

Russia's election meddling backfired — big-time

Intelligence officers sometimes talk about “blowback,” when covert actions go bad and end up damaging the country that initiated them. A year later, that is surely the case with Russia’s secret attempt to meddle in the U.S. presidential election, which has brought a string of adverse unintended consequences for Moscow.

The Kremlin is still issuing cocky statements accusing the United States of “political schizophrenia” in its response to Russian hacking. And there are vestiges of the triumphal tone I encountered in Moscow this summer — a sense that the United States is in decline and that a mistreated but resurgent Russia is in the driver’s seat. But Russia’s confidence must be flagging.

Interference in the U.S. election has created antibodies to Russian power: America is angry, Europe is newly vigilant, and Syria and Ukraine are becoming quagmires. Moscow remains a dangerously ambitious revanchist power, but its geopolitical goals look harder to achieve now than they did a year ago.

The basics of Russia’s covert operations were best summarized in a Jan. 6 report by the U.S. intelligence community: “President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election.” Russia’s goals were to “denigrate” Hillary Clinton and “help . . . when possible” Donald Trump. A broader aim was “to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order.”

So, how’s it going for the folks at Lubyanka Square? Well, Trump was certainly elected, though the factors driving the U.S. vote were much deeper than Russian trolls and bots. And there’s definitely disarray in the global order. But since Trump’s inauguration, the world has begun moving in reverse from what Moscow’s active-measures specialists must have hoped.

Let’s take a brief inventory of this global resilience:

● Russian meddling has produced a strong bipartisan counter-reaction from Congress. Last month’s overwhelming passage of new sanctions against Russia showed how Putin’s assault on U.S. politics has united otherwise polarized

legislators. “Russia” is once again a toxic word in U.S. politics, as Russian commentators are lamenting. It may take years to recover. And Putin has nobody to blame but himself.

●European politics similarly has been galvanized by Russia’s attempt to manipulate debate. The populist firestorm the Russians were secretly fanning — which engulfed Britain in the Brexit vote — has been dampened. The moderate center has held in the Netherlands, France and Germany. Russia’s covert support for right-wing nationalists has partially deflated those movements. To be credible, European politicians left and right are voicing their independence from Moscow.

●Russia’s Internet manipulations have spawned a new push by companies and civil society groups to combat such “fake news.” One example is the online “dashboard” created by the German Marshall Fund’s Alliance for Securing Democracy. It monitors 600 Twitter accounts linked to Russian influence operations to collect a regular summary of trending hashtags, topics and URLs. (Note: I’m a GMF trustee.) The world is forewarned now, and partially forearmed.

●Internet and social-media companies are seeking technology solutions to bots, trolls and fake news. Facebook plans to identify dubious articles and steer them to independent fact-checking organizations, which will warn users if supporting evidence can’t be found. Google is creating algorithms to identify reliable sources from the billions of pages it indexes. Such private-sector efforts are the best hope for sustaining a fact-based electronic environment.

●Investigations have exposed groups and companies with alleged links to Russia’s hacking campaign, such as WikiLeaks. The Russia-WikiLeaks connection is explored in a new edition this month of “The Red Web,” the superb book by Russian investigative journalists Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan. Among their claims is that WikiLeaks moved at least part of its Web hosting to Russia in August 2016.

More heat: A New Yorker piece this week by Raffi Khatchadourian challenges WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange’s denials of Russian involvement in the release of hacked documents. And the New York Times reports that a Ukrainian hacker known as “Profexer,” who may have helped write code used by the Russian covert operators, may now be talking to the FBI. The active-measures structure is weakening.

One of the few positives for Putin is his new support from Republicans. According to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center, the percentage of Republicans who say they trust the Russian leader has nearly doubled since 2015, although to just 34 percent.

Putin's problem is that he overreached. His dislike of Clinton and enthusiasm for Trump led him to violate the cardinal rule of covert action — namely, make sure it stays covert. As Putin discovers anew every day, secret influence operations backfire if they're exposed. Revelations compromise sources and methods, including the cutouts who masked Russia's hand.

Putin, the ex-KGB officer, should appreciate the paradoxical lesson of this spy story: In the Internet era, deception may be amplified. But eventually the truth will out.

Source: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/russias-election-meddling-backfired-big-time/2017/08/17/e7ee4b74-837f-11e7-ab27-1a21a8e006ab_story.html

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