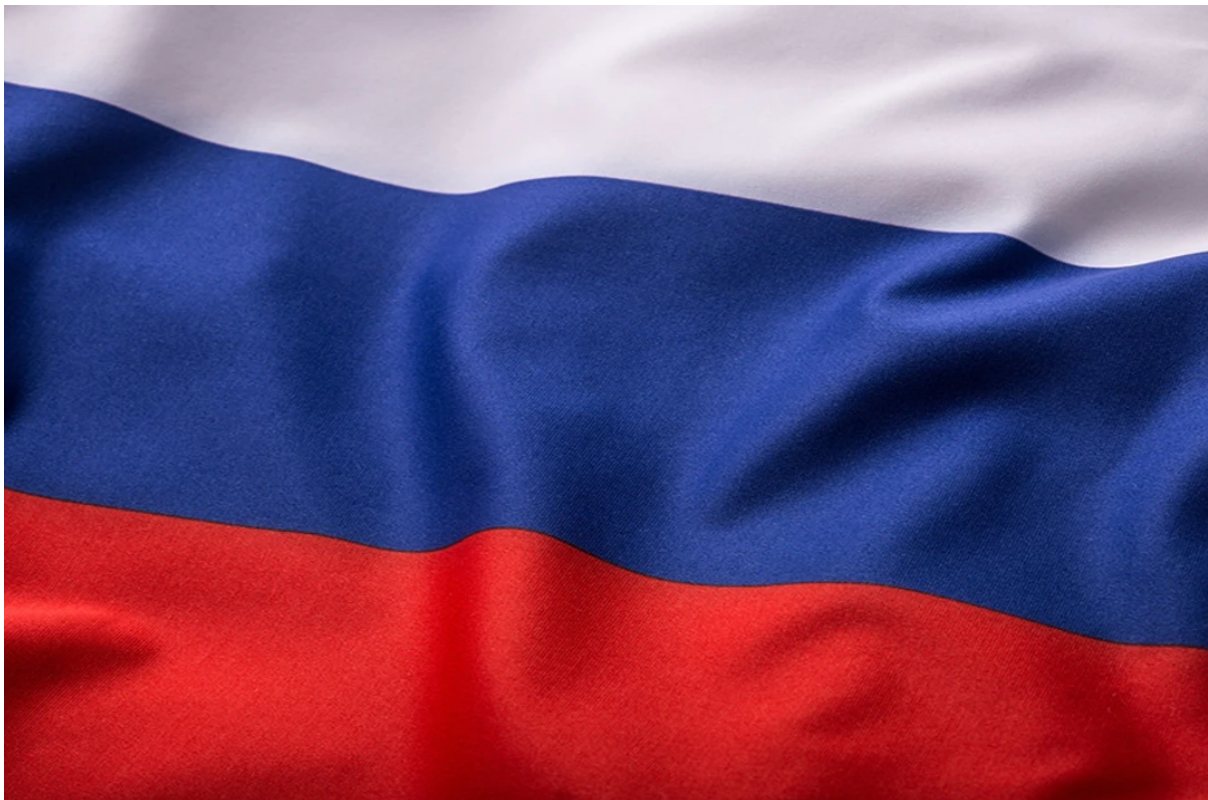


# 2020 Country Brief: Russia



## The National Security Program

### Talking Points

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia is our adversary. The goals of Vladimir Putin are simple and dangerous: 1) reassert Russian global “great power” status; 2) have supremacy over the territory of the former Soviet Union; and 3) create a sphere of influence in the international system to achieve dominance. To do so, the Kremlin seeks to weaken America and its allies by sowing domestic discord, discrediting the institutions of democracy, and destroying US alliances and partnerships. Under Donald Trump, they are winning.

#### **Russia’s aggressive foreign policy actions include:**

Destabilizing the political institutions of Western countries by:

- Brazenly interfering in US elections;
- Boosting right wing extremist organizations through sophisticated social media techniques; and
- Interfering in European elections, spreading disinformation, and supporting separatist movements.

Engaging in threatening and destabilizing military activities, including:

- Threatening US allies and partners by amassing troops and conducting large-scale exercises near their borders;
- Paying bounties for attacks on US troops in Afghanistan; and
- Engaging in offensive military cyber operations that threaten US critical infrastructure.<sup>1</sup>

In what must seem like a dream for Putin, they have a friend in the White House who has broken with every other modern American president and picked Russia over our allies.

Because President Trump won't, Congress must hold Russia accountable for the ways it harms American and global security, including:

- Imposing sanctions on Russia—including under the 2012 Magnitsky Act for human rights violations—for its destabilizing activity in 2014 in seizing the Crimea, and in 2017 for election interference; and
- Strengthening economic and diplomatic sanctions, military deterrence, and election and information security to prevent more damage to US and allied interests.

If we hold Russia accountable for its aggressive actions against America and the West, we can return to a more positive relationship. There are still key areas where the United States will have to work with Russia in order to improve global security, specifically:

- Arms control to reduce the danger of nuclear weapons; and
- Ending the ongoing conflict in Syria.

# Russia has undertaken wide-ranging efforts to undermine Western democracies.

Russia is attempting to undermine democracies, both in the United States and in the West more broadly, as part of its goal to blur the value of democracy as a contrast to Putin's authoritarianism. Those efforts include a long-term, wide-ranging effort to undermine American democracy in the 2016 election, to interfere in the 2018 midterm election and 2020 presidential election, and to undermine European democracies.

In the United States, Russia's interference has been extensively documented. The US intelligence community concluded with high confidence that Russia's campaign to influence the 2016 US presidential election was directly ordered by President Putin. Russia took a series of actions aimed at boosting the candidacy of Donald Trump, who is regarded as more likely to serve Russia's interests. This strategy involved exploiting social and traditional media platforms to promote propaganda and spread disinformation. Twenty-six Russian nationals and three companies associated with Russia were indicted in the United States for illegally using social media or hacking into computer networks to interfere in the 2016 US election.<sup>2</sup> Their tactics included stealing data, using fraudulent accounts, staging political rallies, and promoting pro-Trump or anti-Clinton messages through political advertisements.<sup>3</sup> Facebook has said that 126 million people may have been exposed to content about the 2016 US election posted by Russia-linked operatives. Nearly 11.4 million people may have been exposed to Facebook ads paid for by fake accounts associated with Russia-linked operatives.<sup>4</sup>

As highlighted in the "Trump Investigations" chapter of this book, Special Counsel Robert Mueller's 2019 report detailed Russia's effort to hack the computer networks of the Clinton campaign, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and the Democratic National Committee, as well as attempts to obstruct justice by various Trump officials and associates—six of whom were convicted of crimes.<sup>5</sup>

Russia's efforts to undermine America's democratic institutions and sow discord included influencing the Trump campaign, Trump organizations, and conservative political groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the National Prayer Breakfast.<sup>6</sup> In the latter cases, Russian operative Maria Butina worked to convert the NRA, in particular, into "a foreign asset" for Russia, according to one Senate investigation.<sup>7</sup>

But it is clear Russia did not stop in 2016. Two years ago, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis confirmed that Russia was interfering in the 2018 US midterm elections by spreading disinformation, and the Department of Justice charged a Russian employee of the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency in connection with this interference.<sup>8</sup> A month

later, on Election Day, the US Cyber Command took rare action against the Internet Research Agency, temporarily blocking its internet access.<sup>9</sup>

In July 2020, congressional Democrats and Vice President Biden warned of a Russian disinformation campaign aimed at the politically motivated investigation of Vice President Biden and his son's ties to Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Biden asserted that, if elected president, he would treat any foreign election interference as "an adversarial act."<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Russia's economic espionage activities appear to be increasing, with US, Canadian, and UK government officials reporting Russian intelligence activities aimed at stealing coronavirus research.<sup>12</sup> Russia continues to stoke racial and political dissension in the United States; among other things, the country has interfered in a New York congressional election and spread disinformation about the coronavirus.<sup>13</sup>

Russia's interference in the 2016 US election follows a pattern of Russia-led influence campaigns and aggression toward America's allies and partners in Europe. This political interference has included meddling in France's 2017 presidential election,<sup>14</sup> independence debates in Catalonia and Scotland in 2014,<sup>15</sup> and the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK.<sup>16</sup> In each case, Russia-connected actors have spread disinformation, amplified separatist voices, and sowed doubts in voters' minds about their democratic systems.<sup>17</sup> In the UK, according to a British parliament report on Russian interference in the Brexit vote, Russian money and oligarchs have also directly influenced lawmakers and successive governments, as part of the Kremlin operation.<sup>18</sup>

The ultimate result of Russia's efforts could be a distracted, divided Western alliance that can't effectively stand up to Russian infractions of international law through its military occupations, violations of the Geneva Conventions, and extrajudicial killings in foreign countries. Despite this threat, President Trump will not acknowledge that Russia interfered in the election on his behalf.<sup>19</sup> At the 2018 Helsinki Summit with President Putin, he refused to condemn Russia's attacks on the democracies of America and our allies or any of the country's other malicious behavior,<sup>20</sup> including shooting down a civilian airliner over Ukraine<sup>21</sup> and assassinating Russian opponents around the world.



Source: AP Images

## **Aside from election interference, Russia continues to be a military threat to the US and our NATO allies.**

Russia's military continues to threaten allies of the United States—and with the annexation of Crimea, it altered European borders using military force for the first time since the Second World War. Russia's military invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, as well as its large military exercises in proximity to Eastern Europe, have forced the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to refocus on its original mission of deterring Russia.<sup>22</sup> But while Russian conventional forces threaten the alliance, the country also aims to win conflicts and weaken adversaries through asymmetric means—economic coercion, cyberattacks on military and civilian infrastructure, and information warfare—long before the battle.

The cornerstone of NATO is its mutual defense commitment, which is vital to US national security interests. If the United States were ever attacked by Russia or another hostile actor, it would be considered an attack on all NATO allies. The only time NATO's collective defense obligations have been triggered was to come to America's aid after 9/11.<sup>23</sup> Pushed by President Obama and spurred on by Russia's aggressive behavior, NATO members' defense spending has been rising.<sup>24</sup> In 2014, NATO countries agreed to commit at least 2% of their gross domestic product toward their own defense budgets.<sup>25</sup> By 2018, NATO allies spent an additional \$87 billion on defense and collective contributions—and over the last five years, nine countries reached the 2% goal.<sup>26</sup> By 2024, defense spending by NATO allies is expected to have increased by \$400 billion.<sup>27</sup>

Under President Obama, the United States strengthened NATO by increasing its commitment to deter and protect against Russian aggression. In 2016, the United States committed \$3.4 billion to a new European Reassurance Initiative. This involved moving US battalions between Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, adding an entire army brigade toward Europe's defense.<sup>28</sup>

Under President Trump, the US commitment to the alliance has remained unchanged, thus far.<sup>29</sup> Under bipartisan congressional pressure, the Trump Administration preserved the European Reassurance Initiative and increased its funding. In addition, in 2018, the Trump Administration approved the provision of anti-tank weapons to Ukraine, a valuable lethal defense against any new Russian military invasion and something President Obama did not do, fearing military escalation.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, however, President Trump has continually criticized NATO, and in 2018 launched a barrage of attacks against America's closest NATO allies at the alliance's summit,<sup>31</sup> where he also threatened to withdraw the United States from NATO.<sup>32</sup> In response, the House of Representatives approved a bill last year to prevent the Trump Administration from withdrawing the United States from NATO.<sup>33</sup> Such a move would be catastrophic, damaging a 70-year-old alliance that protects America's interests, spreading security and stability throughout Europe, incentivizing Europeans to set aside conflicts among themselves, and countering the threat of Russia.<sup>34</sup>

Putin has divided the United States and its allies, thanks to President Trump. Trump has repeatedly called for Russia to rejoin the G7 industrialized nations after the country was removed in 2014 as punishment for its annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula.<sup>35</sup> In 2018, President Trump angered allies in the G7, raising the issue while leveling trade actions against Canada under the false guise of a national security threat and imposing tariffs on European allies.<sup>36</sup> Needless to say, Canada and other G7 allies are not a threat to the United States, but Russia is. This May, even as the president and his Administration were aware of intelligence indicating the Russian military was paying bounties to Afghans to kill US troops, he said he would invite Russia to the G7 summit, scheduled to be hosted in the United States. After German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated she wouldn't attend due to the coronavirus and other heads of state expressed similar concerns, President Trump announced the summit would be postponed.<sup>37</sup>

In June, President Trump took a further swipe at Germany, approving a plan to withdraw up to a third of US service members there, a move that weakens NATO and its military deterrence vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>38</sup> At the end of July, the administration announced it would move 12,000 troops out of Germany (about half would remain elsewhere in Europe; the rest would go back to the United States). Experts and Members of Congress from both parties expressed

opposition to this plan, pointing out that it appears aimed at punishing Germany at the cost of alliance political cohesion and military strength.<sup>39</sup>

Alarming, recent reports also show a Russian military intelligence unit offered to pay Taliban militants to kill American service members in Afghanistan, highlighting the continued use of hybrid warfare against the West.<sup>40</sup> Russia's actions, dating back to at least 2017,<sup>41</sup> would typically warrant a public response from an American president and actions such as sanctions and cyberattacks. Trump, however, has spoken to Putin multiple times since the report surfaced and has not raised the issue.<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, US national security officials, intelligence experts, and others have documented a history of cyberattacks by actors enabled by the Russian government, which have resulted in the theft of billions of dollars and data from US businesses and individuals.<sup>43</sup> Russia escalated its use of cyber and information warfare by interfering in US elections, undermining US institutions, and increasing political dissension in a way that allows it to avoid direct confrontation with the West.

Finally, the Russian military continues to regard this political conflict on a continuum to actual war, planning to fight the United States asymmetrically through cyber operations aimed at critical infrastructure—and, if the existence of the Russian Federation is deemed by its government to be at stake, with nuclear weapons.<sup>44</sup>

## **Congress has, and should, continue to take action to hold Russia responsible for its actions.**

Even before the 2016 elections, the US had—on a bipartisan basis—held Russia accountable for its malign activities. In 2012, the US imposed sanctions on Russia under the Magnitsky Act (P.L.112-208) for human rights violations against Russian critics of Putin.<sup>45</sup> In 2014, the US imposed sanctions against Russia for its seizure of Crimea and occupation of Eastern Ukraine.<sup>46</sup>

The United States has imposed several rounds of sanctions on Russia on a cautious, incremental, and targeted basis.<sup>47</sup> In one instance—where sanctions had a potential meaningful bite but threatened the economic interests of Americans, Europeans, and Len Blavatnik, a Ukrainian-American Republican donor with ties to the Kremlin and to Treasury Secretary Stephen Mnuchin—they were reversed by the administration.<sup>48</sup> In that case, sanctions were placed on Kremlin-crony and Paul Manafort benefactor, Oleg Deripaska, effectively banning business with his large aluminum conglomerate, Rusal. The Trump administration brokered a compromise whereby Deripaska gave up his majority ownership of the company, and the United States spared Rusal from sanctions. The House of



Representatives subsequently passed a resolution (H.J.Res.30) to block this move; the Senate did not follow suit.<sup>49</sup>

Beyond sanctions, policymakers must invest in cybersecurity, strengthening agencies tasked with ensuring the security of elections, and working more closely with the private sector to identify vulnerabilities that the Russians might exploit. Policymakers must educate the public about Russian disinformation efforts and condemn President Trump's attempts to ignore or downplay them.

Congress must also continue to provide resources and push for strengthened assistance, coordination, and information sharing between the Department of Homeland Security and state and local election officials to protect against the hacking of election systems. Over the past two years, Senate Republicans attempted to block Democratic legislation to provide additional funding for state election security systems, only relenting under extreme public pressure.<sup>50</sup> But additional funding is not enough; the Senate must pass the three election security bills passed by the House of Representatives, which provide more funding, require campaigns to alert the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Federal Election Commission (FEC) of any foreign offers of assistance, and ban voting machines from being connected to the internet.<sup>51</sup>

Moving forward, Congress should continue to evaluate approaches to force the Trump Administration to ratchet-up sanctions on Russia or any other hostile actor found interfering in US elections, and block Administration efforts to loosen Russian sanctions, if warranted. These sanctions must demonstrate to Russia that it will face costs for its destabilizing behavior. If the United States does not take further action, Russia will continue to influence future US elections—as national security officials, including members of President Trump's own administration, have warned.<sup>52</sup>

## **Despite the challenges in the US-Russia relationship, there are a few key areas where cooperation is necessary.**

Despite their differences, the United States and Russia will still need to work together to address key national security challenges that neither can address alone. First, the two countries possess the two largest nuclear arsenals in the world and will have to reach agreement to control the nuclear danger. Second, the two countries share an interest in brokering peace in Syria.

### **Nuclear Arms Control**



As the two largest nuclear powers on the planet, the United States and Russia must work together to reduce the threat posed by nuclear weapons. Arms control has been a reliable area of cooperation between the United States and Russia, even during the Cold War. With around 7,000 warheads, Russia can annihilate the United States if it were to launch an attack.<sup>53</sup> Washington must find ways to work with Moscow to reduce the number and threat of nuclear weapons, secure stockpiles of nuclear materials, oppose proliferating states, and prevent the risk of nuclear terrorism.

The United States and Russia have pursued nuclear arms control through bilateral agreements for years, including the New START Treaty, which President Obama signed in 2010.<sup>54</sup> Russia has also provided support for diplomatic agreements aimed at reducing the development of nuclear weapons in countries of concern. For example, although President Trump announced in May 2018 that the United States will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, Russia continues to remain a party to the agreement.<sup>55</sup> In the run-up to that deal, Russia removed 25,000 pounds of enriched uranium from Iran, effectively reducing its stockpile to 300 kilograms—as required under the deal.<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, arms control cooperation between the United States and Russia has been almost destroyed by Russia's violation of multiple conventional and nuclear agreements between the two countries and the Trump Administration's refusal to continue negotiations. The two countries signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, banning an entire group of nuclear missiles. But Russia blatantly violated this treaty and has refused to admit it.<sup>57</sup> Instead of working to push Russia back into compliance and/or to include countries like China, the Trump Administration withdrew from the treaty in 2019 and intends to develop US intermediate-range missiles, ratcheting up defense costs and danger for the United States and its NATO allies.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, for years, Russia had failed to fully comply with the Open Skies Treaty, an agreement among 34 countries to allow surveillance flights over their territory in order to minimize the danger of snap military mobilizations and war as a result of miscalculation or overreaction. Instead of negotiating to improve Russia's behavior, the Trump Administration announced in May that the United States would be withdrawing from the treaty.<sup>59</sup> This is a blow to European allies, who rely on the overflights for information they cannot otherwise obtain without access to sophisticated satellite systems. A formal exit will occur in November, unless Vice President Biden, who reportedly supports the treaty, becomes president.<sup>60</sup>

The New START treaty expires in February 2021. The Trump Administration appears uninterested in extending it,<sup>61</sup> questioning the value of the treaty and calling for a trilateral agreement to include China.<sup>62</sup> Moscow has expressed skepticism about this approach because Beijing is uninterested in extending arms control to their forces.<sup>63</sup>

Congress should push for the United States to re-negotiate all lapsed and lapsing agreements with Russia in good faith and should oppose any efforts by the Trump Administration to develop or deploy missiles prohibited by the INF Treaty. <sup>64</sup>

## **Peace in Syria**

Another area that requires US-Russia cooperation is creating a pathway to stabilizing Syria, where hundreds of thousands of civilians have died over the last eight years. <sup>65</sup> The United States and Russia have been on opposite sides of the civil war in Syria, with the United States opposing long-time Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russia working with Iran to support him. Russia has enabled and covered up the Assad regime's attacks on its own people, including through the use of chemical weapons. <sup>66</sup>

In September 2015, Russia's military intervened in Syria to ensure the survival of Assad's regime, which was on the verge of collapse. While Russia has targeted the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other terrorist groups in its operations, it has also bombed US-backed rebel groups <sup>67</sup> and intentionally bombed hospitals, civilians, and humanitarian aid convoys. This has resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent Syrians. <sup>68</sup>

President Trump's October 2019 decision to withdraw US troops from northern Syria and abandon America's Kurdish partners has only served to strengthen Russia's hand and risk the resurgence of ISIS. With this decision, Russia was able to step in and fill the void left by the United States. <sup>69</sup> US Defense Intelligence has also assessed that the move risked enabling a resurgence of ISIS, <sup>70</sup> and an estimated 14,000 to 18,000 ISIS fighters now remain in Iraq and Syria. <sup>71</sup>

Both the United States and Russia have an interest in ending the conflict in Syria and preventing a resurgence of ISIS. Ultimately, only a diplomatic process—requiring cooperation between the United States and Russia—will stabilize the country and lead to a sustainable political settlement.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between Russia and the United States remains at its lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Russia must pay a steep price for its attack on the pillars of American democracy. Without a significant response, Russia will not refrain from trying to influence US elections. Indeed, to the extent that the Kremlin thinks President Trump's time in the White House is running out, it is likely to opportunistically seek to further Russia's objectives. This poses a particular danger to countries on the Russian periphery: foremost Ukraine, but also NATO allies in Eastern Europe and US partners in the Middle East.

President Trump's contradictory approaches to Russia should prompt Congress to use its independent voice to ensure that the United States does not diminish its commitment to its European allies in exchange for vague promises of better relations with Russia. The United States must hold the line on Russia's bad behavior while improving coordination around areas of mutual concern, like nuclear weapons and terrorism.

## TOPICS

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