

**Statement of Lea Gabrielle  
Special Envoy & Coordinator for the Global Engagement Center,  
U.S. Department of State  
Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations,  
and Related Programs  
“United States Efforts to Counter Russian Disinformation and Malign  
Influence”**

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Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers – Thank you for inviting me to testify before your Subcommittee about the Global Engagement Center’s (GEC) work to coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to counter Russian disinformation. This is an important topic and I appreciate the Subcommittee devoting time to it.

Secretary Pompeo is committed to using a broad suite of tools to stop America’s adversaries from weaponizing disinformation and utilizing malign foreign propaganda to undermine free societies, while at the same time respecting the right to free expression.

The GEC’s mission, as defined by Congress, is to “direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and foreign non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States and United States allies and partner nations.”

Before I dive into the substance of my testimony, it is important to underscore that while Russia uses modern disinformation largely from a position of weakness towards the West, this weakness should not be mistaken for a lack of capability or intent to do harm to the United States or our allies. As part of its efforts to sow discord in target societies, weaken Western institutions and governments, and diminish American standing on the world-stage, the Kremlin engages in low-cost, high-volume malign propaganda and disinformation campaigns, targeting areas where press freedom is high and where socio-economic polarization can be further deepened and exploited.

By trying to weaken international institutions and divide alliances, the Russian government finds itself increasingly isolated in this fight. And, here lies one of our

great advantages: The United States has valuable partners and allies around the globe who are working with us to address this challenge.

Russian influence campaigns leverage a range of information-related capabilities and they coordinate them within a common strategic and operational framework. This magnifies their reach and impact. Defending against them requires a robust combination of tools, authorities, and resources across the U.S. government. The GEC is playing an increasingly critical role in coordinating the U.S. whole-of-government effort to counter Russian malign propaganda and disinformation overseas. We are also an active participant in the Russia Influence Group, co-chaired by U.S. European Command and the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs at the Department of State. This interagency group has been coordinating action in the field and at posts to counter Russian malign influence in Europe for almost four years.

## **The Threat**

I have touched briefly on the threat from Russia, and I will lay that out in more detail. Russia seeks to weaken those whom it perceives as its adversaries by overwhelming target audiences with a tsunami of lies, polarizing domestic political conversations, and attempts to destroy the public's faith in good governance, independent media, and democracy.

The highest levels of the Russian government direct and resource these activities in the United States, Europe, parts of the Western Hemisphere, and elsewhere which include: undermining electoral processes; engaging in malign propaganda and disinformation campaigns; promoting corrupt practices; economic manipulation; systematically inflaming the fault lines of society by promoting fringe voices on both ends of the political spectrum; funding agents of influence and front organizations; and conducting direct operations, such as assassinations, coup attempts, and sabotage.

These subversive activities are greatly enabled by new information technologies that increase the volume and velocity of messaging and permit remote network penetration and large-scale data leaks. Along with facilitating Russian influence operations, information technologies allow the Kremlin to rapidly flood the information space with competing, contradictory, and incendiary narratives to hide its malign actions and mislead and confuse publics. Flooding the information space makes it more challenging for responsible governments to communicate factual counter-narratives to the world.

We have seen this approach time and time again. Russia has promoted false narratives about its ongoing aggression against Ukraine; the war in Syria and the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime; migration and minority populations; the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17); the nerve-agent poisoning of UK citizens in Salisbury, England; energy development and distribution; NATO exercises and deployments; the crisis in Venezuela; and countless other topics.

## **A Whole of Government Response**

Before getting into some of the GEC's specific work to counter Russian disinformation, it is important to note some of the many activities of the U.S. government that relate to the overall effort to counter foreign propaganda and disinformation.

For example,

- The Department of State works with Allies and partners to build collective resilience, share best practices, and communicate and impose costs on actors that carry out Russia's malign influence campaigns.
- Through Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), the Department of Justice registers agents of foreign principals in the United States who engage in, inter alia, political activities on behalf of a foreign principal. The Department of Justice enforces requirements that informational materials on behalf of a foreign principal are labeled as such.
- United States Agency for Global Media's (USAGM) mission is to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy which is obviously a key component to all of this. I appreciate that we have CEO Lansing here today to talk about that piece.
- The Department of Defense conducts messaging and promotes fact-based narratives about U.S. military activities.
- The National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) advises and informs decision makers about foreign intelligence threats to the U.S. and,

helps U.S. government partners to identify approaches to counter those threats.

This is just a sampling of the various efforts underway, and while a lot has been done, we can always do more. The GEC is focused on building the capacity of foreign partners to help counter Russian disinformation abroad, while also working to ensure that these efforts are well coordinated across the U.S. government interagency.

### **Specific GEC Counter Russia Initiatives**

The GEC is actively working with Allies and partners in Europe to identify, recognize, and expose Russian disinformation, and to counter such disinformation with accurate messages about the United States and our Allies and partners in the pursuit of freedom, prosperity, and security.

Interagency work is one part of the GEC's efforts to address Russian disinformation. To that end, the GEC is expanding its footprint of interagency detailees who work to ensure the U.S. government's counter disinformation efforts are streamlined across the interagency and duplication is minimized. We also have a mandate and authorities to execute programs and initiatives to counter propaganda and disinformation. To enable this, in FY 2018 the GEC received and spent \$40 million specifically for initiatives to counter Russian, Iranian, and Chinese propaganda and disinformation.

These GEC-funded initiatives include: 1) Deploying technology to provide early warnings of foreign disinformation; 2) analyzing those foreign audiences that are most susceptible to or targeted by disinformation; 3) developing partnerships with key local messengers to produce content to reach critical audiences; and 4) building the technical skills of civil society organizations, NGOs, credible voices, and journalists to shed light on the spread of disinformation.

Our specific counter-Kremlin efforts fall into three categories: Analyze, Build, and Communicate.

First, analyze. We believe strongly that it is vital to understand Russian tactics and goals if we are to address them. The GEC has invested heavily in capabilities that allow us to answer three core questions: Who are the Russians targeting? How are they targeting these people? And how effective are their actions? We answer

these questions by combining traditional market research approaches like focus grouping and polling with modern techniques that rely on machine learning to understand the online information environment.

Second, build. Once we better understand these tactics and goals we can address them. This often starts with building the capability of our foreign partners to quickly identify disinformation and respond effectively. Currently we are supporting both international initiatives that include foreign governments as well as on-the-ground civil society actors.

For civil society actors, the GEC has funded an implementer to train civil society actors in 14 European nations. The training enables the civil society organizations to help their communities rapidly identify and respond to disinformation in locally-relevant ways.

Third, communicate. Russian disinformation often takes advantage of information vacuums. Together with our partners, we must fill the information space with positive, fact-based narratives. Congress provided the GEC with an important tool to meet this need – the ability to hire private sector advertising and marketing firms. We know what story we want to tell. It is crucial to have local communications professionals help us tailor that story to local audiences. They understand the market, and they understand how to message to the market in the most appealing fashion.

One recent GEC initiative, integrates all aspects of the Analyze, Build, and Communicate model. The GEC supported the North Macedonian government in their efforts to ensure a free and fair vote in the lead up to the September 30 referendum on the Prespa Agreement, which helped resolved a long-standing dispute with Greece over the country's name that had stood in the way of North Macedonia's NATO aspirations. While in-country from July 24 to August 17, the GEC worked with the communication teams within the Office of the Prime Minister. As part of this effort, the GEC delivered two major reports to the North Macedonian government. Other completed tasks included providing the host nation with a snapshot of the social media environment, data on media outlets, training on data analysis tools, and building awareness on the disinformation tactics of our adversaries.

Here are some additional specific examples of programs that fall within the overall Analyze, Build, and Communicate model:

- Two major initiatives, developed in coordination with the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, that combine cutting-edge technology and on-the-ground audience research to deepen understanding of the scope and nature of Russian disinformation across 13 Central and East European countries, including the audiences that the disinformation is targeting and viable countermeasures;
- A two-year, multi-million dollar project to build resistance to disinformation in the most vulnerable European societies by increasing direct person-to-person engagement on this issue;
- Projects supporting independent media in two vulnerable European countries to produce higher-quality reporting that exposes and educates their publics on Russian disinformation;
- Creating strategic partnerships with foreign governments to enable the types of information sharing and response coordination that allows us to quickly identify and get ahead of Russian influence operations;
- Developing an online analytics and information-sharing platform that provides the GEC, the U.S. interagency, and our foreign partners with open-source tools and capabilities they need to understand Russian disinformation and malign propaganda in their countries and then coordinate a response with their international partners;
- Providing funding to our embassies for 19 grants for a wide range of efforts to counter Russian disinformation, from supporting accurate reporting around the referendum in North Macedonia, to building media literacy in Bulgaria, Latvia and Spain. With increased funding we intend to provide additional support of this type to our overseas missions.
- Finally, we have established the Information Access Fund grant mechanism called for by Congress in the FY 2017 NDAA via a capable implementing partner. Utilizing an implementing partner allows the GEC and our U.S. missions overseas to be faster and more flexible to respond quickly to new priorities and opportunities as they arise.

## **Analytics & Research**

There is an increasing demand from our U.S. government and foreign partners for data analytics and targeted advertising technologies to counter propaganda and disinformation. To that end, the GEC created an Analytics & Research Team which is made up of about 20 data scientists to enable us to do the type of message testing and audience analysis that is key to success in the information environment.

The Analytics & Research Team provides the following key capabilities, among others to the GEC:

- Capturing trends and patterns in media coverage, networks, and on-line communication outside of the United States;
- Discovery of coordinated adversarial campaigns;
- Analysis of public opinion outside of the United States;
- Advanced statistical modeling applying data science algorithms for cases outside of the United States;
- Advanced computer simulations and scenario development (game theory and agent-based simulations) for cases outside of the United States; and,
- Advanced predictive analytics models to accurately estimate the risk of disinformation vulnerability, election violence, conflict onset, crisis duration, and terror-threat risk for cases outside of the United States.

As one example of this work, the GEC is supporting the public affairs section at U.S. Embassy Sarajevo with data-driven analytic products produced by our Analytics & Research Team in order to equip the embassy with insight about the information environment in the lead up to national elections in October of this year. The GEC's work has focused on key vulnerabilities that threat actors, both state and non-state, are known to exploit in influence campaigns. The GEC has provided information and training to the embassy on bot detection, social media trend monitoring, and social media analysis. As October approaches, the GEC will continue to support the embassy through the election, and intends to provide quick-turn analysis in the post-election period.

## **Technology**

The GEC has also created a Technology Engagement Team which is tasked with identifying, developing, and implementing new technological capabilities, utilizing expertise from the tech industry to counter malign propaganda and disinformation.

Our Tech Engagement Team has three key ongoing initiatives.

- The first is the GEC's Tech Demo Series. Since mid-2018, the GEC has hosted 21 biweekly demos of promising technologies against the problems of malign propaganda and disinformation. The Series regularly includes observers from DHS, FBI, IC components, DOD components, USAGM, State bureaus, and European embassies. The participating technologies have included psychological resilience tools, blockchain-based info validation, and crowdsourced vetting of info online. The Tech Demo Series has resulted in numerous government-industry partnerships, and serves as the sole venue to coordinate Interagency implementation of these tools – offering cost savings and operational efficiencies to the US Government.
- Secondly, the GEC has convened four intensive Tech Challenges, which are workshops with international partners to understand, assess, and implement effective tech solutions to foreign propaganda and disinformation. During the GEC's most recent Tech Challenge in Bristol, UK, the GEC awarded a substantial grant to a Czech-based data analytics company to directly support the UK's counter-Russia efforts. The UK has invited the GEC back for another Tech Challenge in 2020.
- The GEC has also implemented a technology Testbed, which enables the U.S. government to rapidly identify and test promising technologies against foreign propaganda and disinformation. The Testbed has rigorously reviewed more than 30 technologies and will soon publish its results on an online platform called Disinfo Crunch. Disinfo Crunch will be available to the GEC's government partners, and will serve as an unprecedented coordinating function for the US and foreign governments, enabling access to technologies that can directly confront Russia's disinformation activities.

## **Conclusion**

Russia has been using malign propaganda and disinformation for many decades. New information technologies give it opportunities to create harm on an increased scale. As has always been the case, free societies must unite and work together to defeat this threat to our societies and institutions.

Ultimately, one of the best defenses against disinformation is a free and transparent news media environment, which is why the United States actively engages with our Allies and partners to strengthen independent media.



Healthy and robust public debates based on facts, evidence, and reason are integral to civic engagement. A well-informed citizenry is key to the strength of democratic institutions, and so the GEC will continue to support efforts to strengthen civil society, combat corruption, and promote media literacy.

Working closely with the State Department's regional and functional bureaus and across the interagency, the Global Engagement Center is honored to have a key role in this important effort.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to any questions you may have.