

Crossing the red line: how Russian interference in Western democracy is backfiring

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Since the Ukraine conflict has started in 2014, tensions between Russia and the West have massively increased. The US and the EU have jointly supported Ukrainian territorial integrity by introducing massive sanctions against Russia over its annexation of Crimea and its military aggression against Ukraine in the Donbas; plus, Russia has been expelled from the G8. Russian aggression has also led to NATO's re-orientation towards territorial defence. Today German officials, who have long pursued the strategy of modernising Russia and integrating it into Western structures, talk about **'managing an antagonistic relationship' as the new normal**.

Besides the Ukraine conflict, tensions between the West and Russia have also arisen because the latter began to interfere in the domestic political spheres of leading Western democracies. There are three major cases so far: in Germany, the Lisa case in Berlin in January 2016, a Russian disinformation campaign (and before that the hacking of computer systems of the German parliament, in 2015); in the US, the hacking and publishing of documents from the Democratic National Committee during the presidential campaign in July 2016; and in France, financial and other support for Marine Le Pen as well as hacking during the presidential campaign in May 2017.

In Western capitals a consensus has emerged that the Kremlin is using 'active measures' in order to undermine politicians it considers hostile to Russian interests and backing those it considers sympathetic to the Kremlin. More generally, the aim seems to be to undermine the credibility of democratic institutions and to weaken the ability of Western democracies to cooperate by sowing distrust.

The Kremlin is using a number of instruments to achieve these goals, including: State-owned foreign media such as the TV-channel 'Russia Today' and its news agency Sputnik; cyberattacks with the subsequent publication of private e-mails and classified information; social media (trolls and Twitter bots); open support for parties and politicians; and NGOs such as the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute in Berlin.

In many cases, especially as regards the cyber dimension of this type of political warfare, it is impossible to identify a 'smoking barrel' to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the Kremlin has been involved. This allows the Russians to continue denying any involvement in such activities.

And yet there is an increasing awareness about these Russian tactics among experts, officials and the general public. A number of politicians and intelligence agencies have talked publicly about the rise in disinformation and influence operations, and many point their fingers at Russia.

If the Kremlin's overall goal is to improve relations with the West, then such activities are counterproductive. Russian interference in the domestic politics, especially in elections, of major Western countries is leading to a further deterioration of the relationship. Those in the West who argue in favour of detente, of an easing of sanctions and a rapprochement with the Kremlin, find it much more difficult to defend this course of action because of the rising anger over Russian political warfare tactics.

In **Germany**, the cyberattack against the Bundestag in 2015 failed to attract much media attention. But it was a different case with the 'Lisa affair' in January 2016. Lisa F., a 13-year old German-Russian girl living in Berlin, claimed she had been kidnapped and raped by 'Arab' men. While the German police quickly found out that she had made the story up, Russian state-media and pro-Kremlin websites in Germany continued to exploit the story, apparently in order to sow distrust in Germany's law enforcement agencies, especially among Russian-speakers in Germany (estimated at over 4 million).

The Russian Foreign Minister, **Sergey Lavrov**, alleged that German officials were covering up the story. In response, the German Foreign Minister, **Frank-Walter Steinmeier** –from the centre-left SPD, a tireless advocate of cooperation with Russia–, accused the Kremlin of exploiting the incident 'for political propaganda, and to inflame and influence what is already a difficult debate about migration within Germany'.

The Lisa case came as a shock to many in Germany, who had felt that the relationship with Russia, despite tensions over Ukraine and NATO, had at least partly recovered. Germany found out that the Kremlin considered it a legitimate target for political warfare, despite both countries being engaged in permanent diplomacy over Ukraine and Syria.

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While it is too early to assess the fallout of the 'Russia factor' in the **US presidential elections** of 2016, it has become a major issue in American politics. The suspicion that Russian cyber operations played a role in swinging the elections in favour of Donald Trump, and a number of contacts between his team and Kremlin-linked individuals before taking office, have tainted the Trump Presidency; there is even talk of a second Watergate.

These developments have made it extremely difficult if not impossible for the Trump Administration to 're-set' relations with Russia in the way the Obama Administration did. The current Administration's relations are under close scrutiny by the media and US Congress. Not just the Democrats, but also some Republicans (led by John McCain), are suspicious of any potentially inappropriate ties between Trump and the Kremlin. As a result of alleged Russian interference in US domestic affairs, Trump's room for manoeuvre in this respect has become noticeably restricted.

A third example of how alleged Russian interference has backfired is **France**. Putin visibly courted the Front National's leader **Marine Le Pen**, granting her party a loan and receiving her in Moscow before the presidential elections. In addition, a digital

propaganda campaign and a cyberattack on **Emmanuel Macron's** *En marche* movement was attributed to Russia. According to some analysts, the attacks have made the new French President a hawk as regards Russia: the attacks 'have hardened him... and they have hardened his views on Russia'.

It can only be speculated whether the Kremlin has anticipated the negative outcome of its meddling in Western internal affairs and whether it accepts the resulting problems as the necessary cost of an operation that it judges to be beneficial overall –or whether Moscow has simply failed to see in advance to what extent these operations can harm its relationship with the West–.

In any case, the damage has been done. With its political warfare, the Kremlin has added another dimension to the conflict between Russia and the West. While some in the West have a certain degree of tolerance for Russian action in Ukraine and Syria, meddling in sensitive areas of domestic politics is, for many, crossing a red line. In the eyes of a growing number of observers, Russia is acting the cowboy, threatening essential institutions of Western society's democratic life. This makes any attempt at reconciling differences with Russia and working together on substantial issues much more difficult, if not impossible.