



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE  
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

**Hearing on “The Scourge of Russian Disinformation”**

**Thursday, September 14, 2017**

**Room 562, Dirksen Senate Office Building**

**Opening Statement of Representative Michael C. Burgess, M.D.**

I want to thank the Chairman and Co-Chairman of the Helsinki Commission for convening this hearing today on such a timely and crucial topic.

Information warfare is the use of information, whether factual or false, to influence opinions, disrupt lines of communication, and undermine the values of a target for political advantage. This is exactly the behavior promulgated by the Russian government and its proxies during the 2016 Presidential election. Our intelligence community assessed that Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign aimed at the election in order to undermine faith in the democratic process by conducting covert intelligence operations and overtly disseminate false information.

Russia’s attempt to influence our election was not the only goal; Russia is conducting a long-term campaign to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order. Previously, Russia conducted campaigns against Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine. In addition to disinformation efforts in the U.S., Russia is aiming to disrupt the European Union and sow distrust of NATO to accelerate its dissolution.

Today, Russia begins a weeklong series of military drills known as Zapad, or West, with Belarus that will place thousands of troops along the border with the Baltic States and Poland. This exercise is expected to be much bigger than previous iterations. While Russia insists Zapad poses no threat, it is clearly part of Vladimir Putin’s strategy to expand Russia’s sphere of influence and increase military capacity along NATO borders. In response, the United States sent 600 American paratroopers to the area for the duration of the exercise.

In 2009, President Obama reversed a plan to build missile interceptors and a radar station in Poland. As a result, Russia is no longer deterred from aggressive behavior on NATO’s periphery. The strength of NATO, largely based on U.S. backing, is a direct threat to Russia and Vladimir Putin’s strategy of expansion. We must be prepared to respond to this threatening activity.

Executing Russia’s long-term expansion strategy is much easier when the countries and institutions that can prevent Russian expansion may be fighting a disinformation campaign at home. Unfortunately, Russia has perfected the control of information by first imposing strict limits on its citizens. This problem is two-fold, it allows Russia to control what its citizens know about their own country and it prevents Russian citizens from learning the truth about foreign government actions, particularly from the United States. This is why many Russians are reported

to blame the United States for hardships resulting from sanctions rather than blaming the Russian government for behaving in a way that incurs sanctions in the first place.

This type of censorship is absent in the United States because we support freedom of speech and the pursuit of knowledge. Our citizens have always trusted our news organizations to report what is going on in our country and around the world. When reporting is undermined by false information, it is difficult to determine what is real because the news becomes a game of “he said, she said,” or rather “he reported, she reported.” How are our citizens to know what is accurate and what is false?

There is no evidence that Russian interference in our election amounted to the actual changing of votes. With the German election coming up in a couple of weeks, we must continue to fight Russia’s attempt to meddle in foreign elections and threaten our NATO allies. It is paramount that the United States engages with the American public and our allies to ensure that Russia’s information war does not succeed.