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RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN 2016 AND 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: A COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

by

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RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN 2016 AND 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: A COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

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The Russian interference campaign against the U.S. presidential elections in 2016 and 2020 was an unprecedented effort to strike at the core of American democracy, and it is widely expected that election interference will continue in the future. However, key aspects of Russian electoral interference remain unexplored. While there is extensive research into the tactics and methods that Russia employed to influence the 2016 and 2020 elections, far less attention has been placed on the motives for Russia's use of election interference, as well as its effectiveness in achieving the Kremlin's objectives. This thesis examines two potential motives—regime preservation and international status—that may have underpinned Russia's election interference operations. By tracing the evolution of Russia's posture toward the West during the rule of Vladimir Putin, I find that although both motives have been at work, the desire to protect the Putin regime from pro-democracy movements was the primary driver for recent election interference operations. In turn, a cost-benefit analysis of Russian election interference finds that the costs imposed on Russia—particularly economic sanctions—did not sufficiently outweigh the benefits to deter Russia from targeting U.S. elections. As a result, election interference will likely remain an attractive tool for the Kremlin to advance its objectives.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (United States)
CISA	Cybersecurity and Information Security Agency (United States)
DDoS	Distributed Denial of Service
EO	Executive Order
EU	European Union
FSB	Federal Security Service (Russian Federation)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
GRU	General Staff of the Armed Forces (Russian Federation)
IC	Intelligence Community (United States)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRA	Internet Research Agency (Russian Federation)
NSA	National Security Agency (United States)
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
UK	United Kingdom
USAID	United States Aid for International Development

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I. INTRODUCTION TO RUSSIAN ELECTION INTERFERENCE

In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Special Counsel for the United States Justice Department and the United States intelligence community determined that the Russian government and Russian-based actors engaged in an influence operation to sway and subvert the election results. Through internet platforms, online trolls, and widespread active measures, the Russian government reportedly sought to sow social discord, fuel divides, and undermine the credibility of the U.S. election system. After the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the United States government again determined that Russian actors engaged in a similar influence campaign to skew election results. This time, however, the United States was seemingly far more prepared and capable of defending against such an attack. The U.S. intelligence community determined that Russia's interference in the U.S. election in 2020 was far less robust and far less harmful than during the 2016 election.[1]

These events have motivated a flurry of analysis and commentary on the nature and impacts of the Russian attacks on American democracy. However, in the effort to assess the impact of these election interference operations, less attention has been paid to their specific objectives from the Russian perspective. This raises the questions that this thesis seeks to address: what exactly motivated Russia to interfere in the U.S. elections, and did Russia achieve its goals? The thesis will attempt to identify the concrete objectives of Russian interference across two different levels of analysis: (1) from the standpoint of Russia's international status, and (2) from the perspective of the Putin's regime, which has been increasingly threatened by Western influence and democratization pressures amid its decreasing domestic legitimacy. Did the gains of Russian election meddling outweigh the drawbacks for the Putin regime and Russia as whole? Through an examination of Russia's motives across these two levels, this thesis will seek to establish a better analytic foundation and metrics for assessing the cost and benefits of the election interference campaigns.

[1] See National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to 2020 U.S. Elections* (Washington, D.C.: National Intelligence Council, 2021).

Based on the findings of my analysis, this thesis will also attempt to identify broader implications about the utility of foreign interference in U.S. elections.

A. RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

When Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, news analysis and academic discourse focused on the ways in which Russia, according to the U.S. intelligence community, actively and indirectly influenced the presidential election. Much of the discussion focused on the technical and tactical methods that Russia and its proxy forces used to distort information and fulfill the government's objective of "supporting Trump, denigrating Hillary Clinton, and sowing discord in the United States," as stated in the U.S. intelligence community's 2016 assessment.[2] This focus helped mobilize technology companies, local election officials, and the wider public to both recognize disinformation as well as find ways to counter it.

Less attention, however, has been placed on unpacking the specific reasons behind Russia's rationale to wage an information and influence war against the United States and its presidential elections. This has undermined the ability to understand the costs and benefits of Russia's interference efforts and whether they are truly an effective means of improving the Russian position in the world—particularly in terms of its prestige, influence, and security against a core adversary—or for furthering the particular goals of the leadership in the Kremlin. As a result, the question of whether Russia actually benefited from these actions essentially remains largely unanswered. These are the central themes of this study.

This research also has broader implications for the study of international relations. In particular, the realist standpoint would assume that Russia acts as a rational unitary actor in order to maximize state power. As Hans Morgenthau explains, this theory of foreign policy is "an intelligible, rational continuum … regardless of the different motives,

[2] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017), ii.

preferences, and intellectual and moral qualities of successful statesmen."[3] However, the fact that interference in the U.S. elections may have benefited the Putin regime more than Russia's international status points to the need for a closer look at the domestic drivers of Russian behavior, whereby political regimes act in ways that do not maximize the state's strategic interests but instead ensure the regime's survival.[4] This aligns with James Fearon's theory on the domestic drivers of international relations.[5]

Analyzing the Kremlin's motive of ensuring regime survival is crucial because U.S. policymakers cannot assume that the Kremlin seeks to maximize traditional notions of national power: strong economy and stable security interests.[6] Instead, U.S. policymakers must understand the nuances of Putin's regime interests as well as the Kremlin's threat perceptions to better understand Russian objectives. Adjudicating between international status and regime preservation is crucial for assessing the cost-benefit calculus of the 2016 and 2020 Russian electoral interference campaigns and for identifying effective measures to counter Russia's meddling in future elections.

Furthermore, addressing the question posed by the thesis from a longer historical perspective will help assess the role of information warfare and, most recently, cyber warfare in recent Russian influence operations. Most of what Russia does today in the realm of election interference builds upon a long history of interference that dates back to the Cold War. Still, some media and politicians today either dismiss the Russian threat to U.S. elections or consider it a one-off event. This is certainly not the case, and this sort of misunderstanding can create inappropriate—or at the very least, ineffective—polices that seek to deter Russia from interfering in future elections.

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[3] Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Thompson, and David Clinton, *Politics Among Nations*, 7th edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill Education, 2005), 5.

[4] James D. Fearon, "Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 1998): 310, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.1.1.289.

[5] Fearon, 310.

[6] Kathryn E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 15.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is separated into two sections, which assess the key existing scholarly debates about the different aspects of Russian election interference. First, it discusses the Russian purpose for engaging in these operations—specifically, what I label as the international status and the regime preservation motives. Second, it examines the existing scholarship on the effects of election interference in relation to these motives.

1. Existing Views on Russia's Motives to Interfere in U.S. Elections

The existing literature focuses on two key motives that help explain why Russia interfered in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections. The first supposed motive is the desire among Russian leaders to help restore Russia's status of one of the preeminent global powers by sowing internal strife in the United States. The second supposed motive is the intent amount Russian leaders to safeguard the regime.

This motive, according to different observers, has both rational and emotional influences that compel Russian leaders to bring Russia back to a great power status. McMaster's analysis of Russian activity during the 2016 election, for instance, places stronger emphasis on the emotional drivers behind Putin's desire to restore Russia's great power status.[7] McMaster explains that the collapse of the Soviet Union had personally shaken Putin and his security-services affiliated top lieutenants; the West's victory in the Cold War insulted their sense of honor and upended their livelihoods after the Soviet collapse.[8] To redress these grievances and restore what he perceives to be Russia's rightful place, Putin has therefore targeted the United States and the West through election interference to undermine the stability of the Soviet Union's former adversary.[9] Essentially, Putin seeks personal retribution against the United States, which serves his (and his inner circle's) emotional impulses more than simply following Russia's national interests.

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[7] H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, Illustrated Edition (Harper, 2020), 36.

[8] McMaster, 36.

[9] McMaster, 39.

McMaster explains that to Putin and his inner circle, undermining the U.S. election system—the bedrock of U.S. democracy—is tantamount to demonstrating Russia's resurgence as a great power.[10] Robert Hamilton also highlights that Russian leaders try to restore Russia's standing by diminishing the relative power of its adversaries, specifically the United States, through election interference.[11] As these operations "increase discord and political polarization by exploiting pre-existing divisions" in the United States, Russian leaders can use them to showcase Russia's strength, resilience, and coherence in contrast to the United States.[12]

Scott Jasper's research of Russian cyber activity—which was a crucial component of the Russian interference in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections—shows that Putin and his inner circle aim "to resume, on their own terms, what they decree to be Russia's rightful geopolitical position."[13] To achieve this ambition, Jasper says that Russian leaders compete with the United States across political, economic, and military arenas and exploit technology and information to shift the regional power in its favor.[14] Thus, the emergence of cyber helped the Kremlin achieve its motives for election interference operations.

Seen though the more rational perspective of the international status motive, Fiona Hill argues the idea that the Kremlin's election interference operations have helped boost Russia's status as a great power. Like Hamilton, Hill emphasizes the domestic divisions in American society that have emerged in the wake of the 2016 interference and how they have frustrated the U.S. response to Russian assertiveness and aggression. Hill notes that the polarization of American society has become a national security threat vis-à-vis Russia because it has acted as a "barrier to the collective action necessary for thwarting external

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[10] McMaster, 36.

[11] Robert E. Hamilton, "Russia's Attempts to Undermine Democracy in the West: Effects and Causes," Orbis (Philadelphia) 63, no. 3 (2019): 334, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2019.05.009.

[12] Hamilton, 334.

[13] Scott Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations: Coding the Boundaries of Conflict* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 3.

[14] Jasper, 3.

dangers," such as further election interference.[15] Furthermore, she also highlights that America's inability to even agree on Russia's involvement in the 2016 election has hindered American's projection of "soft power" across the globe because "partisan spectacles have undermined the country's international standing as a model of liberal democracy."[16]

In addition to the idea that Russia uses election interference to weaken the United States so Russia can reassert its great power status, Hill also points to a second rational motive: the preservation of the Putin regime. Hill underlines that these operations allow Vladimir Putin to offer an "instructive contrast" to U.S. disfunction because it allows him to promote a single, unified Russian leadership that has "overcome the domestic conflicts of the past that destabilized and helped bring down both the Russian empire and Soviet Union."[17] From this perspective, Putin has advanced an effective alternative to U.S. democracy in the aftermath of the U.S. 2016 election. Moreover, by some accounts, Putin has successfully sold this narrative to his domestic audience, as most Russians do not even think that Putin interfered in the U.S. election and believe the United States is more intrusive than Russia in other country's domestic affairs, according to a 2018 Pew Research Center study.[18] Therefore, by sowing division within the United States and casting doubt about U.S. elections, Russia has effectively demonstrated its relative strength as a durable alternative, authoritarian system as well as a capable great power compared to the United States.

Hill's analysis draws, in part, from the now famed 2013 article published by the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, which offers additional insight into the regime preservation imperative as a key driver of Russian security policy, in particular toward the West. According to Gerasimov, the West has sought to overturn constitutionally

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[15] Fiona Hill, "The Kremlin's Strange Victory," December 27, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-27/kremlins-strange-victory.

[16] Hill.

[17] Hill.

[18] Jacob Poushter, "Views of Russians on the U.S. Presidential Election" (Pew Research Center, August 21, 2018), https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/08/21/russians-say-their-government-did-not-try-to-influence-u-s-presidential-election/.

elected governments in Europe and the former Soviet Union by using information warfare to fuel "color revolutions"—the symbolically-named series of popular uprisings that unfolded largely throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.[19] Gerasimov summarized how the West has threatened the Russian government through election interference, political subversion, information operations, and propaganda (i.e., information warfare) by citing Ukraine, Eastern Europe, and even Syria and Libya as areas in which the United States purportedly supported popular uprisings against legitimate governments.[20]

In addition to providing an outline of the ways in which the Kremlin viewed how the West waged an information war against the Russian government, the so-called "Gerasimov Doctrine" revealed that Russia assigned a central role to "hybrid warfare" in its own conduct of war.[21] Jasper, defines Russian hybrid warfare as "a unique combination of approaches that are intended to target its opponent's vulnerabilities," in which election interference is one of the central tools.[22] Essentially, the Russian leadership saw that it could defend itself from the existential threat posed by color revolutions by reversing the West's use of information warfare back onto its original adversary. As Oscar Jonsson explains, "some even saw [information warfare] as a blueprint for Russian contemporary warfare," and that information warfare "could arguably be a description of Russia's own way of visualizing warfare, tweaked to simultaneously be sold as what others are doing, to legitimize its own view."[23]

The 2014 Russian Military Doctrine offers additional insight into what the Russian leadership perceives as existential threats to its regime. The 2014 Military Doctrine called out "leading nations" for using "radical organizations" and the protest potential of

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[19] Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 23.

[20] Giles, 23.

[21] Giles, 23.

[22] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 49.

[23] Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 75.

populations to seek their political objectives (i.e., "color revolutions").[24] Like the Gerasimov Doctrine, this document singles out color revolutions as one of the most significant threats to Russia and its system of governance. More importantly, according to the "External Military Dangers" section of the 2014 Military Doctrine, the use of information technology was specifically emphasized as the tool used by foreign countries (mostly notably the United States) to undermine a state's sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity, as well as to destabilize the regimes along Russia's periphery.[25] Here, Russia's leadership further underscored the growing importance of information warfare as the main threat to its survival and in the conduct of modern conflict.

According to Jonsson, the 2014 Military Doctrine is critically important because it underscores the role of what Russian military authorities define as "information warfare" (i.e., the vast array of processes and tools, to include mass media and global computer networks, that seek to weaponize information and shape the information environment in a target area), and how information warfare is both an external and internal threat to the Russian regime.[26] It also suggests an inextricable link between the Russian regime and its national security.[27] The survival of the regime and Russia's domestic integrity, from the perspective of this document, are mutually reinforcing elements of Russian national security, so defending Russia from the information war waged by the West is, by definition, crucial to Russian national security. From this point of view, to weaponize information technology against the assailants of Russia's domestic integrity is to not only respond in kind to the West, but to ensure the survivability of the Russian regime and by extension, the Russian state.

Jonsson's analysis into the evolution of Russia's understanding of modern conflict places special emphasis on the regime survival imperative as a key component in the Kremlin's aggressive strategic outlook, which is a key driver of its election interference

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[24] Jonsson, 88.

[25] Jonsson, 89.

[26] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 72–73.

[27] Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, 89.

campaigns. Jonsson explains that Putin and his top lieutenants "believe that their regime's survival is [constantly] threatened by Western subversion," so they act aggressively on the international scene to defend their survival.[28] Russian leaders perceive that the spread of Western values, promoted through popular protests in their society, will motivate their population to "ultimately take to the streets and revolt against the incumbent leadership."[29] Because new forms of communication and spreading information are seen to be at the forefront of these Western influence operations, members of the Russian elite, including Putin himself, have asserted that Russia is in an unending "information war perpetrated by the West."[30] Thus, Jonsson argues that Putin and his elite justify information warfare (which includes covert election interference) as a response to this aggression.[31] The integration of hybrid and information warfare tactics into Russian doctrine implies that election interference is at the forefront of the Kremlin's response options against the West to ensure the survival of the regime.[32]

Western observers of Russian politics and strategic posture have emphasized that the Kremlin seeks to preserve itself by deterrence through retribution, and by degrading the attractiveness of U.S. democracy. Anne Applebaum asserts that Putin opts for election interference because it helps damage the appeal of U.S. democracy, and allows him to tell the Russian people that his style of governance is more effective than a U.S.-style democracy.[33] Ivan Krastev, in turn, asserts that Putin meddled in the U.S. election because "reciprocal action" is how Putin seeks to gain the respect of his adversaries and loyalty of his allies.[34] This idea implies that Putin uses election interference to bolster the loyalty of

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[28] Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 2.

[29] Jonsson, 6.

[30] Jonsson, 6.

[31] Jonsson, 76.

[32] Jonsson, Introduction.

[33] Anne Applebaum, "The Bad Guys Are Winning," *The Atlantic*, November 15, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/12/the-autocrats-are-winning/620526/.

[34] Ivan Krastev, "Robert Mueller Will Never Get to the Bottom of Russia's Meddling," The New York Times, November 1, 2017, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/opinion/mueller-election-meddling-russia.html.

his authoritarian regimes that are partners or clients of the Russian regime—such as Belarus, the Central Asian states, and even the EU and NATO member Hungary—in order to strengthen the power of his regime.

McMaster also acknowledges that Putin's election interference operations are partly motived by a fear of color revolutions occurring in Russia, though he places somewhat less emphasis on this objective.[35] Yet ultimately, McMaster combines the international status and regime preservation motives to suggest that the two jointly drive Putin to target Western, and in particular, U.S. elections. From the lens of the regime preservation motive, McMaster argues that for decades, Russian leaders claimed that they have observed the United States support popular uprisings in Europe and empower the overthrow of constitutionally legitimate regimes throughout the former Soviet Union.[36] Fearing the potential of color revolution in Russia and thus a threat to his regime, Putin has "gone on the offensive against Europe and the United States" to deter the West from supporting popular uprisings that threaten legitimate governments.[37] Though McMaster does not elaborate on the concrete mechanism that Putin uses to achieve these goals, he implies that election interference is one of many ways that Putin attempts to preserve his regime.

Although there is a difference between the Russian international status and the regime preservation motives, it is crucial to note the two may work at cross-purposes. In this sense, Stoner states that "under Vladimir Putin's regime, Russian power has been used not merely or even primarily in the service of the national interests … but also in the service of preserving his own corrupt regime."[38] Put simply, the two motives can be at odds with one another because "to continue to govern at home, the regime that has developed under Vladimir Putin has needed to project its power abroad."[39] For example, analysts have underlined that to ensure the survival of his regime, Putin has pursued aggressive foreign

[35] McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 35.

[36] McMaster, 35.

[37] McMaster, 36.

[38] Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 19.

[39] Stoner, 19.

policy objectives to detract from domestic popularity concerns. Such was the case, in part, in Crimea in 2014 when Putin's low approval ratings dramatically shot up after the annexation—effectively securing his regime from domestic opposition—even though the international community condemned Putin and imposed economic sanctions on Russian industries as a result.[40] This idea can be extended to Russian election interference. Even though the Kremlin perceives it is securing itself from existential threats by interfering in foreign election, the Kremlin may be doing so at the expense of Russia's domestic development, and international status and strength.

The U.S. intelligence community assessment on Russia's involvement in the 2016 U.S. presidential election supports these two levels of analysis (regime preservation and international status) as explanations of Russia's motives for election interference. The 2016 election assessment determined that Russia's efforts to "denigrate Secretary Clinton, harm her electability and potential candidacy;" and demonstrate a "clear preference for President-elect Trump" played into the broader goal of "undermining the U.S.-led democratic order, the promotion of which Putin and other senior Russian officials view as a threat to Russia and Putin's regime."[41] Specifically, the intelligence community assessed that the Kremlin favored then-candidate Trump because it saw, for example, "his Russia-friendly positions on Syria and Ukraine" as advantageous to Russia's national interests.[42] Hence, the intelligence community calls out both the state-focused (i.e., international status) and regime-specific (i.e., regime preservation motive) interests associated with interfering in the 2016 election. In its assessment of Russia's involvement in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the U.S. intelligence community further highlighted the same two motives. The intelligence community determined that "Russian leaders viewed President Biden's potential election was disadvantageous to Russian interests" because Biden supported the anti-Putin opposition while serving as Vice President during the Obama

[40] Stoner, 47.

[41] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution*.

[42] Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

administration (i.e., regime preservation motive), and that interference in the U.S. election was an opportunity to undermine U.S. global standing (i.e., international status).[43]

In contrast to the notion that Putin's election interference operations are part of a coherent strategy to subvert the West or to secure the Putin regime, Anna Arutunyan presents an interesting alternative perspective that is conceptually separate from, though potentially overlapping with, the other two. Arutunyan argues that Putin's election interference measures against the West are actually "a series of opportunistic and uncoordinated responses" to Russia's "paranoid belief that [it] is under attack from the West."[44] According to Arutunyan, Putin's interference operations in foreign elections do not amount to a grand strategy to undermine the United States, but rather reflect what limited resources Putin has at his disposal to create the optic that the Russian government is strong, regardless of the backlashes (i.e., sanctions and international condemnation).[45]

Central to Arutunyan's argument is the idea that the tactics and tools Putin's affiliates use for election interference are articulated and implemented in an ad hoc fashion.[46] The Kremlin essentially free-lances its election interference operations to businesspeople, lobbyists, and unofficial hackers. More importantly, Russia's "active measures" are not necessarily micro-managed by the Kremlin, but to a large degree are orchestrated by these proxies.[47] As a result, Putin can claim that these individuals do not represent Russia's interests, which helps Putin preserve deniability against any allegations of state-sponsored election interference operations.[48] Additionally, Arutunyan argues that for election interference to be a grand strategy for undermining Western democracy, Russia would have to present a concrete, alternative version of American democracy to contest the United States ideologically. According to her, this has not occurred. Putin does not

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[43] National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to 2020 U.S. Elections*.

[44] Anna Arutunyan, "There Is No Russian Plot Against America," August 7, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-08-05/there-no-russian-plot-against-america.

[45] Arutunyan.

[46] Arutunyan.

[47] Arutunyan.

[48] Arutunyan.

actually present the world with a viable alternative to American democracy. Rather, he simply seeks to stoke internal divisions in the United States and undermine its global credibility.[49]

Nevertheless, there are two apparent critiques of Arutunyan's analysis. First, Russia's ad-hoc election interference operations can still fulfill the regime preservation and international status goals, as interference operations can exploit key weaknesses within a country's political culture and have damaging effects on democracy even if they are planned and executed haphazardly. As Jonsson explains, "the EU, NATO, and the broader West are vulnerable to small cracks," so the Kremlin's exploitation of local grievances and frictions in Western countries—regardless if its support is ad hoc or systemic—"stands a chance to be the straw that breaks the camel's back" vis-à-vis social instability.[50] Moreover, the consistent employment of election interference tactics could become part of the Kremlin's strategic repertoire over time, especially if the perceived benefits exceed the costs. Second, the Kremlin does, in fact, offer the world an alternative message to Western-style liberal democracy, according to Stoner.[51] Stoner asserts that over the last decade, the Kremlin has invested heavily in the promotion of Russia's orthodox and historically conservative culture to both its "near abroad" (i.e., Belarus, and Ukraine) and in Europe, and has routinely reinforced the notion of "conservative sovereignty promotion" within Russian spheres of influence.[52] Thus, to better analyze the motives of Russia's election interference operations, it is important to unpack the balance of costs and benefits of election interference operations to understand their value to Putin's regime and Russia's international status.

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[49] Arutunyan.

[50] Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, 159.

[51] Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 219.

[52] Stoner, 220.

2. Why Does Election Interference Pay Off? Easily Accessible Benefits and the Limited Costs

To understand the drivers of Russia's election interference operations, many authors emphasize the factors that have increased the potential benefits of election interference relative to their costs. Much of the literature focuses on the role of new technologies and forms of warfare as key enablers and amplifiers of Russian interference operations. Jasper highlights the role of cyberwarfare as the central aspect of the Russian form of conflict and competition because of the "legal ambiguity and technical complexity" of cyberwarfare that makes it a uniquely dangerous, asymmetric tool.[53] Thus, by 2016, cyberwarfare emerged as the primary vector through which Russian agents could target the U.S. audience. As cyber operations use technology to avoid attribution, Jasper suggests that cyber became the new realm in which Russia could realize its great power status because it reduced the perceived costs of election interference and made it a uniquely attractive tool to undermine democracy in the United States.[54] If Russia could plausibly deny its use of cyber tools against Western democracies, then the attacked country would seem weak and vulnerable. Making the United States seem weak would allow Russia to "shift regional balances of power in [its] favor," which ultimately raises Russia's status as a great global power.[55] As David Shimer supports, by avoiding attribution and subverting the American democratic process, this "bolster's Moscow's relative power" compared to the United States.[56]

Furthermore, a key benefit attributed to Russia's election interference efforts lies not in the actual effect that it had on the electoral outcome, but in creating a widespread *perception* that the Kremlin significantly affected American elections. David Shimer's recount of the political ballast that the Trump presidency had to contend with because of

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[53] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 3.

[54] Jasper, 8.

[55] Jasper, 4.

[56] David Shimer, *Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Covert Electoral Interference* (New York: Knopf, 2020), 145.

allegations of a "Russian hand" in the 2016 election speak to this point.[57] Shimer cites some of President Trump's former senior advisors who claimed that the 2016 U.S. intelligence assessment was Trump's "Achilles' heel," as the assessment supposedly made President Trump insecure about his electoral legitimacy.[58] In turn, the political stain from the allegations of Russian interference in U.S. elections seemed to compel President Trump to explicitly reject the U.S. intelligence assessment during the 2018 Helsinki Summit between Trump and Putin.[59] As President Trump seemed to side with Putin during the 2018 Helsinki Summit, this signaled that the United States would not challenge Russian aggression. This also gave Putin the perception that the United States would not threaten his regime. The mere suspicion that Russian election interference had a decisive influence on U.S. politics is a testament to the asymmetric power as a tool of hybrid warfare.

However, an assessment of the effectiveness of election interference operations in more tangible terms—as in instrument for promoting Russian great power status—leads to less favorable conclusions. In this regard, Hamilton tracks changes in Russian Gross Domestic Product (GDP), global public opinion, and global security status after the operations against the 2016 U.S. presidential election.[60] From this standpoint, Hamilton determined that even though polarization and political tension increased in the United States after 2016, Russian election interference in 2016 failed to boost Russia's great power status because its GDP decreased between 2013 and 2018, international publics have held Russia in increasingly low regard, and Russia's security interests around the globe have become more unstable.[61] Hamilton concludes that: "damaging social and political cohesion in the West has not improved Russia's position in the world. On the contrary, Russia is less well-regarded, less prosperous, and less secure now than it was before it began its [election interference] campaign."[62]

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[57] Shimer, 228.

[58] Shimer, 228.

[59] Hill, "The Kremlin's Strange Victory."

[60] Hamilton, "Russia's Attempts to Undermine Democracy in the West," 335.

[61] Hamilton, 334.

[62] Hamilton, 334.

To assess the costs and benefits of Russia's election interference operations against the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, scholars have also examined the efficacy of U.S. sanctions against Russia, and whether "deterrence by punishment" has been a sufficient strategy to counter Russian election interference.[63] Deterrence by punishment has been part of an overarching, though insufficient, strategy to pressure the Kremlin to cease its aggressive behavior. Beginning in the Obama administration and continuing into the Biden administration, the United States has conducted a "name and shame" strategy, in which the United States first publicly denounces and then sanctions Russian individuals and organizations involved in interference operations against U.S. elections.[64] In contrast to deterrence by punishment, Michael Mazarr suggests that deterrence by denial could be a more effective strategy because it "seeks to deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives."[65] Nevertheless, the United States has prioritized economic punishments as the primary response against Russian election interference.

According to existing studies, U.S. sanctions have largely failed to deter both Russia's overt military aggression and its more limited and deniable operations, such as election interference and cyber operations. Indeed, one could argue that sanctions may have caused the opposite effect. As Anders Aslund and Maria Snegovaya explain, "the Russian economy has barely grown since 2014, [so] the Kremlin has become more cautious with major real warfare. Instead, it pursues cheaper, so-called hybrid warfare, such as cyberattacks and assassinations."[66] Jasper similarly argues that since the 2016 election, the United States has not imposed a sufficient cost on Russia to either change or deter future election interference efforts.[67] According to Jasper, despite the sanctions imposed on

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[63] Michael J. Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence" (RAND Corporation, April 19, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html.

[64] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 123.

[65] Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence," 2.

[66] Anders Aslund and Maria Snegovaya, "The Impact of Western Sanctions on Russia and How They Can Be Made Even More Effective" (Atlantic Council, May 3, 2021), 3, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-impact-of-western-sanctions-on-russia/.

[67] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, chap. Unconvincing Responses.

Russia after the annexation of Crimea, Russia continued to interfere in democratic elections: the 2016 Brexit referendum, the 2017 French election, thee 2018 U.S. midterm election, and 2020 U.S. presidential election.[68]

Furthermore, Jasper notes that Putin regime's ability to limit the fallout with various economic measures shows that targeted U.S. sanctions are not meeting the deterrence effect. Vladimir Milov highlights Russia's resilience to Western sanctions, stating that "[Putin is] working toward the goal of very tough fiscal consolidation so that if there's a new crisis, they'll be able to feel confident on the macroeconomic level."[69] This, in large part, is a consequence of the "disciplined macroeconomic policies" that Russia adopted in the mid-2000s to try to protect its economy from price fluctuations in raw material exports, helping the government "keep budget deficits well under control, even through periods of crises."[70] Ultimately, such measures have helped dampen the impact of sanctions because they have allowed the Kremlin to "blunt the full force of the economic downturn that began again in 2014" and even grow (albeit modestly) starting in 2017.[71]

In this sense, Aslund and Snegovaya concede that "[sanctions] have not succeeded in forcing the Kremlin to fully reverse its actions."[72] Additional research conducted by Snegovaya on the impact of sanctions on "Russia's Poles of Power" argues that sanctions could potentially create a wedge between Putin and members of the Russian elite, but structural factors have made it unclear whether any "tension at the top of Russian society will translate into a substantive policy change from the Kremlin."[73] According to the existing literature, these features limit the impact of economic sanctions on Russia's patronage system that the Kremlin has fostered among top elites, as well as on the highly

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[68] Jasper, 117.

[69] Anton Troianovski, "Russia Keeps Getting Hit with Sanctions. Do They Make a Difference?," Washington Post, n.d., https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-keeps-getting-hit-with-sanctions-do-they-make-a-difference/2018/08/21/f466db1c-a3ec-11e8-ad6f-080770dcddc2_story.html.

[70] Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 137.

[71] Stoner, 122.

[72] Aslund and Snegovaya, "Report," 2.

[73] Maria Snegovaya, "Tension at the Top: The Impact of Sanctions on Russia's Poles of Power" (Center for European Policy Analysis, July 18, 2018), 1, https://cepa.org/tension-at-the-top/.

centralized organizational structure of Russian decision-making. Thus, election interference simply works because sanctions—the primary tool for reprisal—have not amounted to enough cost on the Kremlin to offset the increased benefits of election interference.

C. PROPOSED EXPLANATIONS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the discussion in this chapter, I propose two hypotheses about the motives of Russia's interference in U.S. elections:

H1. The main motive for interference in the U.S. presidential elections is the desire to bolster the Putin regime domestically

H2. Interference in the U.S. presidential elections is primarily motivated by the Kremlin's goal to increase Russia's global power and influence relative to the United States.

In turn, to assess how well the effects of the Russian election interference operations aligned with these alternative objectives, I propose four additional hypotheses:

H3: Interference in the U.S. presidential elections increased both the domestic security of the Putin regime and Russia's relative global power.

H4: Interference in the U.S. presidential elections increased the domestic security of the Putin regime but decreased Russia's relative power.

H5: Interference in the U.S. presidential elections decreased the domestic security of the Putin regime but increased Russia's relative power.

H6: Interference in the U.S. presidential elections did not meaningfully bolster either Putin's regime security or Russia's relative power.

To analyze these proposed hypotheses, the thesis will draw on academic research, as well as on official documents, both from the United States Government and from the Russian Federation, which assess the impact of election interference in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections. Significant emphasis will be placed on the U.S. intelligence community's assessments, notable pieces of Russian doctrine that discuss election

interference, and statements released by Russian government leaders in order to assess government responses and perceptions. These sources will be compared to shed light on the strategic reactions and objectives for both the United States and the Russian Federation, thereby assisting the overall assessment of the costs and benefits of Russian election interference operations.

To place the analysis of Russian motives for election meddling in a broader context, this thesis will first survey Russia's history of election interference and examine the impacts of previous operations on both the target countries and Russia. Next, this thesis will identify the effects associated with Russia's election interference in 2016 and 2020 against the United States in two steps. It will first assess the costs of Russian election interference by analyzing the impact of economic sanctions imposed on the Russian government and individuals for their involvement in these operations. Second, this thesis will evaluate the costs and benefits of Russian interference to the regime and Russia's great power status by examining political polarization in the United States and the policy decisions of Trump and Biden administrations. These elements reveal how Russia's great power status has ostensibly increased as a result of undermining the West and exacerbating political polarization in the United States, and how President Trump's policy choices have potentially given credence to the strength of the Putin regime.

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II. WHAT DROVE PUTIN TO INTERFERE IN THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION?

The collapse of the Soviet Union was perhaps one of the most significant events of the twentieth century, and in particular for Russians. As such, modern-day Russia's perception of war and peace, combined with the Kremlin's underlying sensitivities toward regime stability, are rooted in an apparent trauma from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Russia's new, post-Soviet ruling elite (notably under President Putin) feared that Western-backed popular uprisings would undermine, or potentially upend, the new regime that they created. This chapter examines how the trauma associated with the fall of the Soviet Union, the threat of popular uprisings against the Putin regime, and a long history of election interference between the United States and Russia shaped the Kremlin's view that election interference is an effective way to uphold regime security and realize Russia's great international status. I argue that although both motives (regime preservation and international status) drove the Kremlin to exercise election interference against its adversaries, regime preservation was the original and primary objective that motivated the Kremlin to interfere in foreign elections.

A. RETRIBUTION FOR THE SOVIET COLLAPSE

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent decade of economic and political turmoil provides an important context for Russia's current employment of election interference against Western democracies. As McMaster simply states, the trauma of the fall of the Soviet Union compelled the Kremlin to restore Russia's sense of "lost grandeur."[74] To rebuild Russia's greatness as a strong power, Putin "went on the offensive against Europe and the United States."[75] This offensive included information operations and most notably, election interference. The notion of an offensive against the West is clearly articulated in a 2019 essay written by the former chief ideologue of the Kremlin, Vladislav Surkov, in which he explained that Russia conducted "an information counter

[74] McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 36.

[75] McMaster, 36.

offensive against the West" in 2016 largely because of the "ruinous 1990s."[76] Surkov elaborates that "since the failed 1990s, our country abandoned ideological loans, began to produce its own meaning, and turned the information offensive back on the West."[77] Surkov's essay suggests that information operations (to include election interference) supports Russia's international status because information operations enabled the Kremlin to restore Russia's "meaning" after the "ruinous" 1990s.[78]

To provide some background on this potential motive, it is crucial to examine how the economic and political crisis that plagued Russia in the wake of the Soviet collapse was one of the most severe cataclysms in Russian history. Economically, the end of the Soviet Union put Russia into rapid decline. According to Shleifer and Treisman, between 1990 and 1999, Russia's GDP per capita dropped almost 40% and overall consumption of goods dropped by almost 30%.[79] Economic inequality soared in the 1990s and the simultaneous rise of oligarchs further depressed investment and hindered economic growth.[80] As result, while Russia started to recover after Putin assumed the presidency in 1999, the overall reduction in Russia's status from a "global superpower" to "struggling regional power" reverberated throughout the Kremlin as an painful insult to the global aspirations of the Russian elites.[81]

For these reasons, the Kremlin—under Putin's leadership—considers the 1990s a fundamental insult to Russia's national honor and uses the trauma from this period to justify its aggressive international outlook and behavior. Putin most prominently emphasized the trauma of the Soviet collapse in his 2005 Annual Address to the Federal Assembly in which he claimed that "above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of

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[76] Vladislav Surkov, "Vladislav Surkov: Putin's Long State / Ideas and People," *Independent (Russian)*, February 11, 2019, https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html.

[77] Surkov.

[78] Surkov.

[79] Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, "A Normal Country: Russia after Communism," Journal of Economic Perspectives, 2005, 151–74.

[80] Shleifer and Treisman.

[81] McMaster, *Battlegrounds*.

the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century."[82] Putin also claimed that "as for the Russian nation, [the dissolution of the USSR] became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself."[83] During Putin's 2012 presidential campaign, Putin again made explicit references to the chaos of the 1990s and how he was the assertive and shrewd leader who would redress Russia's past.[84] According to Hill and Gaddy, rather than campaign against the opposition candidate, Putin essentially ran elections against Russia's former economic and political troubles.[85] Moreover, Putin and the *siloviki*—the men with security services backgrounds who now compose most of the Kremlin's ruling elite—saw themselves as the product of, and answer to, the Russia of the 1990s.[86]

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a particularly formative experience for Putin and his associates because they have perceived a "U.S. hand" in Russia's decade of economic and political turmoil. As McMaster recounts, "in their retelling [of Russia's economic decline], their former enemy lorded its Cold War victory over Russian heads, insisting on reforms that left their nation in economic meltdown."[87] Such was the case regarding the Freedom Support Act (FSA) of 1992. The Kremlin considered the FSA an example of a U.S. intervention in Russia, even as the U.S. provided food aid and $2.7 billion in funds and technical assistance to support Russia's democratic transition under the auspices of this program.[88] As Putin later explained in a speech to the FSB in 2015, this was an example of how Western governments used "nongovernmental and politicized

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[82] Vladimir Putin, *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation* (Kremlin, 2005), http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931.

[83] Putin.

[84] Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, New and expanded edition (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 19.

[85] Hill and Gaddy, 18.

[86] Hill and Gaddy, 19.

[87] McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 38.

[88] McMaster, 38.

organizations … to discredit the authorities and destabilize the internal situation in Russia."[89]

Since the early years of Russia's transition from the Soviet dictatorship to a fledgling democratic country, hardliner elites in the country also felt betrayed by their own leaders, who looked to the United States for help. This seemed to have been part of the grievances that many years later, still fueled the anti-Western paranoia of Putin and the siloviki, and motivated them to go on the offensive against the West. In particular, Putin and the siloviki still viewed "U.S. assistance as an affront to Russian sovereignty and an effort to exploit Russian weakness."[90] Former *New York Times* reporter Steven Erlanger wrote that "there was a kind of patronizing quality [in Washington] … that Russians deeply resented."[91] An particular case that seemingly provoked anti-Western suspicions among the Kremlin's elite, according to David Shimer, is the multibillion-dollar loan that Russia received right before the 1996 Russian presidential election. At the time, the loan was considered a critical boost for the troubled campaign of Vladimir Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin.[92] Yeltsin's subsequent victory in the election created the optic that he was reliant on the United States to win.[93] Especially as the United States led the major international institutions that provided such financial aid to Russia—the G7, IMF, and NATO— many Russians believed that their leader was subservient to their country's former adversary.[94]

Taken together, these experiences created widespread feelings of antipathy toward the United States and American democracy, and likely created an environment conducive to the Kremlin's operations against the U.S. election in 2016. In other words, election interference operations became a way in which the Kremlin could demonstrate the relative strength of Russia's system of electoral authoritarian system government, established by Vladimir Putin, as opposed to Western liberal democracy—an objective consistent with

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[89] McMaster, 38.

[90] McMaster, 38.

[91] Shimer, 129.

[92] Shimer, 128.

[93] Shimer, 129.

[94] Shimer, 129.

Hypothesis 1 of this thesis. The Kremlin's aggressive posture toward liberal democracy also reflected a major shift in Russian mass sentiments. After a decade of catastrophic decline during Russia's democratic transition in the 1990s, Russian popular attitudes toward democracy changed from an openness to democracy to an acceptance of a "strong hand" as a necessary condition to keep order in Russia.[95] Aleksandar Matovski finds that as result of the tremendous economic and social hardships endured during Russia's decade of democratization, Russians developed a proclivity for an imperious leader—a "strong hand"—who would impose order and restore stability.[96] Playing into the sentiments of the Russian people, Vladimir Putin exploited the calls for an imperious leader and offered precisely this kind of rule.

Capitalizing on the feelings of resentment toward Western democracy also incentivized Putin to pursue an aggressive foreign policy, which included election interference operations as a key weapon. This notion is also supported by Matovski's analysis of Russian public opinion, which reveals that because of the trauma of the post-Soviet decline, Russian voters expected their leaders to "make Russia a great, respected power again."[97] As Stoner argues, "to continue to govern at home, the regime that has developed under Putin has needed to project its power abroad."[98] Moreover, Putin took advantage of the Russian public's antipathy toward democracy and the West throughout his entire career, as he consistently exploited the public's feelings to justify his foreign policy objectives in the military campaigns in Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015, and ostensibly against the United States in 2016.[99] Furthermore, the reaction of the Russian public to the interference in the U.S. 2016 election shows how these actions helped Putin bolster the legitimacy of his regime, which again, aligns with Hypothesis 1 of this thesis. This is observed in a 2018 Pew Research study, which found that in the wake of the 2016

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95 Aleksandar Matovski, *The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 224.

96 *Matovski, 224.*

97 Matovski*, 232.*

98 Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 19.

99 Matovski, *The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal*, 232.

U.S. election, three out of every four Russians believed that their country was playing a more prominent role in global affairs.[100]

Against this backdrop, subverting U.S. and other Western elections was not a purely emotional retribution for the trauma of Russia's post-Soviet collapse, but also served an instrumental purpose of reinforcing the power and prestige of the Putin regime in Russia. This motive becomes even clearer through an examination of the most important trigger of the growing hostility of the Putin regime toward the West: the threat of "color revolutions" that displaced similar regimes in Russia's periphery. Moreover, as Putinism began to stall due to its corruption and poor economic performance, the Kremlin turned to election interference to push back against Western democracy promotion efforts and to diminish the attractiveness of Western liberal democracy as an alternative form of governance for Russia.

B. COLOR REVOLUTIONS AND THE KREMLIN'S THREAT PERCEPTIONS

In addition to the resentment for Russia's post-Soviet decline, fears of a "color revolution" unfolding in Russia and threatening to topple the Putin regime also incentivized the Kremlin to interfere in foreign elections. This motive became stronger after the first two terms of the Putin regime (2000–2008), as corruption and mismanagement in Russia started to undermine the regime's popularity. According to Stoner, at the root of the Kremlin's fear of color revolutions lies the perception that the United States was to blame for instigating domestic unrest in post-Soviet countries and within Russia's "sphere of influence," all with the intent to oust regimes similar to Putin's.[101] In McMaster's recount of his 2017 meeting with the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, he explains that Lavrov "invariably [accuses] the United States and the West of instigating the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, as well as large-scale protests in Russia in 2011."[102]

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[100] Poushter, "Views of Russians on the U.S. Presidential Election."

[101] Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 22.

[102] McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 27.

Furthermore, according to Weiner, "to Putin, [the revolutions] were part of a pattern of subversion and sabotage conducted by American intelligence against Russia, camouflaged as support for democracy."[103]

Putin's fear of a color revolution taking shape in Russia was not entirely unfounded, especially as structural elements of the color revolutions helped easily mobilize popular uprisings across various countries. Hence, the conditions observed in color revolutions laid the foundation for Mark Beissinger's "structure and example in modular political phenomena" concept, which posits that the example of each revolution (starting in Serbia in 2000 and then spreading to the former Soviet Union) brought about "a fresh rash of attempts at emulation."[104] Beissinger argues that during the color revolutions, "the influence of example" overpowered the challenges of structural (i.e., institutional, financial, human capital) disadvantages and allowed some groups that were "less structurally advantaged to engage in successful action by riding the influence of the prior example of others."[105] Consequently, "the encouragement by example" feature of the color revolutions made popular uprisings—especially ones with significant international and civil-society support—so threatening to the Putin regime.[106]

Moreover, the color revolutions also shared many similarities, such as accusations of stolen or fraudulent elections, international support for the development of domestic democratic programs, and diplomatic pressure vis-à-vis election monitoring. The intervention of Western countries (led largely by the United States) and NGOs in support of opposition candidates, in particular, led Putin to perceive democracy promotion and intervention in the elections of former Soviet states as a direct threat to his rule, especially as his regime was similar to the ones experiencing revolts. When this pattern ultimately spread to Russia in 2011–2012, and massive and unprecedented popular uprisings took aim

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[103] Tim Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare 1945–2020* (New York, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2020) 222.

[104] Mark R. Beissinger, "Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of the Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 2 (June 2007): 262, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707070776.

[105] Beissinger, 260.

[106] Beissinger, 262.

against Putin's authoritarian regime, Putin's feeling of vulnerability reached a peak which confirmed his perception that the United States supported "mercenary foes in the Kremlin."[107] Therefore, fears about regime preservation were the main driver behind the Kremlin's increasingly paranoid and aggressive foreign policy vis-à-vis election interference, as it sought to stamp out the growing opposition to the Putin's power. The examples of color revolutions that follow highlight the preeminence of the regime preservation motive for Russian election interference and illustrate how the growing insecurity of the Putin regime, coupled with protest waves against similar regimes abroad, gradually increased the regime's willingness to target Western elections.

1. Serbia

The model for color revolutions was first articulated in practice during the Serbian mass revolt of 2000 against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. In the years leading up to the 2000 Serbian presidential election, Slobodan Milosevic committed atrocious war crimes, brought his country to a bloody war with NATO, and then manipulated the Serbian voting system such that he and his loyal elite could remain uncontested.[108] Milosevic's political party was based on a strong nationalist platform, which sought to legitimize a corrupt, patronage-based political machine similar to Putin's regime. By 1999, most ethnic Serbs strongly opposed him and the oppressive regime under which they lived.[109] A prominent youth organization known as Otpor quickly developed into a strong opposition force in Serbia that called for the removal of Milosevic. Otpor gained significant international attention, especially from the United States, as the group demanded free and fair elections, an end to political corruption, and a shift toward liberal democracy.[110]

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[107] Steve Gutterman and Gleb Bryanski, "Putin Says U.S. Stoked Russian Protests," *Reuters*, December 8, 2011, sec. World News, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-idUSTRE7B610S20111208.

[108] Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, "Defeating a Dictator at the Polls and in the Streets The 2000 Yugoslav Elections," in Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 28.

[109] Bunce and Wolchik, 28.

[110] Bunce and Wolchik, 28.

The U.S. policy toward Serbia was clear: the Clinton administration supported a formal group that defined its mandate as one that supported regime change in Serbia.[111] For this purpose, U.S.-led international aid organizations contributed over $20 million in financial aid to Serbian NGOs and various opposition groups that sought to oust Milosevic.[112] By the 2000 presidential election, the Western world rallied behind Otpor and other opposition parties in hopes of bringing about immediate democratic change. As Valerie Bunce explains, "there [was] little doubt, then, that international players involved in the September 25 [Serbian] election made significant contributions to the defeat of Milosevic."[113] After a widely contested election, Milosevic was abandoned by much of his elite and eventually conceded. Russia's leaders watched the situation in Serbia unfold and saw how the United States directly contributed to the removal of its ally through financial support and, to some extent, military means during the Kosovo conflict. In 2006, then-deputy chief of staff to the Russian President Vladislav Surkov stated that such actions by the United States were "a very real threat to sovereignty," and that if they were used in Serbia, they could also occur in Russia.[114]

2. Georgia

Motivated by the successful Serbian example, subsequent color revolutions occurred within countries of the former Soviet Union and were therefore perceived by the Putin regime as much closer, and much more significant threats to the Russian homeland.[115] During the Georgian parliamentary election of 2003, incumbent President Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been Gorbachev's foreign minister in the last Soviet decade in the 1980s, was accused of rigging the election.[116] This led opposition leader

111 Bunce and Wolchik, 28.

112 Bunce and Wolchik, 28.

113 Bunce and Wolchik, 28.

114 Jonsson, 129.

115 Beissinger, "Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena."

116 "OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President Visits Georgia," News, Civil Georgia, November 21, 2000, https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=5576&search=.

Mikheil Saakashvili, a graduate of Columbia Law School with a pro-Western outlook, to demand a recount.[117]

President Shevardnadze took hold of parliament on November 22, 2003, but Saakashvili and his supporters marched into parliament, roses in hand, and demanded Shevardnadze step down.[118] As Georgia's independent television service broadcasted the event worldwide, the Georgian people became outraged and took to the streets in protest. Shevardnadze's security team swiftly removed him from parliament, and the next day, he offered his resignation. With one of Russia's allies ousted in Georgia, Putin viewed the victory of Saakashvili as an embarrassment instigated by the West.[119]

Between 2004 and 2008, Saakashvili leaned into his relationship with the United States, which was highlighted by a visit from President George Bush to Tbilisi in 2005 during which he gave his famous "beacon of liberty" speech.[120] This, in addition to the regime threat that the Georgian revolution posed, played into the Kremlin's fears of further eroding Russian influence within its immediate surroundings.[121] The growing discontent and fear among the Russian leadership over Georgia's democratic trajectory contributed to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.

In only five days of direct conflict with Georgian forces between 1 and 6 August 2008, the Russian military achieved air, ground, and naval superiority and seized control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. To Putin, the conflict with Georgia was ultimately a successful maneuver, in part because the West—specifically the United States—responded mildly to the conflict.[122] President George Bush was largely preoccupied with the War on Terror and decided to send humanitarian aid to Georgia in late 2008. A year later, the

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117 Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory*, 41.

118 Weiner, 42.

119 Weiner, 42.

120 Ian Kelly and David Kramer, "A Country on the Verge: The Case for Supporting Georgia" (The German Marshall Fund of the United States, March 2021).

121 Natia Seskuria, "Russia's 'Hybrid Aggression' against Georgia: The Use of Local and External Tools" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 21, 2021), https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-hybrid-aggression-against-georgia-use-local-and-external-tools.

122 Seskuria.

United States sponsored the strategic "reset" between Russian president Dmitry Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama in which both sides agreed to forge stronger bilateral ties.[123]

As Keir Giles explains, the swift "forgive and forget" of Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008 altered the Kremlin's strategic calculations such that the Kremlin felt encouraged, rather than deterred, to proceed with its international adventurism.[124] Essentially, the failure of the West to offer assistance to Georgia during Russia's aggression encouraged the Kremlin to think it could push back against the United States with little to no consequences and long-term costs. Moreover, Russia's success in Georgia consequently led the Kremlin to build up its assertiveness around the world, especially in the information domain, as the Kremlin continued to observe the West supposedly support regime change within Russia's spheres of influence.

3. Ukraine

The most significant of the early color revolution scares for the Kremlin came less than a year after Georgia's 2003 protests, when a similar situation started to unfold in the larger and more populous country of Ukraine. Just as the election in Georgia was marred by election fraud, so too was the follow-on round of Ukraine's 2004 presidential election. Nonpartisan exit polls from the presidential runoff election determined that the pro-West candidate Viktor Yushchenko earned 52% of the vote, as the incumbent Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych earned only 43% of the vote.[125] However, when the official polls were published the following morning, Yanukovych—Russia's preferred candidate and the favorite of Ukraine's corrupt elite—purportedly won by 2.5%.[126] This immediately sparked protests throughout Ukraine, most notably in the capital city of Kiev. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrates clad in orange—the color of Yushchenko's campaign—took the

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[123] Oscar Jonsson*, The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 132.

[124] Giles, *Moscow Rules*, 25.

[125] Adrian Karatnycky, "Ukraine's Orange Revolution," *Foreign Affairs*, April 2005, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/node/1110335.

[126] Karatnycky.

streets and demanded a fair and free recount. At the same time, Putin made numerous press interviews and public meetings attesting to Yanukovych's victory. Reports from the Yushchenko team asserted that Russia spent hundreds of million dollars on Yanukovych's campaign.[127]

After weeks of country-wide protest and unprecedented amounts of media attention, a third election was held to determine the president of Ukraine, this time with significant amounts of international attention, such as from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). As Shimer explains, "for an authoritarian like Putin, electoral monitoring *is* electoral interference, because it exposes efforts to rig votes."[128] Such was the case in Ukraine in 2004 during which Putin considered any input or encouragement from Western observers as an affront to Russia's influence in Ukraine.[129] Thus, when the pro-Western candidate, Yushchenko, won the election, this represented a significant defeat for Putin and a humiliating moment in which another Western-aligned candidate beat out a Russian-backed leader.[130] In Tim Weiner's account of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, Putin stated that the United States was pushing "a dictatorship of international affairs…wrapped up in a beautiful package of pseudo-democratic phraseology."[131] Similarly, Russia's State Duma issued a harsh criticism of U.S. and European observers in Ukraine's election, accusing the West of "encouraging a radical section of the population to commit dangerous actions, which threatens to bring about mass disturbances, chaos and division of the country."[132] By this point, there appeared to be enough pressure against authoritarianism within Russia's sphere of influence for Putin to consider Western election interference a weapon designed to entice regime change. At the same time, the 2004 Ukrainian election was likely a critical point from which the Kremlin

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[127] Karatnycky.

[128] Shimer, *Rigged*, 140.

[129] Shimer, 144.

[130] Karatnycky, "Ukraine's Orange Revolution."

[131] Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory*, 198.

[132] C. J. Chivers, "Putin Says He Will Accept the Will of the Ukrainian People," The New York Times, December 7, 2004, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/07/world/europe/putin-says-he-will-accept-the-will-of-the-ukrainian-people.html.

considered election interference a weapon that it could reverse-engineer and employ against the West. This ultimately aligns with the regime preservation motive articulated in Hypothesis 1 of this thesis, as election interference would become an instrument that the Putin regime would use to protect itself.

4. Kyrgyzstan

In early 2005, a third post-Soviet country fell victim to widespread protests and calls to end election corruption. Kyrgyzstan held its parliamentary election in February 2005 during which incumbent President Askar Akayev was accused of election fraud and media manipulation.[133] Similar to Ukraine, the OSCE determined that the election fell short of the standards required to qualify as a democratic election.[134]

Predictably, people took to the streets in protest over the rigged election; however, unlike in Georgia and Ukraine, the protests in Kyrgyzstan turned violent. Protesters swarmed the main government building in the capital city of Bishkek in March 2005, which drove Akayev to flee to Russia a few days later. Shortly after arriving in Moscow, Akayev issued his resignation from Kyrgyzstan's embassy in Moscow, which was eventually accepted by the Kyrgyz Parliament. The led the alternative candidate, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, to become the acting president and eventually win the presidency in the July 2005 election.[135] Ultimately, the retreat of Akayev from Kyrgyzstan to Russia represented yet another moment of embarrassment for Putin. More importantly, Kyrgyzstan showed that protests could turn violent, and that violence could arise in Russia if the Kremlin did not insulate itself from color revolutions.

5. Building to the Russian Protest Wave of 2011–12

The mounting threat from popular revolutions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union led to a "notable change in the Russian government's public statements" in

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[133] Peter Finn, "Elections in Kyrgyzstan Inconclusive," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2005, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A60195-2005Feb28.html?nav=rss_world/asia/centralasia/kyrgyzstan/post.

[134] Finn.

[135] Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory*, 129.

early 2006, according to Jonsson.[136] The pivotal milestone was Surkov's "sovereign democracy" concept, which he used to describe the Russian version of democracy.[137] This concept underlined a new, more confrontational international posture for Russia, as the "sovereignty" notion demanded noninterference of other states in Russia's internal affairs, and that Russia had the right to fashion its own version of democracy, rather than import the "foreign" model of liberal democracy.[138] Further, the "sovereign democracy" doctrine had a proactive, and even aggressive, component that promoted the Russian alternative version of democracy in international relations as a way to displace "U.S. hegemony."[139] Thus, Surkov's sovereign democracy concept was the first officially enshrined anti-democratic doctrine that put Russia on a confrontational path with the United States, which suggested that the Kremlin would take the "necessary steps" (which over time, also incorporated election interference) to defend itself from any infringement on its sovereignty.[140] This again confirms the primacy of the regime protection motive as the key driver of Russian aggressiveness, which ultimately resulted with operations to subvert Western elections.

The Arab Spring was another key development that contributed to the Kremlin's paranoia of a popular revolution occurring in Russia. The context of the revolutions in the Arab world makes it clear as to why the Kremlin thinks this. For example, on the eve of Egyptian President Mubarak's overthrow in early 2011, Egypt was considered *less* corrupt than Russia according to the 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index (Egypt was ranked at 112th place, while Russia held the 143rd place out of 183 countries).[141] This highlighted the structural vulnerabilities of the Russian regime to popular uprisings and a perception among the Russian elite that what happened in Egypt could unfold in Russia. Additionally,

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136 Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, 129.

137 Jonsson, 129.

138 Jonsson, 129.

139 Jonsson, 129.

140 Masha Lipman, "Putin's 'Sovereign Democracy,'" *Washington Post*, July 15, 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/14/AR2006071401534.html.

141 "Corruption Perceptions Index (2011)," Transparency International, n.d., https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2011.

the Russian view of the West's role in the Egyptian protesters quickly soured by late 2011.[142] Speaking at a National Anti-Terrorism Committee, then-President Medvedev stated that the Arab Spring "is the kind of scenario that [the West] was preparing for us, and now they will be trying even harder to bring it about."[143]

The Kremlin's concern over Western attempts to subvert the regime by sponsoring popular revolts in Russia passed the most crucial threshold when allegations of election fraud marred the results in Russia's parliamentary elections in December 2011.[144] Allegations of election fraud pushed tens of thousands of Russians to the streets in the largest demonstration in Russia since the Cold War.[145] This time, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a statement in which she called out the "blatantly rigged" results and asserted that "Russian voters deserve a full investigation of all credible reports of election fraud" because citizens deserve to have "their votes counted."[146] These words from Secretary Clinton led the Kremlin, most notably Putin, to believe that the United States "gave a signal" to actors in Russia to mobilize the masses for protesters throughout Russia with the intent of overthrowing Putin's government.[147] Moreover, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency assessed that Clinton epitomized exactly what Putin feared most; "a powerful person in the United States who [Putin] believed was trying to start a color revolution in the streets of Moscow," as explained by then-acting CIA director Michael Morell.[148] As Secretary Clinton would later claim, the Kremlin's attack against her campaign in the 2016 Presidential race was a retribution for her perceived role in bolstering the 2011–12 protest wave against Putin's rule.[149]

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[142] Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, 131.

[143] Jonsson, 132.

[144] Shimer, *Rigged*, 145.

[145] Shimer, 141.

[146] Shimer, 141.

[147] Shimer, 141.

[148] Shimer, 142.

[149] David Smith and Julian Borger, "Clinton Accuses Putin of Acting on 'personal Beef' in Directing Email Hack," *The Guardian*, December 16, 2016, sec. U.S. news, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/16/clinton-putin-email-hack-revenge.

These perceptions of a relentless Western campaign to undermine the regime of Vladimir Putin triggered some of the first overtly aggressive measures to limit U.S. influence in Russia. In September of 2012, Foreign Minister Lavrov informed Secretary Clinton that the Kremlin would expel USAID from Russia, which had spent $50 million annually in Russia on democracy and human rights work.[150] In December, the National Democracy Institute was also expelled from Russia. These were attempts at "diffusion-proofing," which was a tactic employed by the Putin regime to insulate itself from the "contagion effects" associated with the international spread of popular challenges to authoritarian regimes, both by supporting democratic elections and contentious action.[151] Diffusion-proofing measures added to the systematic erosion of democratic norms and political competition in Russia—ranging from the effective banning of opposition parties and candidates to arrests and harassment of activists—that accelerated in the wake of the 2004 Ukrainian Orange Revolution.[152]

This background strongly suggests that the underlying motive for the Kremlin's increasing hostility toward the West has been the urge to secure the Putin regime against democratic contagion, more so than to restore Russia's great power status. At first, the Kremlin's moves to secure the Putin regime from the threats of color revolutions consistent of what may be labelled as "defensive" measures, seeking to undermine democratic competition from within Russia. But over time, the Russian leadership began to take increasingly offensive steps against their perceived foreign instigators of democratization movements against the Kremlin. In this effort, the Putin regime built upon the already established toolbox of election interference that Moscow developed in the Soviet period. Hence, the trends that led to Russia's interference in the U.S. election in 2016 represents a merging of the measures against domestic pro-democracy forces and popular movements,

150 Shimer, *Rigged*, 142.

151 Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce, "Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers," Perspectives on Politics 11, no. 3 (2013): 753, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43279645.

152 Koesel and Bunce, 757.

and a retooled set of Soviet-style tactics with modern capabilities, to push back against democracy promoters abroad.

C. RUSSIA'S HISTORY OF INTERFERENCE IN FOREIGN ELECTIONS

According to David Shimer, Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election marked an application of old tactics in a new context and with new tools.[153] Throughout the Cold War, KGB officials consistently considered the potential upsides of exploiting the U.S. democratic process as irresistible. As Shimer highlights, exploiting democracy was "an opportunity to influence American voters as [the KGB] determined the direction of the country."[154] In particular, between 1960 and 1984, there were numerous moments during which Moscow identified "threatening presidential candidates" and "worked to destroy them," not necessarily based on ideological factors, but rather on the perceived security interests of Soviet leaders.[155]

One oft-mentioned Soviet operation to influence a U.S. presidential election took place during the 1976 U.S. presidential election, when Ronald Regan competed against Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination. Russian intelligence professionals considered Regan a dangerous candidate, as he expressed strong anti-Soviet sentiment during the campaign and was an outspoken critic of détente.[156] As former KGB Chief Yuri Andropov simply stated, "we were afraid of him."[157] This political environment therefore compelled the KGB to influence the U.S. election by covertly targeting the minds of the U.S. population.

Uncovered KGB files from 1976 revealed that Andropov confirmed a May 26 plan for "active measures" against Regan, in addition to an existing plan for intrusions into the presidential election. Although limited information is known about how the KGB sought to disadvantage Regan, his defeat in 1976 was likely perceived as a victory for the KGB's

153 Shimer, *Rigged*, 10.

154 Shimer, 85.

155 Shimer, 84.

156 Shimer, 98.

157 Shimer, 98.

efforts to influence the outcome.[158] However, Regan's eventual nomination as the Republican candidate in 1980 showed that KGB efforts to subvert the U.S. election, if at all effective, were short-lived. Once Regan became president in the 1980, Moscow initiated more electoral interference operations for the 1982 mid-term elections. As additional KGB reports reveal, Andropov again ordered his overseas officers to "undermine Regan's' reelection bid [in 1984]," which led the KGB to circulate stories that Regan was "corrupt, racist, and militaristic."[159]

When the Soviet Union collapsed and the new Russian state emerged, Western leaders hoped that Russia's democratic embrace would finally end a half-century of ideological antagonism and shepherd in a new era of friendship. It also seemed, at least temporarily, that the age-old tale of Soviet interference in U.S. elections came to an end as the Soviet empire collapsed, and as the United States pivoted toward counterterrorism and counterproliferation.[160] However, during this time, Presidents Yeltsin and Putin looked inward as they manipulated elections at home to protect their power and the interests of post-Communist regime they established. As Shimer implies in his claim that "[the 2016 U.S. presidential election] marked a direct continuation of old ideas," domestic voter manipulation in Russia seemed to be part of the Kremlin's underlying acceptance of election manipulation and interference as a tool to secure its regime.[161]

For example, Boris Yeltsin notoriously manipulated the 1996 presidential election as he sought a second term. His misconduct garnered considerable attention by the Western press and was later confirmed by former-President Medvedev when he insinuated in a 2012 interview that Yeltsin did not actually win in 1996 and that the election was "rigged."[162] Scholars, such as former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, point to Yeltsin's abuse of campaign finance laws, counting irregularities in certain regions, and the state-

[158] Shimer, 98.

[159] Shimer, 98.

[160] Shimer, 146.

[161] Shimer, 10.

[162] Simon Shuster, "Rewriting Russian History: Did Boris Yeltsin Steal the 1996 Presidential Election?," Time, February 24, 2012, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2107565,00.html.

run media's open support of Yeltsin's cause as the primary features of his meddling efforts.[163]

After Vladimir Putin was selected by Yeltsin as his successor, Putin gradually consolidated his power and took further steps to decisively tilt Russia's democratic process in his favor. As Putin learned to influence elections at home, the development of the internet opened a path for him to test the age-old tactics that were used during the Soviet era against his foreign adversaries. "In the twentieth century, no external actor could meaningfully manipulate America's elections. The internet has upended this dynamic," claims Shimer.[164] The confluence of experiences of the Putin regime with election manipulation in Russia and increasingly bold and uncontested interference operations abroad gradually built the template and confidence to interfere in the 2016 U.S. election. The segment that follows summarizes the key milestones in this trajectory.

1. Estonia

Russia's 2007 cyber-attack against Estonia did not target an election; however, it demonstrated the Kremlin's intent and ability to target a foreign country's online environment and sow confusion and discord, especially when the socio-cultural legacy of Russia was thrown into question. As a result, Russia's attack against Estonia also aligns with the international status motive because the attack suggests that the Kremlin sought to exert uncontested influence in a former Soviet republic, rather than directly combat a threat to the regime's survival. Moreover, Russia's cyber-attack against Estonia was the first instance in which Russia targeted a NATO member state with cyber tools of information warfare—tools that became integral to Russia's conduct of information war in subsequent elections in other Western democracies.

The Estonia episode started after April 2007, when Estonian leaders decided to remove a Soviet war memorial from the center of the capital city, Tallinn, to the outskirts of town. Many ethnic Russians in Estonia revered the statue as a memorial to the sacrifice

163 Michael McFaul, "The Election of ′96," The Hoover Institute (The Hoover Institute, October 30, 1997), https://www.hoover.org/research/election-96.

164 Shimer, *Rigged*, 243.

of 11 million comrades during the "Great Patriotic War."[165] However, to many Estonians—no longer living under Soviet rule—the monument was a symbol of the contentious Soviet legacy in Estonia and the Soviet Union's suppression of their independence.[166] Jasper claims that "the unrest [in Estonia] posed no immediate threat to the Russian Federation but to the interests of nearby Russian-minority population." [167] Nevertheless, as Russian leaders perceived these events as a potential threat to Russia's influence in Estonia, Kremlin officials determined it was necessary to act. Protests—which were attributed to the Kremlin—broke out over the removal of the statue, and although they started as calm and peaceful, they quickly turned violent.[168] Kremlin officials denounced the protests and Foreign Minster Lavrov called the removal of the statue "disgusting."[169]

In the wake of this incident, Russian state-backed actors capitalized on the openness of the internet to conduct multiple waves of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against Estonian government websites and financial institutions.[170] The Russian-based cyber-attacks against Estonia were far-reaching: two separate waves of DDoS attacks targeted the websites of banks, federal ministries, newspapers, and broadcast services. Their online systems were thrust into disarray, which took multiple days to stabilize.[171] As then-defense Minister of Estonia Jaak Aaviksoo explains, "the attacks were aimed at the essential infrastructure of the Republic of Estonia…this was the first time that a botnet threatened the national security of an entire nation."[172] Although many of the attackers

165 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 32.

166 Jasper, 32.

167 Jasper, 42.

168 Steven Lee Myers, "Friction Between Estonia and Russia Ignites Protests in Moscow," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2007, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/03/world/europe/03estonia.html.

169 Steven Lee Myers, "Russia Rebukes Estonia for Moving Soviet Statue," *The New York Times*, April 27, 2007, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/27/world/europe/27cnd-estonia.html.

170 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 32.

171 Jasper, 33.

172 Jasper, 33.

were untraceable, several were identified as internet protocol (IP) addresses that originated from the Russian presidential administration.[173]

More importantly, the decision to exercise a cyber-attack revealed the Kremlin's calculation that cyber actions could achieve a desired effect (sowing chaos in response to cultural attacks against ethnic Russians) while blurring the lines between peace and open conflict. According to Michael Schmitt, "taken together as a single cyber operation, the incidents [in Estonia] arguably reached the use of force threshold.[174] Had Russia been responsible for them under international law, it is likely the international community would (or should) have treated them as use of force in violation of the UN Charter and customary international law."[175]

Russia's weaponization of cyber against Estonia also revealed to the Kremlin many of the advantages of the cyber domain, such as non-attribution and plausible deniability. NATO members could not fully attribute the attacks against Estonia to the Kremlin, which thwarted Estonia's ability to enact Article 5 (collective defense) of the NATO charter.[176] At the same time, because "no definitive evidence that the 'hactivists' involved in the cyber operations against Estonia in 2007 operated pursuant to instructions from a State, nor did any state endorse and adopt the conduct," the Kremlin was largely unpunished for its attack against Estonia in 2007.[177] Evidently, the new cyber-domain as an avenue for the Kremlin to exercise influence presented little to no costs for Russia. As the Kremlin observed the net effects of its cyber-attack against Estonia—such that Russia was largely left unpunished—it started to consider larger countries and more complex networks that it could target.

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[173] Jasper, 34.

[174] Michael N. Schmitt, ed., *Tallinn Manual on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Warfare*, Reprint edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 153.

[175] Schmitt, 157.

[176] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 42.

[177] Jasper, 35.

2. Ukraine

With a both a legacy of election interference and a newfound appreciation of technology at its disposal, it seemed inevitable for the Kremlin to target a larger and more significant country that it deemed a threat to both its regime and international status. After the Kremlin failed to elect its preferred candidate in Ukraine in 2004, by 2014, the Kremlin was determined to not repeat the failure of its past efforts. In early 2014, tensions between Ukraine and Russia were at an all-time high. The Kremlin blamed the United States for instigating the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protest in Ukraine, in which Foreign Minister Lavrov asserted that "by the use of coercive measures, the West unequivocally demonstrates that it does not merely change Russian policy, but it seeks to change the regime."[178] When the pro-Russian leader Viktor Yanukovich was ousted by popular protest, Russia deployed special forces into the Crimean Peninsula for what eventually became a full annexation of the peninsula.[179]

As a result of unprecedented Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory, Ukraine's presidential election was postponed from March to May of 2014. The U.S. intelligence community assessed that Putin would order cyber operations against Ukraine's election system.[180] Days before the election, the U.S. intelligence community revealed that a "front for Russian state-sponsored cyber activity" sabotaged the tallying system of Ukraine's Central Election Commission (CEC).[181] The cyber actors shut down the CEC's network for twenty-four hours, which forced Ukrainian officials to frantically repair the damage so that votes could be counted and reported on election day.[182] The same state-sponsored group was later revealed to have leaked documents and photos from the commission's network likely to sabotage the results and undermine confidence in commission.[183]

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[178] Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, 136.

[179] McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, chap. 1.

[180] Shimer, *Rigged*, 148.

[181] Shimer, 148.

[182] Laura Galante and Shaun Ee, "Defining Russian Election Interference: An Analysis of Select 2014 to 2018 Cyber Enabled Incidents" (Atlantic Council, 2018), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20718.

[183] Galante and Ee.

Despite the assault, pro-Western candidate Petro Poroshenko won the election with 54% of the vote.[184]

The 2014 assault against Ukraine's presidential election was another significant milestone in Russia's interference operations. Russia's intrusion into Ukraine's election infrastructure demonstrated the Kremlin's willingness to target a large, formidable, and nearby threat in pursuit of the Kremlin's overall strategy to exert influence and power over Ukraine. In other words, election interference was one of the many tools that the Kremlin used against Ukraine to not only protect the Putin regime from pro-democracy movements, but also to support Russia's global resurgence. While regime preservation had been the original and primary motive for election interference operations, from the Kremlin's standpoint, geo-political developments necessitated the use of election interference in Ukraine to attain uncontested regional influence—an objective that overlapped the Russian international status motive with (but was ultimately subordinate to) the regime preservation motive. Although the Kremlin was unable to guarantee Yanukovich's victory, the Kremlin's inability to elect its preferred candidate in Ukraine did not deter the Russian leadership from attempting to undermine elections, particularly targeting its biggest and most formidable adversary—the United States—especially as Russia's aggressive behavior abroad seemed to pay off, most notably with the annexation of Crimea, which provided a major boost in Putin's popularity at home.[185]

3. 2016: The United Kingdom and the United States

Before the Kremlin took aim at the United States in the 2016 presidential election, it seized another opportunity to exert influence over an adversary, tarnish the image of Western democracy, and demonstrate the strength and capabilities of the Putin regime. In the summer 2016 when Britons voted in a referendum on whether to stay in the European Union or leave, the political environment became ripe for Russian exploitation and disinformation. Russian-managed Twitter bots mobilized around the Brexit vote, as they both amplified pro-Brexit messages and fabricated content to distort the online

[184] Galante and Ee.

[185] Matovski, *The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal*, 218.

environment.[186] Indeed, British experts knew that Putin would favor the pro-Leave campaign; however, as former Government Communications Headquarters Director Robert Hannigan stated, "we had no sense that [Russia] might be systematically using social media to influence the campaign, partly because we were not really looking."[187]

The prospect of a British departure from the Europe Union played directly into the Kremlin's goal of undermining the cohesion of Western alliances, and it underscored the Kremlin's intent to make Russia appear as a great power (relative to its European adversary). As James Clapper explains, "what a great opportunity to drive a wedge between the UK and Europe, and [the United States]."[188] By many accounts, Russia's election interference operations against the United Kingdom threw the West completely off-kilter, such that according to Hanning, British officials were caught off guard by the covert nature of Russia's manipulation of Britain's social media environment.[189] Moreover, in Hanning's account of Russia's interference in the British referendum, this ill-preparedness encouraged Russia's efforts to target the U.S. presidential election in 2016. As Shimer explains, few in Washington sensed the storm of Russian interference in the 2016 election.[190] Former Deputy Director of the CIA David Cohen said, "one of the things we did not do as well as we should have was sound the alarm," and the United States did not do a good enough job of saying "'the Russians did that there, so there is no reason to think they're not going to do the same thing here.'"[191]

The unpreparedness of U.S. officials to both detect and counter information operations in the up-coming U.S. presidential election allowed the United States to become vulnerable to the pattern of Russian interference operations that had transpired in Europe for years. For example, one month after the Brexit vote, Russian intelligence (working through WikiLeaks) released thousands of stolen emails from the Democratic National

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[186] Galante and Ee, "Defining Russian Election Interference."

[187] Shimer, *Rigged*, 153.

[188] Shimer, 153.

[189] Shimer, 153.

[190] Shimer, 153.

[191] Shimer, 155.

Committee to the public in what quickly became a watershed moment of election interference against the West.[192] With the purpose of revealing any compromising information about then-candidate Hillary Clinton (and her campaign) to destabilize the democratic process, Russian agents "released tens of thousands of stolen emails and documents" with the intent "to influence the 2016 presidential election."[193]

While attempting to denigrate Clinton and her candidacy, the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA), to which the Kremlin outsourced the election interference operation, also created hundreds of social media accounts to impersonate U.S. citizens and promulgate highly polarized opinions, going as far as to organize rallies and political demonstrations through the social media bots.[194] As Hamilton recounts, in the summer of 2016, the "American alt-right media, amplified by Russian bots" branded a U.S. military exercise in Texas as "an Obama plan to round up political dissidents, seize guns, and use shuttered Wal-Mart stores as detention camps."[195] According to Hamilton, such examples speak to the power of the internet and social networks to amplify disinformation and the role it plays in increasing polarization. He suggests that, in part due to Russian influence, "American's views on the role of government, race relations, and immigration, among other issues all show an accelerating partisan divergence in just the last several years."[196]

At the same time, Russia attempted to infiltrate the U.S. electoral system in order to undermine confidence in the U.S. democratic process. "Russian hackers tried to gain access to voting websites, and in 'a small number of these' they actually breached computer defenses," according to Hamilton.[197] More significantly, even though the U.S. Senate eventually found no evidence of voter tally manipulation, "Russian hackers were in a position to, at a minimum, alter or delete voter registration data."[198] By fall of 2016, the

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[192] Shimer, 154.

[193] Hamilton, "Russia's Attempts to Undermine Democracy in the West," 337.

[194] Galante and Ee, "Defining Russian Election Interference."

[195] Hamilton, "Russia's Attempts to Undermine Democracy in the West," 335.

[196] Hamilton, 336.

[197] Hamilton, 337.

[198] Hamilton, 337.

United States had become the focus of a full-scale Russian election interference campaign and the true test of the Kremlin's efforts to bring "meaning" back to Russia and turn the offensive against the West.[199] If Russia could cast doubt about the integrity of the U.S. election and potentially destabilize American democracy, then this would effectively demonstrate Putin's relative strength and confirm Russia's rise as a great (albeit formidable) global power.

By many accounts, the Kremlin also favored then-candidate Trump because of "Trump's stated policy to work with Russia" and because "pro-Kremlin figures spoke highly about what they saw as his Russia-friendly positions on Syria and Ukraine."[200] In April 2016, then-candidate Trump discussed his desire to work with the Russian government to defeat the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant, as well his desire to rebuild "warmer relations" with Russia.[201] By this account, the Kremlin likely saw President Trump as an outlet for Russia to work constructively with the United States, which would force Western leaders to "reckon with Russia as part of their decision-making process."[202]

This may be seen as an objective in line with the motive to promote Russia's national insurgence. However, as in previous incidents, Russia's motive was largely overshadowed by the regime preservation imperative because Putin concurrently expressed a notable dislike for then-candidate Clinton for her alleged endorsement of the protests in Russia in 2011–2012, and because of her persistent "aggressive rhetoric" toward the Putin regime.[203] For example, in August 2016, Clinton called Putin the "godfather of right-wing, extreme nationalism," which the Kremlin regarded as Clinton's way of comparing Putin to

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199 Surkov, "Vladislav Surkov: Putin's Long State / Ideas and People."

200 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution*.

201 Alexander Burns, "Donald Trump Reaffirms Support for Warmer Relations With Putin," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2016, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/02/us/politics/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-russia.html.

202 Hamilton, "Russia's Attempts to Undermine Democracy in the West," 335.

203 Clinton Ehrlich, "The Kremlin Really Believes That Hillary Wants to Start a War With Russia," *Foreign Policy* (blog), September 7, 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/07/the-kremlin-really-believes-that-hillary-clinton-will-start-a-war-with-russia-donald-trump-vladimir-putin/.

Hitler.[204] As Clinton Ehrlich explained, to the Kremlin "it appeared that Clinton was straining to fabricate a rationale for hostilities against the regime."[205] Therefore, it also became apparent that Putin primarily intended to bolster his regime by supporting the candidacy of President Trump.

D. CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, the persistent threat of color revolutions against Putin's regime, and Russia's history of election interference, it becomes clear how Putin was primarily driven by regime preservation in the chain of events that led to the interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Although there were moments where international status influenced Putin's decision-making, such as the Estonia example, regime preservation was the principal motive that drove Putin to go on the offensive vis-à-vis election interference against his adversaries.

Most directly, the persistent threat of color revolutions that unfolded across the former Soviet Union created an environment of fear that initially drove Putin into a defensive posture that then turned offensive. By assuming an increasingly aggressive posture and eventually interfering in Western elections, Putin demonstrated his willingness to target the alleged orchestrators of the color revolutions that threatened his regime. Ultimately, the perceived danger of color revolutions drove Putin to attempt to undermine his primary adversary by challenging the democratic institution that the United States values most—its elections.

The attack against the United States was a culmination of a long, underlying history of election interference between Russia and the United States, stretching back to the early attempts by Soviet Union, to the increasingly more brazen operations against Estonia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom, which established the playbook for Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. As the color revolutions swept across the former Soviet Union and Russia struggled to find effective measures to counter

[204] Ehrlich.

[205] Ehrlich.

democratic diffusion, the Kremlin tested and ultimately resorted to election influence operations as low-cost actions against the United States. With this foundation of Putin's motives to interfere in the U.S. election in 2016, the question of the efficacy (i.e., the costs and benefits) of such actions becomes the next area of inquiry.

III. THE LIMITATIONS OF SANCTIONS AS A DETERRENT AGAINST ELECTION INTERFERENCE

Robert Mueller, Special Counsel for the United States Department of Justice, determined in his 2019 report titled "Reports on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election" that the Russian government initiated an "information warfare" campaign against the 2016 presidential election in a "sweeping and systematic fashion."[206] Then, during his July 2019 testimony before the House Judiciary and Intelligence Committees, Mueller responded to the question of whether Russia would attack future U.S. elections (i.e., in 2020) by saying, "they're doing it as we sit here."[207] Mueller's testimony revealed that the Kremlin's repeated attacks against the U.S. election system raise the question of whether the steps the United States has taken to prevent Russia's actions have been effective means of deterrence.

Considering this assessment, this chapter will explore the effects of U.S. sanctions against Russia for its election interference and whether these measures have imposed a sufficient cost on Russia to deter future interference operations—what amounts to a deterrence by punishment strategy.[208] Based on a review of the available evidence, I argue that U.S. sanctions have not raised a sufficient financial cost on the Putin regime or the Russian economy writ large and have indeed reinforced the Kremlin's impression that election interference operations are a worthwhile tool to promote regime security as well as the resurgence of Russian international influence.

A. OVERVIEW OF SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

Economic sanctions have been the cornerstone of U.S. efforts to deter and punish Russia's aggressive behavior, ranging from its aggression in Ukraine to malicious cyber

206 Robert Mueller III, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, vol. I of II (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019).

207 Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Mark Mazzetti, "Highlights of Robert Mueller's Testimony to Congress," The New York Times, July 24, 2019, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/us/politics/mueller-testimony.html.

208 Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence."

operations. In an attempt to hold the Russian government and its proxies responsible for their involvement in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, the United States has orchestrated a broad "name and shame" strategy, manifested in targeted economic sanctions,[209] which do not target the Russian economy as a whole or even its major sectors.[210] Rather, the U.S. sanctions in response to Russia election meddling consist of "restrictions against specific individuals and entities," as well as "narrower restrictions against wider groups of Russian companies."[211] The purpose of this approach is to punish certain individuals connected to the Kremlin but ideally spare the wider Russian population. However, an assessment of these narrowly focused measures reveals that overall, they have not achieved their objective: the Putin regime remains undeterred in its desire to continue interfering in foreign, and particularly Western elections.[212]

As Table 1 depicts, the United States has developed and issued 14 sanctions-based response options to counter Russia's election meddling and its cyber-related activities overall. The response options have spanned three presidential administrations and have largely focused on select individuals for their involvement in Russia's election meddling efforts. Based on the executive orders of three U.S. presidential administrations—Obama, Trump, and Biden—the United States has designated an estimated 170 Russian individuals, including those associated with Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and military intelligence agency, the General Staff of the Armed Forces (GRU), for their ties to Russia's election interference operations. Named persons also include a network of Russian citizens associated with Russian financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin and the Internet Research Agency, which Prigozhin purportedly bankrolled to support influence operations in the United States.[213]

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[209] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 117.

[210] Cory Welt et al., *U.S. Sanctions on Russia*, vol. Version 8, CRS Report R5415 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2020).

[211] Welt et al.

[212] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 123.

[213] Dianne E Rennack and Cory Welt, *U.S. Sanctions on Russia: An Overview*, vol. Vesion 9, CRS Report R5415 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2021).

Table 1. List of United States Sanctions against Russia for Operations Related to Election Interference.[214]

Date	President	Action	Purpose
April 2015	Obama	Signed E.O. 13694	Sanctions in response to those who conducted cyber attacks against US critical infrastructure, for financial gain, intent to disrupt computer networks, or interfere in elections of the United States
November 2016: U.S. Presidential Election			
December 2016	Obama	Sanctions	Sanctions, expulsion, and closures against the GRU and FSB, four GRU officers, three Russian entities that assisted GRU, two entities for using cyber means to cause the misappropriation of US government funds
January 2017	Obama	Signed E.O. 13757	Amended E.O. 13694
August 2017	Trump	Signed CAATSA	Codified E.O. 13694 & E.O. 13757, titled Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, imposed sanctions on Iran, North Korea, and Russia
March 2018	Trump	Sanctions	In response to NotPetya cyberattack and additional Russian individuals found involved in 2016 election
April 2018	Trump	Sanctions	In response to worldwide malign activity, such as Russia's involvement with chemicals weapons use in Syria, and additional individuals found involved in 2016 election
June 2018	Trump	Sanctions	Cyber-related malign activity
August 2018	Trump	Sanctions	Cyber-related malign activity
September 2018	Trump	Signed E.O. 13484	Sanctions against foreign persons involved in interference in the elections of the United States
September 2018	Trump	Sanctions	Sanctions against additional individuals found involved in 2016 election
November 2018: U.S. Midterm Elections			
December 2018	Trump	Sanctions lifted	In response to global impact from sanctions against Rusal
December 2018	Trump	Sanctions	Cyber-related malign activity and violation of international norms
September 2019	Trump	Sanctions	In response to Russian involvement in the 2018 midterm election
November 2020: US Presidential Election			
April 2020	Biden	Signed E.O. 14024	Sanctions in response to those who, on behalf of the government of the Russian Federation, conducted cyber attacks against the election process and institutions of the United States

The key problem with the U.S. "targeted" sanctions policy is that it does not satisfy some fundamental precepts of deterrence. Robert Jervis posits that "in the most elemental sense, deterrence depends on perceptions" and "unless statesmen understand the ways in which their opposite numbers see the world, their deterrence policies are likely to misfire."[215] Jervis further explains that for deterrence to be effective, an actor must be convinced "that the expected value of a certain action is outweighed by the expected punishment."[216] Essentially, the cost-benefit calculation lies ultimately in the eyes of the beholder. This is where the most fundamental mismatch between the U.S. sanctions

[214] Adapted from Cory Welt et al., "U.S. Sanctions on Russia" (Congressional Research Service, January 17, 2020); Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 117.

[215] Robert Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," International Security 7, no. 3 (1982): 3–30, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538549.

[216] Jervis, 4.

response and the Russian perceptions of costs and benefits lied. I explore this issue in the section that follows.

B. WHY DETERRENCE FAILS: THE SANCTIONS THREAT THROUGH RUSSIAN EYES

Available evidence suggests that Putin and his governing elite have been willing and able to absorb the cost of U.S. sanctions imposed on Russia prior to 2022. From the standpoint of Putin and the ruling elite, sanctions appear to be viewed more as an unavoidable (albeit unwanted) reality of conflict between the United States and Russia, the impacts of which can be largely transferred to the wider Russian population.[217] Even though Putin claimed that U.S. sanctions against Russia in 2014 were a form of hybrid warfare aimed at regime change, the Kremlin was quickly able to deflect the pain of sanctions and secure the country's economic stability.[218] Thereafter, as Russia upheld its control of Crimea and pursued military operations in Syria, this clearly demonstrated both the Kremlin's willingness and capacity to absorb economic sanctions as the cost associated with fulfilling Putin's domestic and foreign policy goals. In October 2014, Putin told reporters that U.S. sanctions were "foolish" and that "all I have to do is smile to show the devil is not as frightening as he seems."[219]

The same assessment was also supported by the findings of the most recent U.S. intelligence report on Russia's involvement in the 2020 election, which concluded that "Russian officials are probably willing to accept some risk in conducting influence operations targeting the United States … because they believe Washington meddles similarly in Russia."[220] Moreover, the intelligence report stated that such operations against the United States "pose a manageable risk to Russia's image in Washington because

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217 Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, 157.

218 Jonsson, 157.

219 Darya Korsunkaya, "Putin Says 'foolish' Sanctions Will Not Hold Back Russia," Reuters, October 2, 2014, sec. Economic News, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-idUSKCN0HR0XU20141002.

220 National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to 2020 U.S. Elections*.

U.S.-Russia relations are already extremely poor."[221] The intelligence assessment alludes to the idea that the current U.S. sanctions regime against Russian for its interference operations in 2016, 2018, and 2020 has been tepid enough for Putin to consider future interference a worthwhile feat, and thus a manageable risk for his regime to undertake. Furthermore, Putin's ability to mitigate the cost of sanctions also suggests a link with the regime survival motive, which, as I argued in the previous chapter, has been the original impetus and purpose for Russia's increasingly aggressive influence operations. Quite simply, the limited cost of sanctions appears to have been insufficient to convince the Putin regime from giving up an instrument that seemed to further its most fundamental interest.

The Kremlin's tepid counter-responses to sanctions also showed how the value of election interference against the United States outweighed the punishment. This was illustrated in December 2016, when Putin decided not to expel U.S. diplomats from Russia in response to President Obama's sanctions against Russia's interference in the 2016 election.[222] Indeed, this was partly to demonstrate Putin's willingness to forge warmer relations with incoming President Trump; however, as Andrew Roth claims, "in a rare, and calculated, break from the diplomatic tradition of reciprocal punishment, Putin opted to do nothing to show that the Kremlin retained its 'right to retaliate'" against President Obama's misappropriated sanctions.[223] Here, Putin's restraint implied that the initial round of sanctions against Russia did not significantly impacted Russia's economy or Putin's regime. The dismissive attitude toward U.S. sanctions extended even to individual perpetrators of the election meddling acts. For instance, in 2018, Yevgeny Prigozhi—one of the key alleged orchestrators of Russia's election interference operations against the United States—dismissed the notion that U.S. sanctions have negatively impacted him. He said, "I don't have business with the United States or Americans" and "I don't care about

221 National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to 2020 U.S. Elections*.

222 Andrew Roth, "Putin Says He Won't Deport U.S. Diplomats as He Looks to Cultivate Relations with Trump," *Washington Post*, December 30, 2016, sec. World, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-plans-retaliation-and-serious-discomfortoverus-hacking-sanctions/2016/12/30/4efd3650-ce12-11e6-85cd-e66532e35a44_story.html.

223 Roth.

this. Except perhaps that I won't be dining at McDonald's."[224] Rhetorically, at least, the Kremlin and its proxies postured as if their core interests were unharmed by election interference-related U.S. sanctions.

Additionally, U.S. efforts to deter Russia's election interference efforts has been complicated by the fact that election interference was largely carried out in the cybersecurity realm. Here, authors like Jasper question whether traditional notions of deterrence are applicable to state and state-backed cyber-offensive actions. According to Jasper's research, deterrence through the threat of retaliation, for example, is undermined by the low probability of detection, lack of attribution, low cost of aggression, and conflicting laws in the cyber realm.[225] Cold War perceptions of deterrence—especially regarding nuclear weapons—also have little applicability to deterrence in cyberspace. In this regard, Dorothy Denning argues that nuclear deterrence relies on the weapons themselves because the inherently catastrophic effect that they produce limits their use and fulfills the deterrence intent.[226] As a result, cyberwarfare tools upend current perceptions of deterrence, which invariably permits cyber-based election interference to operate outside the limits of traditional deterrence theory. Moreover, cyberwarfare opens the space for actors (i.e., the Kremlin) to receive disproportionally greater benefits than costs from election interference, especially as countries struggle to develop effective ways to punish and counter cyberwarfare.

Another key reason why sanctions have been an ineffective deterrent of Russia's aggressive behavior lies at the nature of the Russian political system itself. In this realm, Jasper's points to the close patronage relationships between Putin and his elites, whereby Putin gives elites access to rents to keep his position at the head of the political system.[227] Against this backdrop, even though some elites may feel the burden of U.S. sanctions, "the

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[224] Peter Baker, "White House Penalizes Russians Over Election Meddling and Cyberattacks," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2018, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/15/us/politics/trump-russia-sanctions.html.

[225] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 119.

[226] Jasper, 119.

[227] Jasper, 126.

price for challenges could include withdrawal of [Russian] state support for their companies or corruption investigations."[228] For this reason, U.S. sanctions have driven elites closer to Putin, as he controls access to private and public loans and government contracts that will allow them to compensate for their losses from sanctions. The benefits of loyalty to the Putin regime, in other words, trumps the economic pain from U.S. sanctions for the regime-connected elites.

Another limitation of targeted sanctions against elites in Russia's authoritarian system lies in the influence they have on decision-making. In this sense, Maria Snegovaya posits that "however unhappy with Kremlin policy the Russian oligarchs may be, so far, their ability to veto extreme decisions [of the Kremlin] is limited at best."[229] Still, economic sanctions against the Russian elite have been creating some tension between the oligarchs (the business groups that control Russia's largest companies) and the siloviki (the individuals with an ex-KGB background and within Putin's inner circle) "at the top."[230] Snegovaya cites how the 2018 compliance law in Russia, which imposed criminal liability for compliance with Western sanctions, met significant resistance from the oligarchs and represented the growing dissatisfaction amongst Russia's oligarchs with Putin's handling of U.S. sanctions. Following their criticism of the law, the oligarchs influenced Russia's State Duma representatives to temper the bill's language to reduce the penalty from a criminal change to an administrative charge.[231] However, aside from a few other tangential examples of possible cleavages between Putin and the oligarchs created by sanctions, Snegovaya concludes that the "oligarchs have few mechanisms to affect substantive policy changes inside Russia," so the current U.S. policy of targeted financial penalties for the regime-connected oligarchs is not resulting in any policy changes.[232] Analysis by Snegovaya and Aslund also concludes that although "the impact of financial sanctions on

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[228] Jasper, 126.

[229] Snegovaya, "Tension at the Top: The Impact of Sanctions on Russia's Poles of Power."

[230] Snegovaya, 1.

[231] Snegovaya, "Tension at the Top: The Impact of Sanctions on Russia's Poles of Power."

[232] Snegovaya, 9.

Russia have been greater than previously understood," they have not succeeded in forcing the Kremlin to reverse its actions.[233]

Overall, this suggests that the composition of the Kremlin's elite, and the logic of its functioning, gives the Putin regime substantial leeway to withstand economic sanctions from the West in response to Russia's election interference operations. At the end of 2016, "a [Forbes study] found that four out of the top five businesses that gained state contracts worth more than $15 billion were very closely tied to Putin;" one of those businesses is owned by Yevgenyi Prigozhin of the Internet Research Agency, who sponsored the efforts to target the 2016 U.S. presidential election.[234] The Kremlin, in other words, was able to take advantage of its corrupt, crony-based system, and exert significant control over economic resources, to compensate elites for their exposure to U.S. sanctions. This suggests that, at the very least, the U.S. sanctions were not costly enough to prevent the Russian regime from attempting to increase its security through election interference operations.

Moreover, the tepid economic response to the Kremlin for election interference invited further election interference operations against not only the United States, but also other Western democracies. The overly restrained nature of the U.S. response to Russia for election interference created the appearance that the costs of election interference would never catch up to the benefits. This is examined in greater detailed in the following chapter.

C. CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this chapter shows that the United States' focus on sanctioning Russians and Russian interests for their involvement in the U.S. elections has been an insufficient means of deterring such behavior, particularly vis-à-vis the Kremlin's primary objective of securing the Putin regime. As Putin shaped the Russian political and economic system to deflect and ameliorate the impact of U.S. sanctions, it remains far from certain that tough economic measures will evoke a situation severe enough to seriously

233 Aslund and Snegovaya, "Report."

234 Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, 261.

impact the Russian aggressive foreign behavior.[235] This can be largely analyzed through Jervis' argument that deterrence must be viewed through the eyes of the targeted state. From this standpoint, since Putin's regime does not seem to be seriously impacted by sanctions, the Kremlin will likely remain undeterred in its commitment to interfere in foreign elections. Additionally, before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia's national economy and thus a portion of its national power seemed able to withstand the impact of election interference. Nevertheless, sanctions imposed steep costs on the Russian national economy, leading to a period of stagnation.[236] As economic cost for Russia's aggressive posture abroad did not deter the Kremlin from further election interference, this again confirms that the Kremlin was primarily motivated not by securing Russia's international status, but by preserving the Putin regime by any means necessary.

[235] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 125.

[236] The Economist, "The Kremlin Has Isolated Russia's Economy," *The Economist*, April 23, 2021, https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/04/23/the-kremlin-has-isolated-russias-economy.

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IV. HOW STRATEGIC BENEFITS OF ELECTION INTERFERENCE EXCEED THE TACTICAL COSTS

This chapter examines how the United States has responded to election interference operations at the international and domestic levels. Specifically, it explores the argument that in addition to the weak effects of sanctions, the U.S. and its allies displayed a persistent reluctance to decisively respond to Russian increasing assertiveness, which perhaps inflated the Kremlin's sense that actions like election interference may be a low-cost way of promoting its objectives. To assess this proposition, Chapter IV will first survey the U.S. responses to Russian interference in American elections since 2016. In doing so, I will place special emphasis on developments during and after President Trump's tenure. This period is crucial because it helps reveal if Russia's interference operations in 2016 indeed fulfilled its goals of undermining confidence in the election and exacerbating social fractures within American political culture—outcomes that may have bolstered the Putin regime by distracting the United States and blunting the U.S. edge and attractiveness as the world's leading example of liberal democracy.[237]

Additionally, this chapter examines Russian election interference operations against key U.S. allies, particularly the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2017 French presidential election, and the effectiveness of the measures taken there to counter Russian influence. Through an analysis of the evidence in these cases, I argue that deterrence by denial—defensive cyber tools and other measures to "interference-proof" elections from foreign interference—may be more effective in deterring Russian interference than punitive steps like sanctions.

A. THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: THE INITIAL U.S. RESPONSE AGAINST RUSSIA FOR ELECTION INTERFERENCE

The Obama administration initiated the first wave of economic sanctions against Russia for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Yet, the decision to levy sanctions came after significant deliberation, and the sanctions ultimately fell short on

237 National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to 2020 U.S. Elections*.

imposing any significant economic costs on Russia. The administration's "restraint" arose from concerns of potential escalation with Russia in the cyber domain and from the potential of creating the optic that the White House had influenced the 2016 election.[238] As a result of President Obama's limited response to Russia's involvement in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Kremlin felt emboldened to continue election interference operations against subsequent elections in the United States and other Western democracies, especially as the costs to the Putin regime and Russia's national economy were insufficient to deter the Kremlin. U.S. restraint against Russia was therefore a key enabler of the Kremlin's follow-on election interference. In turn, the Kremlin fulfilled its goal of upholding regime security and asserting Russia's global influence at the expense of the United States.

President Obama conducted a tepid response even though for a full year prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Russia's malicious cyber activity became a topic of growing concern for President Obama's national security team. Reports of Russia's sophisticated cyber capabilities, a deeper understanding of Russia's cyber activity in the 2014 Ukraine Euromaidan revolution, and a breach of the unclassified networks at the State Department, the White House, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2014 eventually influenced President Obama to sign Executive Order (EO) 13694 in April 2015.[239] EO 13694 "authorizes the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with the Attorney General and the Secretary of State, to impose sanctions on those individuals and entities that he determines to obey responsible for or complicit in malicious cyber-enabled activities."[240] The executive order allows the United States to issue sanctions against individuals, rather than governments, for participating in malicious cyber activity. According to Michael

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238 Shimer, *Rigged*, 175.

239 Jordan A. Brunner, "The (Cyber) New Normal: Dissecting President Obama's Cyber National Emergency," *Jurimetrics* 57, no. 3 (2017): 398, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26322715; Ellen Nakashima, "Hackers Breach Some White House Computers," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/hackers-breach-some-white-house-computers/2014/10/28/2ddf2fa0-5ef7-11e4-91f7-5d89b5e8c251_story.html.

240 Executive Order No. 13694, "Blocking the Property of Certain Persons Engaging in Significant Malicious Cyber-Enabled Activities," 80 FR 18077 § (2015), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2015/04/02/2015-07788/blocking-the-property-of-certain-persons-engaging-in-significant-malicious-cyber-enabled-activities.

Daniel, President Obama's cybersecurity coordinator, "[EO 13694] enables [the United States] to have a new way of both deterring and imposing costs on malicious cyber actors."[241]

Following President Obama's relatively subdued public response to the 2014 breach of the White House's unclassified network, EO 13694 seemed to finally signal to Putin that the United States would take more serious measures to deter future malicious activity against the United States.[242] However, as President Obama's relatively passive response to Crimea shortly beforehand revealed, the United States apparently did not take serious measures to counter the threats posed by the Putin regime. As Benjamin Haddad and Alina Polyakova explain, even the imposition of sanctions against Russia in response to Ukraine in 2014 were accompanied by "so much propitiation and restraint elsewhere" that Russia remained undeterred from subsequent aggression, including in the 2016 against the U.S. presidential election.[243]

Then in late 2016, the U.S. intelligence community issued its initial findings that "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election."[244] The U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Office of the Director of National Intelligence stated with confidence that "the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from U.S. persons and institutions, including from U.S. political organizations" and that "based on the scope and sensitivity of these efforts, that only Russia's senior-most officials could have authorized these activities."[245]

With EO 13694 at hand, the Obama Administration was poised to respond; however, concerns over escalation and blowback continued to complicate the response

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241 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 124.

242 Jasper, 124.

243 Alina Polyakova and Benjamin Haddad, "Don't Rehabilitate Obama on Russia" (Brookings, March 5, 2018), https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/05/dont-rehabilitate-obama-on-russia/.

244 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution*.

245 Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

options.[246] This would soon become a recurring problem for President Obama and succeeding presidential administrations, as U.S. responses to Russia's election interference were frequently considered too risky or too complicated. Specifically, President Obama was concerned that a tit-for-tat cyberwarfare with the Russians would not be in the interest of the United States insofar as Russia was believed to have had "a playbook ready to respond with cyberattacks against America's critical infrastructure—and could possibly shut down the electrical grid."[247] Essentially, the United States could not ensure "escalation dominance" in cyberspace nor could it confidentially stop any potential retaliation, let alone deter malicious cyber activity more broadly.[248] In this, it became clear that the novelty of warfare in the cyber domain, and its use as a weapon against U.S. elections, complicated U.S. deterrence measures for Russia's election interference operations. Much like Estonia, the concerns over escalation and second-order effects of retaliation undermined U.S. response options. With these concerns, the Kremlin likely perceived the costs imposed on Russia by the United States would be less than the benefits, which made election interference that much more of a worthwhile action to undertake.

Eventually, in December 2016 President Obama made the first response to Russia's interference in the 2016 election through a package of punitive measures. The measures consisted of sanctions, expulsion, and closures, all of which were deemed a "necessary and appropriate response to efforts to harm U.S. interests in violation of established international norms of behavior."[249] The sanctions specifically targeted the Russian military intelligence service (GRU) for "tampering, altering, or causing the misappropriation of information with the purpose or effect of interfering with the 2016

246 Scott Jasper, "Russia Sanctions Are Insufficient: Use Active Cyber Defense," August 5, 2017, 120, https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/55408.

247 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 120.

248 Jasper, 121.

249 "Statement by the President on Actions in Response to Russian Malicious Cyber Activity and Harassment," Press release (The White House, December 29, 2016), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/29/statement-president-actions-response-russian-malicious-cyber-activity.

U.S. election process."[250] The sanctions consisted of travel bans and asset freezes, but as Jasper underscores, the main targets had few known holdings abroad; essentially, the sanctions were so narrowly targeted "'that even those who helped design them describe their impact as largely symbolic.'"[251] Moreover, Putin stated that he would not respond to the U.S. response, in what was potentially a "public show of restraint that appeared aimed at embarrassing the Obama Administration."[252] As Jasper further explains, "instead, Putin invited the children of U.S. envoys to a New Year's celebration held on the grounds of the Kremlin."[253] In January 2017, President Obama amended EO 13694, which took "additional steps to address the national emergency with respect to significant malicious cyber-enabled activities."[254] Nevertheless, undeterred by the U.S. sanctions and expulsion of a few Russian individuals, Putin proceeded to target the French presidential election in May 2017.

B. THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. RESPONSES AGAINST RUSSIAN ELECTORAL INTERFERENCE UNDER TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

As President Trump took office in January 2017, the question of how to respond to Russia's involvement in the 2016 election again loomed large. In the summer of 2017, President Trump signed into law the Counter America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which was the third iteration of EO 13694 and EO 13757 that gave further authority to the Treasury Department to impose sanctions on Russia for its malicious cyber activities.[255] A year later, the Trump Administration issued its first round of sanctions against Russia, primarily against individuals and organizations involvement in the NotPetya attack, but also against additional individuals found involved in the 2016

250 "Statement by the President on Actions in Response to Russian Malicious Cyber Activity and Harassment."

251 Jasper, 121.

252 Jasper, 121.

253 Jasper, 121.

254 Executive Order No. 13757, "EO 13757: Taking Additional Steps to Address the National Emergency With Respect to Significant Malicious Cyber- Enabled Activities," 82 FR 1 § (2017), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/01/03/2016-31922/taking-additional-steps-to-address-the-national-emergency-with-respect-to-significant-malicious.

255 Rennack and Welt, *U.S. Sanctions on Russia: An Overview*.

election.[256] The March 2017 sanctions specifically listed the Russian Internet Research Agency, Concord Management and Consulting, Concord Catering, and thirteen Russian individuals for their role in the 2016 election interference campaign.[257] Then in April 2017, the Department of the Treasury issued sanctions against seven additional Russian oligarchs, the twelve companies that they owned or controlled, and seventeen senior Russian government officials, partly for their role in Syria and partly for their role in the 2016 election.[258]

By the spring of 2018, a measurable impact of U.S. sanctions—and the threat of further ones—could be observed on the Russian economy. According to then-Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Marshall Billingslea, the impact of the sanctions were "felt within a single day" by the Russian oligarch class.[259] In April 2018, the combined net worth of Russia's wealthiest 27 people fell by $16 billion.[260] Additionally, the Russian Index of stocks dropped the most it had in the previous four years, and the Russian ruble depreciated over 3%.[261] According to the Aslund and Snegovaya, Russia's GDP fell by a total of 35% since its peak at $2.3 trillion in 2013 to $1.5 trillion in 2020, though also partly because of U.S. and European sanctions against Russia for Crimea in 2014.[262] This translated to an almost 11% drop in disposable income for Russians; however, low unemployment rates and controlled inflation made it difficult to ascertain whether the impact of U.S. and European sanctions "[would] provoke a crisis severe enough to have a serious impact on Russian politics."[263] The Kremlin's willingness to further escalate its aggression and

256 Rennack and Welt.

257 Alina Polyakova and Filippos Letsas, "Trump Administration Actions on Russia" (Brookings, December 31, 2019), https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/25/on-the-record-the-u-s-administrations-actions-on-russia/.

258 Polyakova and Letsas.

259 Marshall Billingslea, "Statement of Assistant Secretary Marshall Billingslea Before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs" (U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 13, 2018), https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm480.

260 Snegovaya, "Tension at the Top: The Impact of Sanctions on Russia's Poles of Power."

261 Jasper, "Russia Sanctions Are Insufficient," 124.

262 Aslund and Snegovaya, "Report."

263 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 125.

continue to try to subvert Western elections in spite of the economic decline caused by Western sanctions is a further indication that the Kremlin prioritized regime preservation over Russia's international status.

From the standpoint of Jervis's general theory of deterrence, sanctions against Russian interference could only be assessed as effective (i.e., they evoked a change in behavior) if the targeted actor perceived the punishment as greater than the benefits. The observable impact on Russia's economy does not seem to have passed this threshold. According to Aslund and Snegovaya, this is partly because Putin ultimately *does not care* about the declining standard of living of the Russian population at large.[264] Chris Miller's highlights this point, as he describes how Putin slashed public services over the last two decades, increased taxes, and notoriously raised the retirement age in 2018, all of which signaled Putin's apathy toward public and even Russia's general welfare.[265] Instead, Putin emphasized other measures of economic stability such as "low inflation, the minimal budget deficit, public debt of only 18% of GDP at the end of 2020 and steady current-account surpluses."[266] These measures serve to insulate Russia from relying on foreign debt and Western financing, which, in the Kremlin's reckoning, could be used as leverage against the Putin regime.[267] This peculiar prioritization of low indebtedness and financial independence at the expense of economic growth therefore reveals the primacy of regime preservation over Russia's international status as a driving factor the Kremlin's aggressive posture.

The Kremlin's ability to ride roughshod over the economic interests of the population is partly due to the unique logic of Putin's mass support, which for a long time, emphasized the stability of Putin's rule over concrete improvements in living standards.[268] As result, the apparent impact of U.S. sanctions on Russia's macroeconomic position

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264 Aslund and Snegovaya, "Report."

265 Chris Miller, "Russians Lower Their Standards," *Foreign Policy*, February 11, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/11/russians-lower-their-standards/.

266 Aslund and Snegovaya, 18.

267 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, chap. Introduction.

268 Matovski, *The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal*, 228.

would not induce the change in policy behavior that the sanctions intended to achieve. As the Kremlin seemingly does not care about the welfare of Russia, but instead the stability of the Putin regime, deterrence by sanctions fails because its effects can be redirected at Russia more broadly while the Putin regime largely avoids the consequences. This, in turn, shows that election interference helps bolster the security and power of the Putin regime at the expense of Russia's broader economic interests. Evidence of Russia's economic position evidently aligns with Hypothesis 4 of this thesis, which argues that interfering in the U.S. presidential elections benefited the domestic security of the Putin regime, but decreased Russia's overall economic power and welfare.

Additionally, Russian elite and mass opinion generally aligns with the idea that even if the Kremlin were "to capitulate on all key foreign policy fronts, there would be no tangible easing of sanctions," according to Ruslan Pukhov of the Moscow-based Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies.[269] Even though the 2017–2018 U.S. sanctions had an immediate impact on the Russian economy, the sanctions morphed, from the Russian view, into a "years-long war of attrition that Putin can win."[270] Due to these trends, the Putin regime seems willing to endure a long-term confrontation with the West until "normalization occurs without relinquishing key holdings, such as Crimea," according to Jasper .[271]

Another constraint on the credibility of U.S. sanctions as a deterrent is the unintended economic blowback of some of them.[272] Namely, when the United States imposed sanctions against Oleg Deripaska and his company Rusal—the world's second-largest producer of aluminum in the world (about 6%)—the price of aluminum skyrocketed by 20% on the global markets and threatened closure of Rusal factories across the globe.[273] Consequently, the Trump administration lifted sanctions on Rusal after several months of negotiations. This action drew criticism and resistance from Congressional Democrats,

269 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 126.

270 Jasper, 125.

271 Jasper, 126.

272 Aslund and Snegovaya, "Report."

273 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 125.

who asserted that the move sent "the wrong signal to Moscow about the conduct towards its neighbors and the United States."[274] As Jasper asserts, the administration's move watered down the "most targeted sanction against Moscow" and bolstered Putin's belief that countries are wrong to consider Russia a threat.[275] This point was highlighted by Putin himself, when he asserted that "sanctions [against the Russian interference in the U.S. election] are ineffective, counterproductive, and harmful to all."[276]

Throughout the remainder of his time in office, President Trump continued to impose additional sanctions against Russian individuals and interests related to their involvement in the U.S. elections. By the time President Trump left office, his administration had imposed 10 rounds of sanctions in response to Russia's meddling, yet their effects on the Russian economy were still minimal. As a result, the persistence of sanctions seemed to represent more of a symbolic and increasingly limited effort to punish or dissuade Russian malign behavior, rather than to impose any serious cost aimed at deterring Russian election meddling writ large. While sanctions harmed Russia's national economy, they did not substantively challenge the Putin regime, which further showed the disparity (and indeed contradiction) between the regime preservation motive and international status motive.

Indeed, despite the U.S. sanctions and the repeated disclosure of those involved in meddling in the 2016 and 2018 elections, Putin remained undeterred and took aim at the 2020 U.S. presidential election. According to the Foreign Threats to the 2020 U.S. Federal Elections report issued by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the intelligence community confidently assessed that "Putin authorized, and a range of Russian government organizations conducted, influence operations aimed at denigrating President Biden's candidacy and the Democratic Party, supporting former President Trump, [and]

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[274] Kenneth P. Vogel, "Trump Administration to Lift Sanctions on Russian Oligarch's Companies," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2018, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/sanctions-oleg-deripaska-russia-trump.html.

[275] Jasper, "Russia Sanctions Are Insufficient," 125.

[276] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 125.

undermining public confidence in the electoral process."[277] The biggest change between 2020 and 2016 was that "Russia did not make persistent efforts to access election infrastructure, such as those made by Russian intelligence during the last U.S. presidential election."[278] Moreover, as previously revealed, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that Putin meddled in 2020 because he was willing to accept some risk of influencing the election and believes that such operations pose a manageable risk to Russia's image and interests.[279] This stresses the regime preservation motive such that the benefits of election interference exceeded the relatively low costs imposed by the United States on Kremlin elites and Russia's national economy.

C. U.S. RESPONSES TO RUSSIAN ELECTORAL INTERFERENCE UNDER THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Much like the Obama and Trump administrations, President Biden followed the pattern of sanctions-focused measures against specific Russians involved in the election meddling. Within a few months of President Biden's tenure, he signed Executive Order 14024, titled "Blocking Property with Respect to Specified Harmful Foreign Activities of the Government of the Russian Federation, " which gave the executive branch greater ability to impose sanctions on Russia in the future.[280] As Biden's April 2021 press release stated, "[The United States] has been clear—publicly and privately—that we will defend our national interests and impose costs for Russian Government actions that seek to harm us."[281] President Biden's sanctions against Russia for its interference in the 2020 election came shortly after the United States issued sanctions for the poisoning of Alexsei Navalny and for the Russian government's suspected involvement in the 2020 SolarWinds cyber-

277 National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to 2020 U.S. Elections*.

278 National Intelligence Council.

279 National Intelligence Council.

280 Rennack and Welt, *U.S. Sanctions on Russia: An Overview*.

281 "FACT SHEET: Imposing Costs for Harmful Foreign Activities by the Russian Government," Briefing (The White House, April 15, 2021), https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/15/fact-sheet-imposing-costs-for-harmful-foreign-activities-by-the-russian-government/.

attack, all of which contributed to a heightened focus on Russia for its malign behavior.[282] Moreover, unlike the Trump Administration's more ad hoc approach to Russian sanctions, Biden's administration bundled these punitive measures into a unified sanctions regime to target Russian malign behavior overall.

A significant shift from the previous presidential administration's approach to Russian sanctions was Biden's decision to prohibit U.S. banks from buying Russian ruble debt in primary markets.[283] Starting in 2019, U.S. banks were barred from trading non-ruble debt issued by Russian banks; however, the new sanctions under President Biden extended the ban on ruble-based bonds issued after June 2021.[284] Polyakova asserts that this has made it "increasingly difficult for Russia to raise capital on international financial markets."[285] Similarly, a Biden spokesperson elaborated that "judging from history, removing U.S. investors as buyers in this market will likely cause a chilling effect that raises Russia's borrowing cost, along with capital flight and a weaker currency—all of which leads to slower growth and higher inflation."[286]

Still, the impact of President Biden's sanctions on Russia remain to be seen, and although they are largely more robust than those of the previous two administrations, Putin seems to be undeterred in his commitment to cyber-related operations against his adversaries.[287] That their effects may have also been limited became evident when President Biden confronted Putin about the 2021 REvil ransomware attack. When informed of the United States' ability to conduct its own cyber-attack against Russian infrastructure,

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[282] Julian E. Barnes, David E. Sanger, and Lara Jakes, "Biden Administration to Impose Tough Sanctions on Russia," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2021, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/14/us/politics/biden-russia-sanctions.html.

[283] Arshad Mohammed, "Biden to Bar U.S. Banks from Buying Russian Government Rouble Debt in Primary Markets," *Reuters*, April 15, 2021, sec. Finance, https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/exclusive-biden-bar-us-banks-issuing-russian-sovereign-debt-2021-04-15/.

[284] Mohammed.

[285] Alina Polyakova, "With New Sanctions on Russia, U.S. Sets Up Escalation Ladder" (Center for European Policy Analysis, April 16, 2021), https://cepa.org/with-new-sanctions-on-russia-u-s-sets-up-escalation-ladder/.

[286] Mohammed, "Biden to Bar U.S. Banks from Buying Russian Government Rouble Debt in Primary Markets."

[287] Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 132.

Putin pledged to take "systematical and asymmetric measures to prevent unfriendly actions by foreign states."[288] In this, Putin signaled to the United States that Russia retained both the capability and intent to conduct additional cyber-attacks against the United States if escalation occurred in the cyber domain. Putin's remarks also implied that the Kremlin does not feel sufficiently threatened by U.S. measures to cease cyber-attacks, and that the security of the Putin regime—the primary motive for the interference in U.S. elections, according to the findings of this thesis—remains unchallenged by such threats.

However, Russia's aggressive posture toward the West, predicated on the notion that the costs of actions like interfering in foreign elections pale in comparison to the perceived benefits for the Putin regime, may be upended after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The conflict in Ukraine elicited an unprecedented backlash from the international community, which included sweeping sanctions from the United States, the European Union, Japan, and even the historically neutral Switzerland on the Russian financial system, Russian oligarchs, and Russian foreign assets that will likely distress Russia's economic standing.[289] The Russian ruble plummeted to less than one U.S. cent by the end of February and as the President of the European Commission stated, recent European Union measures against Russia's central bank will "freeze its transactions" and "make it impossible for the central bank to liquidate its assets."[290] Additionally, sanctions have included prohibiting the Central Bank of Russia from conducting business in dollars or euros, effectively negating the international reserves that Russia has held in dollars and euros.[291] As a result, such measures could seriously jeopardize both Russia's economic and regime stability and force the Kremlin to reassess the utility of and its aggressive behavior, including election interference. Alternatively, as Gerstell explains, Putin may double down on this approach if he perceives the security of his regime is a serious risk

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[288] David E. Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, "Biden Warns Putin to Act Against Ransomware Groups, or U.S. Will Strike Back," *The New York Times*, July 10, 2021, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/us/politics/biden-putin-ransomware-russia.html.

[289] Patricia Cohen and Jeanna Smialek, "The West's Plan to Isolate Putin: Undermine the Ruble," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2022, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/28/business/russia-sanctions-central-bank-ruble.html.

[290] Cohen and Smialek.

[291] Cohen and Smialek.

from the most recent round of international sanctions, he may ratchet up information warfare tactics and initiate an all-out cyber-war against the United States.[292]

D. A BETTER WAY TO LIMIT RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE? DETERRENCE BY DENIAL AND IMPROVEMENTS IN U.S. ELECTION SECURITY

After the shock of the 2016 election, the United States and other Western nations took steps that seem to have diminished the utility of Russia's election interference operations for future elections and may, going forward, show better promise than punitive sanctions. These steps amount to the theory of deterrence by denial whereby governments and organizations make it more *difficult* for Russian actors to conduct election interference operations in the cyber domain. A notable first case of the effects of deterrence by denial vis-à-vis improved election security is the unsuccessful Russian interference operation in the French Presidential election of 2017. In May 2017—only four months after President Obama's sanctions against Russia for its involvement in 2016—the French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron announced that the computer networks of his party had been hacked and documents had been leaked to the public.[293] The timing of the data breach—only 48 hours before the election—suggested that the attacks sought to inflict serious damage on the integrity of the French presidential election.

The attack against the French presidential election was certainly a sophisticated campaign designed to undermine confidence in another Western state's democratic process. However, this incident also highlighted some of the key limits—and potential responses—to the Russian electoral interference operations in Western democracies. The technology team for Macron's *En Marche* party understood what had happened in the U.S. election process and took more effective measures to make it difficult for the Russians to

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[292] Glenn S. Gerstell, "Opinion | I've Dealt With Foreign Cyberattacks. America Isn't Ready for What's Coming.," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2022, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/opinion/ive-dealt-with-foreign-cyberattacks-america-isnt-ready-for-whats-coming.html.

[293] Aurelien Breeden, Sewell Chan, and Nicole Perlroth, "Macron Campaign Says It Was Target of 'Massive' Hacking Attack," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2017, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/world/europe/france-macron-hacking.html.

inflict damage.[294] Overall, there was a focus on more robust cyber-defenses that aimed to insulate the election from foreign influence. For example, the *En Marche* technology team created false emails accounts and loaded them with fake documents so that the public would question the validity of any publicly disclosed data.[295] Additionally, the French election commission informed the public and the French media that the leaked files were probably laced with fake documents and warned the public that disseminating the documents could lead to criminal penalties.[296] These countermeasures, coupled with the French government's pre-election "discretionary period" (i.e., media blackout period), helped contain the spread of the leaks. Despite the Russian attack, Macron handily won the presidential election.[297] Ultimately, by many accounts, the French presidential election was a failed attempt by the Kremlin to influence a Western country's election and divide its society. As Heather Conley states, "the Kremlin neither succeeded in interfering with the presidential election nor in dividing French society."[298]

The steps that the United States has taken to limit the impact of Russian interference operations appear to have had comparable, if more modest results, compared to the French. In the lead up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, a flurry of analysis—both from the private and public sector—highlighted the improvements to U.S. election security, regarding both election infrastructure itself and the online information environment.[299] Shortly after the election, the U.S. intelligence community also determined that unlike in 2016, "we did not see persistent Russian cyber efforts to gain access to election

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294 Jasper, "Russia Sanctions Are Insufficient," 122.

295 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 31.

296 Jasper, "Russia Sanctions Are Insufficient," 122.

297 Jasper, 123.

298 Heather Conley, "Successfully Countering Russian Electoral Interference" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 21, 2018), https://www.csis.org/analysis/successfully-countering-russian-electoral-interference.

299 Joseph Marks, "The Cybersecurity 202: The 2020 Election Is Far More Secure than Four Years Ago. But Experts Are Still Eyeing These Five Things," *Washington Post*, November 3, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/03/cybersecurity-202-2020-election-is-far-more-secure-than-four-years-ago-experts-are-still-eyeing-these-five-things/.

infrastructure."[300] The intelligence community assessed that this was partly because "greater public and media awareness of influence operations in 2020 compared to past election cycles probably helped counter them to some degree."[301] Based on these claims, the improved security of the 2020 presidential election may explain why Russia's efforts in 2020 fell short compared to 2016.

The 2020 election was "the most secure election in U.S. history" because private companies made significant improvements to protect the information environment, according to Lawrence Norden and Derek Tisler.[302] The tech giant Facebook, for example, launched the "Facebook Protect" program, which helped secure the official accounts of government officials, candidates, and their staffs.[303] It also allowed Facebook users to register their accounts for increased monitoring of malicious activity. Facebook introduced stricter rules for political ads by requiring advertisers to verify their credentials with verified identification and by adding political disclaimers to political advertisements.[304] Events surrounding the January 6 attack notwithstanding, the consensus among technology experts seemed to be that election day "came and went" without obvious "hitches" at Facebook—a noticeable improvement from 2016.[305]

Twitter, the other main platform cited for fostering the spread of Russian disinformation, also took steps to fight disinformation on its site. Understanding that a large enabler of disinformation is the ability to frivolously "re-tweet" information, Twitter's engineers created a function where users must open and nominally read an article in order

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[300] National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to 2020 U.S. Elections*.

[301] National Intelligence Council.

[302] Lawrence Norden and Derek Tisler, "The 2020 Election May Be the Most Secure in U.S. History," November 5, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-10-15/2020-election-may-be-most-secure-us-history.

[303] Shira Ovide, "What Went Right in the 2020 Election," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2021, sec. Technology, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/08/technology/what-went-right-in-the-2020-election.html.

[304] Ovide.

[305] Ryan Mac and Sheera Frenkel, "Internal Alarm, Public Shrugs: Facebook's Employees Dissect Its Election Role," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2021, sec. Technology, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/22/technology/facebook-election-misinformation.html.

to pass it along on the platform.[306] According to Dan Rogers of the Global Disinformation Index, "anything that slows people down and prompts us to think more is a good balance to our information overload."[307] Essentially, Twitter and Facebook created obstacles to the otherwise rapid spread of information, which helped tame the spread of disinformation across all social media platforms.

These efforts by private companies to combat disinformation has shown some success in increasing skepticism of Russian disinformation. According to a 2020 RAND Corporation study on the impact of Russian propaganda, revealing the source of Russian propaganda (i.e., labeling the originator of the information) tended to "reduce the probability of a positive emotional response, mostly for content that aligns with a consumer's ideology."[308] More significantly, the study found that within the most extreme-leaning sample groups (the "political left" and "political right"), "revealing the source of Russian memes significantly reduced the emotional responses among these groups" and reduced the likelihood that they would "like" the content.[309] Although the report acknowledged that Russian content still produced "strong emotional reactions" and that the "targeted partisans 'liking' and sharing that content is problematic given the scope of the Russian propaganda campaign," the steps taken by private companies to minimize the impact of Russian disinformation were determined to have at least a small positive influence on American skepticism of Russia-sourced news.[310] As the chief innovation officer at Graphika—a company that focuses on identifying and combating online disinformation—Camille François said, such steps have ultimately helped researchers and public officials better understand the techniques of "online propogandists" to better adapt

306 Thomas Germain, "Twitter Asks Some Users: Have You Read the Article You're Retweeting?," *Consumer Reports*, June 10, 2020, https://www.consumerreports.org/social-media/new-twitter-feature-misinformation/.

307 Germain.

308 Todd C. Helmus et al., *Russian Propaganda Hits Its Mark: Experimentally Testing the Impact of Russian Propaganda and Counter-Interventions* (RAND Corporation, October 15, 2020), 51, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA704-3.html.

309 Helmus et al., 52.

310 Helmus et al., 52.

to the challenge of disinformation.[311] As a result, such efforts have may have started to degrade the utility of cyber-based disinformation as a tool to undermine foreign elections and exacerbate social divisions. For the Kremlin, this potentially represents an increased cost on its election interference operations, as the Kremlin can no longer completely assume that it achieves cyber-domain dominance like it did during the 2016 election.[312]

Moreover, the U.S. government has also taken steps to improve the security of U.S. elections, with some success. One notable example is the steps the state of Georgia took to create a paper trail of ballots that could be audited quickly and also provide greater visibility into the voting process.[313] As Shira Ovide explains, the paper trail helped build trust amongst Georgia voters in the election process, especially as they entered a highly contentious election cycle in 2020.[314] Indeed, efforts such as the ones taken in Georgia focused largely on day-of election credibility, but as Ovide further explains, this played into the broader effort to rebuild American confidence in U.S. elections after the damaging effects of 2016 on U.S. voters.[315]

Additionally, research conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice found that coordination between the U.S. government and private companies showed the biggest area of progress in election security. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security designated U.S. election systems as critical infrastructure, which permitted federal agencies such as the Cybersecurity and Information Security Agency (CISA) and U.S. Cyber Command to increase information sharing, deploy intrusion detection sensors, and help train election officials on cybersecurity risks.[316] According to former Director of

311 Ovide, "What Went Right in the 2020 Election."

312 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operations*, 3.

313 Ovide, "What Went Right in the 2020 Election."

314 Ovide.

315 Ovide.

316 Andrew Cordova McCadney, Lawrence Norden, and Derek Tisler, "2020s Lessons for Election Security," Brennan Center for Justice, December 16, 2020, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/2020s-lessons-election-security.

CISA Matt Davis, "states were better prepared and able to bat down threats before they caused any harm," as a result.[317]

In the lead-up to the 2020 election, the U.S. government also focused on a rapid take-down approach to combat disinformation targeting the U.S. electorate. For example, when Russian-backed fake Twitter accounts tried to impersonate the Associated Press and preemptively call the election, CISA immediately released a statement on Twitter that called out the false account. In coordination with the CISA, Twitter suspended the accounts in question.[318] According to Jasper, these sorts of coordination efforts between the federal government and social media platforms amounted to a credible reduction in Russia-backed trolls throughout the 2020 election season.[319] Similar to the 2017 French presidential election, U.S. efforts to combat disinformation during the 2020 U.S. election marked a tactical defeat for the Kremlin, especially as the United States government garnered support from technology companies to ensure greater security of the online environment during the 2020 election.

The United States Congress also acted to increase federal funding of election infrastructure as a concerted response to the issues of 2016. Congress had not appropriated federal funds for elections since the Help America Vote Act in 2002; however, federal investments since 2018 have amounted to over $800 million for election security. In 2018 and 2020, Congress passed two bills that gave grants worth $400 and $450 million, respectively, to states to modernize ballot equipment and secure election infrastructure.[320] Altogether, the combined effort of the federal government and private companies to combat disinformation and secure election infrastructure has shown, at the very least, the United States' ability to acknowledge the need for improvement and pass measures (albeit relatively small) to reshape the information environment.

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317 McCadney, Norden, and Tisler.

318 Scott Jasper, "Why Foreign Election Interference Fizzled in 2020," November 23, 2020, https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/66182.

319 Jasper.

320 U.S. Election Assistance Commission, "Election Security Funds" (Washington, D.C., Spring 2021), https://www.eac.gov/payments-and-grants/election-security-funds.

Indeed, U.S. efforts to secure the election in 2020 showed an improvement from the previous election in 2016. Yet, as Jasper explains, "while seemingly unable to reproduce their massive disinformation campaign from 2016, the Kremlin saw the [2020] U.S. election as a chance to cast Western democracy as prone to chaos."[321] Jasper's argument suggests that while the United States took meaningful steps to combat Russian election interference against the 2020 election, such steps amounted to more of a tactical victory over Russian interference rather than a strategic win.

While the Russian interference in the 2020 ballot was more limited in scope because improvements to election security, many of the political vulnerabilities that make the United States an attractive target for foreign exploitation have remained and even increased. For example, the false narrative that the 2020 election was stolen, which culminated in an attack on the U.S. Capitol, also revealed the limits of U.S. efforts to secure its elections. As ostensibly half of the U.S. electorate perceived the 2020 election was "rigged" and continues to diminish Russia's role in the American election process, the ability to unanimously accept election results decreases America's stability and its credibility as a global standard-bearer of democracy.[322] More significantly, a National Public Radio poll in October 2021 found that only 33% of Republicans would "trust the 2024 election, regardless of who wins."[323] The survey found that 82% of Democrats would trust the outcome of the 2024 election and 62% of Independents would also accept the outcome.[324] Evidently, the 2024 election may face a similar fate as the 2020 election and Putin may find it even more inviting to exploit these fissures within the American electorate.

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321 Jasper, "Why Foreign Election Interference Fizzled in 2020."

322 Helmus et al., "Russian Propaganda Hits Its Mark."

323 Domenico Montanaro, "Most Americans Trust Elections Are Fair, but Sharp Divides Exist, a New Poll Finds," *NPR*, November 1, 2021, sec. Politics, https://www.npr.org/2021/11/01/1050291610/most-americans-trust-elections-are-fair-but-sharp-divides-exist-a-new-poll-finds.

324 Montanaro.

E. CONCLUSION

The evidence reviewed in this chapter shows that the United States' relatively tepid policy responses, stretching across multiple presidential administrations, compounded by the ineffective targeted sanctions approach, likely further encouraged the Kremlin to continue election interference operations. Encountering little backlash from these actions against the fundamental interests of the Putin regime, the Kremlin saw little reason to discontinue these actions, even though this often came at the expense of Russia's national economic growth and international standing. Extrapolating from these experiences, we might conclude that without a serious cost imposed on the Putin regime for its election interference, the Putin regime may find it inviting to both continue—and even expand—these operations in the future.

Additionally, this chapter reveals that a potentially more effective (albeit still imperfect) approach to mitigating the risks associated with Russia's election interference operations is investment in election security measures. Evidence from the 2017 French election suggests that strict coordination between the public and private sectors can significantly contain the impact of Russian interference. This is also apparent in coordination between the U.S. government and "tech giants" to monitor and manage the information environment in the lead up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Evidently, governments and the private sector in democracies must add deterrence by denial to their portfolios of cybersecurity responsibilities.

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to unpack the motives behind Russia's election interference operations against the United States in 2016 and 2020. What exactly drove Russia to target the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections? How should the United States interpret the goals of Russia's decision to target the bedrock of U.S. democracy? This thesis finds that the fundamental need to protect the Putin regime from internal and external threats, and to a lesser degree, the desire to increase Russia's global power, were at the core of Russia's decisions to undertake such actions.

Tracing the processes and decisions that led to the Russian efforts to interfere in foreign elections clearly shows that regime preservation and international status were the two main justifications for such operations. As demonstrated in Chapter II, the trauma from the collapse of the Soviet Union had a profound impact on how the Kremlin, notably under President Putin, viewed the use of election interference as a way to push back against Western democracy promotion and to restore Russia's former glory by diminishing U.S. democracy. The hardliner, security services-affiliated Kremlin elites under the Putin regime resorted to election interference to both distract and undermine the largest democracies and to "get payback" against the West for its perceived role in precipitating the Soviet collapse—and for worsening Russia's decline during the 1990s.

In the ultimate analysis, however, the evidence examined in this thesis found that the dominant motive for the Russian election meddling was strategic and rational, and it was rooted in the insecurity of the Putin regime.[325] The fear of color revolutions—which, according to Kremlin officials, were supported by the West—posed such an existential threat to the Putin regime, that the Kremlin resorted to election interference against the United States to diminish the potential for popular uprisings and maintain domestic support. Against the backdrop of the growing corruption and poor economic performance, color revolutions in Russia's periphery raised the specter of democratic contagion and

[325] Natalia Antonova, "In Putinism, Hurting the United States Is All About Payback," *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/01/putinism-russia-payback-united-states-soviet-trauma/.

spillover, which threatened the survival of Putin's regime and motivating it to strike back through election interference. The examination of Russia's election interference efforts against foreign countries in Chapter II—first within its immediate sphere of influence and then against larger democracies—clearly shows the fears about the vulnerability of the Putin regime were the primary driver to interfere in foreign elections.

Apart from examining the motives for the Russian election interference, this thesis also assessed if interference operations had achieved the motives: whether Russia's election interference operations were an effective tactic to increase the regime's security and/or to boost Russia's power. Did the benefits of election interference for either the Putin regime or Russia's international status outweigh the costs associated with conducting interference operations? These questions are crucial not only for understanding the nature of election interference as a form of warfare, but for efforts by the United States and its allies to mitigate the risks of Russia's election interference operations in the future.

In Chapter III, an examination of U.S. sanctions against Russia for its election interference operations offered key insight into the cost and benefits of election interference. U.S. sanctions were designed to be the primary mechanism of Western deterrence; however, they have not deterred the Kremlin from its use of election interference. This ineffectiveness of the U.S. sanctions policy suggests that the benefits of interference exceed the costs. The patronal nature of the Putin regime enabled the Kremlin to decrease and dissipate the impacts of economic sanctions on its stability. Additionally, U.S. sanctions have been too narrowly focused to amount to any genuine cost on either the Russian economy or the Russian ruling elite. By extension, economic sanctions did not present a tangible threat to regime security—the primary motive for subverting foreign elections.

This thesis also finds that increasing the resilience of the electoral infrastructure (i.e., deterrence by denial) could address some of the gaps in the U.S. strategy for countering Russian election interference. In particular, the experiences to increase the robustness of the electoral process in the French Presidential election in 2017 and the U.S. Presidential election of 2020 demonstrated that denial by deterrence can greatly diminish

the success of operations that seek to undermine the electoral process in the cyber-realm and beyond.

Yet, the combination of deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment (i.e., sanctions) may be the best strategy to raise the costs of election interference such that the costs eventually exceed the benefits for the Kremlin. For this reason, the United States and other Western democracies should continue to make tactical-level improvements to election security and the online information environment to combat foreign interference. Multiple small steps at defending against election interference over time could reverse the Kremlin's cost/benefiting calculation for engaging in election meddling by diminishing the benefits to the point that they might not be worth the investment. One possible way to build up the United States' defenses against online disinformation—one of the key pillars of Russia's election interference operations—is the creation of a dedicated, executive-level open-source intelligence center of excellence. Open-source intelligence "offers practical advantages to military commanders that other, highly classified forms of intelligence typically lack," according to the Federation of American Scientists.[326] More broadly, a dedicated and unified agency could streamline lines of effort that all attempt to collect and analyze open-source information. A dedicated agency could also garner the necessary federal funding to field sophisticated artificial intelligence and machine learning tools to uncover disinformation and source attribution. As Amy Zegart remarks, an open-source agency could be the necessary testbed for new analytic tools and emerging technologies that seek to manage the entire open-source information environment.[327] Overall, an open-source agency could combat foreign election interference through disinformation, and act as the unified center for counter-election interference operations.

Although economic sanctions have been an insufficient deterrent for the Kremlin to crease election interference operations, the United States should also not abandon them as a deterrence tool against Russia. First, reduced sanctions could encourage the Kremlin

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[326] Steven Aftergood, "A Push to Elevate Open Source Intelligence," *Secrecy News (2000-2021)* (blog), October 4, 2021, https://fas.org/blogs/secrecy/2021/10/open-source-elevate/.

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to act more aggressively against its adversaries. Second, the ineffectiveness of the current, limited sanctions does not mean that more extensive set of sanctions will not raise the financial cost above a threshold that the Putin regime is unwilling to accept for election interference operations. To achieve this purpose, as Aslund and Snegovaya suggest, the United States could coordinate with its European allies, especially those who were also victim to Russian election interference, to produce combined "sanction packages."[328] With support from allies, this would allow the United States to raise the economic cost on the Putin regime and unify the West in a collective effort to deter Russian election interference operations.

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