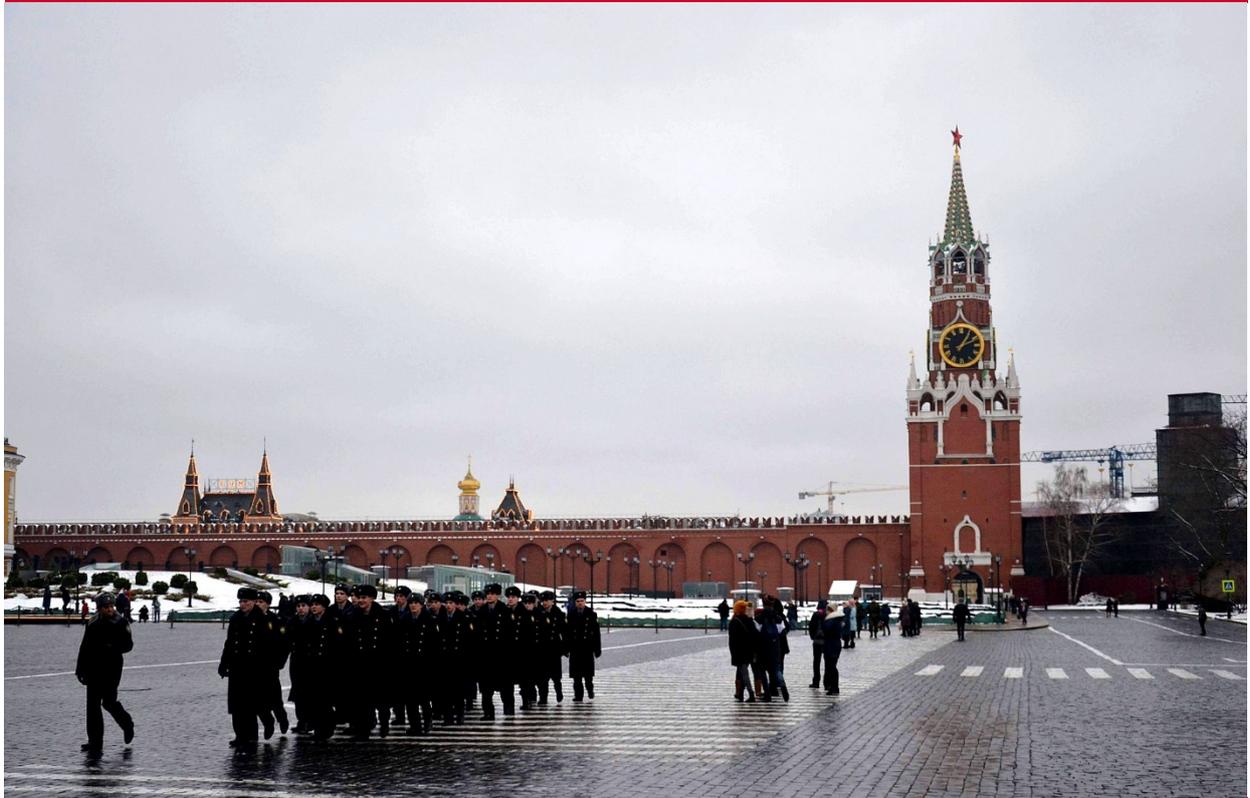


Centre d'étude des crises et conflits internationaux



The Eye of Moscow in the 2020 US Elections

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential elections is one of the most closely studied and commented event of recent American history. It has been examined by the whole spectrum of the American political world, going from every American political think-tanks, the tech giants – Twitter and Facebook among others – at the Silicon Valley, to private and state investigators, including the FBI (Foer, 2020). The most prominent report on the issue is the “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election” published by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, a document that has underlined a significant Russian activity in the US (Arutunyan, 2020).

The Americans know it: Russia's interference in the 2016 election was “real, intense and unprecedented in scale and scope” (Barnes et al., 2020). Indeed, the Russians put in place a combination of hidden warfare techniques, propaganda campaign, hacking and leaking disinformation in order to attain the US electoral system. However, it is important to understand that Russia is acting this way for one reason: it has to. As former US intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia Eugene Rumer puts it, Russia has to hit above its weight in order to compensate for its “conventional shortcomings vis-à-vis the West”. Cybercriminals are far less costly than armed units, but can be as efficient, or even more. The spending in conventional defence and in the economy between the US and Russia cannot be compared, but Russia has found a way to force the US to review its behaviour towards Russia: cyber and information warfare (Haverty, 2020). At the highest political level, Vladimir Putin recognised that internet would play a role in future relations with the US: “the rapid progress of electronic media has made news reporting enormously important and turned it into a formidable weapon that enables public opinion manipulations” (Posard, Kepe, et al., 2020). The statement of the chief of the Russian Armed Forces Valeri Gerasimov confirms this position: “non-military options have come to play a greater role in achieving political and strategic goals and, in some situations, are greatly superior to the power of weapons” (Lewis, 2020). Russia is not in favour of direct confrontation with the US, and therefore uses cyber and information techniques to gain in political leverage, making of Russian interference one of the most contemporary national security threat against the US (Eoyang et al., 2019).

The aim of this paper is to put ourselves in the shoes of the Russian authorities and to ask ourselves the question: why do they act and have they done it again in the 2020 US election? If yes, how could the international environment be less or more suitable for Russian interference in 2020 than in 2016? In the conclusion, we will discuss one of the solutions, presented by Joseph Nye during a conference of the Center for National Interest (Beebe et al., 2020), that can be explored in order to halt this cyberwarfare between the two superpowers.

1. RUSSIA'S CONTEMPORARY “ACTIVE MEASURES”

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union introduced a global influence campaign, which is composed of so-called “active measures” (aktivnye meropriyatiya). However, time has changed since the end of the Cold War and we have entered a new era in terms of interference efforts: the New Generation Warfare (Jones, 2019). The information republic – the control of the content by the state – has become the information democracy: today, every single one of us can decide what is media material (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017). Russia has adapted its “active measures” to this new era and

disinformation on social media has become the cornerstone of Russia's influence efforts to sow discord, undermine faith in institutions, create fear and, ultimately, achieve political goals.

It is thus not surprising that the actors behind this system of "active measures" have developed a highly-skilled plan of action: first, they infiltrate an audience – the American voters – second, they influence this audience, third, they spread disinformation and damaging narratives against certain politicians or organisations and their action (Robbins, 2020). In fact, research on the political effect of disinformation has proven that it does not change people's mind, but it exacerbates their fears and opinions. These stages are administrated by a multichanneled network of actors at different levels: the media actors (Sputnik, Russia Today and the Internet Research Agency) and Russia's intelligence agencies like the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation and the GRU (Robbins, 2020). These well-established disinformation channels are backed by trolls, hackers, and so on, active on social media (Posard, 2020).

According to research on the topic, the different groups of actors work hand in hand in order to accomplish the stages stated hereabove and all of them are somehow related to the Kremlin. This fact has been commonly acknowledged, except by one person: Vladimir Putin. He stated, "Russia did not intervene in the 2016 US elections at "state level"" (Beebe et al., 2020). What could that mean? In fact, determining who are the Russians operating and their link with the Kremlin is from major importance if the US wants to react. It is important to know which scenario is the most appropriate: did Vladimir Putin elaborate a strict and specific plan with all actors playing their role or did he provide a set of instructions, giving operational freedom to the actors, with the condition to report their action to the Kremlin? (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017). We cannot know what Vladimir Putin meant by "state-level", and he may truly believe that he did not give the order to state-sponsored organisations, but he is still the national representative and thus responsible for the actions taken within his territory. He may not be at the initiative, but if he wanted, he could have stopped it (Beebe et al., 2020). However, American intelligence officials have little doubt that Vladimir Putin was at the origin of the 2016 and 2020 interference.

The end of result of this high-developed and multichanneled propaganda machine is the exposition to disinformation of approximately 100 million Americans, according to Robert Mueller's report (Fly & Rosenberger, 2019) and 126 million according to Facebook (Eoyang et al., 2019). Regarding the 2016 US election intrusion, the Mueller report indicates that Russia interfered in "sweeping and systematic manner and this mainly through two operations". The first action was operated by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) on social media, which reached tens of millions of Americans. The second are the efforts of the Russian military intelligence GRU which strives to reach the American electoral systems and Democrat targets (Courtney, 2019). While the IRA – the main actor of Russian interference in 2016 – was more or less circumvented during the 2020 US elections, the GRU has not ceased its actions. Those two main organisations involved in interference will be discussed, chosen on the basis of their link with the Kremlin and the importance of their influence during the 2016 US election.

The GRU

The GRU or the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation has engaged in cyberoperations around the world, but especially in the US. Donald Trump's homeland security adviser Thomas P. Bossert stated: "The G.R.U.'s hackers operate as a strategic arm

of the Russian state, and they have been using this cybertool as a military weapon in a military campaign” (Schmidt & Perlroth, 2020). The organisation’s main method is to infiltrate the computers of American states, as it did in a small software company in Florida in 2016 (Foer, 2020).

In fact, what the Russians cannot do from afar, they will do it with agents on the ground. The GRU has acknowledged having led operations in Rio de Janeiro, Kuala Lumpur, The Hague in order to spy high-ranked officials and to hack on software systems or WIFI networks (Foer, 2020).

The Internet Research Agency

The Internet Research Agency, stationed in Saint-Petersburg, has updated the “active measures” to the digital information age, making use of Facebook, Instagram, bots and trolls. Thanks to the technologic advancement and the use of social media, contemporary Russian disinformation have been more successful than any Soviet leader could have wished for (Jones, 2019). The IRA is in fact constituted of well-funded and high-professional trolls: people are sitting behind their screen all day long, pretending to be Americans, conducting disinformation and social media operations – in the form of social posts, memes, videos, and so on – in order to gain followers and to exacerbate pre-existing divisions in American society (Niu et al., 2020).

According to the US Department of Justice, the IRA has been active since 2014: “the Internet Research Agency is a Russian organization engaged in operations to interfere with elections and political processes” (Jones, 2018). The Department of Justice issued this statement shortly after the IRA published a manifesto on its website on the day of the 2018 US midterm election which declares:

Soon after November 6, you will realize that your vote means nothing. We decide who you vote for and what candidates will win or lose. Whether you vote or not, there is no difference as we control the voting and counting systems. Remember, your vote has zero value. We are choosing for you (Foer, 2020).

The statement is absurd. But if Americans came to believe that Russia did decide in their place and can reach their electoral processes, it would increase their distrust in American institutions, achieving Russia’s political goals. Following this event, the Department of Justice decided to release 13 Russian names of people who are reportedly linked to the IRA and to indict the IRA for interference in electoral processes (Sanchez, 2018). However, even though the US has managed to circumvent many of the IRA’s operations, they are back at it again. The organisation is trying to repeat its efforts from four years ago. Through a network of fake accounts disseminating fake news, it aimed to push voters away from the Democratic candidate Joe Biden, to help Donald Trump, who was, by the way, Russia’s best ally in these efforts (Frenkel & Barnes, 2020).

In order for the US to react to the very organisation of Russian interference campaigns, many experts highlighted that the first question to answer is the motivations of Russia. Why do they act?

2. RUSSIA’S MOTIVATIONS FOR INTERFERENCE

It has become official that the US has not been spared from foreign interference during the 2020 US elections (Wright, 2019). American experts have confirmed that countries like Russia, but also China and Iran have expanded their influence efforts regarding the election. However, the question they have not yet answered is the extent of the Russian operations and how Vladimir Putin wants to

deal with it (Barnes & Sanger, 2020). In order to answer these questions, we must ask ourselves the question about the motivations for Moscow to intervene.

As former FBI Special Agent and fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute Clint Watts perfectly resumes:

... Moscow's primary objective is to increase its global standing and influence by weakening America — domestically and abroad — through efforts to sow discord, distract, shape public sentiment and undermine trust in Western democratic institutions and processes (Sanger & Kanno-Youngs, 2020).

The motivations are thus intertwined and, in fact, result from each other. Hereunder, we will discuss the different hypotheses individually. Depending on the hypothesis we chose to support, the response will be different.

Defending Russia

The departure point of Russian reasoning is to say that what Americans do to them, they will do it in return. It was inevitable that Russia would retaliate in the US because they were complaining about American interference efforts in Russia to bring “democracy” to the country (Beebe et al., 2020). The Russian Director of the Department of International Information Security Andrei Krutskikh stated in 2018:

According to American media, the United States has seriously interfered in the affairs of other countries at least 85 times. And they have interfered in our political processes too. We are not going to give any unilateral promises or declaration and we especially do not intend to accept the blame for any incidents that Russia is allegedly involved in (Arutunyan, 2020).

Even if there is no clear reciprocity, the Kremlin is convinced that the US is interfering in Russian politics but is denying doing so. Therefore, Russia will also deny interference (Arutunyan, 2020). From the point of view of the Russians, they are not initiating the conflict, because it is the US that is not able to take into account Russia's interest in the new post-Soviet space and in other areas. Therefore, Russia will seek for other allies and cooperation, for example it is currently building its relationship with China.

It is not *per se* their dislike towards the US that make them act this way but rather to defend themselves. They are taking seriously the acts of the US on the international scene – like the withdrawal of the US from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Iranian nuclear deal – that have to be countered by creating a counterbalance (Beebe et al., 2020). This vision of the Russian leaders is strengthened by their insecurity feeling, as developed by Zbigniew Brzezinski. To this day, Russia sees itself as under attack undermined by its adversaries. From the Russian point of view, the anti-government protests the country has witnessed over the last years and the events in its near abroad – Ukraine, Georgia and now Belarus – are conducted by the aggressor: the US, that seeks to undermine Russia's foreign policy and economic ambitions. Consequently, the Kremlin perceives the interference in US elections as a symmetrical response (Sonin, 2020). Valeri Gerasimov once again gave a definition that perfectly explains the Russian of conception of “non-linear warfare” (Cordesman & Hwang, 2020):

The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population (Cordesman & Hwang, 2020).

As explained in the introduction, Moscow is continuing its strategic competition with the US through asymmetric threats because it has to. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Putin's narrative has always been to render to Russia its power and prestige, and this through undermining the US national interests. The following FBI assessment perfectly describes how contemporary the KGB active measures can be in the explanation of Russia's foreign policy goals (Jones, 2019):

Although it is often difficult to judge the effectiveness of specific active measures operations, the Soviets believe these operations have a cumulative effect and are detrimental to U.S. foreign policy and national security interests. Furthermore, the Soviets believe that their active measures operations in the United States do contribute to their overall strategy to advance Soviet foreign policy interests, influence U.S. government policies, and in general discredit the United States (Jones, 2019).

The end objective is to secure one's national interests and since the GDP of Russia is equivalent to the one of Texas, Russia has to avoid direct conflict with a superpower like the US (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017). Ironically, Russia is even weaker than it was in Soviet times: its economy is not solid, Moscow has lost its neighbouring countries, it does not have a popular ideology (Jones, 2018), but Russia has developed a weapon that shall not be underestimated: a great network of information and cyber warfare. And it is working quite well.

Exacerbating divisions

The motivations that will be stated now are ways to achieve the political goals explained before. As Robert Mueller explained, the Russian government carried out interference campaign to “provoke and amplify political and social discord” (Fly & Rosenberger, 2019). These efforts have never been as fructuous as in 2020, since we have never witnessed such a divided American society as we did last year.

The concept of reflexive control is the intellectual basis that can be considered for the Russian efforts during the 2020 US election. If we understand how reflexive control works, we will understand Russia's strategy. The theory considers that we live in a polarised world of cooperation and conflict and that we make decisions based on who is our friend and who is our enemy (Posard, Marrone, et al., 2020). Russian intelligence will simply use these pre-existing conflicts and feed it with information to exacerbate them even more, the end goal being pushing people to make pre-determined decisions in order to make consensus – the bedrock of American democracy – impossible (Posard, 2020). Consequently, reflexive control does not try to convince one group that it is in opposition with another group, it assumes that this conflict already exists and that it can strengthen the perception of “us vs them”. The ultimate objective is to make it impossible for the two groups to find common ground on issues of public concern (Posard, Kepe, et al., 2020).

If we apply this concept of reflexive control to the case of Russian interference in the 2020 US election, we will find that the aim was to divide American society even more. Indeed, reports indicate that Russia-backed operations have attempted to create discord by using existing movements across the political ideological spectrum and have worked on creating new ones. The issues at stake can be very broad: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, geography and so on (Posard, 2020). No need to explain that race and political affiliation were the main focus points of Russian intelligence in the 2020 US election. Russian trolls have reportedly trying to target white supremacist and nationalist groups and civil rights activists, like the Black Lives Matter group (Posard, 2020). However, it goes further than simply wanting to exaggerate division. The elected candidate will have to recover the division. Indeed, we can imagine that one of the objectives of the Biden administration will be to reunite America, as their slogan “Build Back Better” and “Unite for A Better America” suggest. What does that mean for Russia? Russia imagines that since Joe Biden will focus on reuniting America, it will be less inclined to fight Russia (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017). The ultimate goal is thus political paralysis (Posard, Marrone, et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, what American leaders need to understand is that no matter how effective Russia’s reflexive control is, it would not have resonated so loudly without an already deep polarised American society (Hill, 2020). Russia’s actions should not be overestimated: they are effective above all because of the general political environment in the US. It would be better for American leaders to reduce unrest and diminish populist sentiments, because what was back in 2016 a vulnerability of American society, has become today a national security crisis and, consequently, an even easier target for interference (Lewis, 2020). Since 2016, American intelligence has learnt about Russia’s tactics and ways to circumvent its action. Therefore, there was a possibility for Russia’s operations to be less effective in 2020, if only the American society was not so polarised. The computers are not being hacked, but the brains of American voters. As long as public discontent will not be addressed, Russia will continue to exploit discontent, and democratic regimes will remain vulnerable (Jones, 2019) – will it be the US or European countries.

An important *nota bene* here is the fact that the Russian population is also the target of Russia’s effort. The effect on the Russian population is important because it is often domestic issues that pushes one country’s foreign policy. Vladimir Putin wants to give its people the impression that “we do not want to be like them” (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017). He wants to convince its nation that it has to stay united, a crucial narrative in current times, if we think about the recent upheavals in the near abroad and in Russia itself. The Kremlin wants to take any kind of evidence of disfunction in the West and used it for internal propaganda (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017).

Breaching trust in institutions

One of the motivations of Russia, which is linked to the efforts of sowing discord, is to decrease the population’s trust towards American institutions and their electoral system (Barnes & Sanger, 2020). According to American intelligence assessments, Project Lakhta – the name given to the information operations during the 2016 US elections – was mainly put in place in order to swing the election to Donald Trump (Sanchez, 2018). However, this year, experts have come to different conclusions: the main aim of Russia would be to erode confidence in the American electoral system. The Kremlin seeks to undermine the US democratic institutions by disrupting public trust and

manipulating the Americans' attitude towards their own the democratic institutions and processes (Lewis, 2020).

In the case of the 2020 US election, it has become easier for Russia to create doubts into the Americans' brain since their own former president himself, Donald Trump, has thrown the election results into doubt. Consequently, Russia does not even have to change a single vote, but rather to entertain the narrative of Donald Trump (Barnes, 2020). The Chair of the House Intelligence Committee Adam Schiff perfectly explains this strategy in the following statement:

It was far easier for adversaries to cause Americans to doubt that they can rely on the results of the election. They don't actually need to change the votes; they just need to diminish voters' confidence that the votes are accurate [...] The Russians have concluded it is easier to change the voters than the vote (Barnes, 2020).

Having this in mind, the joint warning issued by the FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency of the Department of Homeland Security is not surprising. It states that the "vulnerability of American voting systems may be the greatest in the days after the election" (Barnes & Sanger, 2020). According to the two institutions, during the period when the outcome is pending, hackers have the opportunity to amplify the disinformation regarding voter or ballot fraud, votes suppressions, illegal vote counting, and so on, enhancing the image of illegitimate elections. In the context of the COVID19 crisis, the US had to adapt and had to put in place mail-in ballots. However, according the former information security official Mick Baccio, this reality would lead to a long counting period, during which foreign interference could intensify:

As votes are being counted, foreign powers could seek to undermined confidence in the vote. The post-election period is what I am most concerned about. The window of time where we are uncertain, that is when they will drop their madness (Barnes & Sanger, 2020).

Through undermining trust between society and government institutions in democratic countries, Vladimir Putin wants to present himself as the leader of an illiberal world. His goal is to blur the value of democracy as a contrast to his authoritarianism ('2020 Country Brief', 2020) and to propose a world order and values that are alternative to the ones defended by the United States, namely a liberal-based world order (Posard, Kepe, et al., 2020). This strategy encompasses the efforts made in the 2016 US election, the 2018 midterm election and the 2020 US, not to forget elections in European democracies.

Supporting Donald Trump

The first element to take into consideration: Vladimir Putin distrusts all American political leaders, like all Russian and Soviet leaders always have. But there may be American presidents that he dislikes more than other – Barack Obama is a perfect example (Sonin, 2020). A classified White House memo concluded in 1984 that "the principal method by which the Soviets attempt to influence American voters is by campaigning against the candidate and the Party they do not like" (Jones, 2019). This was true in 2016, when Moscow obviously preferred Donald Trump to be elected than Hilary Clinton, but the situation has changed in 2020 (Cordesman & Hwang, 2020). In fact, the Kremlin's attitude towards Donald Trump is more complex than commonly presumed. The Russian elite could not reach a consensus on whether Donald Trump was the best candidate for Russia (Stanovaya, 2020).

On the one hand, a part of the elite still believed that Donald Trump was “their man”. They believed that if Donald Trump could have, he would have started a new era of collaboration between the two countries. However, this group was composed of increasingly fewer members of the elite and their voice became more and more silenced inside the Kremlin. Within this group, there are the ones that are of the opinion that Donald Trump might not be the objective, but an instrument to sow chaos in the US political class and destroy Western alliance. It is not hard to understand why: Donald Trump has divided the Americans more than ever. In this context, it does not really matter if Russia can get something from Donald Trump, as long as his destructive policies make the US more fragile and more exposed. Moreover, Donald Trump’s isolationist position in regard to foreign policy has weakened the country’s reputation abroad (Stanovaya, 2020). As Biden spokesman Andrew Bates stated:

It is absolutely clear who Vladimir Putin wants to win this election, because Donald Trump’s foreign policy has been a gift to the Kremlin (Barnes & Sanger, 2020).

Russia welcomes heartily the fact that the US does not intervene in internal affairs, nor in conflicts within the post-Soviet space or even in geopolitical conflict of high importance like Syria. This thinking based on national interest is present among the *siloviki*¹. They would like to reach an agreement with the US in areas where it is possible, and both countries to stay out of internal affairs in matters on which they disagree (Stanovaya, 2020).

On the other hand, there is the Russian elite who did not support Donald Trump’s re-election. The group includes people involved in diplomatic services and other experts and advisers in the foreign policy field. They considered that Donald Trump’s unpredictability and unprofessional behaviour could be a threat to Russia, and the international community as a whole. The destruction of a strategic partnership, the withdrawal of key international arrangement, the threat to Nord Stream 2, ... all these events created a kind of “Trump fatigue”. According to them, Joe Biden’s victory was not the worst scenario for Russia (Stanovaya, 2020).

Russia’s support for Donald Trump is thus called into doubt, but did Russia support Joe Biden then? Not really. In August 2020, US intelligence officials said that Russia was actively working to denigrate the Democrat nominee Joe Biden, as well as the tech giant Microsoft who informed Joe Biden that he might have been targeted by Russian-backed actors – Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the claim “nonsense” (Haverty, 2020). The Kremlin thus did not stop his efforts to favour one candidate over another, just like it did in 2016 against Hillary Clinton. There are reasons why Vladimir Putin would have preferred Donald Trump to be re-elected above Joe Biden. During his electoral campaign in July, Joe Biden said that he would “exact a high price for any interference in this year’s election” and that he was “putting the Kremlin and other foreign governments on notice”. He assured that he would retaliate against any interference through “sanctions, asset freezes, cyber responses, and the exposure of corruption” (Shuster, 2020). In this scenario, no wonder that Russia would have preferred a cooperative Donald Trump.

However, Joe Biden could bring some positivity in the US-Russia relationship. First of all, Joe Biden’s presidency will be predictable. His attitude will match with his actions. Vladimir Putin might not like certain of his policies, but he will know how to act without uncertainties unanswered.

¹ The long-time “loyalists” of Vladimir Putin, which originate from the security services, especially from his KGB years.

Secondly, Joe Biden might have the intention to professionalise the relationship between the two countries. He knows that dialogue matters, even when bilateral relations are at their lowest point (Pifer, 2020). A return to a more regular and diplomatic dialogue seems thus on the agenda between the two countries now that Joe Biden has been elected.

Did Russia want to be uncovered?

The main motivations for Russian interference have been described. A subsequent question arises from this analysis: did Russia want his actions to be discovered? It seems obvious. Russia knows what it is doing, and Russia knows that the US knows (2020). In March 2018, former FBI director James Comey stated at his hearing: “They were unusually loud in their intervention. It is almost as if they did not care that we knew.” (Sanchez, 2018). Many experts share the same opinion: regarding Russia’s skills on the matter, if they wanted to be hidden, they would have (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017). But why did they want to be seen? Difficult question. Here again, the hypothesis we chose can lead to different reactions.

A show of force is one hypothesis. It can be that the Russians wanted to show that they can, but without *per se* using all their material. The real potential of Russian malware is more impressive than it has used for now. Russians can create a black out on election day, they can shut down important programs and so on. But if they did, the retaliation would be too costly to pay for (Polyakova et al., 2018). Is it a deterrent action? It can be approached as a warning that if the US messes with them, they will retaliate. This approach signs up with the idea that Russia is trying to create a counterbalance against the US and is trying to change the behaviour of its adversary. Russia has moved to a position where it is capable of captivating the attention of the US political class. Through their interference operations, they create a balance in which the US may reconsider its place (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017).

3. RUSSIA’S BEST ALLY: DONALD TRUMP

It was not possible to end this paper without discussing one peculiarity of the past 2020 election regarding foreign interference, namely the attitude of the former President Donald Trump towards the matter. If the aim of Russia was to breach the trust towards American institutions, then it has found a reliable ally: the former President himself.

During the 2016 electoral cycle, Russia had launched attacks mainly on two fronts: using cyberattacks to hack US election infrastructure and spreading disinformation through social media. However, the second front seemed less visible in the 2020 election, according to the FBI director Christopher Wray (Shuster, 2020). Bret Schafer, who tracks foreign disinformation campaigns at the Alliance for Securing Democracy, gives a simple explanation:

Russian propaganda seems less visible online because our own discourse on social media is so toxic, polarized, and filled with wild conspiracy theories, that it is somewhat unnecessary for Russia to do too much more than amplify what is already out there. There are several possible explanations for the Kremlin’s relative restraint — but one of the likeliest is that much of the damage Vladimir Putin’s government could have inflicted upon us we were already inflicting upon ourselves (Shuster, 2020).

Indeed, in 2016, the Russians had to make up false news or manipulate narratives for their disinformation efforts. They truly had to put effort into inventing credible fake news. But during the

2020 election, they did not write anything that was not already written on social media. This year their task was much easier, especially thanks to Donald Trump's own efforts to polarise American society himself. According to analysts, Russian disinformation in the 2020 US election has mainly contained re-utilisation and aggravation of Donald Trump's tweets, misleading contents and false charges (Sanger & Kanno-Youngs, 2020).

One example are the misleading statements of Donald Trump regarding the danger of mail-in ballots that the Russians did not hesitate to amplify. Public opinion was quite reassured and public controversy was rare when experts made it clear that mail-in voting was secured (Barnes, 2020)...until Donald Trump unloaded all his false statements. Knowing that Russian disinformation efforts was focused on existing controversies, House Intelligence Chairman Adam Schiff asked the intelligence agencies to keep an eye on Russian disinformation efforts from the moment Donald Trump started to criticise mail-in ballots. They did not find any Russian attempt to interfere with mail-in voting or fake ballots, but they did notice a spread of disinformation about a compromised voting system, the main aim being to manipulate public opinion in making them believe the Trump narrative (Barnes, 2020).

Clint Watts, a former F.B.I. special agent and a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute thus resumes simply why the Russians were successful in 2020: "active measures worked this time because the commander in chief has used Russian active measures at times against his opponents" (Groll, 2017). Donald Trump's own attacks on the voting system threatens democracy, and he continues his actions even after the elections. The danger of electoral disinformation was nearly exclusively linked to foreign interference before the 2020 US election, but Donald Trump's actions have made clear that also disinformation from domestic sources, let alone from the President of the United States, can reach epidemic proportions (Fidler, 2020). Domestic disinformation has only amplified foreign disinformation operations, and not the contrary. We can believe that even after the election, since the former president is himself casting doubt on the election results, Russian disinformation is still doing its job.

Another important element of Russian interference under Donald Trump is that he does not only help Russian disinformation to take place, but he even denies the very existence of Russian interference, and consequently, undermines his country's defences (Eoyang et al., 2019). It is a true democratic problem that the President of the United States denies foreign interference, because a democracy cannot defend itself if it cannot determine the attacks against it (Foer, 2020). Donald Trump has clearly refused to acknowledge that Russia interfered on his behalf during the 2016 US election and during the 2020 electoral campaign. Experts and political actors all agree to say that during his presidency, Donald Trump has repeatedly downplayed Russian interference and refused to accept the conclusion of the US intelligence community because it would make him "look bad" (Kanno-Youngs, 2020). Donald Trump has always been very interested in his reputation, but the intention of minimising foreign interference is against American values and discredits his own authority (Eoyang et al., 2019).

The most worrying, in fact, is not that Donald Trump has chosen to minimise the attention brought to Russian interference, but that he decided to use it to his advantage. Indeed, according to Robert Mueller's report, Donald Trump has embraced the Russian efforts and even obstructed any kind of investigation on the matter (Groll & Mackinnon, 2019). This is where Donald Trump becomes dangerous: he does not want to punish interference but seeks to solicit it when it serves his interests.

When asked if he would call the FBI in case of foreign interference or use it for political ends, he answered: "I think maybe you do both. I think you might want to listen; there isn't anything wrong with listening." (Groll & Mackinnon, 2019). He also stated that he might accept information from a foreign country during the 2020 US electoral campaign. The attitude of Donald Trump will have one consequence for sure: the Russians will not stop. Fiona Hill, a scholar who served as the top Russia expert on Trump's National Security Council, explained that "the fact that they faced so little consequence for their action gives them little reason to stop" (Foer, 2020).

One of the tactics that the Trump administration has used in order to diminish the importance of Russian interference in the public debate, is to shift the accusation on China. As a matter of fact, Donald Trump's key advisers have been very strong in putting forward the argument that China was a bigger threat to electoral interference than Russia (Herb, 2020). Attorney General William Barr and National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien are two of them who claim that China poses the biggest danger, blurring the line between broader national security concerns from China and specific election interference concerns coming from Russia (Herb, 2020). However, experts do not deny the fact that countries like China and Iran are a threat to foreign interference: Microsoft has admitted that also Chinese and Iranian hackers have tried to diffuse disinformation regarding the 2020 US election. However, there is a consensus among experts and officials that the most dangerous and wide meddling in the 2020 US elections was coming from Russia. Those countries have targeted the US, but do not pose an immediate threat as Russia does. Through false statements, Donald Trump's advisers are misleading public opinion that China is a bigger threat, as cover to avoid action against Russian interference (Herb, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Over the last presidential elections, the US has been facing an unconventional threat: foreign interference in their elections. Indeed, already in 2016, the Mueller report highlighted the threats coming from adversaries, including Russia. We can conclude that the relationship between Russia and the US is at its lowest point since the end of the Cold War ('2020 Country Brief', 2020). The two countries have not much in common. Russia is an undemocratic country, the population has no say regarding election results, the media and press is controlled by the state and information has been weaponised (Jones, 2019). The Kremlin had already claimed a long time ago that information could become a weapon, while Washington stayed true to its values by claiming that information should be free (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017). However, over the last years, the Americans were pushed to reconsider their position since information became dangerous for their own institutional system. How should the US react to this threat without changing the nature of its values and rights? It is certainly easier for Russia to do deception since transparency, freedom of press and speech are not common in Russia (Beebe et al., 2017).

However, the American leaders play an important role in the effectiveness of the Russian operation and we can conclude that Donald Trump's presidency has been a gift to Russian intelligence. Not only did the preferred candidate win in 2016, but he spent his term fulfilling what the Russians hoped for: undermining American institutions, sowing discord in American society and isolating the nation from international relations. Instead of enjoying this triumph, Russia did not stop its efforts in 2020 (Foer, 2020). The motivations of Russia might have changed over time, but one aim is clear: to create political paralysis in the US in order for Russia to recover its international place. Russia will thus

not cease the interference operations that every American intelligence agent has investigated, because it is a too cost-effective asymmetric weapon that the weak can use against the strong (Courtney, 2019). Robert Mueller's statement perfectly describes the current environment in which the US finds itself today:

I hope this is not the new normal, but I fear it is. They are doing it as we sit here, and they expect to do it during the next campaign. I have seen a number of challenges to our democracy, but the Russian government's effort to interfere in our election is among the most serious (Groll & Mackinnon, 2019).

Robert Mueller was right: Russia did it again in 2020. Foreign interference has become one of the most important threats to national security, as other countries like Iran and China are attempting to develop the same ability as Russia.

This state affairs, however, can be improved. This issue is getting in the way of improving Russia-US relations, causing harm to both countries. A first step towards a *détente* could be to determine Russia's main motivation. As we have seen in this paper, there are several hypotheses on Russian interference – Russia wants to destroy democracy, Russia wants to defend itself or Russia wants the American attitude to change. A hypothesis is built on arguments that support that hypothesis, but maybe it would be more effective to look for disconfirming hypotheses: what evidence is not present (Beebe & Haseltine, 2017). In the search for the truth behind Russian interference the prominent American political analyst Joseph Nye proposed an interesting solution: a bilateral agreement based on unilateral declarations on foreign interference. The positive side of a unilateral declarations is that common interests will prevail. Russia will be able to continue to use Sputnik and Russia Today, and the US will continue to criticize human rights violations in Russia, but both countries will cooperate in areas of common interest. Each country could also impose its red lines and its size of escalation: what action would lead to retaliation? The means that are put in place in case of non-respect would therefore be as important as the terms of the agreement itself. In this framework, the two countries could organise regular consultations because the threat of escalation could inflict considerable damage to both countries (Beebe et al., 2020). The Kremlin itself published on its website a warning about the “risk of a large-scale confrontation in the digital field” and the intention for Russia to exchange “guarantees of non-intervention into internal affairs of each other, including into electoral processes” (Shuster, 2020).

The question to ask is not whether such an agreement would last but if the Russian government would enter in a dialogue. Their response could shed light on Russia's true intentions. Indeed, if the aim of Russia is to change US attitude, it might accept the deal, while if the main objective is to crash democracy, it will not (Beebe et al., 2020). A mutual deal will show the truth: Russia's attitude towards the deal will prove what the country aims to achieve. The research on foreign interference opens a window of solutions to improve the relations of both powers regarding the issue but be sure: cooperation will be key to diminish the threat of foreign interference and cyberwarfare.

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