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Perspective

Foreign Actor Influence on Right-Wing Extremism in the United States: The Case of Russia

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ACTRI is a cross-disciplinary 501c(3) nonprofit research organization focused on the broad spectrum of transnational extreme-right, extreme-left, and militant-jihadi political violence. We study the relationships between them and their effect on how ideologies emerge, spread, dominate, and influence countermeasures.



In February 2020, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) announced that racially motivated violent extremism was elevated to a national threat priority for the 2020 fiscal year.¹ This is following an increase in incidents in August 2019, where the number of domestic arrests, reported to be approximately 100, surpassed 2018 totals.² This equaled the number of arrests related to international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS in the same time period.³ While the FBI has not released the total number of incidents or arrests for 2019, the 2019 Anti-Defamation League (ADL) audit reflects a 12 percent increase of anti-Semitic incidents in 2019, totaling 2,107 incidents.⁴ Despite a lack of a comprehensive review of right-wing violent extremism landscape in 2019, it is reasonable to deduce the total numbers of racially motivated incidents conducted by right-wing violent extremists trended upward from 2018 to 2019 based on these data points alone.

The manifestations of right-wing violent extremism in the United States continue to exacerbate fear and uncertainty. Right-wing violent extremists exploit the dissemination of “fake news” and social media to push their ideological and political agenda. The modernization of technology and the internet in particular has served as a catalyst for how violent extremists communicate and influence each other. They leverage this resource by achieving a transnational reach and allowing foreign actors to impose their influence and political agenda. Right-wing extremist networks are not new to digital platforms, adapting early to dial-in bulletin board systems, evolving to websites and online forums, and quickly adopting the current age of social media.⁵

Right-wing violent extremists judiciously

exploit social media to project and propagate their agenda. Right-wing violent extremist content may be found on mainstream platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, as well as fringe platforms including Gab, Discord, and Russian-based platform *Vkontakte (VK)*.⁶ Exact numbers of right-wing violent extremists on these platforms are difficult to determine, as demonstrated by a 2018 census of Twitter.⁷ Data manipulation, follower counts, and automatic retweeting make it especially difficult to ascertain the exact follower base number.⁸

Right-wing violent extremists have also taken advantage of the transnational character of the internet and social media. Reliant on intervention and public relations effort from international actors like Russia, a Southern Poverty Law Center designated hate group, *League of the South*, in 2018 added a Russian language page to its website.⁹ A spokesperson for the League of the South defended the action on the grounds of unreasonable crackdowns on American-based social media and funding platforms, purportedly forcing them to seek out Russian platforms and reach out for an alliance.¹⁰ The Kremlin is known for sowing discord in order to undermine democracies, including the United States, and also uses targeted misinformation campaigns against democracies.¹¹ It also appeals to domestic far-right factions with strict conservative convictions and policies under the guise of traditional family values, with laws infringing on LGBTQ+ rights.¹²

Russia has been reluctant to take action against ultranationalist, far-right paramilitary organizations operating in its territory, such as the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), a Russian-based and recently designated “Specially Designated Global Terrorist



(SDGT)” group by the U.S. Department of State. RIM for years has had a hand in the United States in the way of providing or offering to provide training to U.S.-based right-wing extremist groups. The group also continues to propagate disinformation in the United States.^{13,14} While in an adversarial relationship with the Russian government, they seem to have learned how to coexist and tolerate each-other.¹⁵

Law enforcement and intelligence agencies have only recently given a needed focus to right-wing violent extremism, and are facing hurdles in catching up to the threat. Some of the hurdles manifest in the form of a lack of focus, budget, and resources. Another challenge facing resources involves the mislabeling of domestic terrorist attacks by right-wing violent extremist as hate crimes, or other such crimes, which remain a lower priority for the FBI.¹⁶ This creates issues for statistics, including the argumentation for more resources and budget for the issue. A third, and a rather more compounding issue, remains the 1st amendment protecting the freedom of speech. Hate speech is protected to a degree, and this presents legal concerns in monitoring social media to prevent another domestic attack.¹⁷

Impact of Social Media Content

“Fake news” refers to a form of partially or fully false information that is created and shared in order to sway opinions, discredit, or obscure the truth about individuals or groups, such as political parties or movements.¹⁸ While it only accounts for approximately one percent of all news, it remains a large swaying variable, with social media significantly amplifying its impact.¹⁹ A 2019 Pew Research Study found that 55 percent of American adults receive news from social

media sites, and that this percentage has increased annually from 2016, with a noted 8 percent increase from 2018 to 2019.²⁰ The same research revealed that the majority of Americans were concerned about both the quality of the news information on social media and perceived skewing of this information.

The concern is not unfounded, however, as false information spread through social media has resulted in violent actions in the past. A notable example of this is the 2016 Washington D.C. #pizzagate shooting. Rumors of a pizzeria conducting a pedophilia ring in the basement, supposedly connected to the Democratic party and then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, resulted in an active shooting incident.²¹ This information was spread through social media, starting with Twitter and moving to other sites, before motivating the perpetrator to take a weapon and fire it multiple times inside the establishment. Ultimately, no links to the pedophilia ring were found. The only factual information was the political connection between the owner and the Democratic party, as the owner had hosted fundraisers and had other distant connections.²²

Right-wing extremists have also taken advantage of spreading disinformation and hate during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations mapping marketing and disinformation campaigns during the pandemic on Twitter have found that right-wing linked accounts pushed the majority of the disinformation.²³ While the study included right-wing accounts based in the United States, Italy, and France, the majority of the disinformation came from accounts linked to the United States, with common themes from these accounts including anti-



immigrant and racist narratives, especially focused on China.²⁴ These same themes of racism and anti-China and anti-immigration were witnessed in the right-wing protests against stay-at-home orders and shutting down of all but essential business across the United States earlier this year.²⁵ Additionally, in a 2018 sample of Facebook accounts, extreme right-wing identified profiles shared the majority of “junk” news. They accounted for 58 of the total 91 percent identified junk news websites, according to a study by The Computational Propaganda Project.²⁶

International Ties to Russia

“Russia is our friend” was chanted at the “Unite the Right” rally in 2017 in Charlottesville, VA, with evidence suggesting Russia’s ties to right wing-extremists both in the United States and globally.²⁷ Russia seems supportive both overtly and covertly of white supremacy and right-wing extremism,²⁸ and has possible direct ties to at least one U.S.-based right-wing extremist group.²⁹ Russian server based and popular social media website VK is offering a safe haven for right-wing extremists who are kicked off of U.S.-based social media platforms for their views and statements.³⁰ It is often argued that the goal of the Russian government in both assisting white supremacy/right-wing extremism and tolerating it internally is to sow discord to undermine trust and delegitimize democratic governments.^{31 32} The goal is to not only destabilize Western governments, but also to weaken the power the United States has held since post WWII, thus increasing Russian power and influence globally.³³ The author conducted a brief survey, coupled with follow-up interviews with select law enforcement, intelligence, and prosecutors in the United States, the Balkans,

and Europe, to determine Russia’s direct and indirect interference in domestic politics and influence on extremist groups and individuals.³⁴ Key findings are highlighted in the following table.



| Direct (overt) & Indirect (covert) Support | Objectives & Goals | Manifestations of Support |
|--|---|--|
| <i>Political party support: Ethnonationalists, populists, far-right, etc.</i> | Recruitment, indoctrination, manipulation of domestic extremist groups | Propaganda value to political parties and domestic extremist groups |
| <i>Extremist group support: white supremacist, neo-fascist, skin heads, motorcycle gangs, soccer hooligans, etc.</i> | Sow long-term political chaos and violence as opposed to overthrowing democratic governance | Provision of safe haven to extremist groups and supporters to launch propaganda campaigns |
| <i>Recently exhibiting influence over far-left extremist groups</i> | <p>Undermine trust of democratic institutions</p> <p>Entice and utilize domestic groups as a conduit to establishing further ties with far-right parties and anti-establishment politicians</p> <p>Exploit supporter base to secure support for the pro-Kremlin political candidates (e.g. President Milorad Dodik, Republika Srpska)</p> | <p>Cultivation of local proxies</p> <p>Amplify the impact of civil unrests and protests</p> <p>Cyber-attacks & social media presence (e.g. clone website, spread of disinformation on local politics, hacking into WhatsApp and spreading rumors and disinformation, etc.)</p> <p>Messaging and narratives focused on anti-immigrant, anti-LGBT, anti-Muslim, anti-women, etc., rhetoric</p> <p>Support of the establishment of local chapters of “banned” Russian organizations (e.g. Banned “Russian Night Wolves” motorcycle gang establishing local chapters in Macedonia, Bulgaria, Bosnia, Serbia, etc.)</p> |

Table 1: Source: Author³⁵



Russia has for years openly supported notable white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups in Europe.³⁶ While existing evidence does not suggest any direct, open form of support for any of the U.S.-based right-wing extremist groups, Russia remains a supporter of these groups nevertheless. The most dominant form of support springs in the form of amplifying voices in social media bot campaigns, spreading misinformation. Research shows that prior to the 2020 election, the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) was targeting polarizing issues in the United States, including right-wing extremist viewpoints.³⁷ The Mueller investigation described the IRA misinformation accounts as “false U.S. personas, operated social media pages and groups designed to attract U.S. audience.”³⁸ Sixteen of the 40 Twitter accounts—almost half—identified were aimed at topics right-wing extremist groups align with, such as: Southern Heritage, gun rights, and Conservative pro-Trump fake accounts.³⁹ Following the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally, a large number of bots, apparently linked to Russia, served to amplify the messages from the rally as well as to spread conspiracy theories to discredit the counter protest.⁴⁰

There is a lack of research into the actual impact of these campaigns but taking the earlier research on right-wing groups sharing the most disinformation, the probability of these campaigns having an impact is high. Normal Spear (*a.k.a* Roman Wolf, Rinaldo Nazzaro), leader of a U.S. accelerationist right-wing extremist organization *The Base*, who lived in Russia with his Russian national wife since at least 2018,⁴¹ has actively used encrypted social media platforms to plan violent attacks.⁴² He is also believed to be

now linked to the Russian government by US law enforcement and intelligence agencies, including accused to be a Russian spy by a former member.⁴³ This would indicate a direct interaction with the Kremlin and violent right-wing extremist actions in the United States.

Policy and Law Enforcement

Investigation and prevention of right-wing violent extremism under domestic terrorism laws remains perplexing. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the USA Patriot Act encompassed acts of domestic terrorism, though failed to make domestic terrorism a federal offense. Additionally, the terrorism statutes that do exist apply only to specific crimes, such as weapons of mass destruction or an attack on the government directly. This has led to the rising right-wing extremist violence to not be classified as domestic terrorism. This also limits the resources allocated for the prevention of these crimes.⁴⁴ Current open and broad definitions of domestic terrorism may pave the way to political abuses, including concerns over first amendment protections in the United States. These concerns are currently validated when viewing the issue through the lens of anti-terrorism laws in Europe. The Council of Europe stressed how catch-all-terms are applied too broadly in France over a large variety of statements, often resulting in infringement on freedom of expression; in the United Kingdom possibly hindering journalist and academics researching this topic.⁴⁵ Similarly, in Russia, anti-terrorism laws were used against journalists to infringe on freedom of the press.⁴⁶ Given the concerns, the American Civil Liberties



Union (ACLU) has recommended narrowing the scope and authority *vis-à-vis* domestic terrorism to enhance the effectiveness and limit abuses.⁴⁷

At the pinnacle of law enforcement, the FBI is the lead organization for investigating and preventing both domestic and international terrorism.⁴⁸ As of 2019, only around 20 percent of the FBI field agents assigned to the counterterrorism division focus on domestic terrorism.⁴⁹ This places burden of investigation and prevention onto state and lower law enforcement levels, to multiple pitfalls. State level law enforcement remains the primary link between local and federal law enforcement. As of 2006, a lack of a common approach to terrorism prevention, including intelligence training at the state level or between the states, raises concerns over whether domestic terrorism is able to be properly identified and classified at the state level.⁵⁰ Even with the rise in reported crimes, as noted in the introduction, it is estimated that only one third of all these crimes are even labeled as such, and the majority of local law enforcement communities report no such crimes in their jurisdictions.⁵¹ These points highlight that the lack of federal focus and clarity may have trickle-down effect at state and local law enforcement levels. While the federal government has made domestic terrorism and right-wing, racially motivated violence a priority, more efforts are needed to effectively address the issue and offer clear guidance to local level law enforcement.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Attempts by foreign governments to influence the domestic political landscape of other countries by promoting recruitment, propaganda and spreading disinformation have become more visible in recent years.⁵² Foreign interference tactics have also evolved, becoming “less clandestine and more overt.”⁵³ Despite the claims of prioritizing and being vested in the identification and prevention of extremism in the country and abroad,⁵⁴ Russia’s coercive sphere of influence in the West, including in the United States, can no longer be ignored.⁵⁵ Though resolute in repudiating any role in influencing far-right groups in the West—and alluding to any ties to such groups to be occurring spontaneously⁵⁶—evidence points out the need for a more proactive approach in prioritizing defensive measures to counter Russia’s influence and activities in the West.

The policy of naming and shaming Russia and its proxies has become common, with many questioning the logic of such a response absent clear understanding of Russia’s behavior and limited utility in influencing a change in its behavior.⁵⁷ Proposed alternatives include: targeting domestic organizations that receive direct support and training from Russia, instituting federal crime of domestic terrorism, designating domestic violent right-wing groups with ties to international links as terrorist, and increasing support for the FBI and intelligence organizations to generate counter-radicalization programs.⁵⁸

With Russia’s desire to spread and influence right-wing extremist behavior online,⁵⁹



formal and better coordinated international efforts are needed to develop measures for identifying Russia's disinformation on social media platforms. With a better understanding of how right-wing extremists exploit social media and are being connected to foreign actors, law enforcement may be able to better prepare and deal with the issue. Facebook has recently engaged in a number of takedown efforts targeting small networks, pages, and accounts on its platform that were created or run by Russian operatives, with links to the Russian IRA or affiliated individuals.⁶⁰ Disinformation materials posted by such accounts ranged from articles targeting 2020 Democratic presidential candidates, to articles supporting opposition political leaders in Latin America, to articles discussing global issues and promoting normative frameworks of human security, to articles discussing the far-right "boogaloo" movement in the United States.⁶¹

In addition to important content take-down and removal efforts by the social media organizations, increase in social media transparency (e.g. TOS, policies governing freedom of speech, take-down policies, filtering of extremist content, etc.) and better information-sharing mechanisms between the government, research institutions, and social media companies could significantly improve preventative and counter-radicalization efforts. For instance, recent research on Russian disinformation strategies and tactics,⁶² given its practical value in the way of identifying extremist content online, could significantly reduce social media's ability to proactively thwart Russia-influenced extremist content online. Lastly, media literacy campaigns are needed to strengthen the consumers and the viewers'

ability to identify and reject Russia-driven disinformation campaigns.

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