on user behavior. The labels helped only 3.7 percent of those surveyed identify false stories. More worryingly, among supporters of President Trump and those under twenty-six, the study found that the flags did the opposite of their intended goal and made users more likely to *believe* the content. Finally, the study warned about a truly frightening problem of scale. In what it dubs the "Implied Truth Effect," the study found that users assumed unlabeled content was accurate, a nearly insurmountable obstacle in the endless flow of information that is today's internet.[25]

Kuleba, of course, is well aware of these challenges. I catch up with him in a Turkish restaurant on Kreshchatyk, Kyiv's sweeping main boulevard, almost exactly three years after the Netherlands referendum. His experience running the campaign clearly influenced him; he has spent his free time since 2016 writing a book about information warfare, after all. He signs a copy for me and walks me through its main arguments over coffee. What Ukraine has experienced in its fight for truth both at home and abroad is not unique, he says. But if we are to make progress in this battle, "we have to dare to speak openly about the use of technology by both the bad guys and the good guys."[26] It's not just people like Harry van Bommel or the employees in Putin's troll factory who aim to disorient populations that are ill-equipped to handle the modern information environment; media outlets and benign online "influencers" use the same tactics to get and keep attention. "The era of post-truth is gone," Kuleba says, referencing a term many academics and experts used to describe the disinformation phenomenon. "What you have now is a plurality of versions of the truth."

"Alternative facts, as we like to say in the States," I offer.

"It's far worse than alternative facts, far worse," Kuleba says, shaking his head. "From my perspective, I can say this is a fact and this is an alternative fact. But for the person who believes in alternative fact, it doesn't matter. This division only serves our ego and our self-perception … as educated, reasonable people who can see the difference. But as communicators and politicians"—and indeed, as gatekeepers of information, like social and traditional media platforms—"we always have to ask ourselves a question: how can we change people's perceptions?"

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A few weeks later, Ukraine holds its second presidential election since the Euromaidan protests. Political newcomer and comedy superstar Volodymyr Zelenskyy soundly defeats both incumbent President Petro Poroshenko and the overwhelming perception that fueled the "no" campaign in the Netherlands: that Ukraine is a country divided. Zelenskyy, a Russian-speaking Jew, wins 73 percent of the vote. More surprisingly, at least to those who believe Ukraine is a country of Ukrainians and Russians who are constantly searching for ways to undermine each other, Zelenskyy wins a majority of votes in all but one of Ukraine's regions.

In a campaign video, Zelenskyy dispels Harry van Bommel's understanding of Ukraine as a neo-fascist nation split between Russia and the West. "They divided us … but we are all Ukrainians … In the north, south, east, west and center … Ukrainian and Russian speakers … We are different, but so similar. We are uniting to move forward."[27] A vote for Zelenskyy was a vote against corruption, for honesty, for change, and for a commitment to Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic future. Nearly three quarters of Ukrainians chose that path, intrigued enough by the slogan "We're Doing It Together" and

advertisements that were produced with the same wit and pizzazz as Zelenskyy's comedy programs to reject the status quo. As an entertainer, Zelenskyy seems to be gifted with the ability to change perceptions that Kuleba wondered about, recognizing the necessity to speak to people in a way they can understand. In Zelenskyy's new government, Kuleba served as vice prime minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration, and later, was appointed foreign minister. Zalishchuk lost her parliamentary election but advised the Zelenskyy government's first prime minister on foreign policy. Frolova left her PR firm and serves as deputy minister of defense in the new government. Zelenskyy gave Ukrainians—a people that have been abused and neglected by many—a new, more hopeful story in which to believe. Learning from their experience in the Dutch referendum, this class of reformers hopes to do the same for Ukraine in the West.

6

Czech Republic: Fighting Lies Means Fighting Opinion

History is hard to escape in Prague.

It's 5:00 a.m. on a Friday and I'm catching an Uber to the airport after my third trip to the city this year. Today is a public holiday, "Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day," which marks the anniversary of the 1939 student revolt against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia that led to the storming of Prague University and execution of nine of its student leaders. It's also the anniversary of the demonstration thirty years later that began the Velvet Revolution and Czechoslovakia's ultimate rejection of communist rule.

My driver, Jiří, is chatty, despite the early hour and the somber occasion; he's an economics student trying to make some extra money while at university. "It's a great opportunity if you have a car," he says of his side job, "especially on a night like tonight." He has been up all night driving partiers who decided to mark today's public holiday with a night of drinking. "It's nice to finally have a passenger who can say a proper sentence," he jokes.

He wants to know what I think of Prague. The truth is that I didn't like it at first. Especially coming from Kyiv, it felt like an Eastern

European Disneyland, where men at stag parties in search of cheap beer and brothels kid themselves into thinking they got a taste of life behind the former Iron Curtain by staggering around Prague's historical center, blindingly drunk and seemingly unaware that this part of town hardly represents Prague's communist history. But as I returned and explored Prague's residential neighborhoods, I found myself growing more enamored of the pastel façades, fairytale parks, and art nouveau details despite my strange affinity for Soviet brutalist structures. "It took a while, but I really like it here now. Especially this area," I say to Jiří, as we stop at a light at the edge of Letná, where I've been staying.

"Most of the buildings here are older than your country!" Jiří says, incredulous that it wasn't love at first sight for his city and me. When he drops me off at the airport later, he neglects to end the trip and instead goes for a joy ride around town, charging me three times as much as what I would have otherwise paid. Jiří's economics degree is evidently working well for him.

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Prague's architecture is indeed a splendid reminder of a refined and dignified era. Well-preserved and striking, it sparkles on, trying hard to outshine the more recent, more gruesome past—one that's closer to Jiří's attempt to swindle me than any postcard-worthy building. Take the Czernin Palace, for example. Built in the seventeenth century, its domineering exterior looks out toward the spires of Prague Castle. The Czech Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is housed in a utilitarian Soviet structure tucked behind the stately old building, so as not to cause offense to the casual tourist. The palace itself is used for official diplomatic functions these days.

But the majestic façades of these buildings mask the uglier truths of their interior histories. Sixty years ago, the palace's third floor

was home to Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk. During the Nazi occupation, Masaryk, the son of the founder of modern Czechoslovakia, served as foreign minister in exile in London. In 1948, he found himself the only remaining noncommunist minister in the now-repatriated government. He was found below his bathroom window in the middle of the night on March 10; his death was described as an alleged suicide, though in actuality was a government hit job staged as such. Forty-three years later and two floors below, in a cavernous conference room, the Warsaw Pact—and the group of nations that served as the communist antidote to NATO and notably invaded Prague to put down the anti-communist Prague Spring protests in 1968—was officially dissolved.

The building occupied by the Ministry of Interior, too, has a history, and it's not lost on the attendees of the "StratCom Summit," a gathering of few hundred policymakers and activists from across Europe and the United States. It's May 2017, and I've come to the Ministry, just steps from Letná park, which boasts a stunning view of downtown Prague, an iconic beer garden, and a mean game of pétanque, to discuss Russian disinformation and how to fight it, because the Czech Republic was the first country to launch a response to Russia's meddling. It did so from inside these four walls. "It's grotesquely appropriate that we're here," says one participant, "since communist-era interrogations happened in this very building not too long ago."

Many in Prague's policy circles view Russia's meddling over the last ten years as a direct extension of Soviet influence, expanded and amplified by new technology. But when the Czech disinformation experience is compared with its similarly situated neighbors', the state's emergence as the leader of the so-called information warriors is unique. Estonia shares a border with Russia and is directly threatened by Russian cyber and physical warfare; Russia masses tanks along

its Western flank every few years in military exercises that conjure visions of the invasion of the Baltic States. Poland nervously watches as Russia moves heavy weaponry to its military exclave in Kaliningrad, not far from the northern city of Gdańsk. In Ukraine, war with Russia on both the physical and informational plane is a fact of life.

None of these governments established intelligence units tasked with countering Russian disinformation. And yet the Czechs, who face no direct military risk and only host several loud but not-extremely-influential websites sympathetic to the Russian narrative, boast the first governmental unit tasked with responding to the Russian "hybrid threat." The Czech Republic is a microcosm of the environment that the United States woke up in after the 2016 election. In the birth of Prague's disinformation response, including how the mandate for it emerged, who defined it, and why it came under fire from Czech political leadership, there is a map of one route forward to combating Russian disinformation, complete with competing interests, intrigue, and the pitfalls that come with being a pioneer in a controversial, high-stakes game.

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Several months before my conversation with Jiří, I was in Prague for the first time. It was bitterly cold and the sky was shrouded in gray; appropriate, I thought, since Donald Trump's inauguration was that weekend. Protests were planned across the United States and even in Prague. The extent of Russian influence over the US election—and perhaps even the Trump campaign itself—was becoming clearer and more worrisome with each day that passed in the young new year. Just a week earlier, BuzzFeed published the explosive and as-of-yet-unverified "Steele dossier," a set of reports commissioned by Trump's political opponents—beginning in the Republican Party, and eventually changing hands to the Democrats—that alleged the

president-elect and his team had deep ties to Russian intelligence services and that Russia had interfered in the US election to swing it in Trump's favor.

I flew to Prague to investigate a different, quieter, and certainly less newsworthy instance of Russian influence: what exactly the Kremlin was up to in the Czech Republic and how it inspired the creation of the West's first-ever government-level response to disinformation.

A few months earlier my Twitter feed had exploded as the Czech government announced it would create a center to counter so-called hybrid threats, including Russian disinformation. From my experiences in Kyiv—at that point only about ten weeks—I knew that even on the "front lines" of Russia's information war, turf battles, duplication, and waste were all too common. I was more than skeptical of new anti-fake news initiatives. I knew immediately that Prague was calling me.

While Czech President Miloš Zeman had toed the Kremlin line on Ukraine for months,[1] the country's Interior Minister Milan Chovanec was launching a counterpropaganda campaign. "We want to get into every smartphone" to fight Russian disinformation, said Chovanec, in a comment to *The Guardian* that echoed Big Brother more than Uncle Sam.[2]

I wanted to understand the creation of the new body, christened the "Center against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats," from a policy perspective; could it offer the United States a way forward as we began our fight against disinformation? A clue about the center's genesis was nearby, as I stood on a corner in Charles Square, pushing my hands deeper into the pockets of my winter coat. Behind me stood two columns housing electrical equipment. One was tagged with graffiti. On the other someone had simply spray-painted: "Fuck Islam."

It seemed thoroughly out of place in a country as homogenous as the Czech Republic. Most immigrants originate in nearby Slavic countries (including 117,000 Ukrainians in 2011, a number that is sure to have increased since the beginning of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine and the advent of visa-free travel regulations for Ukrainians to the EU) or the Balkans, with the notable exception being the country's large Vietnamese community.[3] While 15,000 Czechs listed their religion in the 2011 census as "Jedi Knight," the same survey identified only 11,000 Muslims in the country or 0.1 percent of the population (for comparison, Muslims make up 1.1 percent of the US population).[4]

And yet, as the perceived threat from the migration crisis burgeoned, there has been an indisputable rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric over the past several years; a search on the EU's database of disinformation turns up hundreds of fake or misleading stories from Czech outlets over its three years of data collection. Some of the most outlandish headlines claim that "due to migration, the number of rapes in Sweden has increased by 1000% in two years," "hundreds of thousands of Arabs are waiting for Czech citizenship and a social benefit of 21,000 CZK (about $1000) per month" and that "pork is disappearing from the German restaurants and school cafeterias to please Muslim refugees."[5]

Especially given the low percentage of Muslims in the Czech Republic, the narratives look ridiculous, but they are designed to exploit the prejudices and fears of the Czech population, just as the Internet Research Agency's anti-migrant posts around the 2016 election targeted voters who wanted then candidate Trump to "build the wall" to stem illegal immigration. In a March 2017 survey, the Czech Public Opinion Center measured 1000 citizens' attitudes toward different nationalities. Seventy-five percent of the population reported they "disliked somewhat" or "disliked very much" "Arabs." The survey also reports the proportion of the population that dislikes

"Arabs" has been growing steadily since 2014.[6] Disinformation outlets, or "alternative media" as their readers refer to them, sought to exploit and manipulate public opinion "to spread and generate fear and panic in society," according to a 2015 Ministry of Interior report on extremism.[7]

Several websites became hubs for Islamophobic disinformation, including Sputnik, the Russian government-funded news site, and Czech Republic–based websites *Aeronet, Parlamentní Listy, Svět Kolem Nás* (The World around Us), and no fewer than twenty smaller outlets. Unlike Sputnik, the provenance of the Czech websites is opaque.

Michael Colborne, a freelance journalist who researches disinformation and extremism in Europe, witnessed their campaigns "firsthand" while based in Prague. We became friends on Twitter through a shared interest in Russian disinformation. "What 'alternative' websites have done," he writes in a WhatsApp message, "is whip up more and more fear among the part of the population that reads those sites … There's a part of the Czech population that really believes all Muslims and Islam as a whole is a totalitarian ideology and there are conspiratorial plans afoot to Islamize their country."[8]

It was this disinformation, surrounding the migration crisis—not a pernicious pro-Putin narrative, or even influence campaigns of the type experienced during the Netherlands referendum or in Estonia's Bronze Soldier Crisis—that drove the Czech Republic's creation of the first government-level anti-disinformation task force in NATO or the EU. What gave birth to the Czech Republic's anti-Russian disinformation strategy was, quite simply, Islamophobia.

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A few days after I stopped to consider what "Fuck Islam" graffiti meant for a country with few Muslims and an almost religious reverence for pork, I met Dr. Benedikt Vangeli, the director of the

new Center for Terrorism and Hybrid Threats. Vangeli is broad and muscular, with a full head of dark, slicked back hair. He seemed uncomfortable in his full suit and, like the center he runs, which at that point had been operational for only three weeks, had a harried energy about him as he settled into his new responsibilities. He was about fifteen minutes late for our meeting due to some "urgent issues" that came up but quickly and perfunctorily launched into a description of the new unit. That I was one of many researchers who paraded through his office since the New Year was clear as he rattled off key moments in the Center's origin story: a national security audit conducted in 2016 concluded the Czech government needed to deal with so-called hybrid threats, a military term that had gained prominence since Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula and invasion and destabilization of Ukraine's Donbas region in 2014. Enter the Center, he told me. He seemed less than self-assured.[9]

And for good reason. The fight against "hybrid warfare" is not as simple as Vangeli made it out to be. Neither policymakers nor military strategists agree on a single definition of the concept. A 2010 US Army training circular defines it as "the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, and/or criminal elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects."[10] The EU and NATO's Center of Excellence tasked with countering hybrid threats, opened in 2017, calls hybrid warfare "the methods and tools used by individual state or non-state actors to enhance their own interests, strategies and goals" ranging from disinformation to disruption of energy supplies, cyber war, and traditional warfare.[11] In the 2016 audit that Vangeli referenced, the Czech Republic defined the concept as "a way to wage a confrontation or a conflict [that] represents a wide, complex, adaptable, and integrated combination of conventional and unconventional means, overt and covert activities,

characterized primarily by coercion and subversion, that are executed by military, paramilitary, and various civilian actors."[12] Hybrid warfare can essentially be anything and everything a government wishes it to be, causing difficulties for any who seek to combat it.

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With this opaque definition as a guiding principle, Vangeli and his team of twenty set off to "deal with the hybrid threat," as he put it. They follow what's going on in the media, including the narratives in purported disinformation outlets like *Aeronet* and *Parlamentní Listy*, and "do debunking on internal issues," like, he volunteered, "refugees."

The focus seemed strange to me, given the fanfare that has surrounded the Center's opening. "Czech Republic to fight 'fake news' with specialist unit," announced *The Guardian*.[13] *The Irish Times* wrote: "Czechs launch anti-propaganda unit with close eye on Russia."[14] Other than the Center's long and cumbersome official name, nowhere in the public fanfare was any emphasis placed on "hybrid threats" like Islamophobia.

This focus on Russia turned Czech President Miloš Zeman against the Center as well, despite having signed the measures to approve its creation and appointed the interior minister, a member of Zeman's political party. In addition to making a number of pro-Russian statements over the course of the year, he singled the Center out in his annual Christmas address, drawing on sensitivities from the not-so-distant communist era: "We do not need censorship, we do not need idea police," he said.[15] Zeman's commentary reflects the role history played in the debate surrounding the Center's opening. Czechs are loath to give up their hard-won right to free speech, which is what some assume the Center was doing with its efforts to "debunk internal disinformation."

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One of the Center's other prominent critics is Jaroslav Plesl, the editor of the second-largest Czech daily newspaper, *Dnes*. He's in his forties, handsome and tall, with white-blonde hair. An American friend who has lived in Prague since the 1990s suggested I meet with him, describing him as part of the class of freedom-loving journalists who came of age during the Velvet Revolution and now find themselves running the media in the country. Despite meeting in one of Prague's iconic coffeehouses, Plesl takes periodic hits from a squeeze tube of Korean coffee-flavored goo he brought along, bizarrely at odds with his otherwise carefully curated persona.[16]

"Russia has always been undermining" politics in Central and Eastern Europe, Plesl told me. "It's no different now." What changed, he said, was that the topic of Russian disinformation began to divide society. The Hybrid Threat Center's fact-checking mission didn't sit well with him or his readers; they believed it would amount to censorship. "People feel that fighting lies means fighting opinion," he said. Czechs didn't want to give up the democratic rights they had only recently regained. According to Plesl and his readers, disinformation itself would not destroy their freedoms, but initiatives like the Hybrid Threats Center might. "It will only [further] divide society and cause mistrust in democracy."

It's this lack of trust that Plesl wished the government would work on, instead of focusing on fact-checking, which he thought accomplished "the exact opposite" of what it is supposed to. "The Hybrid Threats Center is shooting itself in the foot," he said. And in the West, this push and pull between cracking down on falsehoods while maintaining freedom of expression has become the key inflection point in debates about battling disinformation through social media regulation.

A few months after meeting Plesl, I published research imploring governments to think more about the victims of disinformation, not

just its perpetrators. The paper drew in part from my conversation with Plesl. Czech colleagues were up in arms that I had even spoken to him. They told me he may as well have been on the Kremlin payroll, given his views on the Hybrid Threats Center and the ideas his newspaper pushed to readers they viewed as susceptible to disinformation.

But I couldn't square this argument with the parallel reckoning going on in the United States. After the 2016 election, I felt some guilt for "hiding" pro-Trump friends on Facebook rather than engaging with them. Like their Czech counterparts, Trump supporters' political views were based on lived experience and perception of their status as citizens in their country. In other words, these views are based on history, whether ancient or modern, individual or shared. And although the resultant views may be repugnant to the beholder, their origins are legitimate and deserve to be considered as governments do the difficult work of knitting nations back together.

With this post-election guilt weighing on me, when I returned to Prague a few months later and was connected with a member of the "alternative" media itself, I jumped at the opportunity to speak to him. The meeting didn't come without a warning shot from Jan Rychetský, an editor at *Parlamentní Listy*, one of the country's most notorious "alternative" outlets, where facts and fiction comingle in a melee all but indistinguishable to the untrained eye. Before we met, Rychetský sent me a host of links to his fairly balanced coverage of Russia and opposition movements in Ukraine. "Being a journalist in alternative media such as PL is not easy," he wrote in the email. In what seemed like a thinly veiled warning, he continued, "As you know, without any evidence we are for some people enemies."[17] I sent him a list of prepared questions, assured him I was coming with an open mind, and set our meeting for the next day at a hip and crowded coffeehouse, so our conversation would be one of many boisterous ones floating in the atmosphere that afternoon.

Rychetský arrived a bit early. If I hadn't Googled him, I might not have assumed this thoroughly ordinary-looking, middle-aged Czech man who had spent a few extra nights at his local beer hall represented a maligned "alternative" media outlet. He carried a hulking backpack and smiled throughout our conversation, apologetic over his halting English.

I asked Rychetský how he ended up at *Parlamentní Listy* and was surprised to find out he spent his whole career as a journalist, working for many different publications on both sides of the political spectrum. He doesn't worry about the more objectionable content posted on the website, because in addition to the curated content he and his colleagues produce, *Parlamentní Listy* allows individual users to post content with little to no oversight. "[It] is not a newspaper project," Rychetský told me. "It's like … a participation project. Something like a political Facebook." In all, only about 30 percent of the content is directed by the editorial board. The rest is user-generated; many Czech politicians pay to prominently place content on it. It publishes conspiracy theories, outright fakes, editorials that advocate for Zeman and Putin, as well as less objectionable content, where Rychetský feels his work falls.

I asked him about how *Parlamentní Listy*'s readership received the articles he forwarded me a day earlier. He laughs pitifully; they weren't so popular on the portal. "Lots of our readers admire Putin, because I think our readers admire authoritarian regimes." By feeding readers more of this conspiratorial content, supportive of Russia and critical of the West, the tabloid-style site maintains a growing readership, usually finding itself among the top ten most popular news portals in the country, clocking millions of visits per month (for comparison, the most popular news site, *Dnes*, Jaroslav Plesl's paper, has about ten times as many visitors).

Despite the site's popularity, Rychetský is still criticized for his coverage of anti-Putin figures. "In the comments, I'm a Bolshevik-Jew, I'm a neo-Nazi … I'm an agent of the USA, I'm an agent of Russia, maybe I'm not an agent of Bhutan … but I think I do my job very well," he asserted, because his critics can't quite settle on an angle from which to attack him. "I care about my articles and the people with whom I speak. Not the numbers, not the business side."

If Rychetský and the editorial staff at *Parlamentní Listy* feel slighted by the perception of their outlet, they don't do much to repel it. Months after I met him, the Czech version of Sputnik published an interview with Rychetský on his travels in Russia, titled "The Russia I Saw Is Not an Evil Empire at All."[18] Although he calls Putin an unquestionable authoritarian in the interview, he makes a curious assertion: in an act of self-determination, the Russian people have themselves chosen the form of "democratic authoritarianism" to which they are currently subject. Curiously, Rychetský doesn't mention the lack of competitive elections in the country. The very act of providing comment to Sputnik is also suspect; Rychetský may view the act as an attempt to inject reason into the realm of Russian disinformation, but even the most reasoned of experts should expect their words will be twisted by the notorious Russian propaganda outlet.

It's unlikely that Rychetský cares; even as we sat in a crowded Prague coffeehouse, where our fellow diners would have undoubtedly found his very presence repulsive, he wore the label given to his outlet by Czech intelligentsia with pride. "Sure, we are the cockroach from the Kremlin," he quipped. "But on the other side you have something very anti-Russian."

Rychetský feels this polarization, related to Russia and other hot-button issues, like migration, is harmful to discourse in Czech society. Near the end of our meeting, he eschewed the descriptor of "filter

bubbles" and instead compared attending an event organized by either side of a given debate to attending a heavy metal concert where everyone is friends, and everyone is banging their head along to the same beat. Leaning far into this metaphor, Rychetský flashed a "rock out" gesture and started to bop his head.

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Meanwhile, Ondrej Kundra, an investigative journalist at weekly news magazine *Respekt* who has researched the shadowy underworld of Czech alternative news sites, is at a different concert altogether. He is best known as a Kremlin-connection hunter, although you wouldn't guess it.[19] He is mild-mannered and soft-spoken. But his deep investigations into dirty Russian money in the Czech Republic reveal a grit and courage beneath his academic exterior. Despite threats to him and his family, he continues researching Russian connections to *Aeronet*, a site in the same class as *Parlamentní Listy*. His work has increased the notoriety of Russian influence among Czech intellectuals. Recently, Kundra found that *Aeronet's* bank accounts are registered to a disaffected citizen who can't withdraw money from them. An "expert computer hacker" asked him to act as a custodian on the accounts, and this hacker is the governing force behind *Aeronet*. Kundra suspects the hacker has Russian connections, although he "didn't find anything that look[ed] like a Russian source [of income]." Instead, he found "hundreds and hundreds of Czech citizens who are sending money every month to support Aeronet."[20]

These suspicions are enough for Kundra at the moment; only the Czech security services can truly confirm who is behind the alternative news sites. But it is clear he believes—and won't be surprised if it is confirmed—that Russia has a hand in disinforming Czech citizens. "Russian influence is not new," Kundra told me in his home office, on a hill high above downtown Prague, as we sipped herbal tea on a

cold November day in 2017. During the Prague Spring, when 200,000 troops and 2,000 tanks from the Soviet Union and members of the anti-NATO Warsaw Pact security structure invaded the capital in 1968 in response to ongoing reforms to create "socialism with a human face," protests broke out, killing and wounding hundreds. The Kremlin regained control of the city but decided it needed more eyes and ears on the ground in the Czechoslovak capital. It established its first "Rezidentura," or espionage residence, at its embassy in Prague, a convenient hub for its Eastern European sphere of influence. The structure remains in place today; that the Embassy to the Czech Republic is one of Russia's largest in the EU means they are keeping it well-populated, and not just with diplomats.

"[Russia has] many contacts here, and … they were partly successful in the sixties," Kundra told me. "The only thing in my eyes that has really changed is the way … they spread disinformation into the public." This explains his focus on the Czech alternative news sites; modern technology amplified the success of Russia's efforts. Lies that used to be printed in the thousands of copies can now reach views in the millions overnight and be fashioned to read like homegrown information. It makes Soviet propaganda look rudimentary, and this, according to Kundra and others, is a reason to fear it and to fight it.

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The next day, I visited Ben Vangeli at the Ministry of Interior for a second time. A perturbed security guard was skeptical of my presence; "Some American girl is here to see you," he said in Czech, phoning up to Vangeli's office, not realizing that between my Polish and Russian, I can understand basic Czech. Simona Lerchová, a stylish and apologetic young woman and recent Center hire, retrieved me from the foyer; the Hybrid Threats Center, nine months into its life, is now fully staffed and has hosted two international conferences, including the one I attended

in May. They have been working on joint projects with officials from the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western governments. The machinery of government seemed to be rolling along.

Vangeli confirmed my impression. He was clearly more at ease than at our first meeting, wearing a T-shirt and jeans and joking about the Center's remit. "We approached it with good Austro-Hungarian bureaucratic tradition; we got a task, and we fulfilled it," he said with a playful glint in his eye. I was a bit surprised; the passion and seriousness of the endeavor that characterize most Czech conversations involving Russia seemed to have disappeared. I asked him about the Center's origin story, and this new frankness continued. "Disinformation and propaganda have radicalized half of the population," Vangeli said, bluntly. "When you have a large [percentage of people] willing to behead and prosecute small children just because they are Arabs, you have a problem."

Vangeli admitted that unlike its eastern neighbors, the Czech Republic didn't have a major incident that led to the creation of the Center. According to him, "Even though it was not a real threat, it was a threat in terms of the media. We had to calm down the people." But he also allowed that in reality, the Czech Republic's troublesome Islamophobic rhetoric was a gateway to a wider swath of issues: disinformation "needed to become a security problem" to get people on their side and make headway on the issue.

I wanted to know more about the biggest struggles Vangeli and his team have faced, the accomplishments they were most proud of, and where they saw the Center going in the next few years. But Vangeli shrugged off these more probing questions. "Look," he said. "This isn't a story about me, or about us," gesturing toward Simona, who had been nodding along as her boss spoke. "This is a story about the [national security] audit"—the one that was responsible for the Center's creation. For Vangeli, this document—143 pages

of bureaucrat-speak, complete with an index of abbreviations that would make even the most seasoned Washington "swamp dwellers'" heads spin—is a triumph of will over slow-moving government structures. "We don't have new laws, we don't have new powers … the only difference is that we turned something that others are talking about all the time into actions," he said. And that action turned the Czech government into a leader in the fight against disinformation and hybrid warfare.

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At the heart of this fight is one man. Unlike Vangeli, he doesn't serve in the government. He doesn't even remember communist rule. He was born in 1990. As a child, he dreamed of becoming a professional baseball player. Now, Jakub Janda is the 29-year-old director of the European Values Think Tank, a group that was instrumental in the framing of the 2016 National Security Audit.[21]

The European Values office is a short tram ride up the hill from Prague Castle, in a low-ceilinged basement of a residential building-turned-office space. Despite meeting me at 9:00 a.m., Jakub was escorting another guest out the door. "Our military friends like early morning meetings, and I am in the National Guard, so I don't mind," he said with a boastful smile and a hand on my back, ushering me into the office.

This isn't unusual for him; Janda is king of the humble—and the not-so-humble—brag. It's something everyone who knows him acknowledges. *Respekt*'s investigative journalist Ondrej Kundra doesn't necessarily view this as a negative trait. "He wants to be a star," he told me. "He wants to be the most influential, he wants to be seen and recognized by [everyone]. And he loves working."

Jan Rychetský, the editor from controversial *Parlamentní Listy*, described his organization's relationship with European Values

as "like hate-ping-pong," yet he recognized Janda's effectiveness as a communicator and leader. European Values, he said, was full of "young tigers," and he wouldn't be surprised if Janda went into politics.[22]

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For himself, Janda has had an unusual career trajectory but views his path from baseball to Czech civil society as a natural one. He was playing semi-professionally on the Czech national team when he realized he wanted more for himself. "I wanted to be doing something real. I didn't want to be, you know, thirty-plus and have only sports and alcohol in my life." So he came back to Prague, started studying international relations and interning at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Janda wasn't happy with the opportunities for upward mobility there, either; "I realized that I would have to spend 20 years working my way up within the foreign service to do something real or start working on whatever I considered [important]." That all changed in 2011, his final year of university, when he attended a European Values event and later applied for an internship with the organization. European Values believes that a "free, safe and prosperous Czech Republic within Central Europe … is an integral part of the West."[23]

Janda quickly worked his way up the organizational ladder, assuming the role of deputy director within two years of joining the group full-time. He and former Director Radko Hokovsky were intent on expanding European Values' mission: "We wanted to be activists within the field of foreign and security policy, where we could be pushing stuff that we want, not only writing about it, not only being in the academic bubble, but basically pushing those issues on the political level." He recalled an interview he conducted with late Czech President Václav Havel, the playwright and dissident who

led the Charter 77 opposition organization and the so-called Velvet Revolution, the nonviolent dissolution of Czechoslovak ties with communism. "It was a strong inspirational moment for me," he said, indicating a portrait of Havel on the mantel, "because [Havel] was like, 'civil society needs to be pushing the politicians.'" And so Janda cast himself in his role as activist in the costume of a think-tanker.

For Janda's first few years at European Values, the group focused on migration and terrorism. It wasn't until Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea that they began to focus on Russia. "Almost nobody was present" in this arena, Janda recalled. "Obviously we knew that Russia was a threat … but we didn't have anything specific about what we should be doing about it." Janda began advocating for sanctioning Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine as well as vigorously supporting Ukrainian reform.

"But this was only public advocacy. It was only part of the game," Janda said. In a meandering autobiography, he tells me how European Values was "seeking for its soul." Eventually, he came to the realization that Russia was "not only about Ukraine or the Baltic States. We could see Russian influence spreading in Central Europe." It had been spreading for some time, Janda realized, "and we [were] very bad in responding to it in the West." Janda thought European Values was in a position to change the conversation, and, impatient no longer, the "Kremlin Watch" program was born in 2015.

This program began monitoring the Czech information space with the ultimate goal of raising awareness about Russian disinformation, "because there was almost no understanding in the Czech security institutions, media as well." Janda wanted to explain to his government that "[disinformation's] not just—if you'll excuse me—some bullshit on the internet. It's actually something that's important because if it's long enough, if it's massive enough," it can change public opinion in society.

Janda's passion—whether for the topic or his organization—was palpable while he told me his story, as it was every other time I interacted with him, whether via emails answered at lightning speed or at the European Values conference, where he seemed to be chairing every panel and interacting with every guest. But enthusiasm does not always make up for cold, hard facts, and it's notoriously difficult to prove that disinformation, no matter its provenance, affects an individual's views or voting behavior. Americans who wish to claim that "Russian interference" is a Democratic political tool to avoid taking responsibility for the party's election loss frequently employ this argument; more than a year after Donald Trump's inauguration, David Harsanyi asked in *The National Review*, "Has anyone yet produced a single voter who lost his free will during the 2016 election because he had a Twitter interaction with an employee of a St. Petersburg troll farm?"[24]

To fight this wave of skepticism, Janda's outfit produced a report on the "Impact of disinformation operations in the Czech Republic."[25] Using a survey of over 1000 respondents as its source, the report makes leaps between correlation and causation such as: "Despite limited US involvement in Syria, half of Czechs believe that the USA are responsible for Syrian refugees coming to Europe. Creating this impression is the obvious aim of the pro-Kremlin disinformation operations."

Certainly, creating the narrative that the United States is responsible for the refugee crisis benefits the Kremlin, but the report seems to assert that in this and other cases, the reader should have no doubt that disinformation, and not greater societal shifts such as declining trust in the European Union, is at fault for respondents' beliefs.[26] These beliefs are often exploited by Russia and other bad actors, but as I learned when speaking with skeptics like Plesl and

Rychetský, they are important to capture and explore, particularly in research marketed as academic.

Despite these academic shortcomings, after six months of producing weekly news summaries on the Kremlin-influence information space and holding closed roundtables and public debates, Janda was tapped by three government ministries—Interior, Defense, and Foreign Affairs—to be an external consultant on a chapter of the National Security Audit discussing the influence of foreign powers in the country. "We were one of the few who were working on this," he said with pride. "It's not about creating one major paper every half year, [the outreach] really needs to be systematic" to impact the course of policy in the country. And Janda is proud of being handed that role to play. It turns out he didn't need to work his way up the foreign service ladder at all; at twenty-seven, he had already exercised outsize influence in the underpinnings of a major foreign and domestic policy decision in his country.

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Janda was clear-eyed, however, when I asked what the galvanizing issue for the audit was. Was there something Russia did to awaken Czech bureaucracy in a call to arms? Not exactly. Like Vangeli, he said that migration was the reason for the audit. "The government needed a process that showed the public that it took security seriously. Maybe on migration, terrorism, but also on other issues, which the public didn't care about much, and still doesn't care about. To put it very pragmatically or opportunistically, the migration crisis actually helped the Czech Republic work on Russian disinformation." In opposition to the United States, Estonia, Ukraine, or Georgia, where Russia became a policy priority because of a directly Russian threat, in the Czech Republic it became a policy because Janda and others

detected Russian influence in the language of public fear of migration and terrorism.

This underlying theme is strongly present in the National Security Audit. Five of its ten chapters are directly related to the larger Czech Islamophobia problem. It is self-referential to a fault; to paraphrase, the authors of the audit assert that distasteful but otherwise understandable fears of migration and terrorism contribute to extremism. All three of these problems are weaponized by foreign powers in their influence game, and influence operations are part of the greater "hybrid threat" toolkit used by bad actors including Russia. The deployment of the hybrid warfare toolkit will, in turn, result in the "radicalization of the public" and "rise of extremist and anti-system attitudes (threatening Czech interests) within society and among political representatives."[27]

In evaluating the level of individual threats posed by foreign influence campaigns, the audit's authors refer to the European Values report with the same cherry-picked data relating to the prevalence of "alternative media," although they concede both a lack of reliable public opinion polling data on the issue and that "polls … regarding undemocratic governance alternatives do not show any major fluctuations of public opinion in recent years."[28]

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Despite this somewhat dubious framing, the 2016 Czech National Security Audit allowed the government a mandate to tackle a problem of which the general population was not keenly aware: namely, Russian influence. In addition to training programs for potential targets of foreign influence, such as diplomats and other government officials serving abroad, and a cursory section on media literacy programs in elementary and secondary schools, it recommended the establishment of "departments within relevant Government

institutions for the evaluation of disinformation campaigns and other manifestations of foreign power influence." And the Hybrid Threats Center with its far-reaching mandate of countering terrorism, hybrid threats, and disinformation of all stripes was born.

Among the Center's skeptics are eight Czech academics who published an open letter about European Values' research methods and the publications that served as the underpinning of the audit. They wrote that Janda's group "flood[ed] the public debate with a vast number of 'expert studies' characterized by interpretations strictly based on (neo-conservative) ideology."[29] Even hard data, they asserted, were subject to ideological interpretations. One of the authors of the statement, an assistant professor at one of Prague's leading universities, conveyed his shock that European Values often omitted data that inconveniently undermined their arguments from their publications in an article entitled "Countering Fake News … with Fake Expertise?"[30]

I was surprised to read these open criticisms. The community of anti-disinformation researchers and policymakers tends to have a fairly transparent "if you're not with us, you're against us" narrative. Criticisms of this type are leveled in hushed tones, preceded by "between you and me…," as those who have publicly expressed doubts about the efficacy of anti-disinformation programming or the provenance of supporting research have been derided as "Kremlin trolls" or "useful idiots."

Jan Daniel and Jakub Eberle, two young analysts at the Prague Institute for International Relations, are among this small group that publicly criticizes the seemingly sudden fascination with hybrid warfare in the Czech Republic. Daniel was a signatory of the open letter criticizing European Values' research methodology.[31]

"We are absolutely not disputing that Russia is [conducting] some influence operations," Daniel told me in November 2017, in the

open office he shares with Eberle, not far from Prague Castle. "But we are really uneasy with all the framing of these things in terms of hybrid warfare. Basically, you lump up intelligence operations and disinformation and put it all together in one package—"

"—one master plan, that is done just by Russia," Eberle finished, as he and Daniel would continue to do throughout the meeting. It was clear they spent a lot of their waking hours in close proximity.

Like most Czech intellectuals, Daniel and Eberle agreed that Russian influence operations have been active for decades, but they noted an understandable uptick in anti-Russian sentiments among the policy elite after the annexation of Crimea. It was then that "activists"—which, I was amused to find out, is how they refer to Kundra and Janda, who consider themselves journalists and think-tankers, respectively—began to exercise their influence on the policymaking debate out of concern that the Czech Republic would be dragged eastward if Russia were to deploy the hybrid tactics it used in Ukraine in Central Europe. Thanks to these "activists'" influence, the 2015 Czech Security Strategy included a section on hybrid warfare. The audit was still to come.

Daniel and Eberle began excitedly gesticulating as they described the buzz that built around hybrid warfare within the policy community throughout 2015, likening the growing anti-Russian coalition to a networking party that people attend out of obligation but stay when they realize there's something in it for them. By the time the audit began, this grouping became a veritable "party bus," with actors across Czech society—civil society, the media, the government—working in concert to create a comprehensive narrative and vocal political backing for countering the Russian hybrid threat.

But that strong political backing didn't last long. Less than a month before the Hybrid Threats Center, the crown jewel of the National Security Audit, was due to open, Czech President Miloš Zeman

unleashed a wave of acerbic and scandalous criticism on the entire counter-hybrid-threats sector in his annual televised Christmas address. Seated next to a Christmas tree decorated in the red, white, and blue of the Czech flag, the aging Zeman invoked recent Czech history, as Plesl and Rychetský did to me, claiming that the Center's activities would infringe on free speech. But he went further. "I would not like … a porn star to compile a list of unwanted [pro-Russian] websites" for the country, he said to millions of Czechs on Christmas Day, referring to an adult film in which European Values' Janda had performed six years earlier.

This climate, in which the government rejected its own innovative initiative while the international community praised it in a parallel universe, is what drew me to Prague in the first place, and it's something about which the proponents of the Center now have prepared talking points. Back at the Center, its director, Vangeli, plays the sympathy card. "It's hard to have lies spread about you a month before you even start working," he said, recalling the early days of the Center and the criticism from media influencers and government officials alike.

"Apparently we've got a button [to turn off] the internet," Simona chimed in, recalling some of the early criticisms of the Center. "We don't!" Citizens and media became so irate after Zeman's address and subsequent media coverage that the Center was forced to post a "frequently asked questions" page on its website, explicitly refuting the button claim and other lies that had proliferated in the Center's early days. The staff focused on describing the Center's work, highlighting its monitoring capacity, not its debunking efforts.[32] Similar bureaucratic challenges plagued the early US government efforts to combat disinformation abroad; as the Intelligence Community clearly laid out the Russian threat for the American public, the president denied it even existed, calling it "fake news."

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The Czech President's scrutiny created a challenge for the Center early on in its life. Even Janda agrees that the Center got off on the wrong foot. He shrugs off Zeman's references to his adult film career with a practiced cheeky grin; it just gave European Values more notoriety. But on the level of the Center, he comments, "We had a big gap of expectations, that's very clear … the expectation was that it was going to be an anti-fake news center. And obviously it's not. The [Center's] role is actually to set up the whole system inside the government on countering hostile foreign influence. Disinformation is only part of it."

It's hard to believe Janda truly buys into this narrative, though; a glance at his Twitter page and quick Google search would leave even a cursory observer with the impression that Russian disinformation is the defining issue of our era. His feed full of articles about the transatlantic relationship and general international affairs issues is punctuated with the same refrain: Russia is dangerous and employing useful idiots (including one of Janda's favorite targets, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs Frederica Mogherini, who he deservedly criticizes for her lack of attention to Russian disinformation in the EU) to do its bidding and allow its information warfare to spread unchecked throughout Europe.

Janda has also structured his goals for his entire life, personal and professional, around the issue. I asked him about his future plans, expecting an answer about his political aspirations or the next topic he sees European Values focusing on; instead, Janda told me that his greatest hope is to have children and raise them in a democratic Czech Republic. But he has to solve the disinformation problem first, he said, as "it's one of the major threats for our democracy, and for me living here with my future family."

Yet Janda still sweeps aside journalists across the Czech and international spectrum who criticize the Hybrid Threats Center

for not doing more anti-disinformation work, despite the narrative behind the Center's launch that he perpetrates in his outreach. On the whole, 90 percent of what they do is classified, Janda told me. Given the Center's mandate within the Interior Ministry, his estimate is probably close. ("Sorry I can't say more, you understand," he added with a wink.) The other 10 percent, which includes ongoing threat monitoring, training civil servants ("in the low hundreds" of trainees, according to Janda), and debunking internal disinformation, is not sexy enough to be reported. There's some truth to that; in Ukraine, I heartlessly shut down countless op-ed ideas from my Foreign Ministry colleagues when there just wasn't enough of a news hook or enough intrigue to merit interest from the international press.

According to some outside the government, however, the Center's work is falling short of expectations, partly due to the initial backlash the Center faced, but also because of their choice of medium: Twitter. After a spokesperson for President Zeman established a fake Twitter account mocking the Center after the fateful Christmas Day speech, the Center spent the weeks leading up to its launch defending its existence and explaining its methodology. Since it opened, the Center is far from establishing a consistent narrative in its online outreach; it tweets sparingly and has amassed fewer than 10,000 Twitter followers. Even with a strong narrative, the Center would be missing its target; fewer than 15 percent of Czechs use Twitter, while roughly half of the country uses Facebook.[33] Clearly, the Center's Twitter account exists not to reach Czech citizens, but the international community.

Criticism of the Center is not limited to the public; even within the government and expert circles there is confusion about what exactly the Center does. But in November 2017, Vangeli and his team felt they were fulfilling their mandate. They forded the initial onslaught of criticism and, since then, have stayed out of political

battles. "We disappointed [both sides of the political spectrum]," Vangeli said of the Center's critics and their anti-disinformation mandate, "those who were afraid that we would hurt them, and those that wanted us to [do exactly that]. But we stayed out. We did what we said we would do."

Others, like journalist Ondrej Kundra, told me it was far too early to pass judgment. "This is just a first step, and we are still waiting for more." It's clear he yearns for confirmation of his hypotheses about Russian funding of alternative media. "As a journalist, I was able to find a couple people behind one of them, but we're still waiting for a deeper investigation," he noted with impatience. "[The Ministry of Interior] will tell you 'it's not our job, it's the job of counterintelligence [services],' but as far as I know, [they] have never given me any indication that they know more [about] where the money is going."

But the Center doesn't "have the operational capabilities or the mandate" for work like this, Janda said, "and that's intentional. If they had the abilities to investigate individual online portals, it would be dangerous." Officials with an authoritarian streak "could start using [the Center] against the domestic opposition or individual journalists." In a way, by being understandably cautious of the historical legacy of restrictions on speech in the communist era and attempting to define a narrow mission and avoid further public condemnation, the Center and its creators have rendered it somewhat impotent.

When a wave of disinformation overtook the Czech presidential election in early 2018, there was an expectation that the Center would weigh in. A variety of alternative news portals attempted to taint Milo Zeman's opponent, Jiří Drahoš, accusing him of being a pedophile or a "Europhile" who would block a potential "Czexit." He would force the country to adopt the Euro, the alarmists wrote, and claimed he would support mass migration to the Czech Republic.

Drahoš lost the election by just over 152,000 votes. According to a European Values report, anti-Drahoš disinformation was shared at least 87,000 times on Facebook, with the aim of "demobiliz[ing] some of the voters who would have voted for [him]."[34]

As in the case of the US election, it is difficult to determine if voters were affected by the widespread disinformation campaigns that occurred during the Czech Election. What is verifiable, however, is that the government did little to stop them, as in the US case. Despite tweeting that "the Ministry of the Interior has taken all necessary steps to ensure that the presidential elections proceed in a standard and legal manner," the Center against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats took on few challenges related to the debunking of pernicious rumors spread during the election campaign.[35] In addition to this self-congratulatory tweet, the Center issued only two corrections on Twitter during the entire election period: one clarified that President Zeman would not proceed to the second round of the elections automatically, and another refuted a claim that Germany was bussing migrants into the Czech Republic through a forest.[36]

I emailed Vangeli to ask if they saw an uptick in disinformation surrounding the election, how he and his team decided which fakes to debunk, and how he felt things went. His reply was a terse bulleted list, in which he told me they crafted responses "mainly based on whether the disinformation touched the competence of [the Ministry of Interior]." The Ministry and Center were also undoubtedly under political pressure from the Zeman administration—with whom the Center clearly has no love lost—to avoid appearing politically partisan in their debunking efforts. But given that so much of the disinformation surrounding the campaign related to migration, terrorism, and extremism, the Center once again failed to meet the expectations of many both inside and outside the country.

The Czech Center against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (and disinformation, when convenient) represents one battle plan against information warfare and foreign influence, complete with the triumphs and pitfalls of any inaugural strategic effort. "If you see it from the US point of view," Ondrej Kundra tells me, "they did something important. They recognized this was a problem … [We were the] first country within the European Union [to do it], much earlier than you happened to do it in the United States. This is important."

This is true; the Czech Republic, lacking the exigent and confirmed foreign threat faced by the United States in 2016, Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008, or Ukraine since its war with Russia began in 2014, was able to anticipate the disinformation threat and circle its governmental wagons to mount a response.

But in opportunistically framing the Center's original raison d'être through the combined lenses of migration, Islamophobia, terrorism, and extremism, the Center and its supporters muddied its mandate and squandered precious public support. More than a year after its momentous launch, it publicly had little to show for itself. As the presidential election demonstrated, Islamophobic or anti-migrant rhetoric still runs rampant in the Czech Republic, with little course correction from the Center, and its modest forays into fact-checking had little to no effect.

What's more, the Center's work, and in particular the early criticism it faced, did little to build public awareness of the disinformation threat. "Alternative" media enjoy a growing readership. And according to Kundra, "most people don't care, or they don't know" what the background of the sites they visit is. "They consume information, but they don't know what type of information they consume."

For most of Czech society, Russian disinformation is viewed as a politicized issue, discussed by people sipping overpriced cappuccinos

in Prague's hip coffeehouses. Meanwhile, the structural and societal issues that have yielded a growing mistrust in media and mainstream politicians and caused a growing number of Czechs to seek out news that sounds and looks more like their backyard than an elite coffeehouse hangout in Prague have yet to be addressed. It barely even registers as part of the conversation among the national security types who represent the Czech Republic as it parades throughout the international community bragging of its status as the "first" to combat disinformation. It must be said, however, the fact that the Center still exists despite its political and operational struggles is a victory in and of itself. Now it's time for the Center to make the leap and justify their mandate to the public and earn their trust.

It won't be easy. Forget "alternative" websites being weaponized by Russia; normal citizens think the purported Russian threat has been weaponized by the government to censor the public's hard-earned right to free speech. And given the way it was opportunistically inserted into the national security audit only after being paired with hot-button issues like migration and terrorism, it's easy to understand why many feel duped.

It's these people—the more easily offended, the less educated, the less trusting—that Russia deceives. Governments remain seemingly incapable of reaching them, and no taxpayer-funded fact-checking, training, or hybrid-threat-assessing service—when they even exist—can truly bring them back into the fold. Although I was chastised by Czech friends for speaking with individuals on the "other side" of line dividing Czech society, like Plesl and Rychetský, who are believed to cater to the salacious and conspiratorial information cravings of Russian disinformation targets, it's those conversations—about reaching people, no matter what the motive—that most impacted my thinking about this crisis.

Rychetský told me his boss at the infamous *Parlamentní Listy* didn't want him to meet me, but he told him, "Hey, when we will not be open, anybody can say [anything] about us. So I think we should be a lot more open." It's that openness and dialogue that are the key to repairing the root divisions that cause disinformation, whether in Prague or far beyond.

7

How to Lose the Information War

Imagine it's July 2028, and another US presidential election is fast approaching. Talking to most Americans, though, you wouldn't be able to guess that the major political parties' conventions are this month or that poll workers around the country are being trained to deal with a line of voters that will almost certainly not materialize. Turnout has been on a steady decline since 2020, when allegations of a nationwide, Democratic Party–organized social media manipulation campaign spread. After Election Day had come and gone with Trump easily winning a second term, a Ukrainian journalist uncovered that the manipulation story was fabricated; it originated from a Twitter account based in Sochi, Russia, where another "troll factory" had been quietly operating for years.

The rumor—like most successful disinformation—was based in a kernel of truth. In 2017, a democratic research firm had attempted to replicate Russian social media manipulation tactics during an Alabama Senate race in order to swing the vote. The project was revealed a year later in *The New York Times*, adding a fresh fervor to President Trump's drumbeat of tweets calling for the Democrats—not the Republicans or Russia—to be investigated for election interference.[1]

According to the Sochi troll farm and the fabricated tale it spread, the Alabama story was the tip of the iceberg of Democratic social media manipulation; the story asserted that it continued today and was orchestrated by the leadership of the Democratic National Committee itself. With a well-timed tweet from an inauthentic account in Sochi to President Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, the rumor got its legs. In a single retweet, the former New York mayor turned the entire conservative Twittersphere rabid. Giuliani found an unlikely bedfellow, since the rumor alleged the Democratic Party was using social media to manipulate public opinion against Bernie Sanders. The Sanders campaign and its millions of digitally native supporters brought the story from the loony Trump fringe to the digital mainstream. It was no matter that the story was complete hearsay and based on no evidence other than extrapolations about the 2017 study in Alabama. No one ever produced a shred of concrete evidence about the whole affair. But after the Democratic National Committee (DNC) had been hacked and its emails plastered across the internet during the 2016 election, it had lost the trust of its members and, more importantly, unaffiliated swing voters. "If it's true," many conversations began, "I don't see how I can vote for a Democrat this year." They were fed nonstop coverage of the scandal; in a vicious and unending circle, the news media reported on the new allegations despite a lack of hard evidence. It was what voters, candidates, and parties were discussing; how could they leave it untouched?

Doubt in the integrity of the American electoral process ballooned. On Election Day, technical difficulties at precincts with electronic voting machines were perceived as potential "vote hacking," and the lack of investment in the security and improvement of American election infrastructure since 2016 made that theory seem plausible. In 2019, the senate announced that the Russian Federation had targeted all fifty state voting systems with cyberattacks in 2016.[2] Any

other explanation for technical difficulties on Election Day seemed a relic of a quaint, bygone era. Doubt bred low turnout. Despite four years of organizing against Trump, youth turnout reached its lowest levels ever; young people were too disillusioned with the "corrupt" system to participate in it. Trump's base, ever loyal, turned out in droves.

Trump won reelection and the deterioration of the American information ecosystem continued apace. The Republican Party—newly returned to a Congressional majority and eager to please the Trump voters that had put them in office—offered little resistance as the Trump administration's diatribes about the "fake news media" became government policy. They slashed funding for the Public Broadcasting Station and National Public Radio and set US foreign broadcasters such as Radio Free Europe, one of the only stable vectors America had in place to counter Russian influence abroad, on a path to extinction. For-profit journalism did not fare much better than its government-subsidized counterparts after Trump won reelection. When Facebook launched News Speed, its own barely curated micro-blogging and video news service for its growing platform, advertisers jumped at another chance to reach their target audiences. This content was engaging, short, and viral, and a product that advertised alongside it was sure to sell well. Advertisers redirected the remainder of their ad budgets toward the service.

Traditional media could not make the leap to the new format and still reported the news as they always had; readers were exhausted from four years of hard-hitting, outrage-provoking investigative journalism. They were seeking infotainment: light on the information, heavy on the entertainment. They wanted a distraction from Washington, not a reminder of it. Facebook provided a highly personalized "news" experience that buoyed its ad-based business model, kept users ravenously scrolling through

the site, and reinforced the caustic recommendation algorithm created years before, which fed users content they were more likely to interact with, even if that meant feeding them violence, hate speech, or disinformation. Adolescents, conspiracy theorists, and Grade A weirdos are pulling in millions of dollars in revenue each year, with users glued to their antics. In 2028, long gone are the days of filter bubbles, which had the potential of getting popped; today, unless you consume your media only in hard copy, you are helplessly drawn into an informational vortex.

Foreign interference has become an expected feature of the electoral process. While some politicians and civil servants across the US government struggled to harness resources and approval for commonsense projects during Trump's first term, from protecting election infrastructure to funding and launching a counter-disinformation center at the State Department, Trump continued to cast doubt on the severity of the problem, even joking about it at a meeting with Vladimir Putin. "Don't meddle in our elections," he said, playfully wagging his finger. His sporadic tweets declaring "WITCH HUNT! NO COLLUSION, NO OBSTRUCTION!" even after the conclusion of the Mueller investigation kept the issue a political, rather than a democratic one and meant that a Republican-controlled Congress could not pass legislation that mentioned foreign interference without risking Trump's highly public, highly damaging wrath. In the shimmering greatness of Trump's America, foreign interference was a hoax. In reality, the Chinese, Iranians, and North Koreans began replicating the Russian playbook at an increasingly wide and active scale, enjoying plausible deniability as breathless opposition politicians continued to point a finger toward Moscow. Their protests didn't matter; today, most Americans pay so little attention to the democratic process, care so little about their civic duties, that Voldemort and a coalition of fictional villains may as well be the ones interfering in our elections and our discourse.

This, of course, is the ideal outcome for Moscow. American democracy—once a shining city on a hill—is weak and crumbling. The debate, dissent, and protest, on which the United States was founded are increasingly foreign concepts. Corruption, once kept in check by an active media and engaged electorate, reaches to the highest levels of government. Consumed by problems at home, the United States is less engaged abroad. And the Kremlin points to the failings of our democratic system to justify repressions and a broader embrace of authoritarianism inside and outside its borders.

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This scenario should not seem far-fetched. The United States, along with some of the countries profiled in this book and venerated European democracies, is well on its way to a fact-free version of Democracy Lite, in which the tenets of the process—participation and protest—are under attack from within and without. The foundation for the story I told above has already been laid. The hack of the DNC, the amplification of disinformation, Trump's rejection of the Mueller investigation and refusal to take foreign interference seriously, Democratic operatives' use of Russian tactics in the fight to defeat Roy Moore in Alabama, Republicans' refusal to push back on Trump, the continued deterioration of the news media, and social media companies' pursuit of profit over morality—all of these are events that have taken place or actions that are ongoing. Russian actions have shone a light on and driven a chisel into the cracks in our system, and we've stood by, mouths gaping, as it happened. It's time for us to rebuild.

As we begin to fill the cracks of the failing foundation of our information ecosystem and, more broadly, our democracy, we should not draw up our plans from scratch. Central and Eastern Europe may not have a foolproof archetype for how to win the information war, but these countries have made mistakes that the West need not repeat. They know how to lose. They have learned lessons that the West is

ignoring at its own peril and at the peril of democracy writ large. They have also made progress in building a feasible, generational, citizens-based response to the problem while the United States has been mulling whether to build at all.

Since I became interested in disinformation and ways to counter it in 2013, little has changed in the American understanding of the challenge, beyond its geography. We thought about it as something that happened to others. We were safe from it. Now that some recognize the seriousness of the problem and the fact that it has been unleashed on us, we have forgotten that others experienced it first. We want to have dealt with the problem yesterday, ignoring the fact that the countries that have been countering modern Russian disinformation for the past decade or more have still not declared their mission accomplished. Generational, systemic solutions, many Americans tell me, are a nice sentiment, and they are probably necessary, but we'll get to them later. They want to know what we can accomplish now.

This attitude is reflected in our response so far. In our missteps and hesitance caused by political quagmire after political quagmire, combined with our desire for an easy fix, the United States has abdicated its leadership of this critical issue. Where we ought to have been setting the rules of engagement, the tone, and the moral compass in responding to Russia's information war, the United States has been a tardy, timid, or tertiary player, with the efforts we have managed to establish stymied by domestic politicization.

A consequence of American political acrimony is that our lawmakers have effectively issued social media companies a "get out of jail free" card for their role in the erosion of our information ecosystem, the demise of democratic debate, and their complicity in the spread of disinformation. So far, in this book, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have escaped serious inspection because the case studies outlined in these pages focus on *government* responses

to disinformation. Given that these companies are headquartered in the United States, the US government should lead in regulating and conducting oversight on the platforms. The actions the United States takes will have a ripple effect for millions of social media users around the world. But years after the revelations that a foreign government was targeting Americans with political advertisements and divisive messaging, and even attempting to suppress voter turnout through such measures, Congress has yet to pass a bill imposing even the most basic of regulations related to social media and election advertising. The Honest Ads Act, a bipartisan bill that would set standards for disclosures on online political advertisements and that has the support of social media companies, has languished in Congressional committees since it was introduced in 2017.

Instead, both the White House and Congressional Republicans have attempted to divert serious discussions about social media companies' role in creating the disinformation crisis to circuses about questions of "political bias" on the platforms. The White House hosted a "social media summit" in 2019 that included only right-wing activists to discuss alleged anti-conservative bias on the platforms. The event was widely criticized for its nonrepresentative guest list—it only included conservative figures friendly to the president—and the near-complete lack of evidence that such bias exists.[3] For their part, Democrats have made several embarrassing missteps in their attempts to counter disinformation, jumping at chances to label any suspicious activity as Kremlin-sponsored; in 2018, the Democratic National Committee raised alarm bells about an attempted phishing attack that turned out to be an IT security exercise.[4] Politicians on both sides of the spectrum have squandered valuable opportunities to question tech executives about their companies' practices.

The technology companies have caved somewhat to the public scrutiny that has resulted from revelations about information

warfare, as well as several overlapping, large-scale privacy scandals. From calling the influence of malign foreign actors on our electoral discourse and processes a "pretty crazy idea,"[5] to inviting regulation, however begrudgingly, the social media platforms have slowly begun to make changes to the way their services operate. Facebook, Twitter, and Google have made political advertising more transparent, creating searchable databases of political ads, and have tightened restrictions on who can purchase them. In order to reduce the amount of fake news being spread by ads, Facebook has updated its policies "to block ads from Pages that repeatedly share stories marked as false by third-party fact-checking organizations."[6] Twitter's policies no longer allow the distribution of hacked materials.

Facebook has attempted to increase authenticity and transparency around the governance of pages, an influence vector Russia's Internet Research Agency utilized in 2016. It claims that administrators of pages with large audiences undergo extra verification to weed out fake accounts; Facebook has also made other adjustments to arm users with information about the pages they follow. Each of the platforms has made adjustments to its algorithm in order to attempt to combat the problem of disinformation. Facebook did this by focusing on content from "friends and family." Google changed the search engine's algorithm to surface more "authoritative content," and Twitter has reverted its news feed to a more chronological timeline with less algorithmic intervention. Facebook and Twitter have also invested more in human and automated content moderation to identify and remove content that violates the platforms' policies, including those related to false information, fake accounts, and hate speech.

Finally, Facebook has launched a series of efforts that are more about public relations and boosting trust in the company than addressing and solving problems on the platform. It stood up a series of "war rooms" around key elections, bringing its existing policy,

security, and content review staff into one room for a period of time. During the European Union's Parliamentary Elections in 2019, several European news outlets released eerily similar profiles of the effort, usually with a headline beginning "Inside Facebook's Election War Room." It was a positive PR coup for the company, although an internal European Commission analysis later "revealed a continued and sustained disinformation activity by Russian sources aiming to suppress turnout and influence voter preferences."[7] The platform's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, has also started to participate in a series of public "conversations" about the future of technology in society, in which pre-chosen interlocutors have congenial chats with the CEO in a closed environment. Meanwhile, he refuses to appear before an investigative committee on internet harms in the British parliament that would not be afraid to hold his feet to the fire.

What I've listed above are the more well-known and purportedly messianic features that social media platforms have developed since 2016. They are meant to deliver us from all manner of internet evil. They are not enough. Congress and the US government ought to be pushing for more action, not only from social media platforms. The government itself also needs to contribute to the fight. Unfortunately, the government efforts that do exist have been rendered impotent by the politicization of all issues related to disinformation.

Take the Global Engagement Center (GEC), an office within the State Department "charged with leading the U.S. government's efforts to counter propaganda and disinformation from international terrorist organizations and foreign countries."[8] Initially established to counter propaganda from groups like the Islamic State, the GEC's mission expanded in December 2016 after the passage of the bipartisan "Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act" as part of the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act.[9] By early 2018, however, the GEC had still not spent any of the $60 million allocated to it to

fight information operations emanating from Russia and other state actors; the office was stuck in a back-and-forth with then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson about how the money would be spent, feeding a narrative that the funding was held up because it might anger the president or the Russian Federation itself.[10]

Eventually, the funding was released, but the delay has meant the office is consistently understaffed and under-resourced. It essentially operates as a grant-making body, supporting foreign civil society groups and partners who research and counter disinformation, such as independent journalists, fact-checking organizations, and "online influencers." These groups work to counter Russian and other state-sponsored narratives in target countries. They aren't always successful or even productive; one GEC-funded group working to combat Iranian propaganda trolled "U.S. journalists, human rights activists and academics it deemed to be insufficiently hostile to the government in Tehran."[11] Later, the office's director terminated the group's grant and claimed its funding was an oversight in the first place. Another obstacle for the GEC is its location within the US government; as part of the State Department, it is strictly prohibited from influencing Americans. While investing in programs that create more robust information environments and bolster the resilience of our allies in Europe is a necessary part of a disinformation response, it is exactly that: one part. The GEC's programs have no means to change the realities of the American information environment, where Russian disinformation has affected our discourse since 2014.

On the home front, the Federal Bureau of Investigation created a Foreign Interference Task Force (FITF) in 2017. It cooperates with social media companies, notably Facebook and its subsidiaries, sharing information that it detects on fake accounts and influence campaigns on the platforms. Ahead of the 2018 Midterm Elections, the FBI, along with the Department of Homeland Security, notified

Facebook of a network of more than 100 IRA-run Facebook and Instagram accounts, which the social media platform then removed. It was the first time Facebook removed accounts suspected of foreign interference as a result of a law enforcement tip. The FITF has also worked with political campaigns and the general public to increase awareness about cybersecurity measures and online influence tactics ahead of major votes. One such effort is their "Protected Voices" video series, "an FBI initiative to mitigate the risk of cyber influence operations targeting U.S. Elections."[12] In the videos, FBI agents give dry presentations on topics like phishing, choosing a password, and incident response.

The Department of Homeland Security, for its part, focuses on the protection of critical election infrastructure, such as voting machines. It interfaces with state election commissions to ensure lines of communication are open between the state and federal organs so that incident response can happen more efficiently. Several bills to allocate greater funding to these federal efforts and those at the state level have been thwarted in Congress. "It's just a highly partisan bill from the same folks who spent two years hyping up a conspiracy theory about President Trump and Russia," said Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority leader, when blocking passage of the Securing America's Federal Elections Act, which would allocate "$600 million in election assistance to states and require backup paper ballots."[13] The Honest Ads Act, as mentioned above, has met a similar fate.

The sparse efforts the United States has initiated are disparate and uncoordinated. They are, for the most part, focused on retaliation and short-term prevention and awareness-building, rather than systemic, generational solutions. No single US government agency or entity holds the reins in the American response to Russian disinformation at home. And none of our efforts have the support from the highest levels of government: the President of the United States and his

closest advisors; *The New York Times* reported in April 2019 that top officials charged with protecting US elections were told not to bring up their work in front of the president. Mick Mulvaney, White House Chief of Staff, "made it clear that Mr. Trump still equated any public discussion of malign Russian election activity with questions about the legitimacy of his victory," and said Russian interference "wasn't a great subject and should be kept below his level."[14] The former Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, clashed with the president over Trump's outlandish views about Russia's goals and intentions.[15] Even outside of this reporting, there is a stark incongruity between what the president says and what his administration does. How can US allies, or moreover, the American people, trust that the Trump administration's efforts to protect the democratic process are adequate or legitimate when Trump praises and jokes with the leader that perpetrated the crime?

But even if Trump were to give a speech from the Oval Office today decrying efforts to influence our democratic process, urging Congress to fund election security measures and pass commonsense advertising regulations, we would still be on the back foot, defining the problem as something being done to us, rather than a weaponization of our own weaknesses. The key to successful disinformation campaigns is the manipulation and widening of these fissures. In Estonia, the key was ethnic tensions and historical revisionism. In Georgia, culture and religion are a vector for Russian influence today. Poland's political polarization allows it to be manipulated. Ukraine lost the referendum on its Association Agreement in the Netherlands not because the Dutch hate Ukraine, but because they are inherently skeptical of the European Union. And in the Czech Republic, anti-migrant sentiment has been a wedge issue for disinformers and made the government's job in responding to the problem muddled and confused. In short, it isn't only foreign ills that plague us. Unless we mitigate our own

political polarization, our own internal issues, we will continue to be an easy target for any malign actor—Russian or Iranian, foreign or domestic—to manipulate.

Our point of view is devoid of a basic understanding of Russian disinformation. We do not view the Kremlin's campaign as a strategic endeavor, with tactics that were tried, tested, and refined across Eastern Europe since 2007. Instead, we continue to categorize it as a transient, new phenomenon that we have time to solve. We ignore that even within the United States, the Kremlin's information operations against American democratic institutions have been a years-long endeavor. Efforts to sway the 2016 presidential election began in 2014. Estonia and Georgia continue to occupy the vanguard of the modern Russian information war, as they have done for more than a decade. Countries that believed themselves to be inoculated to Russian disinformation, such as Poland, have a serious problem on their hands. And even countries like Ukraine and the Czech Republic, which have a strong recognition of the threat, still struggle against it after establishing the obvious short-term, high-level domestic responses. The United States has already lost years debating whether this problem exists; we cannot lose more time repeating mistakes that these countries made first.

One such mistake is ignoring the fact that Russian influence extends beyond the online realm, which several governments profiled in this book did. Even the Republic of Georgia, a country that has had a quarter of its territory illegally occupied and annexed by Russia and has dealt with Russian hybrid warfare for over a decade, has made mistakes in its efforts to counter Russia's creeping offline influence in the country. Both disinformation *and* cultural influence campaigns run rampant, abetted by a government that ignores the many forms it might take. Beyond trolls, bots, fake stories, and propaganda outlets—all of which are active in Georgia—the country must also reckon

with influence through religious and cultural organizations, such as the Orthodox Church and Russian-Georgian cultural organizations, which peddle a pro-Russian, anti-European, anti-Western narrative as Georgia attempts to further integrate with transatlantic security and political structures. Economic influence through increased Russia-Georgia trade opens yet another avenue for influence.

Although Western countries—namely the United States and the United Kingdom—share many fewer cultural ties with Russia than Georgia does, these less obvious vectors of influence still yield power in our political systems. The National Rifle Association (NRA), an American gun rights lobbying group with over 5 million members, has been embroiled in a series of investigations into its ties with Russia since the 2016 US presidential election. Maria Butina, a Russian gun rights advocate who pleaded guilty to acting as an agent of influence for the Russian Federation, viewed the NRA as one of her primary targets and sought to "establish unofficial lines of communications with Americans having power and influence over US politics" through the organization.[16] In addition to that criminal case, two committees in the Senate and one in the House of Representatives are investigating the NRA's ties to Russia, including a 2015 trip that NRA members took to Moscow, where they met with "high-level Russian government officials."[17] The Russian government has also courted secessionist organizations in California and Texas in order to "foment the type of secession crisis the U.S. hasn't seen since the 1860s," according to researcher Casey Michel.[18]

Beyond online influence campaigns and covert lobbying attempts is another overlooked avenue, according to Ilya Lozovsky, the managing editor of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). "They're not the only, or even the main, vector of influence," he told me.[19] "No serious attempt to understand contemporary politics can ignore the most old-fashioned vector

of all: money." Many Western countries—including the United Kingdom and the United States—have welcomed Russian investment and, with it, the illicit financial networks that fund malign Russian activity. OCCRP, which assisted in uncovering stories including the Panama and Paradise Papers, investigates "the secret financial flows that enable shadow elites to escape scrutiny, undermine democratic accountability, and erode the rule of law," Lozovsky says. And while powerful, wealthy individuals including politicians and government officials invest in luxury real estate and other ill-gotten goods, ultimately, OCCRP finds that "'dark money' means 'dark power'. … That's why it's so important for authorities in the U.S. and U.K., where many of these funds end up, to strengthen money laundering regulations and find other ways to crack down. Their efforts thus far have been totally inadequate."

Outside of this disturbing nearsightedness, many of the countries I've profiled here still believe that good communications or the establishment of a compelling narrative is the key to winning the information war. They're not alone. This sentiment is popular in the West as well. It is misguided, but persistent. Despite the Ukrainian government's losing experience fighting Russian disinformation with a valiant but ultimately unsuccessful public relations campaign during the Netherlands' Association Agreement Referendum in early 2016, in Kyiv there is still a strange and religious reverence for the mystical powers of "strategic communications." Much of my time in Ukraine only months after that stinging Association Agreement Referendum loss was consumed working on communications campaigns about various anniversaries of recent or ancient Ukrainian history, meant to remind the international community that Ukraine existed, that Ukraine was suffering. Few of them gained significant traction. Many were supported by funds from Western governments. And outside of Ukraine, at every convening on disinformation, there is inevitably a

panel on "A New Narrative for NATO" or the European Union, or the United States, or democracy itself. But as in the Netherlands, where Dutch citizens were skeptical of what another EU edict might offer them, those drawn to disinformation and most likely to fall for its falsehoods are not searching for a new narrative; they are searching for a renewed, more responsive form of governance, restored trust in the state and the media, and faith in their futures in countries that have left them behind.

We are not even sure that *facts* can prevail over disinformation, let alone government-concocted narratives of peace and prosperity. Decades of political science and psychological research indicate that fact checks not only fail to correct falsehoods, they often cause individuals to double down on incorrect information.[20] Fact-checking also presents challenges for Facebook's efforts to work with third parties to debunk mis- and disinformation on the platform; researchers from Yale University found that articles that were not labeled as having been debunked were saddled with the "implied truth effect" or that "the presence of warnings [on some headlines] caused untagged headlines to be seen as more accurate."[21] Facebook, for its part, has been relatively hesitant to share information about the efficacy of its work with third-party fact-checkers with both the general public and the fact-checking groups themselves.[22] Most worryingly, in countries including Brazil and India, disinformation has increasingly spread through encrypted messaging apps, making its emergence and amplification all but impossible to track. Fact-checking can't help us dispel claims made in private fora.

All of these trends are present in an ever-declining environment of distrust toward institutions, including government and the media, two critical players in the counter-disinformation space. The Edelman Trust Barometer, a yearly survey that measures how trust in institutions is perceived within the "informed" and "general" public, has recorded a double-digit gap between these two groups for the past

three years. Across populations, government and media were trusted less than NGOs and business, a trend established in 2016–17.[23]

Between a world of online and offline influence and flagging trust which clever communications campaigns cannot solve on their own, the cards are stacked against societies attempting to win the information war. But establishing a coherent counter-disinformation policy becomes impossible when governments stealthily crack open the Russian playbook for political gain; the line between fact and fiction is blurred even further and levels of distrust grow when governments engage in the same techniques as Russia, becoming purveyors of disinformation themselves. In Poland, where the Law and Justice government utilized conspiracy theories and fearmongering to gain support in the short term, polarization has skyrocketed in the long term. A 2017 poll showed that Polish political parties, which my interlocutors cited over and over as purveyors of disinformation, are the least trusted institutions in the country.[24] Government is not far behind. Similar trends are visible in Georgia and the Czech Republic, where counter-disinformation policies exist on paper but in practice create little change in the behavior of officials, the media, citizens, and, in particular, disinformers themselves.

The United States has ventured further down this road than any other government profiled in this book. The Trump administration has engaged in many of the same tactics as the Russian government, and it has done so for short-term political gain, increasing American vulnerability to future information attacks. From Inauguration Day, when President Trump disputed the size of the crowd that gathered for his swearing in on the National Mall, to 2019, when he used his Twitter account to amplify conspiracy theories about the suicide of sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, among tens of thousands of other examples as tracked by *The Washington Post*, Trump has willingly and repeatedly eschewed the truth and eroded American democratic discourse.

It's clear that President Trump's behavior—and his use of the term "fake news" to describe politically inconvenient stories—has been noted, absorbed, and employed by authoritarian leaders around the world, including in the Philippines and Hungary. In 2019, Trump even seemed to bond with Russian President Vladimir Putin over their shared disdain for the news media. "Fake news is a great term, isn't it? You don't have this problem in Russia but we do," Trump said. Putin responded: "We also have. It's the same."

Trump's disregard for facts also inspires undemocratic behavior at home, some of which I encountered firsthand. In the lead-up to the US midterm elections in 2018, I was on the lookout for suspicious behavior in a few key senate races across the country. More transparently: I was hunting Russian trolls. Instead, I found the American variety.[25]

Elizabeth Warren, the firebrand liberal senator from Massachusetts, had long been a target of President Trump. He regularly ridiculed her claim of Native American heritage, calling her "Pocahontas." She was up for reelection, was a staunch opponent of the president, and was rumored to be considering a presidential run, so monitoring pro-Trump, anti-Warren Facebook groups for signs of suspicious behavior seemed like a logical place to begin a hunt for midterm disinformation campaigns. One profile caught my eye; a young blonde woman in a red "Make America Great Again" Trump hat and a red, white, and blue bathing suit was one of the most active members of several groups. She claimed to live in New England, posted multiple times a week about Shiva Ayyadurai, an independent candidate challenging Warren for her senate seat, and called herself "Donna Trumper," but she was not Donna Trumper at all. A reverse image search revealed that the woman in the MAGA hat was actually a second-year law student at the University of Virginia; her picture had been lifted from a search engine to use as the false Donna Trumper's profile image.

"Trumper's" fake name and fake profile picture led me to a small network of pro-Ayyadurai, anti-Warren accounts that posted nearly identical messages across a swath of Massachusetts area Facebook groups for Trump supporters: Patti Johnson, a woman in an American flag bikini and "Trump 16" written across her bulging cleavage; Eddie Decker, a clean-cut man in a suit whose profile picture originated on a website for male haircuts; and Vinnie Boombatz, whose profile picture was the Trump-Pence campaign logo, but whose name originated from a Rodney Dangerfield comedy sketch. Together, they carried out a small-scale astroturfing campaign, creating a guise of grassroots support for Shiva Ayyadurai, spreading disinformation about Senator Warren and abusing anyone who disagreed with them. Most worryingly, they appeared to be associated with the Ayyadurai campaign; in some cases, Ayyadurai's profile had added them to the Facebook groups. In others, they posted in quick succession after his volunteer social media manager made almost identical posts.

I interviewed Ayyadurai the evening of the state primary election in September 2018, when he gathered with about twenty supporters at his campaign headquarters in a nondescript office building in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The building directory listed him as "VA Shiva, inventor of email," a claim disputed by internet historians. His campaign bus, complete with the slogan "Only the Real Indian Can Defeat the Fake Indian," stood in the parking lot, along with a teepee draped in American flag bunting. Two of his supporters, dressed in robes and taking puffs from pipes (contents unknown), periodically bellowed into long, curly shofars, drawing curious looks from passersby.

Our fifteen-minute conversation meandered from why his Trumpian campaign motto "will go down … in political history as probably one of the most powerful slogans" (as he proselytized in his mini-lecture to me, it employs "systems theory," which causes a

property to emerge that is bigger than the sum of its parts) and why Elizabeth Warren "has no integrity" and is part of the "academic military industrial complex."[26]

I asked about the four fake accounts making posts about him across Facebook. At first, he claimed to know nothing about them, asking "really, who are they?" I named Vinnie Boombatz, and he became agitated. He claimed he personally handled his Twitter account, but not his verified Facebook account with over 40,000 followers, and declined to answer who among his all-volunteer campaign staff managed it. He went on: "We're going to end this interview right now because you're doing an insane and inane interview. I'm a serious political candidate … You're doing a racist interview right now because you're a racist." None of the questions I asked concerned race, but Ayyadurai continued his tirade. "You're reducing a guy who busted his ass … to nonsense. And you came here to do a hit piece and you should go out." As one of his staff escorted me down the stairs, Ayyadurai shouted that my degrees were worthless and that I wasted my money on my education. I sent Facebook my research two days later. They removed the fake accounts, several groups, and the profile of Ayyadurai's campaign manager "for violating [its] policies against fake accounts, spam, and misrepresentation."[27]

It was shocking to uncover this homegrown, red, white, and blue disinformation campaign, agitating not for the Kremlin, but for the benefit of an American candidate. If this is how a small, independent campaign is running, what do better-resourced operations get up to? President Trump's behavior tacitly endorses tactics like these and, worse, ushers the United States into an era in which basic facts are disputed. When we can't agree on the truth within our own borders, we will not be able to dispute the lies coming from outside of them.

Perhaps the gravest mistake that all of the countries in this book have made, including and especially the United States, is ignoring the

use of homegrown actors and domestic disinformation to amplify preexisting conflict and discord. In Estonia, the Kremlin messaged to Russian-speaking residents and citizens to amplify discontent over ethnic Russians' treatment. In Georgia, traditionalism has been weaponized in an attempt to derail the country's European ambitions. In Poland, the government does Russia's dirty work by fueling conspiracy theories—Russia barely has to lift a finger. In the Netherlands, Russia fueled anti-Ukraine narratives and potentially provided more substantive support to fringe figures who campaigned against the ratification of Ukraine's European Association Agreement. In the Czech Republic, it's not only the Czech-language RT and Sputnik that fuel disinformation, but local Czech outlets feeding a voraciously anti-migrant public. And in the United States, lest we forget, even the most progressive actors who openly call for President Trump's impeachment, such as Ryan Clayton and his Americans Take Action showtunes flash mob, can be supported by Russian advertisements.

These actions give the Kremlin plausible deniability and make the job of governments attempting to counter Russian influence and restore productive democratic discourse much more difficult. How can any administration that intends to protect free speech censor the authentic opinions of its own citizens? Given what we know about the limited efficacy of fact-checking and the impossibly high levels of distrust toward institutions, how should a government, a newspaper, a social media platform, or a niece or nephew concerned for their crazy, conspiracy-loving uncle, approach attempts to inject discourse with a shot of truth?

As I told the Senate Judiciary Committee—at least those senators who stayed for the entirety of the hearing—in 2018:

> Even if the United States Government were to acknowledge the threat posed by Russian influence campaigns today in no uncertain

> terms, and we were to walk out of the hearing room and secure beyond a shadow of a doubt the country's election infrastructure; even if we hermetically sealed our information environment from inauthentic users and false or misleading information, and if social media companies finally put forth a good faith effort to put users and the security of our democracy first; even then, we would still not successfully dispel the threat our democracy faces from malign actors' political influence operations.

The actions I listed before the senate are *part* of a solution. But winning the information war will take more. It will take a long-term investment not only in future generations, so we ensure this information wasteland is not regenerated, but in the very people who might be swayed by disinformation campaigns, who clicked on, engaged with, and shared Russian content in 2016 and beyond. They might be without a local newspaper to act as the connective tissue between their communities and the statehouse or the Capitol, where fewer and fewer states send reporters. Or they might be sent into a vortex of conspiracy-ridden, fact-free, hateful content by social media platforms with a monetary incentive to keep them coming back for more.

Whether Russia or any other bad actor, foreign or domestic, amplifies the sentiments these targets are seeking out is irrelevant to a country's response to information warfare; we should *want* our citizens to have the tools they need to navigate the fast-flowing rivers of information they encounter every day. We should *want* them to participate in the democratic process—but do it with facts, not fakes.

There is no foolproof game plan for winning the information war. But the short-term solutions the West has pursued so far—deleting fake and abusive accounts in a never-ending game of Whack-a-Troll, attempting to hold Russia accountable for its actions through vehicles

like sanctions—are not enough. Russia and other bad actors can always create more fake accounts. They can always find the loopholes in the social media policies meant to block their avenues of manipulation, as I observed during the Ukrainian presidential election in 2019, when Russian operatives attempted to rent authentic Ukrainians' Facebook accounts in order to circumvent the platform's political advertising rules ahead of the vote. And the reprisals of the rules-based international order that the West has placed on Moscow seem to have had no effect; Russia continues its information war against the United States and the democratic world, inspiring chaos, confusion, and distrust in the democratic system, all while increasing its own stature on the global stage.

These short-term solutions do not address the underlying societal fissures that left us vulnerable to information operations in the first place. As Estonia, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic have learned, it's past time to begin a generational investment to build resilience within populations and target the root causes of our weaknesses.

We must first begin with addressing social media and its effect on democratic discourse and our societies overall. Sociologist Zeynep Tufekci often makes the comparison between the early days of the car and the early days of the internet. In the infancy of the automobile industry, she writes, "There were still no seat belts, airbags, emission controls, or mandatory crumple zones."[28] As we better understand the disturbing effects social media has on democracy and daily life, it is time to set the guardrails of the internet and the social media platforms on which we share so much of our lives.

That begins with setting clear and unified definitions of not only the rules of the road, but the vehicles on them. To draw out Tufekci's car analogy further, imagine how difficult driving would become if neighboring states or countries defined simple concepts like right of

way or speed limits differently. This is essentially how social media platforms operate today. Each has its own definition of disinformation, of hate speech, and of targeted abuse, among other concepts, and each deals with each of those concepts differently. Facebook, which has received the most scrutiny for its role in amplifying Russian information operations during the 2016 election, has spurned both the popular and academic terms to describe the information war and developed its own separate lexicon, choosing to use broad—and widely misunderstood—terms like "misinformation," "false news," and "false amplifiers" to describe the variety of behaviors observed on its platform.

Russian operatives have always used a variety of social and traditional media platforms to deliver their messages; during the Dutch referendum on Ukraine's Association Agreement, disinformation cropped up in the form of YouTube videos, misleading and false articles, and Facebook and Twitter posts, for example. Russia has continued this strategy even after 2016. In early 2019, Facebook removed accounts associated with Russian propaganda site Sputnik that posed as local news outlets and targeted populations in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia on Facebook and Instagram. In the United States, beyond the big three social media platforms of Facebook, Twitter, and Google, Russian actors were active on Reddit, an anonymous message board, as well as other, smaller platforms during the 2016 election. This cross-platform approach makes it all the more necessary that in describing and attempting to counter these strategies, we are speaking the same language and cooperating not only across the tech sector, but between the public and private sectors, inclusive of social media platforms, governments, and civil society organizations.

In the United States we are hesitant to allow government bodies jurisdiction over our right to free speech, but we are delusional if we

think platforms are currently protecting that right. Their algorithms control what we see and how far our posts travel; their terms of service are spottily and opaquely enforced. Automated accounts, or bots, along with less sophisticated astroturfing operations, take advantage of the algorithms, boosting the discussion and virality of topics that might not otherwise trend. And the microtargeting features behind platforms' advertising schemes mean that ads can be delivered to users based on private information, including detailed tracking of users' browsing histories. When related to opportunities such as housing or employment, the platforms are essentially enabling race-, age-, or gender-based discrimination. Though they may seem like a free-flowing, organic experience, social media platforms are highly curated, highly addictive content farms that have total control over what we see and how we communicate;[29] it's time they do it in a way that promotes the greater democratic good and not just their bottom line.

Unfortunately, social media platforms have no incentive to operate this way. Although the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) issued a $5 billion civil penalty against Facebook for violations of an existing FTC order about user privacy, both the fine and the oversight measures the FTC instituted are expected to have little impact on the company's practices. To a company worth hundreds of billions of dollars like Facebook, $5 billion is a laughable amount, and the commission missed a chance to set guardrails about what the company can do with user data. Instead, they required Facebook to file reports about potential risks of new products. As Commissioner Rohit Chopra wrote in a dissenting statement, continuing the automobile analogy, the rule is "akin to if federal regulators, instead of ordering automakers to install seatbelts, ordered them to document the pros and cons of installing seatbelts, and to decide for themselves whether it would be worthwhile."[30] The settlement also granted Facebook immunity for

infractions that the FTC may not have uncovered during the course of its investigation, making further related action against the company extremely difficult for the government to pursue. Chopra concludes, "The case against Facebook is about more than just privacy—it is also about the power to control and manipulate. Global regulators and policymakers need to confront the dangers associated with mass surveillance and the resulting ability to control and influence us."[31]

Outside of the United States, other bodies have attempted to tame the social media beast; the European Union instituted the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in May 2018, which places more power in the hands of users to control how organizations collect, use, and share their personal information. Germany's NetzDG law requires social media companies and other content hosts to remove "obviously illegal" speech within twenty-four hours of it being reported or face a fine of up to $50 million. At the time of this writing, both of these laws are in the early stages of implementation and their long-term effects on social media companies' operations are unclear. However, a patchwork of laws with different aims and implemented by different capitals will not necessarily bring big tech to heel; the United States, serving as the headquarters of many social media platforms, has a unique opportunity and responsibility to institute regulations that can protect human rights and free speech around the globe. So far, this is a responsibility that we have shirked. It is past time we replace our outmoded regulatory tools; they amount to a melange of oversight mechanisms that are behind the ever-growing and shifting challenge that social media platforms present in the age of disinformation.

This book is largely about how governments respond to the challenge of disinformation, but intrinsically, it is also about how they feed and nurture their information environments. Ours, by all accounts, is atrophying. When I was a child, growing up in New

Jersey, my parents were subscribers to *The Star Ledger*, a respectable statewide newspaper that would be delivered to our suburban driveway every morning. As I grew up, my mother lamented that the paper seemed to be getting thinner with every passing day, until finally, we stopped subscribing altogether. My father would pick up hard copies from a local convenience store a few times a week, and he would buy the Sunday edition along with *The New York Times*.

Today, it has been years since my mom has read a print copy of *The Star Ledger*; she might engage with content on its busy, ad-laden website, but mostly she relies on the *Times* and her local National Public Radio stations—she can tune into New York, Trenton, or Philadelphia from her house—for her news. In New Jersey, no one is ever very far from several bustling metropolitan areas, and the coverage afforded by any one of those cities' newspapers or radio and television stations is applicable and useful for daily life. But imagine a similar situation in the nation's heartland, and you begin to understand why so many people are flocking to dubious websites that replicate their worldview; the connective tissue between the local and the national or international has been lost. The Pew Research Center found that while in 2018, US newspaper circulation reached its lowest level since 1940,[32] Americans still value a local connection in the media they consume.[33] The solution isn't as simple as moving the operations of "legacy" media outlets online; a variety of online-only news outlets have run into many of the same difficulties in the digital age as their paper counterparts and were forced to lay off reporters or shutter operations entirely.

The American information landscape is further complicated by a number of factors, including declining trust in the media, fed by the Trump administration's relentless attacks on the fourth estate as "fake news" and the "enemy of the people." I hope to one day see an America that invests more in journalism as a public good,

not only through the variety of philanthropic initiatives to support the industry that have proliferated since 2016, but through further government investment in public broadcasters. In 2018, the US government allocated $447 million to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which funds the Public Broadcasting Station and National Public Radio, as well as their local affiliates. In comparison, the British Broadcasting Corporation's budget for the same year was over $6 billion, despite the fact that Britain's GDP is about a fifth of the size of the United States'.[34] The BBC did not save Britain from the influence of foreign disinformation; an investigation into Russian information campaigns during the run-up to the Brexit referendum is ongoing. However, the British population turns to the BBC when looking for a trusted news source; in a 2017 poll, 57 percent of those surveyed said they were mostly likely to turn to the BBC for "news [they trusted] the most." No other news outlet, online, in print, or on television, scored more than 11 percent.[35]

It is unlikely that any US outlet could garner the same rating from the American public; in 2017 and 2018, Pew Research found gaping divides between Republicans' and Democrats' opinions of and trust in the news media. In particular, the Center recorded a 44 percent gap between Democrats and Republicans in support of the media's watchdog role that "keeps political leaders from doing things that shouldn't be done." In 2016, before President Trump was inaugurated, that gap was only 3 percent.[36]

Investments in journalism as a public good are critical to maintaining a healthy information environment in which disinformation can more easily be dispelled, and in which a trusted voice is readily accessible in times of chaos and turmoil. In Georgia, a struggle over the future of the opposition broadcaster has been ongoing for years. Poland's public broadcaster was decimated and subjected to the editorial control of the ruling party; conspiracy theories flourished.

In Estonia, investing in the Russian-language media is a key part of outreach and integration of the country's ethnic Russian minority. If any good comes from America's era of "alternative facts," perhaps it will be a broader understanding of the value of the fourth estate as the bedrock to productive, informed, democratic discourse.

Even with greater investments in quality journalism, people will still need help navigating the unending flow of information that characterizes the modern media environment, as I found in every country I visited over the course of researching this book. In Estonia, education and outreach form the backbone of the government's renewed efforts to build an inclusive Estonian identity that is resilient to outside influence. As Irene Käossar, the head of Estonia's Integration Foundation, told me, the government is no longer trying to express "why" ethnic Russians should pursue citizenship or learn Estonian language; instead, the onus is on the government to figure out how to "change thinking." In Georgia, where culture and religion are vectors of Russian influence, on top of a simmering local media sphere that repeats Russian narratives, activists like Batu Kutelia are trying to use another part of culture—humor—to reach local populations and teach them the basics about information warfare. Even in the Czech Republic and Poland, both countries steeped in political environments that are unfriendly to counter-disinformation activity, the idea of education as a primary component of the healing of the information environment is slowly gaining traction; Poland's minister of digital affairs views it as his primary goal.

In Ukraine, beyond President Zelenskyy's new efforts to communicate with the Russian-speaking population in the East, the country also experiments with education efforts as an antidote to disinformation. In 2016, 20 million people viewed a television ad that was a bit peculiar for the Ukrainian information environment, typically replete with commercials for medicines, upcoming shows,

and beauty products. What they saw was an army of grocery shoppers selecting products from shelves without looking at them, while one woman took time to look at the nutrition label on each box. "Information is like a product," intoned the voiceover. "It can be poor quality, incomplete, or even harmful. So what do you consume? High-quality [products], or something that only looks it? Be careful! Consume wisely!" Polling that measured the ad's effect showed a 14 percent increase in viewers who recognized a need for knowledge and skills to separate truthful information from lies.[37]

This public awareness campaign was a component of "Learn to Discern," a media literacy project implemented by IREX, a Washington-based NGO. The program, which "helps citizens detect and decode misinformation and propaganda," developed a first-of-its-kind curriculum for media literacy in the digital age. "Traditional approaches to teaching media literacy haven't evolved with the rapidly-changing information space we live in today," Mehri Druckman, director of programs at IREX's Kyiv field office, told me in 2017. "With the advent of the internet and social media, individual citizens are now 'news' outlets themselves."

Druckman described the curriculum, which was developed in partnership with the Academy of Ukrainian Press and StopFake, a Ukrainian fact-checking organization, as "less academic and more practical," focusing on increasing consumers' ability to recognize emotional manipulation—a tactic used by bots, savvy advertisers, profit-motivated publications, and, yes, purveyors of disinformation from Russia and beyond. In order to respond to the unique threat of "colorful [and] emotionally charged" disinformation, such as the content that Russia produced during the 2016 US presidential election, IREX sought to "equip citizens with techniques for recognizing their own emotional reactions so they can read news more critically," Druckman said.

Svitlana Zalishchuk, the young parliamentarian and former journalist who was involved in the Ukrainian campaign against the Netherlands referendum, agreed that Ukrainian education needed a reboot: "Communication is one of the most important dimensions of our life… but we don't know anything about the rules, about how to do it, how to protect ourselves. It has to be part of education, without a doubt."

And studies show education has an impact. Eighteen months after the IREX program first began, the organization evaluated participants' skill retention compared with a control group. Participants of the Learn to Discern program were better able to navigate the modern information environment than their peers; they were 28 percent more likely to "demonstrate sophisticated knowledge of the news industry" and "25 percent more likely to self-report" cross-checking multiple news sources, an important skill given today's fast-paced flow of information.[38] The campaign trained 15,000 individuals directly; those participants shared their new skills with another 90,000 friends, family members, and peers. Although that's a fraction of the country's population of 45 million, the program offers a model that might be replicated more broadly at this particularly critical time. In 2017, the Ukrainian Ministry of Education signed a decree prioritizing media literacy in the national curriculum, and IREX began working with fifty schools across the country to inject the subject into the education system. Rather than create an entirely new subject, the skills are presented in the context of preexisting courses, such as history and language.

Finland also conducts education-based counter-disinformation programs, and they are often cited as a plausible model for US emulation; comedian Samantha Bee even profiled them in an episode of her television series.[39] In part, Finland was ahead of the modern Russian disinformation curve, thanks to decades, if not centuries, of experience responding to hostile narratives peddled by its much

larger neighbor. But Finland also sought out more generational solutions than most other nations, eschewing surface-level fixes like fact-checking in favor of programs that would leave all of Finnish society more resistant to disinformation, whether it was coming from Russia or within Finland itself.

The Finnish government equips even its youngest citizens with tools to survive in today's crowded media environment. The government has viewed "media and information literacy," which is predicated on critical thinking, as a "civic competence" since the 1960s.[40] "We all need media literacy skills in our different roles in the information society: as citizens, consumers, employees and students," wrote the Finnish minister of culture and sport in 2013.[41] As such, in Finland, media literacy is a whole-of-government affair. The Ministry of Culture and Sport, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Justice, and the Finnish Competition and Consumer Agency, and others all contribute to the government's policy.

The policy is also radically inclusive, recognizing that "the child's relationship with media may begin as a baby, for example on the lap of a parent who is using the internet," and becomes stronger as children grow older and begin to use media to play, learn, and socialize. Finnish officials often refer to schools as Finland's "first line of defense" against disinformation. Whether this approach can be replicated in the United States is uncertain. The Finns enjoy a smaller and more homogeneous society and, therefore, a clearer and more prevalent national narrative, as well as a nimbler governmental structure, which makes an efficient and inclusive response to disinformation easier to mount.

Escaping the information vortex and the degeneration of democracy will not be easy, and it will not happen overnight. That's why it's critical we bring this conversation—which, thus far, has been steeped in the language and the circles of the national security apparatus—back to those it most affects: ordinary people.

Let's begin at the most logical first step: elementary and secondary school education. The United States' federal education system, in which states control curricula and school structures, presents a challenge that unified systems such as those in Ukraine and Finland do not have, although it is not insurmountable. The Department of Education could provide extra funds to incentivize the inclusion of media and digital literacy programming in school curricula. In an environment in which the Department of Education is not able or willing to begin such a program (such as the one the US education system finds itself in under the Trump administration), individual states could prioritize the inclusion of these subjects in their curricula on their own accord; since 2016, a number of state legislatures have already moved to elevate media literacy in their curricula. Ideally, philanthropic foundations and even technology companies could support such efforts.

These programs wouldn't portray Russia as the evil menace from the East, here to ravage the American information environment; they wouldn't portray Russia—or any other politically charged issue—at all. Instead, they would teach simple heuristics for gauging the trustworthiness of information. Are other sources reporting the information? Does the source have a history of publishing reputable stories? Does the outlet list contact information or information about its editorial staff? Has the author published anything before? Did the image that accompanies the story originate elsewhere on the internet? They would also cover tactics for detecting and resisting emotional manipulation and telling the difference between news, opinion, and satire. They might include visits to local newsrooms to understand how stories are written and reported. And just as curricula include teaching good dental hygiene and "stop, drop, and roll" fire safety campaigns to young children, curricula should also include modules on good cyber hygiene and the dangers of the internet.

A final element of these programs, particularly as students near voting age, would have nothing to do with media, digital literacy, or disinformation at all. It would center around civics and the functioning of our democratic system at the local, state, and national level. Much of the disinformation surrounding the 2016 presidential election centered around the technicalities of the primary election process and general voting rights awareness. Those who understand how government operates in actuality are much less likely to buy into conspiracy theories about its secret cabals.

Primary and secondary school education is the most logical place to begin an awareness and education campaign to counter disinformation, but it is critical that states also target the general, voting-age population with these efforts as well. Reaching them without the built-in delivery mechanism of schools is more difficult, but it is adults who decide elections and adults who shape our democratic discourse. How do we ensure the effects of citizen-based counter-disinformation programs are not only felt when today's students reach adulthood? We should begin with state employees. Even in Poland and the Czech Republic, where, thanks to political polarization, internal resistance to programs countering disinformation is high, governments are educating their civil servants about foreign interference. They—and Western countries—should go a step further, approaching the topic through a broader, depoliticized lens, and discuss foreign and domestic vulnerabilities, emotional manipulation, and cyber hygiene, just as programs in schools would. Similar professional development opportunities can and should be offered by large corporations. Some companies offer incentives to employees who live a healthy lifestyle; those who complete courses on healthy democratic discourse might also receive them.

Social media platforms also have a role to play in educating and informing the general public about best practices in resisting

influence campaigns. The "big three" social media platforms have nearly ubiquitous access to most Americans' lives. Facebook tells us when we might need an umbrella, informs us about election dates and polling places, and reminds us of events that happened over a decade ago, no matter how desperately we might want to forget them. It should use that access for good. So far, efforts to raise awareness of media and digital literacy best practices on the platforms have been lackluster; in its "Tips to Spot False News," which is available online in the "Help Center" and has run in several of the world's major newspapers (arguably not the audience that most needs assistance spotting "false news"), Facebook even writes "reliance on unnamed experts may indicate a false news story," a tip that might cause readers to discount reporting that uses anonymous or background sources, as many whistleblowing investigations do.[42] More worryingly, the Trump administration has used this tactic to question critical reporting from a variety of outlets.

Overall, platforms' efforts to promote media literacy awareness have been surface-level distractions, not deep-rooted attempts to change user behavior. They should be developed in broad consultation with experts in the field and be integrated into the user interface of the platform—not buried in a help section or in a print newspaper advertisement—at the platform's expense. Like reminders to grab an umbrella or do your civic duty, social media platforms can empower users to be more discerning consumers of information. It is not a question of ability; it's a question of volition.

Should social media companies choose not to put the health of democracy worldwide ahead of their profit margins (and even if they do) public libraries can also serve as counter-disinformation educational hubs for people of all ages. The Pew Research Center found that 78 percent of Americans of all ages trust libraries to "find information that is trustworthy and reliable."[43] In an age where

trustworthy, nonpartisan interlocutors are increasingly hard to find, libraries and librarians can not only act as skills-builders, but serve as hubs for information integrity. In Ukraine, the first round of the Learn to Discern program recognized the potential of libraries; its trainers all came from a long-established network of librarians who were trusted community leaders. A similar program in the West could navigate the tricky waters of political partisanship as well as reinvigorate the library system, a critical democratic resource for the era of information warfare.

I do not kid myself; education and awareness alone cannot win the information war. It will take a long-term investment in them to even win a single battle. But in countries where disinformation—emanating both from Russia and domestic sources—has long been a reality of life, empowering people to be active and engaged members of society through investments in the information space and in people themselves is always part of the solution. While platforms, governments, and civil society organizations play losing games of fact-checking and wield their digital cudgels, whacking all manner of trolls, bad actors continue to manipulate and amplify our weaknesses. Moscow will continue to attempt to influence our democracy, as it has for decades, and now that the Kremlin has written the textbook for how to do so, other bad actors are already imitating Russian tactics. To prepare for these future attacks on democracy—and indeed, even attacks from within—we must think beyond Russia to the key actors in the democratic process: people.

Thomas Jefferson recognized this, writing in 1820: "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."

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It's Election Day, November 2028. The latest polls are close; it will probably be another nail-biter. But unlike eight or twelve years ago, this campaign hasn't been characterized by the rancor of the past. After the scandalous foreign hack-and-leak operations that marked the 2016 and 2020 elections, affecting first the Democratic and later the Republican Party, a remarkable thing happened. Party leaders, editors-in-chief of the country's newspapers, major broadcasters, and even the social media platforms convened to sign a Declaration on Truth and Integrity: they would not discuss, cover, or amplify content for which a legitimate source could not be established. This bipartisan effort did not eliminate all attempts at foreign interference, but rather than boosting the bogus claims, repeating them on the airwaves, printing them on front pages, and retweeting and sharing them online, it relegated them to the fringes of the internet, where they never gained much traction. The publicity surrounding the declaration served as a primer and awareness campaign for millions of Americans who believed for years that foreign interference was a specter politicians unleashed for personal gain.

In the months after the declaration, while the new administration settled into office, Congress took stock of what the document had achieved. It engendered cooperation between politicians and the fourth estate, across social media platforms, and between all these groups and law enforcement, which was notified as suspicious posts were encountered. They worked to build on the informal structure they created, creating an independent government hub to serve as coordinator, watchdog, and educator. The new body worked with civil society to write a curriculum for schools and professional development programs, doled out educational grants, and advocated for users' rights in the development of new technologies on social

media platforms. It also acted as a neutral researcher, employing an apolitical group of experts to act as a watchdog on questions of hate speech, political bias, disinformation, and "fake news," among others. The government allocated greater funding to American public broadcasters, encouraging a more balanced news landscape.

In 2028, the information war is still not won. There were and continue to be challenges. It is not utopia; the project of democracy will never be. Online abuse, while on a downturn, is still a problem. But people are beginning to have more inquisitive, respectful conversations, based on responsible, level reporting. They are recognizing the humanity in their fellow avatars. Americans regularly have heated debates about how to protect free speech in the age of the internet. But unlike during the height of the information war, that speech is not being manipulated to drive division and chaos from without and within.

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This may only be a dream for the future, but it is one that feels possible to achieve.

Epilogue

When I was finishing this book in July 2019, trying to concoct a realistic, but still-nightmarish scenario that might serve as a warning of what the US government risks should it allow disinformation to run rampant, I didn't think the basic catalysts of the story would be borne out in reality before this book went to print. Six months later, the United States is in the midst of an impeachment trial that is awash with disinformation. As in the dystopic future I envisioned, the source of that flood of information is Rudy Giuliani.

I chose Giuliani as the central character in my cautionary tale motivated not by a special animus toward the former mayor, but by the robust disinformation campaign he waged in, around, and about Ukraine throughout 2019. I covered the Ukrainian presidential election from Kyiv that spring, and Giuliani's shady influence hovered, ghost-like, above the vote, and later, the new administration of Volodymyr Zelenskyy. It seemed that should the United States become fully engrossed in an environment of domestic disinformation, he was likely to be involved. In January 2020, as I write this epilogue, President Trump's impeachment trial in the senate is about to begin, the primary elections are weeks away, and politicians are embracing and amplifying conspiracy theories rather than seeking a fulsome investigation of the truth. The information war not only continues to rage; it has come home. And we are losing.

The campaign against Ukraine—and, ultimately, against truth in America—began in late March, when I was on a Ukrainian intercity

train headed to Ivano-Frankivsk, a small city in the country's west, at the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. I sat knee to knee, shoulder to shoulder with five other passengers in a stuffy sleeper-car-turned-passenger-shuttle. We didn't speak much, except to offer apologies as we climbed over—and inevitably got caught on—each other's limbs when we left the car to stretch our legs. My mobile signal dipped in and out. Every time I caught it, I impatiently refreshed Twitter, bored.

In one cell-signal haven, an unwelcome tweet crossed my feed; Donald Trump, Jr., called for the resignation of the American Ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, claiming that the career foreign servant had taken partisan action against President Trump, among a host of other conspiracies about her work that did not square with the reality on the ground.[1] The man to my right, unabashedly reading over my shoulder, raised his eyebrows at the tweet. I shook my head and sighed. A week before the Ukrainian presidential election, a major test of the country's nascent democracy, Kyiv needed signals of stability and support from one of its most important allies, not this turmoil and manufactured intrigue.

Those signals would continue as the Trump administration and Republicans—led by Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani—spread a barrage of conspiracy theories throughout 2019 about Ukraine's alleged collusion with the American Democratic Party. They published op-eds and went on primetime television shows excoriating Ukrainian corruption. In May, Giuliani went so far as to say Zelenskyy was "surrounded literally by enemies of the President."[2]

President Trump even aired the theories on an official phone call with Zelenskyy on July 25. "I would like you to do us a favor, though," Trump begins after Zelenskyy asks for continued US support, according to the rough transcript of the phone call.[3] Trump blunders on in what seems to be an incoherent attempt to accuse Ukraine of being involved with Democratic plots to undermine his

administration through the Russia investigation. Later, Trump asks Ukraine's president to look into unfounded allegations of corruption against his likely political rival in the 2020 election, former Vice President Joe Biden. For good measure, he badmouths the American Ambassador, just as his son had done months earlier (unsurprisingly and unfortunately for both the United States and Ukraine, she was since recalled from her post). The call ends with an agreement that Rudy Giuliani will reach out to Zelenskyy.

That call is the basis of the impeachment proceedings against President Trump. His decision to place his own personal political future ahead of American national security is frightening, but it is damage that can be undone. It might happen thanks to his unlikely removal from office through the impeachment trial, the 2020 election, or whoever replaces him in 2024. What will have a more lasting influence on the United States is the alacrity, the complete lack of forethought, and the absolute moral depravity with which politicians supporting the president have repeated these unfounded narratives throughout the entire impeachment process. As we have learned from countries like Poland and Georgia, until a country's elected leaders recognize the threat disinformation poses to a democratic society and do not themselves engage in its amplification, we stand little chance of winning the information war.

The Trump-Ukraine scandal is the perfect environment in which to encourage the spread of disinformation. The president's missteps concern US foreign policy, about which Americans care little. It involves the betrayal of an ally about which Americans know even less, and what little they know is colored by the legacy of communism. "Ukraine is corrupt. Ukraine is useless. Ukraine should be part of Russia. Why should we care about Ukraine anyway?" they ask. When Members of Congress repeat falsehoods that Ukraine worked with the Democratic Party to try to steal the election from Trump, or that

the Biden family engaged in corrupt activity in Ukraine, it sounds plausible to many Americans. They do not have the time or volition to understand the details of Ukraine's anti-corruption reforms since 2014. They are unaware or perhaps choose to forget that members of Trump's own inner circle, including his former campaign manager Paul Manafort, have made millions supporting corrupt Ukrainian officials. Rudy Giuliani has also worked in Ukraine.

The president's supporters in Congress are homegrown purveyors of disinformation. They do not want to remind the American people of these inconvenient truths; they choose instead to shout lies through a megaphone, capitalizing on their constituents' unfamiliarity, ambivalence, or polarization. Dr. Fiona Hill, a highly respected scholar and the former Trump administration National Security Council Director for Russia, was so disturbed by this that in her public testimony before the House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, she implored the members to stop. "In the course of this investigation," she intoned in her distinct Northern English accent, "I would ask that you please not promote politically driven falsehoods that so clearly advance Russian interests."[4]

I agree with Dr. Hill, and I make my own plea: repeating lies may be a political salve for a party or a candidate in the short term, but no matter the outcome of the impeachment trial, this behavior will render a grave diagnosis for the health of our democracy—and that of the many others that look to America as an example—in the long term. In large part, the crisis of truth and trust the United States finds itself in today is one of our own makings. Until our elected officials begin to once again respect the truth, it is up to us—at protests, in the voting booth—to remind them it exists. It would be easy—as in the dystopic scenario that closed this book—to check out, to seek entertainment instead of information, and to shirk our civic duties and democratic discourse entirely. But unless we aim to live in an autocracy, it is something we cannot allow. Impeachments are rare; elections are yearly.

Acknowledgments

The Russian saying "в гостях хорошо, но дома лучше," which translates directly as "it's nice to visit friends, but nicer at home," or more idiomatically, "there's no place like home," is frequently offered to road-weary travelers. It is usually met with a wistful smile and thoughts of familiar comforts. This book is the culmination of three years of work at a time when I did not always react that way. More than once, while boarding a flight back to the United States, I was filled with apprehension. The country I was returning to and the discourse that had come to characterize us at home and abroad did not feel like the America I knew or the America I set out to represent in Ukraine as a Fulbright Fellow in 2016. This book is my contribution to changing that.

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Nina Jankowicz studies the intersection of democracy and technology in Central and Eastern Europe. She has advised the Ukrainian government on strategic communications under the auspices of a Fulbright-Clinton Public Policy Fellowship, and her writing has been published by *The New York Times, The Washington Post*, and *The Atlantic*, among others. Jankowicz began her career managing democracy assistance programs at the National Democratic Institute. She received her master's degree in Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and her bachelor's degree in Russian and Political Science from Bryn Mawr College. She lives outside of Washington, DC.

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