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**U.S. COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
HELSINKI COMMISSION
HEARING
“THE SCOURGE OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION”**

**Testimony of Melissa Hooper
Director of Human Rights and Civil Society**

Human Rights First

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Introduction

Senator Gardner, Co-Chair Smith, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Helsinki Commission, I would like to thank you and Chairman Wicker for giving me the opportunity to testify today regarding the damage caused to democracy and human rights globally by Russian disinformation efforts in the United States and in Europe, the efforts of some European countries to respond, and steps the United States should consider to counter Russia's weaponization of information.

I want to address these issues from the perspective of someone who has studied Russia's interference strategies as they operated in Russia during my years living there, and followed their development in Europe, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In the United States, we are still grappling with the ramifications of the Russian government's meddling in the 2016 Presidential election. Just last week, Facebook revealed its sale of \$100,000 worth of ads promoting divisive social messages to 470 fake, likely-Russian-owned sites. Since the election, Congress and other policy-makers have become increasingly sensitized to the Russian government's use of various forms of disinformation, including Russian-funded media outlets that publish false or misleading stories, automated bots and trolls that disseminate false information to create the appearance of a "grassroots" movement, the use of faux "experts," foundations and think tanks that lend a veneer of credibility to fabricated information, and other methods intended to sow confusion and threaten the foundations of democracy – including the concepts of truth and trust.

The use of disinformation is not the Russian government's sole strategy, but is part of a coordinated effort to disrupt and attack liberal policies, institutions, and norms wherever the opportunity arises, with an overarching goal of fracturing the European Union and the trans-Atlantic alliance. Other strategies include economic influence, in which key figures are offered lucrative deals that implicate them in Russian corruption – such as has occurred in Germany, the UK, and the Czech Republic; electoral disruption, such as funding fringe political parties – as has occurred in Germany and France; and the weakening of multilateral organizations such as the OSCE or UN bodies through obstructionist policies.

At Human Rights First, we have documented the effectiveness of these threats in Eastern Europe, including how Russia has contributed to significant backsliding on democracy and human rights in Poland and Hungary – each a NATO ally. We are seeing Russia make inroads in Central and Eastern Europe through the use of online bots and trolls in Poland, the buying off of politicians and business leaders in Hungary and the Czech Republic, the funding of youth military camps in Hungary and Slovakia, and the dissemination of fabricated stories about migrants and Muslims across Europe, but particularly in Germany.

Contributions to Backsliding in Hungary and Poland; Disruption in Germany

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government often rubber stamps Kremlin propaganda. The Hungarian government frequently shares the Kremlin's interest in disrupting E.U. policy, unity, and principles of equality and human rights, particularly when it comes to refugee issues. Indeed, the Hungarian government itself often generates false information on migrants, refugees, and the E.U., messages that align with the views of the Kremlin.

Russia has gained a foothold in Hungary through its support for business projects such as the expansion of the PAKS nuclear power plant, the modernization of the Budapest metro, and the MET gas trading enterprise. Russia also funds far-right and paramilitary groups in Hungary.

In Poland, Russophobia runs strong, given the two countries' histories. Today, Russia sponsors around 20 sites that self-identify as "right-wing" Polish websites that do not acknowledge their Russian connections. These outlets work with other disruptive media in Poland to source stories that support the Russian perspective on the E.U., NATO, migrants, and refugees. Russia also disseminates pro-Kremlin propaganda through a network of bots and trolls. In a parallel to our own experience, these programs seek to spread disinformation while making certain ideas appear grassroots-supported.

Importantly, the Hungarian and Polish publics largely disagree with anti-E.U. and anti-democracy messaging. According to several studies, nearly 80% of these populations want to stay in the E.U. and NATO, despite propaganda attacking these institutions. Thus, programs in Eastern Europe that shore up democratic institutions are likely to yield positive returns.

In addition to the propagation of disinformation, Russia also sponsors "Government Organized NGOs," or GONGOs in Poland, Hungary, Germany, and across Europe. These groups, which include advocacy organizations, foundations, and think tanks, put out false or misleading analyses, studies, expert statements, and reports on topics of interest to the Kremlin including on sanctions, Ukraine, migration, E.U. unity, and the efficacy of democracy. Frequently sponsored by oligarchs or organizations with cultural or religious ties to the Kremlin, these GONGOs provide a veneer of legitimacy to misleading data and arguments.

A number of these organizations espouse the neo-Eurasianist philosophy of Kremlin advisor Alexander Dugin, who argues that democracy is waning globally. We now see Eurasian think tanks and NGOs cropping up all over Europe, including via websites that actively traffic in false information. Two pro-Kremlin Eurasian organizations are particularly active putting out information ahead of the upcoming election in Germany. The German Center for Eurasian Studies is based in Berlin. The other - the European Center for Geopolitical Analysis - is based in Warsaw.

A clear example of how the Kremlin has employed disinformation in conjunction with other strategies of disruption is its use of false stories about migrants, refugees, and Muslims, and the threats they allegedly present to national security and public health. In partnership with far-right parties in Germany, the Kremlin has weaponized these false stories to sow fear and distrust, a wedge that it uses to undercut support for Angela Merkel and the CDU.

As a number of studies have shown, our brains are wired to increasingly believe a statement is true the more often we hear it. Russia has become expert at using this brain science against us, carefully repeating false facts—in this instance, about Muslim immigrants.

At Human Rights First, we call the spread of social media targeting minority communities, abetted by disinformation, "weaponized speech." Next month we'll be issuing a report on how to combat it.

One well-known example of weaponized speech is the 2016 so-called "Lisa F. case." It is the story of a 13-year old Russian-German girl in Germany who didn't come home one night. Russian media spread a false narrative that she was kidnapped and raped by Muslim migrants.

German police debunked this story soon after interviewing the alleged victim. Yet Russian media, German far-right parties, and Russian political leaders (including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov), continued to promulgate the false story. These voices urged the Russlanddeutsche, ethnic Germans who lived for generations in Russia but have now returned to Germany, to question whether the German police were covering up the alleged crimes of migrants for political reasons.

As a result, thousands of Russlanddeutsche came out into German streets to protest the alleged cover-up and Angela Merkel's migration policy. Protests concerning a non-event are the stuff of dreams for the Kremlin, as they cause Europeans to question their institutions and their values of democracy and tolerance.

The German Election: Russian-funded Think Tanks and German Far-Right Parties

I conducted my own research into Russian disinformation in Germany earlier this year. I was interested in Russia's use of think tanks, particularly in the run-up to Germany's September election, and their possible link to the far-right and ultra-nationalist parties Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and National Democratic Party (NPD).

I knew that AfD's top candidate on the party slate, Alexander Gauland, had traveled to Russia last year and met with Alexander Dugin. He also met the head of a Berlin-based Russian think tank, Boris Yakunin. AfD has also possibly received funding from the Kremlin. I also knew that leaders of the neo-Nazi NPD had attended a conference in St. Petersburg at the invitation of Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, and that NPD had publicly expressed support for Putin and pro-Russian policies in Germany.

I tracked the information, statements, and papers put out by two Berlin-based, Russian-funded organizations: the Dialogue of Civilizations – Yakunin's organization, and the Center for Continental Cooperation, now called the German Center for Eurasian Studies. I also tracked the statements and policy papers of AfD and NPD leaders.

What I found was that the Russian-funded think tanks and German far-right parties were putting out similar messages on a number of key topics including the E.U., NATO, the United States, Western democracy, and Western media. In general, these included attacks on multilateral institutions built on liberal democratic values, and indictments of these institutions as serving only elites. Specifically, both argued that Western democracy had been degraded by multiculturalism, that Western media was untrustworthy, that the E.U. and the U.S. were not truly free or democratic, and that the U.S. used NATO and other tools to subject the world to its hegemony.

It bears noting that the reach of these campaigns is at present quite small. Overall, Germany seems to be prepared to fend off interference around its upcoming election. Learning from the experiences of the recent U.S. and French elections, German leaders have issued public warnings about potential Russian cyberattacks and disinformation. The German public has therefore been sensitized to the possibility of interference.

However, success is not a foregone conclusion. About three million Russian speakers are being targeted daily with disinformation about refugees, same-sex marriage, terrorism, and defense

issues. Merkel's pro-U.S. stance, and support for liberal democratic values, is being used by Russia to exploit anti-Americanism and anti-migrant sentiment.

Germany has also made some missteps in responding to disinformation. The Network Enforcement Act it passed in June essentially forces social media companies to be the arbiter of what constitutes free speech and what violates German law. This is a dangerous, short-sighted approach that will inevitably force corporations to rely heavily on censorship. The danger of this approach can be seen in the fact that Russia saw fit to pass an almost identical version of the German law. Ukraine is also dangerously responding with a wave of censorship.

The patterns I have described are by now familiar because we have seen them here at home: Russia's disinformation campaigns discredit democratic institutions, such as elections and independent media, and are accompanied by other strategies of interference, such as the use of corruption to infiltrate policy-making bodies, the employment of faux experts to echo Russia's false claims, and the funding of disruptive agents such as extreme political parties and movements.

We need to act comprehensively against these strategies.

In January, then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said that the attacks that occurred around the U.S. presidential election were a "clarion call" for action "against a threat to the very foundation of our democratic political system." This threat is not confined to the immediate run-up to elections. Foreign challenges to our democracy are occurring right now, and the U.S. has so far been slow to respond.

How the U.S. Can Combat Russian Disinformation

So, what do we do?

First, the U.S. government needs to unify around the conviction that Russia uses disinformation in the United States. By no means is it the only purveyor of false and misleading information here, but it remains a leader in pursuing this phenomenon for political ends. The U.S. government needs to present a united front to European allies in combating this threat, and take a leadership role in crafting a thorough and methodical response. The current presidential administration has not provided leadership in this regard. Congress should thus remind our European allies that the U.S. stands strong in its values, and is ready to partner with them to fight interference by foreign powers that seek to undermine democracy.

Second, Congress needs to work with other government bodies, tech companies, and civil society to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how disinformation works and can be combatted – and shouldn't rely on short-sighted responses similar to the German law and the censorship it incentivizes.

A thoughtful approach to online disinformation will involve: (1) combating the use of bots that robotically amplify information and articles based on programmed algorithms, given that the U.S. does not protect the free speech of computer programs; (2) working with experts in civil society to examine laws around online speech to ensure they are informed not only by the first amendment, but also by the experiences of affected communities; and (3) creating an appeals process whereby consumers can contest instances of content removal, and receive quick and efficient redress.

Third, while much of the U.S. government's focus has been on messaging and public diplomacy, we also need long-term strategies to support democratic institutions and values overseas. Last year, Senators Portman and Murphy passed legislation that allotted \$80 million to the State Department's Global Engagement Center for programs to combat disinformation, including Russian disinformation. Secretary Tillerson has approved the use of \$60 million of these funds by the State Department to combat disinformation put out by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State. This funding is important. At the same time, however, we need to recognize that putting out better messaging about what democratic institutions can accomplish, or responding to specific false messaging campaigns, is an incomplete response. Doing so is like treating the symptoms of an illness, rather than curing the disease. The best advertisement for democracy and human rights is the demonstration of strong, well-functioning democratic institutions – not just more messages about what these institutions could be. We need to show people, not just tell them.

On the part of Congress, this means adequately funding democracy and governance programming, including in Eastern Europe, a region that we formerly thought had “graduated” from authoritarianism.

One strategy that Congress should support is the European and Eurasian Democracy and Anti-Corruption Initiative, which was introduced by a bipartisan coalition, including some on this Commission. This legislation would commit \$157 million for innovative projects to combat Russian disinformation and influence in Europe. Indeed, the Senate's current State and Foreign Operations bill contains \$120 million for Countering Russian Influence.

With these funds, the Department of State could support regional programs to bolster democracy and human rights, including in countries where the U.S. does not currently have a USAID office, such as Poland and Hungary. The funds could support media literacy, like what we believe is helping Germany fend off Russian influence this election, and support independent media to counter Russian disinformation. These programs can increase the critical eye of media consumers. They should also support local civic leaders to hold governments accountable when they engage in corruption, threaten the rule of law, or flout the basic values and requirements of E.U. and NATO membership – actions which show the strength of democratic principles.

Conclusion

At a time in which democratic values and institutions are being undermined and challenged directly by Russia through a concerted, multifaceted effort, we need to invest resources in these mainstays of sustainable security and prosperity. Now more than ever, the United States needs to maintain the leadership role we have held since the last World War in supporting democratic norms and values. Nations the world over are looking to us for guidance in dealing with this new type of threat to our institutions and ideals. We need to step up.

Thank you.