

The Authoritarian Challenge:

The Concordance of the Trump Presidency and Putin's Russia

by Eric Chenoweth

Since November 8, 2016, American citizens and citizens of the world have faced a startling new situation. On that day, the United States, the longest continuous representative democracy in the modern world, elected to a four-year term as president the authoritarian-minded Donald J. Trump. A man having little or no knowledge of, experience in, or appreciation for representative government and having no stated adherence to the system of alliances the United States forged to make it “the leader of the free world,” Trump promised to upend U.S. domestic and foreign policy and reshape the international order. He has done so.

Put together with the decade-long rise and strengthening of dictatorial leadership and nationalist and chauvinist parties in a number of countries, Trump's election has brought about a broadly acknowledged crisis of world democracy. Given its position and role in the world, the United States is now center stage in that crisis.

One of the most troublesome aspects of the election was that the rules of the U.S. Constitution awarded Trump victory based on the preference of a minority of voters using an antique and unique electoral college system that overrode a substantial national vote margin in favor of the election's loser. Notwithstanding Hillary Clinton's supposed unpopularity, the Democratic Party candidate won 2.85 million more votes in the national ballot, 48 percent to 46 percent, while Trump's electoral college victory was determined in three decisive states by a total of 77,000 votes (out of 13.4 million). Putting aside that the results were influenced by foreign intervention (see below), the election itself should be a cause of serious concern at the state of American democracy. For the second time in recent U.S. history, a *national minority government* has been imposed on the majority. No other democracy elects national leadership in such a manner. Yet, there is little discussion of addressing this structural weakness in the political system.¹

The more disturbing aspect is that the person who gained power according to these constitutional rules won the election through demagoguery, propaganda, and populist appeals — what Alexander Hamilton called “low intrigue and the little arts of publicity.” Those appeals formed an entire authoritarian platform: mass detention and deportation of millions of unauthorized immigrants; building an impenetrable 2,000-mile border-wall; imposing a ban on Muslims entering the country; nationwide stop and frisk policing to impose “law and order”; ordering the use of torture to combat foreign terrorism; imperialist seizure of oil resources of sovereign countries; and the imprisonment of Trump's election opponent upon victory; among many such election campaign promises.

¹ The anomaly is significant. In the country's first 100 years, only three presidential elections were decided by the electoral college or House of Representatives contrary to the national vote winner. From 1892 to 2012, however, the victor in presidential contests won both the electoral college and national vote in all but one of thirty-one elections, usually by large margins, to achieve a popular mandate. The exception was the 2000 election. George W. Bush won a slight electoral college victory (271-266), affirmed by a narrow 5-4 Supreme Court ruling, which overrode a small national vote margin in favor of Al Gore of 0.5 percent. In light of the 2016 result, the historical anomaly of 2000 should have led to much greater national reflection on how U.S. presidents are elected.

Some argued that Trump's words should not be taken literally but these pledges were made day after day in rallies and television appearances. Trump's support increased the more extreme his positions and the more immediately he pledged to implement them by exercising executive power. His campaign had further echoes of past anti-democratic movements, such as encouraging violence among supporters, singling out reporters of the "disgusting press" for attack, and directing chants of supporters to equate Trump with the salvation of the nation. All of this became normalized in their repetition, media coverage and, finally, in Trump's election.² One is left with the question of which is worse for the health of American politics: the percentage of 63 million people voting for Trump on the basis of his authoritarian platform or the number who discounted Trump's pledges as demagoguery and disregarded his evident lack of fitness for the job but voted for political party over any other consideration.

Yet, this question is particularly vexing given the most alarming story of the election: the Russian Federation's intervention to affect the outcome in favor of Donald Trump. It is in this story that one finds the confluence of factors contributing to the crisis of American democracy: an authoritarian-minded president is elected by a minority of voters due in large part to the intervention of a hostile foreign power.

For all the analysis of Trump's election and its causes (renewed by debate over Hillary Clinton's recent book, *What Happened*), there remains a reluctance to confront the reasons for and consequences of the 2016 presidential election and the damage Trump's victory has done both to American democracy and its global leadership. What remains largely undiscussed is the deep concordance between the Trump presidency and the authoritarian aims of Vladimir Putin. It is important therefore to assess America's national crisis from this vantage point, how it came about, and the damage done thus far. Only by doing so may it be possible to repair the damage.

"Active Measures": The Underlying Basis to the U.S. Election's Most Alarming Story

While there have been numerous stories on different aspects of the Russian intervention, it is rarely presented in its full context. It is worth doing so.

The Russian intervention was consistent with ongoing "active measures" operations directed at Western democratic countries. These operations are not new. They were inherited from the USSR and these capabilities were maintained, utilized and updated by post-Soviet intelligence services. Their continued deployment in both the former Soviet bloc countries and in the West was one among many indications in the 1990s that Russia's transition to democracy following the Soviet Union's collapse was quite limited. Putin, an ex-KGB officer who headed the KGB successor agency starting in 1998, assumed full control of these capabilities in 2000 as president.

Active measures are aimed at influencing and altering the politics and international behavior of nations to benefit Russia's interests and further its geostrategic doctrine. They involve a number of components: espionage, embedding Russian agents in foreign countries, and recruitment of foreign agents; financial and indirect support for political parties, organizations, and media; a broad range of overt and covert propaganda operations; use of compromising materials to coerce foreign nationals; entanglement of foreign businesses, investors and cultural and academic

² A fuller treatment of these features is in "[The Authoritarian Temptation](#)" by Eric Chenoweth (June 24, 2016).

institutions in Russian state interests; murder of vocal opponents abroad; the more recent deployment of various cyber weapon techniques; among other means.³

Russia's influence operations have multiple purposes, among them to weaken Western economic, political and military alliances (especially the European Union and NATO); to promote pro-Russian sympathies in the West among political parties and other institutions; and to reverse what are perceived as anti-Russian policies by Western countries. The most important of these is NATO and the EU accepting the sovereign decisions of former Soviet bloc countries to join them. A more recent priority is to reverse the imposition of sanctions by the EU and U.S. in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and further military aggression attacking the sovereignty of Ukraine after its people made clear their choice to join Europe in early 2014.

Active measures are not a substitute for declining military power, as some speculate. Nor are their use a sign of Russia's declining economic or military power. They were and are essential assets of the Russian state that are integrated within important power structures (the security services, military, and propaganda agencies). They remain essential to projecting power in pursuing the Russian Federation's geostrategic aims, namely: (1) solidifying and expanding Russian dominance in Eurasia; (2) restoring Russia's international position to that of the Soviet Union before its collapse; and (3) in so doing re-establishing (and re-asserting) Russia as a Great Power that helps determine global developments and alignments.

To achieve these aims, Russia has carried out aggressive foreign policies challenging the post-Cold War international framework in which the U.S. has been dominant. Well before Russia's aggression in Ukraine and intervention in Syria, it had violated the sovereignty of many neighboring countries, created "frozen conflicts" aimed at keeping post-Soviet countries under its control, and used energy policies to make neighbors and EU/NATO alliance countries more dependent on Russia and thus (it was hoped) pliable to its interests. But to fully achieve his aims, Vladimir Putin seeks to change the world order from an international rules-based system to one determined by Great Power relationships that divide spheres of interest.

At the root of Russia's international actions is the political basis of Putin's rule. Since assuming power in 1999, he has undone any democratic transition that took place following the collapse of the Soviet Union and has used war, violence and harsh repression to consolidate control over a corrupt authoritarian state, one built on post-Soviet communist institutions and networks.

As with other dictators, Putin seeks justifications for his rule and these have also become an essential underpinning to his maintenance of control over the country. Such justifications are found in the development of a Russian nationalist ideology drawn from both tsarist and communist-era thinking. One element of this thinking is that the collapse of the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc was a "catastrophe" resulting from internal weakness, feckless leadership and foreign intervention. The Soviet collapse caused Russia's unnecessary decline and created economic and political chaos that was reversed only through the re-establishment of strong state control and policies put in place by Putin. A second element is the idea that the United States took advantage

³ On Soviet active measures, see e.g., *The KGB in Europe and the West: The Mitrokhin Archive* by Christopher Wall and Vasili Mitrokhin (Penguin, UK: 2006). The full Mitrokhin files are made available at [The Woodrow Wilson Digital Archive](#). Russian active measures and their impact in the U.S. election were explored by the Senate Intelligence Permanent Select Committee at its public hearing on [March 30, 2017](#).

of Russian decline to assert world hegemony through expansion of its foreign empire (NATO) and undertaking wars of aggression in the Middle East. In this conception, Russia must re-assert its world power status to prevent U.S. domination and protect national interests. A third element is that Russia and its leader are central to the defense of Christian civilization against anti-civilizational dangers. Those dangers include the decadence of liberal democracy; international terrorism; mass migration; and economic disruption caused by (U.S. and European) elite-driven capitalism, globalization and multiculturalism. Inherent in this “Russian idea” is the need for strong leadership to restore Russia’s greatness and uphold Russia’s national identity. These doctrines, like much ideology, are contradictory and do not conform with history or current reality. Nevertheless, they form powerful messages that dominate Russian state propaganda.⁴

Russian active measures have had increasing success among right-wing nationalist and populist movements in Europe that share Putin’s message in defense of “civilizational values,” national identity, and traditional morals. There also remains lingering success from the Soviet era in encouraging pro-Russian sympathies on the Left using anti-American, anti-capitalist and peace themes (e.g. the movement that propelled Jean-Luc Melanchon’s strong French presidential campaign). But Russia also directly purchases the services of major politicians like Germany’s Gerhard Schroeder, a former Social Democratic chancellor and now the leading lobbyist in the West for Russia’s state-owned energy giants Gazprom and Rosneft.⁵

The U.S. Presidential Election and Russian Active Measures

The United States was a long-standing target for Soviet and Russian active measures operations. The 2016 presidential elections, however, offered a distinct opportunity for Vladimir Putin to weaken its democratic stability and alter the geo-strategic direction of Russia’s key rival.

Russian intelligence services targeted specific weaknesses within American democracy to take advantage of this opportunity, most significantly the U.S. media’s inability to defend itself against foreign propaganda sources. But the operation relied on other factors and indicated a sophisticated assessment of American vulnerabilities: the rise of a partisan media in politics; the now-easy possibility to spread false news stories through social, digital and broadcast media; increasing hyper-partisanship and the susceptibility of voters to propaganda messaging; and the weakness of digital security within the electoral system. This assessment aligned with long-standing efforts to influence attitudes towards Russia on the Left and the Right. On the Left, the U.S. Green Party and a segment of Bernie Sanders supporters assumed a high value. On the Right, targets included religious conservatives focused on defense of “traditional values”; libertarians espousing isolationism; businessmen seeking investment opportunities; and the so-called alt-right with its focus on “white civilization” and “white identity.”⁶

⁴ For Russian strategic and ideological doctrines, and the intersection of policies in carrying them out, see *Putinism: Russia and Its Future with the West* by Walter Laqueur (St. Martins Press, New York: 2014).

⁵ On Russia’s recent active measures in Europe, see The Atlantic Council’s report [The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses](#) by Alina Polyakova, Marlene Laruelle, Stefan Meister, and Neil Barnett.

⁶ See “How Putin Played the Far Left” by Casey Michael (*Daily Beast*, Jan. 13, 2017) and “How the GOP Became the Party of Putin,” by Jamie Kirchik (*Politico*, [July 18, 2017](#)). On Russia’s persistent influence operation aimed at white supremacist and white nationalist groups (the so-called alt-right), see also author Molly McKew’s Twitter thread “We Need to Have a Conversation About What Is Happening” ([August 12, 2017](#)).

The aims of the Russian intervention in the U.S. presidential election were evident to those observing its state-controlled media. Quickly after Trump announced his candidacy in June 2015, domestic and foreign-language Russian broadcasts generated a high level of stories against Hillary Clinton, the likely Democratic Party candidate, and in favor of Donald Trump. Echoes of this propaganda could be seen repeated in U.S. social media and broadcast and print outlets.

It was not unusual to view negative messages directed at a particular U.S. presidential candidate on Russian state broadcasts. In the case of Clinton, Putin had publicly expressed his antipathy for her more anti-Russian views and accused her of instigating public demonstrations directed against his rule in 2011. She also represented a more hawkish wing of the Democratic Party and a continuation of policies in support of U.S. world leadership. During the primaries, Russian broadcasts repeated and exaggerated criticisms made against her by her primary opponent Bernie Sanders that she supported Wall Street financial interests and had a militarist foreign policy.

What was unusual was the strong messaging in favor of Republican candidate Donald Trump. The reasons for the preference were disturbing.

A top U.S. presidential candidate for the nomination of a major political party was repeatedly praising the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin and frequently parroting Russian propaganda that apologized for Russian repression and even war crimes.⁷ The same U.S. presidential candidate proposed better relations with Russia and the fulfillment of Putin's own long-standing goal of a U.S.-Russian entente to combat the global threat of Islamist jihadism. Further still, Trump's ethno-nationalist campaign themes and policies echoed the "Russian idea" of defending "civilizational values" by pointing to exaggerated dangers of terrorism, mass migration to Western countries, and the economic damage of elite-driven global capitalism. Trump's themes and foreign policy positions appeared in synchrony not only with Russia's propaganda messaging in Europe and the U.S. but also with Russia's broader geostrategic aims. Indeed, Trump proposed a new "America First" doctrine that de-emphasized the U.S. leadership role in the world, questioned the value of the NATO alliance and relationships with other democratic allies, and advocated a unilateralist and economics-based concept of national interest.

Trump's positions, ideological in nature, were reflected in the staffing of his campaign. In addition to a number of minor staff who had pro-Russian and pro-Putin sympathies, Trump's senior national security adviser, Lt. Gen. Michael A. Flynn, advocated an alliance with Russia to fight the global war on terror (he received \$50,000 from Russia Today and Kaspersky Labs for a trip to Russia in December 2015). Most significant was the appointment of campaign chairman Paul Manafort, who had been paid many millions over ten years working for pro-Russian Ukrainian dictator Viktor Yanukovich and his political party and who acted as a financial go-between for Kremlin-tied Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs. There were more, among them Richard Burt, a respected former State Department diplomat and now a lobbyist for Gazprom, who was a key adviser on Trump's "America First" speech in April 2016.

⁷ In one instance, after the release of a definitive report by a Dutch government commission that tied the downing of the airliner MH17 and the deaths of 287 people on board to Russian anti-aircraft missiles supplied to pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, Trump raised doubts about Russia's role in similar fashion as its state television station Sputnik. Trump frequently equated U.S. actions and practices with those of Russia ("the U.S. kills a lot of people too"), a common justification found on Russian state propaganda. The practice has been termed "whataboutism."

Media reported on numerous financial ties between Trump and Trump associates and Russian state entities, oligarchs and post-Soviet dictatorships.⁸ These, together with Trump's public positions and his campaign staffing, were all highly abnormal for a candidate of the Republican Party, whose past policy and leadership, like Hillary Clinton, generally opposed Russia's dictatorship, supported stronger action in response to Russian aggression, and advocated continued strong U.S. world leadership.

Russia's Decisive Role

Each week, the extent of the Russian intervention in the U.S. election becomes clearer. While often termed "meddling," this is deliberate understatement of Russia's actions. They constituted a coordinated influence operation and assault on America's electoral process and sovereignty. As additional news comes out about this assault, it becomes harder to ignore the impact.

The Russian active measures campaign integrated domestic and foreign propaganda operations, traditional methods (like espionage and infiltration of foreign institutions by agents), and highly unusual non-traditional methods. The last included an aggressive operation of direct hacking into (at least) 21 individual state election systems (two successful) and seemingly failed attempts to install Russian malware on electronic voting machines. The non-traditional methods also included a multi-pronged cyber operation involving paid advertising on social media and (at least) a thousand human agents and tens of thousands of automated "bots" directing Russia's domestic and foreign propaganda, "false news" stories farmed in remote places, and ideologically targeted messaging at social and digital media platforms and partisan broadcast media. Both media platforms were key sources of news and opinion for much of the electorate. The cyber operation worked seemingly in concert with the Trump campaign's national strategy for depressing Hillary Clinton's vote, especially in target Electoral College states, by spreading large amounts of anti-Clinton propaganda. Facebook and Google reported that much of its news feeds in the months prior to the election had been made up in large part by "fake news."⁹

The most unusual and aggressive of the active measures was the Russian intelligence operation to hack computers of the Democratic National Committee and key Clinton campaign staff and then to "weaponize" seemingly compromising emails stolen in this effort. They did so through selective and well-timed public release by a third party so that they would have maximum public damage for the Clinton campaign. Arguably, this had the most effect.

The third party Russia chose was the internet platform Wikileaks, which free speech advocates and opponents of the "national security state" had championed for publishing classified U.S.

⁸ "The Curious World of Donald Trump's Russia Connections" by John Henry comprehensively details these ties (*The American Interest*, [Dec. 19, 2016](#)), but much of it had already been reported during the election campaign.

⁹ The large nature of the operation is truly impressive. Department of Homeland Security officials testified in Senate Intelligence Hearing on [July 21, 2017](#) about the number of state election systems hacked. On other aspects see, e.g., *Wired* magazine ("Everything We Know About Russia's Election-Hacking Playbook," [June 17, 2017](#), among several articles) and *Time* magazine ("Inside Russia's Social Media War on America" [March 19, 2017](#)). Carole Cadwalladr's *series* in the *Guardian* details how social media influence operations may have affected the referendum in the UK and also the U.S. election. Facebook has recently provided information to Intelligence Committees and the Special Council regarding paid advertising and the widespread use of fake accounts to spread propaganda (see, e.g., *New York Times*, [September 6, 2017](#)). But the extent of disinformation ("fake news") on Facebook and Google has been detailed by many, including [Vice News](#).

government documents. Still, there were clear reports that Wikileaks founder, Julian Assange, had a pronounced anti-U.S. and anti-Clinton animus and had generally aligned Wikileaks policy and output with Russian interests.¹⁰ The original source of the emails was fully confirmed by the Intelligence Community in a rare consensus statement made on October 7, 2016 that warned American citizens of Russia's intervention in the presidential election.¹¹

Nevertheless, most print and broadcast outlets were eager to publish "open source" information and reported aggressively on both sets of Wikileaks "dumps." The first set, which might now be considered a test run by Russian intelligence services, was released during the Democratic National Convention and generated enormous negative media coverage over supposed favoritism by the DNC towards Hillary Clinton. The second set was a Chinese water torture-like drip of daily releases onto the heads of American voters beginning on October 8 made up mostly of private Clinton campaign staff emails. Neither of the email dumps had much substantive news value and were generally unverified but both sets were reported on as important negative "revelations" about Clinton and her campaign. There was little context offered to readers that these emails were stolen by a Russian government intelligence agency and formed part of a foreign government's propaganda operation aimed at influencing the American electorate.

Further indication that Russian active measures acted in concert with the Trump campaign's strategy to depress Clinton's voter turnout was that Trump himself, his staff, and pro-Trump media abundantly used the Wikileaks releases, often distorted, as part of a disciplined, propaganda campaign against Clinton. In fact, they became the basis of the Trump campaign. Trump launched every rally with the newest "revelation" as "proof" of Clinton illegality or deception, while exclaiming, "Don't we love Wikileaks!" The Wikileaks "revelations" were used to buttress the overall themes of the campaign, which had distinct echoes of Russian propaganda depictions of American politics. "The system is rigged"; Washington (epitomized by the Clintons) was a "swamp" of corruption; and the capstone to the campaign, elaborated in chief strategist Steve Bannon's "final argument" speech and advertisement, which claimed that Clinton was the agent for a "global economic elite" (all of whom appeared to be Jews in the TV advertisement) that had devastated the American economy and workforce.

Post-election analysis (and Clinton herself) focused on the effect of the unprecedented action of FBI Director James Comey to re-open and then close again a controversial investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server while Secretary of State. This certainly had an effect, but one very considerable reason was that it reinforced the messages of the Wikileaks "dumps," which had already dominated news coverage for weeks and continued until the day of

¹⁰ *The New York Times* published a comprehensive article on Wikileaks ("How Russia Often Benefits When Julian Assange Reveals the West's Secrets" ([August 31, 2016](#)), but several journalists detailed Assange's anti-Clinton and anti-U.S. animus and ties to Russia, including its subsidization when Wikileaks almost went bankrupt in 2011. It was widely accepted in the Intelligence Community (and known by national security reporters) that Wikileaks was a "Russian asset." Following the election, Trump's own CIA Director, Mike Pompeo, confirmed [this assessment](#).

¹¹ See "Joint Statement of the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Election Security," [October 7, 2016](#).

the election.¹² From October 8 to November 8, Clinton's polling lead dropped 8 points to a two-point margin nationally (the actual result).

Acceptance of Non-Democracy, Authoritarian Leadership, and Foreign Intervention

Despite the strong indication that a hostile foreign power attacking the democratic process of an American election helped propel Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States, there was general acceptance of his narrow and anomalous Electoral College victory. Indeed, there was a determined attempt to establish normalcy, including by Clinton, who conceded immediately and negated the significance of her national vote margin, and by outgoing Democratic President Barack Obama, who met quickly with Trump to prepare the transition of power, which he stated was the most important aspect of the country's constitutional system.

There was, however, no longer normalcy to American political life.

Trump was unchanged by his election and maintained an authoritarian caste of leadership. He personalized the transition process within his own Trump Tower; he kept control over his business empire through his children and claimed the right to enrich himself and his family through the presidency; he appointed his most extreme campaign advisers to be his chief domestic and foreign policy counselors; he practiced nepotism by adding his own daughter and son-in-law as high-level staff with expansive portfolios; he attacked media as "fake news"; and he continued to organize mass rallies to affirm his leadership to save the nation. Revealing of Trump's authoritarian mindset was the frequent practice of lying and wholesale fabrication, a practice that has gone unchecked throughout his presidency.

News reporting began to bring to light the full dimensions of the intervention in the presidential election, but there was general denial that this foreign effort had *any* significant effect in determining the outcome. Even when grudgingly (and temporarily) accepting that interference took place, Trump, Republicans generally, and pro-Trump media asserted that no votes were altered by the intervention and thus Trump had won on his own merits — despite Trump's own reliance on a foreign-directed propaganda operation for campaigning. As noted earlier, nearly all political analysis of the election, including by Democrats, ignored the impact of Russia's massive active measures operation.¹³ And the U.S. media generally defended their own role in the election in facilitating Russia's propaganda and influence campaign.¹⁴

Americans discovered that Congressional leaders were informed by the Intelligence Community in early September 2016 about Russia's intervention but that Republican members prevented any

¹² Nearly all statistical analysis of the role of the media has pointed to the lack of coverage of issues and policy. The extent of the coverage of the Wikileaks dumps was measured by the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University in its report "Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 Presidential Election" ([August 17, 2017](#)). It found that they did in fact dominate media coverage.

¹³ Fareed Zakaria's special on CNN ("[Why Trump Won](#)") that aired on August 8, 2017 is a typical example of the conventional analysis. He cited "4 Cs" as determinative factors in the election: capitalism (economic dislocation and distress of workers), cultural alienation of whites, class rebellion against elites, and ideologically based media (or communications, the fourth C). The Russian intervention was barely mentioned.

¹⁴ Editors at newspapers repeatedly defended their coverage of the election, including their reliance on Wikileaks releases for election news articles. See, e.g., "Editors Defend Coverage of Stolen Emails After News of Russian Hacks," *The New York Times*, [December 16, 2016](#).

bipartisan public statement regarding it or its purpose. Voters were only told by U.S. intelligence officials *after* the election that the Russian intervention had the clear intention of electing Donald Trump as president. How many voters might have changed their votes had this been made clearer and connections made between Russian intentions and Trump's campaign themes? Or if media had made clear how the Russian propaganda operation was aimed at electing Trump? There is no means of saying. But the conclusion that this had no effect is equally without basis, while many factors, especially the small margins of victory in the three states delivering Trump his Electoral College margin, indicate that the course of the election was decisively affected.

The Multiple Authoritarian Intentions of the Foreign Intervention

The unified Intelligence Community assessment is that the Russian intervention had the goal of electing Donald Trump as president.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the common layman's analysis is that Putin's initial aim in intervening in the election was not to elect Trump but rather to delegitimize and weaken a likely Clinton presidency. In this analysis, no one could have predicted Trump's victory and Putin now has "buyer's remorse." Trump, even if wanting to establish better relations, cannot do so because of the revelations of Russian intervention in the elections. He now faces a united anti-Russian "establishment" among both Republicans and Democrats. Russian leadership, it is claimed, is now wary of the instability it has caused.¹⁶

Such analysis exaggerates short-term and personalized motivations and expectations (Putin's "hatred" for Clinton, his "fear" of color revolutions, his "desire" to ease sanctions) and thus underestimates the broader ideological purposes of Russian active measures to weaken American democracy and its global leadership generally. This analysis also underestimates the elastic nature of active measures. In this case, one goal may have been to delegitimize and weaken a potential adversary (Clinton), but the maximum one was to help propel a candidate to power who would change U.S. foreign policy in favor of Russian interests (Trump). Both these goals had multiple potential benefits and both involved continuing pursuit of the broader and longstanding geostrategic aims to weaken America's political system and its global leadership.

A clear indication of Putin's more ambitious intentions are the reports of the reaction within Russia at the news of Donald Trump's victory. There was "thunderous applause" at the State Duma, highly positive coverage in state news broadcasts, toasts by top presidential aides, and Moscow pubs resounding with cheering and the Queen rock song and Trump anthem "We Are the Champions."¹⁷ Both high-level and low-level celebration indicates a common understanding that Putin's intelligence services had helped manipulate the U.S. election *both* in preventing an avowed enemy from gaining power and in propelling a potential "best friend" of Putin to the U.S.'s most powerful position. This reflects another aim of active measures and state propaganda, which is to demonstrate the powerful capabilities of the Russian state and its

¹⁵ See "Background to Assessing the Russian Intentions and Activities in Recent U.S. Elections," Report of the Directorate of National Intelligence, [January 7, 2017](#).

¹⁶ The most extensively laid out argument to this effect is *The New Yorker's* "Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War" by Evan Osnos, David Remnick, and Joshua Yaffa ([March 6, 2017](#)).

¹⁷ See, e.g., CBS News, [November 9, 2016](#)) and *The Washington Post*, [November 9, 2016](#)). High-level celebration in the Kremlin was reported in an article revealing intelligence intercepts by *The Washington Post* ([January 5, 2017](#)). In most democratic countries, media reported the opposite reaction and somber statements of world leaders.

leader's superior will to undermine Western democracy. The interventions in U.S. and European elections demonstrate a high capability to influence news media coverage and social media, craft public opinion, and help determine a country's leadership. These are all powerful capabilities.¹⁸

Russian state propaganda repeatedly presents the hypocrisy, internal dissension, chaos, and ultimate undesirability of Western democracy by comparison to Putin's "managed democracy" (where outcomes are predictable and pre-determined for the benefit of the nation). But it also easily reverts to a depiction of the United States being controlled by a dominant "anti-Russia" elite that maintains positions of power and directs the country for its own interests and that of world domination. In this depiction, Trump and the American people are presented as victims or hostages of the establishment. Either depiction benefits the overall strategy.

Ultimately, Russia's active measures seek to break through such an establishment and create strong sympathies within the U.S. for fulfilling Russian interests, that is to help create a base of support for Trump's "America First" doctrine and thus potentially a Great Power concordat system. There are indications Russia is succeeding in that longer term goal. According to one poll taken before the election, 49 percent of respondents wanted better relations with Russia — despite its annexation of Crimea and aggression in Ukraine. After the election, an equal percentage of Republicans have favorable views of Vladimir Putin.¹⁹

Assessing the Damage: The Weakening of American Democracy

In assessing the damage of Trump's victory in the 2016 election, it is hard to conclude otherwise that the first strategic goal of Vladimir Putin to weaken American democracy has been achieved. An authoritarian-style candidate appealing to a nationalist and intolerant base of supporters won the election with a minority of votes. He did so by use of anti-democratic means (propaganda and demagogy) and by relying on the decisive help of the Russian Federation. The dominant political party in the U.S. embraces Trump and Trump's base as its own and attributes opposition to Trump as pure partisanship. It is noted that in the first round of France's presidential elections 60 percent of voters preferred pro-Russian candidates before giving pro-NATO Emmanuel Macron a decisive second-round victory. In the U.S., 46 percent of the American electorate voted for a president stating his full admiration for Putin and promising better relations with Russia.

Further, Trump's leadership, rhetoric and policies consistently divide the nation. In the wake of his comments around the events of Charlottesville, that division has increased. Constitutional safeguards have limited the damage of Donald Trump's presidency to some degree. But there has remained until now solid backing for Trump's presidential rule within the Republican Party and especially for his ethno-nationalist, anti-terrorism and anti-immigration policy goals — the key concordances with Russian propaganda and Russian state policy.

¹⁸ Recently, a prominent Russian lawmaker and leading figure in Putin's United Russia party, Alexander Nikonov, the grandson of the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, asserted on state television, that "Russia stole the American election for Donald Trump" (see [link](#)) It is the most brazen of several such public statements since 2016.

¹⁹ See the survey of the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs "[American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy](#)," (2016) and the Morning-Consult/Politico poll of [May 24, 2017](#).

Despite facing institutional checks and balances on his power, Trump immediately set out to exert presidential authority through executive orders revamping policies and “restructuring” government agencies, often contrary to long-standing Congressionally determined mandates, authorizations, and appropriations. Such “restructuring” is contrary to the principal function of the president (“to faithfully execute the laws”) but it fulfills a fundamental promise of his campaign to run the country as he did his business, without legislative approval as necessary.²⁰

More significantly perhaps, Trump has flouted democratic and diplomatic norms regularly to create a chaotic atmosphere of national governance that undermines any pretense of stability. He has propagated a cascade of lies to deflect attempts at holding him accountable in office, all the while abusing the powers of his office to foster his private business enterprises. He has organized his presidency around the constant assertion of ideas that reflect Richard Hofstadter’s “paranoid mind in American politics”: demonizing the media as “the enemy of the people”; questioning the legitimacy of courts; accusing the Intelligence Community of delegitimizing his election; baselessly accusing his predecessor of carrying out illegal “dirty tricks” against him; and encouraging the notion that a “deep state” loyal to his Democratic opponents is conspiring against his leadership and sabotaging his administration; among others.

All of Trump’s practices undermine public trust in American institutions. On top of such an achievement, the Russian intervention has succeeded in sowing doubts among American citizens as to the validity and reliability of its political system while also having a U.S. president regularly depicted as being potentially compromised by the Russian government.

Assessing the Damage: The Weakening of America’s Global Leadership

Trump is also fulfilling the second broader aim of Russian geo-strategy: to weaken America’s global leadership.

For more than 70 years, the United States has been the pre-eminent economic and military power among democratic states in alliance against anti-democratic nations and blocs. Since the collapse of the USSR, it has acted as the world’s only super-power. While at times having contradictory policies and undertaking wars to pursue national security interests, the U.S. has not acted generally with imperialist purpose or to defend *only* its own interests. Rather, its consistent foreign policy doctrine has been to support the liberal international world order the U.S. helped create after World War II and the system of political, military and trade alliances that preserves it. There were significant differences carrying out foreign policy, but Democratic and Republican administrations each adopted this general foreign policy doctrine out of a common understanding that it protected the world’s security, prevented general war, and served both domestic and global interests. It was out of this understanding that the U.S. and Europe (as well as the U.N. General Assembly) acted against the aggression of Russia after its annexation of Crimea — the first time since World War II that state borders in Europe were changed by force.

²⁰ Minor examples: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is closing of a Congressionally mandated cyber security division within the State Department that would protect against foreign cyber-attacks ([link](#)) and he is refusing to spend \$80 million allocated by Congress to combat Russian and ISIS propaganda ([link](#)). But there is a general effort to downsize the State Department against the clear wishes of Congressional leaders. A fuller description of the “restructuring” at the State Department is “Present at the Destruction” by Max Bergmann (*Politico*, [June 29, 2017](#)).

In his Inaugural Address — that is, from his first hour in office — Donald Trump asserted that the United States would reject traditional doctrines and responsibilities of global leadership. He stated that the U.S. would instead adopt a foreign policy defined by narrow economic interests and protection of its own borders and national security. In doing so, he created a fully fictitious account of post-war and current reality. Until now, America had been “taken advantage of” by nearly all countries (except Russia). Its economy was “devastated” by free trade and impoverished by unnecessary wars. Its military was “depleted.” Foreign policy, he declared, would be governed by a new doctrine: “from this day forward, America First, America First.”

The Vice President and some key advisers and Cabinet members more grounded in post-WWII foreign policy have stated that the concept of “America First” includes “defense of American values” and maintaining previous policies and alliances. Several conservative analysts have concluded that “the establishment” re-asserted itself and Trump has adopted a “traditional Republican foreign policy.”²¹ Such claims simply normalize “America First” doctrine as the new basis for U.S. foreign policy. Following Trump’s first trip abroad, during which he embraced dictatorships as allies and treated allies as moochers and trade enemies, his key economic and national security advisers wrote definitively that the America First doctrine “embraces” the view that the world is “an arena where nations . . . compete for advantage.”²² After Trump’s second trip, H.R. McMaster and Gary Cohn repeated their defense of a foreign policy based on “securing the American homeland, enhancing American prosperity and advancing American prosperity and influence.” This doctrine of self-interest directs all departments of the U.S. government. Reflecting this, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson proposes to take out promotion of democracy and human rights from the Department of State’s mission statement.²³

Within a brief time, Donald Trump has thus re-oriented American foreign policy away from its post-war global responsibilities and Trump is directing an overall unilateral dismantling of non-military capabilities to project power and protect national security interests.²⁴ Trump has also isolated the U.S. both economically and diplomatically by abruptly withdrawing the country from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the proposed Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, and the Paris Climate Change Agreement.

Regardless of any individual policies that may be adopted, Trump’s nationalist and chauvinist themes, erratic behavior, petty disputes with allies, and general orientation towards authoritarian leaders has greatly weakened America’s standing in the world. The United States is no longer a model for democracy nor a champion for it. Neither the country nor its president are any longer recognized as “the leader of the free world” but rather both are seen as inconstant and unstable.

²¹ The strongest such argument is made by former Reagan and Bush administration official Elliot Abrams (“Trump the Traditionalist,” *Foreign Affairs*, [July-August 2017](#)).

²² This was stated in the contrarily titled “America First Doesn’t Mean America Alone” by Gary Cohn and H.R. McMaster (*The Wall Street Journal*, [May 30, 2017](#))

²³ Trump reiterated the doctrine before the United Nations, where he declared the primary interest of the U.S. among nations as self-interest, not mutual interest, contrary to the stated purposes that the U.S. helped to craft in the U.N. Charter. See Jennifer Rubin, Washington Post, [September 19, 2017](#).

²⁴ See, e.g. “How Trump Broke the State Department,” by Robbie Gramer, Dan De Luce, and Colum Lynch, *Foreign Policy*, [July 31, 2017](#).

After Trump deliberately refused to articulate a commitment to NATO's mutual defense provision in front of NATO's members, German leader Angela Merkel stated her conclusion of Trump's behavior and policy starkly: "Europe can no longer count on others," meaning the United States.

The Correlation of Trump and Putin

All of this is consistent with Trump's most frequently stated foreign policy goal: to have better relations with Russia. During and after the campaign, he did not describe the purpose of such good relations except their general desirability ("wouldn't it be nice") and more substantively to establish a partnership to "get rid of ISIS" in Syria. Trump's determination in this regard and his affinity for Vladimir Putin — he continues never to criticize the leader — are often described by journalists as "mysterious" and "strange" as if they are discordant stances to an otherwise democratic outlook or set of policy positions.

Trump's stances are certainly strange from a democratic standpoint: Russia, like the Soviet Union before it, is anti-democracy. Nor can it be considered a partner in the war on terror; it is instead a geo-strategic competitor wanting to re-establish influence in the Middle East.²⁵ Yet, despite all obstacles put forward by "the establishment," Trump still insists on bringing about better relations with Russia. Recent signs of this insistence are the private one-on-one meetings at the G20 Summit that made clear Trump's preference for Putin over allied leaders; his reluctant signing of the Russian sanctions legislation and subsequent blaming of Congress for bad relations with Russia; his continued insistence that Russia did not interfere in the presidential elections and his repeated statements that it is all a "hoax"; and his stunning approval of Putin's order to severely diminish American diplomatic and intelligence capacities in U.S. facilities in Russia. In this regard, Trump clearly does not view either Putin or Russia through any democratic lens, but rather through the lens of America First.

Complicity, Collusion, and the Assault on American Democracy

Although it is rarely stated so baldly, Trump, the Trump campaign, pro-Trump media, and also the Republican Party were fully complicit in the Russian intervention. All used information that was known to be stolen and "weaponized" by Russian intelligence services for purposes of political propaganda to denigrate an opponent and win a presidential election.²⁶

The U.S. media's complicity is also clear. Broadcast, print and digital outlets publicized information provided as a result of a hostile foreign country's fundamental assault on Americans' privacy rights. They did so according to the exact schedule of that foreign power's assigned "third party" outlet to distribute the information. News editors defend this practice as having benefitted the American people by revealing truthful information about a presidential candidate. When looking at the media coverage, it is not evident that truthfulness was the object. What is evident is that publicizing the contents of the emails on a daily basis (and then

²⁵ "Trump's Plan to Fight ISIS with Putin Isn't Just Futile. It's Dangerous" by Molly McKew, *Politico*, [Feb. 7, 2017](#).

²⁶ Senator Marco Rubio was [the only prominent Republican](#) to state that private emails stolen by Russia should not be used in a political campaign and that the Russian hacking and "weaponizing" of private emails constituted a foreign assault on America's democratic process. His lone voice demonstrated the extent of complicity of others.

publicizing the distortions of that contents by the Trump campaign) drastically altered the campaign coverage for the month following the final debate between the two candidates. The media thus served not to reveal “truth,” but to carry out the aims of a foreign intelligence agency to influence a presidential campaign. By not reconsidering its practices, U.S. media remains vulnerable to both foreign and domestic manipulation by propaganda and fake news.

As public evidence emerged of Russia’s foreign intervention in the U.S. presidential elections, the Republican leadership restricted any investigation to less public efforts by House and Senate intelligence committees. The focus of the Congressional investigations remains a neutral topic of “Russian intervention” and how Russian active measures might be deterred in the future so that American democracy is not undermined. The investigations nevertheless continue to have partisan overtones that prevent a full and open investigation and accounting of the perversion of the 2016 election by a hostile foreign power.

Several issues remain. One is whether there was direct collusion between Trump and Trump associates and the Russian government in trying to manipulate the election and if this is connected to financial or worse blackmail the Russian government may hold over Trump. The second is if Trump has tried to obstruct investigation into such collusion or foreign influence. Each, it is assumed, would be the “red lines” that cannot be crossed in American politics and might result in the constitutional remedy of impeachment. Several analysts, albeit partisan, have presented strong arguments for both collusion as well as obstruction of justice.²⁷ The recent revelations about Russian use of ads and news feeds on Facebook indicates the likelihood of directed assistance in the targeting of specific audiences.

Still, it remains to be seen if definitive proof will emerge showing Trump’s family or associates’ actual collusion with Russian officials in manipulating the election as opposed to general illegalities of individuals already shed by Trump that are discovered during the investigation. As to foreign influence, there was already ample evidence of a web of financial interactions between Trump, Trump associates and Russian businessmen. Such foreign influence was certainly demonstrated in the case of Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who was forced to resign as National Security Adviser twenty-one days into his tenure after it was demonstrated that he lied to the Vice President about his calls to Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak regarding sanctions on Russia. He also lied about receiving money from Russian (and Turkish) government assets.

However these issues play out, American democracy has been assaulted. “Red lines” of anti-democratic behavior have been crossed multiple times. But it is the actual acceptance of the foreign intervention by Russia in helping to determine the outcome of a U.S. presidential election that is most alarming. In helping to propel the election of Trump to the presidency, Russia successfully targeted weaknesses in America’s electoral system, its democratic process, and its political culture to alter American domestic politics and foreign policy in fundamental ways that are weakening democracy and America’s global power. Regardless of any change in policies

²⁷ “Russiagate: The Depth of Collusion” ([August 7, 2017](#)) by Max Bergmann of the Center for American Progress is a comprehensive report on the subject. It cites numerous articles pointing to evidence accumulated since the election. See also “[Interactive Timeline: Everything We Know About Russia and President Trump](#)” by Stephen Harper (Bill Moyers and Company web site).

benefitting Russia — which Trump continues to pursue — this can only be assessed as a clear geostrategic gain for Vladimir Putin.

Assessing the Challenge

All of the weaknesses that Russia targeted remain: an electoral system that allows a minority of voters to outweigh the majority in a national election; hyper-partisanship that puts political party interests above considerations of country; the rise of an authoritarian-minded leader whose main affinity is with authoritarian leaders; mainstream and other media that is susceptible to foreign influence.

The question now is whether America's institutions and citizenry are able to defend U.S. democracy and its broader purpose in the world. One positive indication is the adoption by overwhelming majorities in both houses of the Congress of legislation that strengthens and codifies into law existing sanctions against the Russian Federation for its annexation of Crimea, military aggression in eastern Ukraine, and its intervention in the U.S. election.

For the first time, the Congress acted decisively to constrain Trump's power to radically re-orient American foreign policy and to continue to recognize Russia as a threat to global security and freedom. Many of Vladimir Putin's aims for destabilizing the international world order and advancing Russia's power would be fulfilled with the tacit recognition of the annexation of Crimea or the acceptance by the international community of a "frozen conflict" in Ukraine. Either or both such outcomes would permanently undermine Ukraine's independence and sovereignty. Different aims would be fulfilled if there were no U.S. response to its destabilizing actions in the U.S. elections. The previous sanctions policy adopted by the United States, in tandem with the European Union, are the necessary and minimum measures for defending basic democratic principles of the liberal international world order and its proscription against the use of force to change state borders. The limited sanctions adopted by the Obama Administration and new, stronger ones adopted by Congress in reaction to the Russian intervention in the elections are a first step towards defending against external assaults on American democracy.

Only such a clear assertion of pro-democratic principles and policies by the Congress, including its proper authority in setting the foreign affairs of the United States, can begin to protect the country from the willful undermining of those principles by Donald Trump. A next step would be in heightening the sanctions policy to pressure Putin to abandon his adventurist and aggressive foreign policies.

But it is unclear if this first step will be followed by broader action of Republicans acting with Democrats in a bipartisan majority to defend the country. One additional measure would be to re-assert fully Congress's powers to declare war and constrain the president's power to undertake military action, including nuclear war, unilaterally. But there are further steps, such as directing the Secretary of State to fully respect Congressional authority in setting foreign affairs of the nation and to prevent Tillerson from permanently harming the diplomatic capacity of the United States and its other means of asserting "soft power."

None of the above analysis takes away from the need to address fundamental political, economic or social issues that face the United States or its citizens. Vladimir Putin succeeded because he

was able to take advantage of real fissures within American politics and American society. Those fissures exist on both domestic and foreign policy and need ample discussion for any bridging of divides. Ultimately, though, to safeguard democracy, we must realize the full nature and meaning of the assault on its political system by an authoritarian dictatorship. This is necessary in order to prevent that authoritarian dictatorship from furthering its own anti-democratic and imperialist interests at the expense of global security, freedom and also American interests. It is the concordance of Trump, Putin, and Russia's active measures campaign to bring him to power that allows us to assess the true damage to American and world democracy — and the challenge to repair it.

• • •

Eric Chenoweth is co-director of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe and primary author of the Democracy Web, an extracurricular resource of the Albert Shanker Institute.