

Russia's Disinformation Ecosystem - A Snapshot

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New Sanctions And Research Show How Americans Consume Kremlin Disinformation & Propaganda



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It's finally happened. Seven years after my colleagues and I encountered and began tracking Russian disinformation proliferating on the Internet and swirling on social media platforms, the U.S. government has begun a holistic effort to disrupt Putin's digital propaganda machine.

On Thursday, April 15, 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department issued wide-ranging sanctions against many elements operating online and on-the-ground involved in U.S. election interference efforts. Specifically, these sanctions revealed four additional information outlets to be connected to Russian intelligence services. SouthFront and NewsFront were described as receiving “taskings” and working with officers from Russian domestic intelligence—the FSB.

Strategic Culture Foundation, another one of the designated outlets, is “an online journal registered in Russia that is directed by the SVR and closely affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.” The SVR is Russia's foreign intelligence service. And Strategic Culture? Well, that's the outlet that curiously had an article placed in an online local Yonkers, New York newspaper last May of 2020 —an article that derided former Department of Defense Assistant Secretary Evelyn Farkas and alleged a “Russiagate hoax” just before the local Democratic Congressional primary where candidate Farkas vied for the nomination (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Strategic Culture Foundation (SVR) article in Yonkers Tribune maligning local Congressional candidate Evelyn Farkas - a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia.

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What Evelyn Farkas, Trey Gowdy and Some Others Dubiously Have in Common

By MICHAEL AVERKO

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WASHINGTON, DC — MAY 25, 2020 — The likes of Evelyn Farkas and *The Washington Post* (*The WaPo* or *WaPo* for short), continue to hustle the Russigate hoax, despite the presence of **fact based second guessing**, that has been very much censored by US mass media. Farkas served a period in the Obama administration as a "deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia". Over that time and thereafter, she has made a series of subjectively inaccurate and negative claims about Russian government actions, in a way which also happens to be an



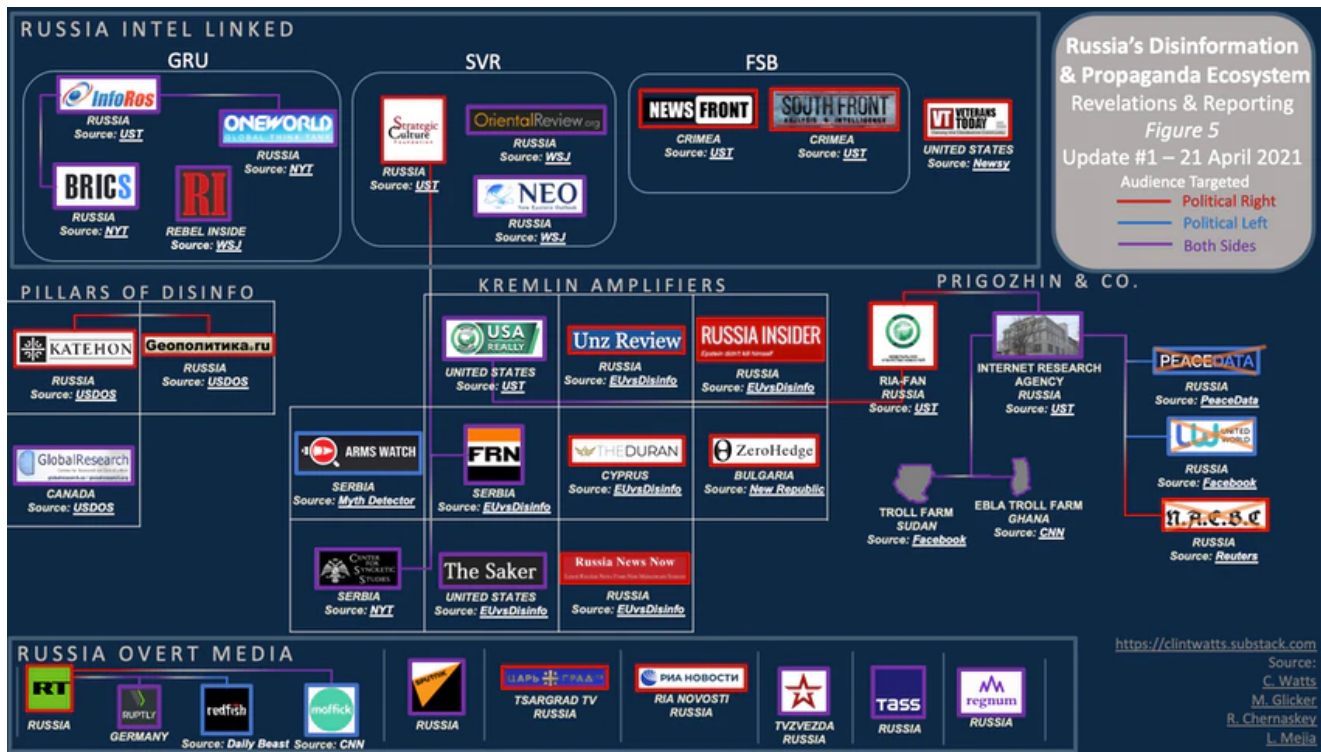
Learn more at the following hyperlink:
<https://www.strategic-culture.org/about/>

Finally, the Treasury designations outed news outlet InfoRos as run by the GRU—Russia’s military intelligence. Of critical importance in this declaration was some specific text:

InfoRos used a network of websites, including nominally independent websites, to spread false conspiracy narratives and disinformation promoted by GRU officials.

Four years ago, Americans were surprised that many of the political partisans they encountered on Twitter and Facebook were actually fake Russian accounts impersonating Americans operated from a troll farm in St. Petersburg. Hearings and investigations revealed the GRU’s hacks were real and damaging, that the Kremlin’s trolls duped us with conversations and memes and, in some instances, even persuaded Americans to attend political rallies of their own making, convincing one woman to dress up as Hillary Clinton and climb into a cage in front of a Florida Cheesecake Factory.

Overlooked in the broad discussion about election interference efforts has been the payload delivered by the Kremlin’s disinformation machine—the messages Putin’s minions seek to disseminate inside America and where those messages are generated. The sources of disinformation are not singular but many, and seek to subvert not one political or social group but all, hoping to demobilize establishment politicians, undermine elected officials and the democratic institutions they represent, and generally erode trust and confidence in democracy as a system of governance. The messages mirror each other in some cases, contradict each other in others, appear overtly some days and covertly in social media posts on other days. But the goal is always the same: Shift American perceptions of Russia and U.S. policies toward Russia to Putin’s advantage, while pitting Americans against each other in ways that shake the political and social stability of the country.



Some good news though: In 2020, the U.S. did much better fending off Russian interference in the election. U.S. government agencies, social media companies and mainstream media outlets all improved their game. But it's still difficult to understand how all of the pieces fit together. Fact-checking outlets like [EUvsDisinfo](#) have posted many reports over the years noting Kremlin connections or suspected sponsorship to disinformation campaigns and the websites that propagate them. Last week brought the Treasury Department's [sanctions](#). Last summer, the Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC) revealed Russian connections to various outlets in its "Russia's Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda" [special report](#). Sprinkled in between were disclosures of Kremlin connections and sponsorship in the [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [CNN](#), [NBC News](#), and the [Daily Beast](#). Every month, Facebook's shutdowns of social media accounts revealed in dribs and drabs the expansive nature of Russia's trolling and supporting infrastructure. Examining one outlet can infer the problem is small, but when one outlines the entire system, the full scope of the Kremlin disinformation effort to undermine democracy takes shape.

To keep a handle on the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation ecosystem, we've built Figure 5 above, which shows the range and type of Russian outlets revealed in a range of sources, offering a single location for researchers to connect disparate research and news reporting. The categories we'll use for this diagram and future updates will be:

- Russian Overt Media: Openly state-sponsored outlets
- Russian Intelligence Linked: Websites with connections to Russian foreign (SVR), domestic (FSB) or military (GRU) intelligence

- Pillars of Disinformation & Propaganda: Outlets discussed in the Department of State report from August 2020
- Amplifiers: Those websites consistently amplifying pro-Kremlin narratives and discussed in a range of reports from fact-checking outlets and public reporting
- Prigozhin & Co.: Part of the network associated with sanctioned Russian oligarch and owner of the notorious Internet Research Agency (IRA), Yevgeniy Prigozhin

As additional disclosures come in, we'll continue to update Figure 5 and offer the sources for the disclosures.

I routinely run into Americans who don't believe they encounter Kremlin disinformation or that if they did they would know it. This is unlikely. We found out four years ago that many Americans of all races, ethnicities, economic strata, social causes and political parties interacted with covert Russian accounts, repeated Kremlin lies, and shared Russian memes and propaganda.

Today, much of Russia's disinformation is drowned out by—or simply repeats—American misinformation and disinformation. But during the COVID-19 pandemic and now, amid the global vaccine rollout, Kremlin disinformation and propaganda from outlets listed in Figure 5 has repeatedly drifted into my own social media feed. Since the pandemic started, my next-door neighbor from childhood posted a Global Research article claiming COVID-19 is a bioweapon; a high-school classmate shared a Sputnik News story proclaiming the FBI investigation into Russian interference was a hoax; a former U.S. Congresswoman posted a Kremlin outlet pushing a conspiracy about vaccine safety; and many on my Instagram and Twitter feeds shared George Floyd protest content from Redfish. One might wonder why a Russian-funded social media venture based in Berlin, Germany makes English-language content for Americans that showcases protests, racial inequalities, and political violence in America.

To get a better flavor for these outlets in Figure 5 and some of their popular nonsense one might encounter on social media, we also created the accompanying Figure 6 to help one understand the types of readers they attract and the headlines they produce. More updates to come as we learn more ... the U.S. government appears to be back.

Thanks to Max, Rachel and Lukas and all of my research team for their hard work, analysis and graphic design skills.

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FIGURE 6 - RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM DESCRIPTIONS

Russia's Disinformation & Propaganda Ecosystem (Figure 6)

Source: Selected Wisdom <https://clintwatts.substack.com/p/russias-disinformation-ecosystem>

TYPE	SPONSOR	OUTLET	DESCRIPTION	LIES & PROPAGANDA
Covert	GRU	InfoRos	"Russian government information center" that has pushed English-language disinformation, including about the Coronavirus; tied to GRU's psychological warfare Unit 54777 (Sources: NYT , WashPo)	"Diplomat warns 'Skripal saga' will be brought to logical conclusion"
		InfoBrics	Nominally independent site positioned within a "GRU-directed network" (Sources: NYT , NYT)	"Beijing believes COVID-19 is a biological weapon"
		One World	"Nominally independent site that United States officials said had ties to the GRU"; used by InfoRos to spread information campaigns (Source: NYT)	"China Is Saving The World From COVID-19"
		Rebel Inside	Outlet that covered riots and protests around the world; "has been controlled by the GRU" (Source: WSJ)	"New wave of the protests Yellow vests in France"
	SVR	Oriental Review	Presents as an academic journal commenting on world affairs; controlled by the SVR (Source: WSJ)	"Bill Gates, Vaccinations, Microchips, And Patent 060606"
		Strategic Culture Foundation	"Controlled by the SVR's Directorate MS (Active Measures)"; "created false and unsubstantiated narratives concerning U.S. officials involved in the 2020 U.S. presidential election" (Source: US Treasury)	"Who Made Coronavirus? Was It the U.S., Israel or China Itself?"
		New Eastern Outlook	Presents as an academic journal commenting on world affairs; directed by the SVR (Source: WSJ)	"America Under Censorship: Biden's Presidency Certified, Free Speech May be No Longer"
	FSB	News Front	Crimea-based disinformation and propaganda outlet publishing content in 10 languages; directed by the FSB (Source: WSJ , US Treasury)	"Navalny and Novichok substance: some very uncomfortable questions"
		SouthFront	Disinformation and propaganda outlet that covers military and conflict news; receives taskings from the FSB (Source: US Treasury)	"THE CORONAVIRUS COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE

			US Today	PANDEMIC: THE REAL DANGER IS "AGENDA ID2020"
		Veterans Today	News outlet targeting U.S. military veterans; directed by Russian security services (Source: Newsy)	"The six-million figure: another holocaust lie and the lying liars who enable it"
Pillars of Disinformation & Propaganda	Katehon	Russian "think tank" that publishes disinformation and propaganda in five languages; subsidiary of Tsargrad, U.S.-sanctioned oligarch Konstantin Malofeev's media outlet; "appears to have ties to both the Russian state and the Russian intelligence services" (Source: US State Department)	"SOROS MEDIA PLOTS COLOR REVOLUTION IN AMERICA"	
	Geopolitica	"Serves as a platform for Russian ultra-nationalists to spread disinformation and propaganda targeting Western and other audiences"; promotes the ideology of U.S.-sanctioned ultranationalist Alexander Dugin (Source: US State Department)	"UNITED STATES OF AMERICA - GLOBAL SPONSOR OF WORLD TERRORISM"	
	Global Research	"Canadian website deeply enmeshed in Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem"; broad author and content overlap with other sites tied to Russia (Source: US State Department)	"5G Danger: 13 Reasons 5G Wireless Technology Will Be a Catastrophe for Humanity"	
	ArmsWatch	Outlet run by Bulgarian journalist Dilyana Gaytandzhieva that publishes unverified stories aligned with Russian strategic narratives (Source: Bellingcat)	"US diplomats involved in trafficking of human blood and pathogens for secret military program"	
	Fort Russ News	Serbia-based disinformation outlet with an "openly pro-Kremlin agenda"; affiliated with Strategic Culture Foundation (Source: EUvsDisinfo , EUvsDisinfo)	"REVEALED: Is The Coronavirus Scare A Psychological Operation?"	
	Center for Syncretic Studies	Serbia-based think tank "believed to have ties to Russian intelligence"; affiliated with Fort Russ News (Source: NYT)	"Western 'Anti-Imperialist' Contradictions in Syria"	
	USA Really	English-language outlet owned by Alexander Malkevich; sanctioned by the U.S. in 2018 for interference efforts (Source: USA Really , targeting the U.S.)	"BREAKING: China Printed 5M Ballots And Sent"	

Amplifiers		using USA really targeting the U.S. Midterm elections (Source: US Treasury)	Them To the US
	The Saker	Pro-Russia blog; “strongly integrated into both Kremlin-controlled networks and homegrown US-based conspiracy groups” (Source: EUvsDisinfo)	“The Alternative Skripal Narrative”
	Unz Review	White supremacist website that “support[s] pro-Kremlin narratives” (Source: Reuters , EUvsDisinfo)	“Did the US Just Try to Murder Lukashenko?”
	The Duran	“Website based in Cyprus that often spreads Russian disinformation” (Source: NYT)	“Biden Campaign COLLAPSING as RIGGED Polls REVEALED to be FAKE!!!”
	Russophile	“Russian news outlet” spreading disinformation (Source: NYT)	“Will the allies have to die for Kiev?”
	Zero Hedge	Bulgaria-based financial blog that frequently “echo[es] the Kremlin line” (Sources: RAND , New Republic)	“Software 'Glitch' In Michigan Erroneously Gave 1000s Of Votes To Biden; Up To 47 Counties Compromised”
	Russia Insider	“Pro-Kremlin” website that “traffic[s] disinformation” and “celebrates fascism” with ties to “The Right Stuff, a white nationalist organization that helped plan and promote the deadly ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville” (Source: SPLC)	“Empires Fall. Now It's America's Turn, and Russia Will Make It Happen”
Prigozhin & Co.	RIA-FAN	Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Federal News Agency; “an entity utilized by Project Lakhta”—a “broad Russian effort ... which has sought to interfere in political and electoral systems worldwide”—to “obscure its activities” (Source: US Treasury)	“Putin: Russia will defend its position in front of other countries”
	Peace Data	A website “focused largely on the environment and corporate and political corruption” that was run by people formerly associated with the Russian Research Internet Agency” (Source: NBC News)	[down]
	NAEBC	Inauthentic far-right news site “run by people associated with the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency” (Source: Reuters)	[down]
	United World	Website posting content on global affairs “connected to the Internet Research Agency” (Source: NPR)	“Is COVID-19 an American bioweapon?”

Overt	Russia Today (RT)	“The Kremlin’s principal international propaganda outlet”; contributed to election interference efforts (Source: ODNI)	“America on cusp of a Civil War: No matter who wins the election, there will be no peaceful transfer of power”
	Sputnik News	“Government-funded outlet producing pro-Kremlin radio and online content in a variety of languages for international audiences”; contributed to election interference efforts (Source: ODNI)	“White Helmets Filmed 'Human Victims' After 'Chemical Attack' of Syrian Army - Russian MoD”
	TASS	Russian state-controlled media outlet (Source: US State Department)	“Five-year-old killed in DPR in Ukrainian drone strike – militia”
	TV Novosti	Russian state-controlled media outlet (Source: US State Department)	“Slutsky commented on the death of a child in the DPR”
	Tsargrad TV	Pro-Kremlin media outlet owned by U.S.-sanctioned Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev (Source: US State Department)	“MH17 WAS KNOCKED DOWN WITH A GUARANTEE: 'CONFUSED WITH THE BOARD OF THE PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA'”
	TV Zvezda	Media outlet run by the Russian Ministry of Defense (Source: NBC News)	“Bill Gates, the secret laboratory and the conspiracy of pharmaceutical companies: who can benefit from the coronavirus”
	Regnum	“State-controlled Russian news site” (Source: EuvsDisinfo)	“European Parliament elections could 'put out the political crisis" - Marine Le Pen”

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