

BROOKINGS

The Impact of Russian Interference on Germany's 2017 Elections

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Chairman Burr, Vice Chairman Warner, distinguished members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,

It is an honor for me to be invited to testify before you here today on the critical issue before this panel: the impact of Russian interference on European elections, and more particularly in my case, on the German federal elections on September 24.

The question of how to deal with Russian attempts to influence our politics has become one of the most salient policy questions of our time. But Europeans have been working to detect, evaluate, and counter this kind of meddling for many years now.¹

1. It's about the West: Russian active measures are strategic

Three things are new about Russian interference today. *Firstly*, it appears to be directed not just at Europe's periphery, or at specific European nations like Germany, but at destabilizing the European project from the inside out: dismantling decades of progress toward building a democratic Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. *Secondly*, its covert and overt "active measures" are much more diverse, larger-scale, and more technologically sophisticated; they continually adapt and morph in accordance with changing technology and circumstances. *Thirdly*, by striking at Europe and the United States at the same time, the interference appears to be geared towards undermining the effectiveness and cohesion of the Western alliance as such—and at the legitimacy of the West as a normative force upholding a global order based on universal rules rather than might alone.

That said, Russia's active measures are presumably directed at a domestic audience as much as towards the West: They are designed to show that Europe and the U.S. are no alternative to Putin's Russia. Life under Putin, the message runs, may be less than perfect; but at least it is stable.

2. Germany is the prize: Berlin currently leads Europe, including on relations with Russia

The past year has seen a string of key European elections: the Italian constitutional referendum on December 4, 2016, the election in the Netherlands on March 15 of this year, the French presidential (April 23 and May 7) and legislative (June 11 and 18) votes, and the British polls on June 8. But arguably none is quite as consequential for the future of Europe as the September 24 federal elections in Germany, in which Chancellor Angela Merkel is running for a fourth term.

Notwithstanding the recent French presidential election victory of Emmanuel Macron, a passionate European who appears determined to be a strong leader as well as an ally to chancellor Angela Merkel, Germany remains a major power, and in some ways *the* fulcrum of power on the continent. For a Russia that is clearly bent on destabilizing Europe and the

transatlantic alliance, Germany is the prize: Weaken Germany, and you diminish the EU and the European project.

Russia's antagonism towards Germany is a relatively recent development. The two countries share an age-old, deep, and strong relationship, a tangle of reciprocal interests and exchanges, but also a legacy of victimization and complicity; never more than in the 20th century. The memory of that guilt will forever be part of Germany's cultural DNA. Yet in the fateful years of 1989-90, Germany and its then-chancellor Helmut Kohl had cause to be grateful to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's enlightened decision to drop support for the East German regime, and to agree to the reunification of a divided Germany as well as to the peaceful withdrawal of Soviet troops from East German territory.

A year later, the dissolution of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact set in motion a chain of events that led to the enlargement of NATO and the EU: "Europe whole and free" meant an immense increase of prosperity and security for all of Europe, but for none more than Germany. For two decades thereafter, Germany was seen in the Kremlin as a friend and ally, as a partner in modernizing the Russian economy, especially through German manufacturing exports and investment, and as a strategic bridgehead into Europe—not least because Germany was importing roughly a third of its oil and gas from Russia.

German attitudes were somewhat more ambiguous. Germany wanted Russia as a partner, and hoped that it might guide it towards a transformation similar to the one undergone by Eastern Europe. Its "modernization partnership" with Russia had been based on two implicit assumptions: firstly, that economic integration would be reciprocal and, secondly, that it would lead to gradual political transformation in Russia, which would bring it closer to Europe. But economic integration turned out to be strictly downstream; and political reform remained elusive. When then-President Dmitry Medvedev called for a "new European security architecture" in a June 5, 2008 speech in the German capital, it became clear to senior German policymakers that Moscow was still hoping to put NATO out of business and push the U.S. out of Europe. Many in Berlin placed the blame for the Russo-Georgian war in August of the same year on Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili rather than the Kremlin; nonetheless, Germans were deeply alarmed by Russia's actions and its increasing antagonism toward NATO, as well as the EU. The relationship with Moscow soured from then on.

Between 2008 and 2014, a string of events pushed Germany into the role of a "reluctant hegemon" (*The Economist*) in Europe. The global financial crisis, which swiftly became a Eurozone crisis, exacerbated an already existing economic north-south divide in Europe, and led to the rise of populist parties and movements across the continent. Systemic competition between the EU and Russia in Europe's eastern neighborhood became increasingly apparent. And there was growing turmoil in Northern Africa and the Middle East in the wake of the Libya intervention and the short-lived "Arab spring." A U.S. administration announcing retrenchment in Europe and a "pivot to Asia," French introspection, and the looming specter of a Brexit: all contributed to a recognition in Berlin that the European project was in peril, and that Germany, now Europe's leader by default, would have to step up to the challenge of preserving it. At the Munich Security Conference in January 2014, Germany's president as well as its foreign and defense ministers called for a more responsible and forward-leaning

German foreign policy. Subsequent institutional reforms, key policy documents, and responses to events like the refugee crisis have demonstrated the seriousness of their resolve.

This backdrop of growing regional volatility and risk, and Germany's decision to rise to the challenge of leadership, is essential for understanding Germany's role in the ensuing Ukraine crisis, which redefined Berlin's relationship with Moscow. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea following the Euromaidan uprising, the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17, and Russia's continuing support of conflict in eastern Ukraine, as well as Moscow's campaign of lies, bullying, and propaganda, made German policymakers realize that their offers of de-escalation and "off-ramps" were not being reciprocated. They concluded that they were facing a Russian policy based on confrontation rather than cooperation.

The chancellor, as well as her former and current foreign ministers Frank Walter Steinmeier and Sigmar Gabriel, reacted by announcing that the "strategic relationship" with Russia is over for the foreseeable future. Germany has been leading negotiations with Russia and Ukraine in the "Minsk Process," and it has orchestrated and held together the European consensus on sanctions against Russia. These actions make Berlin the main obstacle for Russia in pursuing its interests in Europe and Ukraine.²

Finally, Chancellor Merkel is one of the few Western leaders who can understand, and speak to, Vladimir Putin in his own language; by all accounts, she does so calmly and fearlessly. Merkel has been at pains to deprecate attempts to depict her as the "beacon of the free world"; but they are unlikely to have endeared her to Russia's prickly president. For Putin, humbling Merkel would be a victory for him across Europe, and the West. Small wonder that she, and Germany, are the object of the Kremlin's particular hostility today.

3. It's not just about elections: Russian interference will continue

A divided Germany was Ground Zero for espionage, propaganda, and other kinds of influence operations throughout the Cold War; this did not end with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Experts identify Vladimir Putin's return to the Russian presidency in 2000 as the beginning of a much more systematic gearing up of influence operations directed at Europe and Germany—with a noticeable increase following Germany's decision to support Ukraine's efforts to attach itself to Europe. In the words of the most recent annual domestic intelligence report published by the German Interior Ministry (it oversees the domestic intelligence agency *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, or Office for the Protection of the Constitution) of 2015: "With their broad-based efforts to acquire information and exercise influence, the Russian intelligence services have been active for many years with high intensity against German interests in Germany and in the Russian Federation ... there is no reason to assume that their espionage activities will abate in the foreseeable future."³

4. We get it: Germans are concerned about Russian interference

Senior German officials have been notably more explicit than many of their European peers in attributing cyber hacks and other forms of interference to Russia. Chancellor Angela Merkel has publicly acknowledged that the German government is concerned about Russian

active measures, and raised the issue in person with Russian President Vladimir Putin at a recent meeting in Sochi.⁴ The head of the (external) Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst/BND*), Bruno Kahl,⁵ and the head of the domestic intelligence service Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz/BfV*), Hans-Georg Maaßen, have repeatedly confirmed that their agencies are on the lookout for Russian meddling.⁶ The aforementioned annual report on domestic intelligence notes in its chapter on Russian measures that besides espionage at a “high organizational and financial volume,” Russian intelligence services are also “attempting to influence Germany’s decisionmakers and public opinion.”⁷

The topic has been prominent on the radar of German think tanks and media for the past three years—roughly coinciding with the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of large-scale Russian trolling in German social media.⁸

Heightened awareness in Germany is due to several high-profile cases of active measures in Germany, but also to the salience of the issue in the United States, in France, and elsewhere in Europe. (Trust in Russia has plummeted in German public opinion surveys; German-Russian relations are perceived overwhelmingly as bad; and there has been consistently high support for sanctions based on Russia’s role in Ukraine.)

As for the September 24 elections, there seems to be a broad consensus in Berlin that Russia will attempt to meddle with the decision of the voters. The only open questions are when, and what form that interference will take. Less than two weeks ago, Germany’s President (and former foreign minister) Frank Walter Steinmeier weighed in. Remarking on “a decade and a half of growing alienation between Europe and Russia,” he warned: “If Moscow interferes with the Bundestag elections, (...) that would be damaging for both sides.”⁹

5. It’s not a hardware threat: Technical manipulation of Germany’s elections is unlikely

Germany does not use voting machines; citizens vote on paper ballots. The Federal Statistical Office (*Statistisches Bundesamt*), which oversees elections, employs computers to process and aggregate the data. But it uses an encrypted network that is not connected to the internet. Its president Dieter Sarreither has told the media that the entire network infrastructure has been overhauled and modernized since the last election in 2013. Together with the Federal Office for Security in Information Technology (*Bundesamt für Sicherheit in der Informationstechnik/BSI*), his agency has been conducting regular simulations, such as “attempts to invade our system and discover potential weak spots.”¹⁰

A hacking of voting technology in the German elections probably can’t be excluded completely; but experts concur it is highly unlikely to succeed. Voters’ heads are by far the more vulnerable target.

6. The toolbox of head-hacking: Russian interference occurs on a broad spectrum

Propaganda: The three key German-language propaganda outlets linked to the Kremlin are RT Deutsch, Sputnik Deutsch, and NewsFront Deutsch, which appeared on the German market in 2013. The two former are funded and managed by the Kremlin; the latter claims to be independent, but as the analyst Ben Nimmo has pointed out,¹¹ its editorial stance matches that of the Kremlin, and it is reported to be funded by the Russian secret services.¹² None of the three are major players in the German media market, whether in terms of output or of followers.¹³ Their disproportionate impact derives from highly active pushers or amplifiers. Some of these are automated (bots) or semi-automated (cyborgs). Others are human networks, often connected to either pro-Russian or far-right and anti-migrant groups, particularly the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland/AfD*) party. Extreme left- and right-wing conspiracy media outlets (Jürgen Elsässer’s magazine *Compact*, the Kopp publishing house) help in adopting and amplifying Russian narratives.

For Germany’s Russian-German community,¹⁴ estimated at around 2.5 million people,¹⁵ the original Russian-language state media—which for years have been waging a relentless campaign against a “Gayropa” of extreme liberal values and overrun by swarthy Muslim migrants, and other tropes of a decadent West—also remain an important source of information. That said, this community is often caricatured as monolithically conservative, which risks scapegoating it unfairly as a passive or even willing victim of manipulation.

Disinformation: The most famous case of disinformation pushed by Russian outlets is that of “Our Lisa,” the supposed abduction and rape of an underage Russian-German girl in January 2016 by three men variously identified as “Muslim” or “Arab.” The groundless reports caused hundreds of Russian-Germans to demonstrate in cities across Germany, including in front of the Chancellery in Berlin. In many ways, this was Germany’s wake-up call, coming as it did at a time when German public opinion was on edge from the impact of nearly a million refugees, and during three regional election campaigns.

In 2014, Russian media blamed the crash of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17—which Western officials said was shot down by Russian-supported separatists with a Russian-supplied missile—on Ukrainian fighters; in general, they have depicted Ukraine’s politicians as corrupt, fascist, or both. Another false story in January 2017 alleged that German Bundeswehr soldiers had raped a young girl while stationed in Lithuania as part of a NATO reassurance mission. Other reports said that 700,000 Germans had left the country because of Merkel’s refugee policy, or that refugees had destroyed the oldest church in Germany. A video portraying the German chancellor as mentally ill received more than a million views.¹⁶ Other narratives of Russian disinformation focus on alleged U.S. and NATO aggression, migrants and refugees, and radical Islam.

Hacking and denial-of-service attacks: In January 2015, the pro-Russian hacker group CyberBerkut undertook a two-day DDOS (distributed denial of service) attack on German government computers—timed precisely to coincide with a visit of Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk; the hackers called “all Germans and the German government to end financial aid for the criminal government in Kiev.” In April and May 2015, the German federal legislature (*Bundestag*) came under sustained attack by hackers over several weeks. They

infected a network that includes more than 5,600 computers and 12,000 registered users (including those of at least 16 members of the Bundestag and chancellor Merkel's office) with malware, and stole 16 gigabytes of data in what has been the most extensive and damaging cyberattack on German government institutions so far. The attack was so severe that the entire Bundestag network had to be taken offline for four days. In response, Merkel spoke of "hybrid warfare." German domestic intelligence blamed the attack on the group known as APT28 (also known as Fancy Bear or Pawn Storm), which is thought to be linked to the Russian GRU, or military intelligence; it is also believed to have executed the hack on the Democratic National Convention's servers in July 2016 with the purpose of discrediting the Clinton campaign. According to news reports, in a 2016 unpublished analysis commissioned by the Chancellery, the German intelligence agencies concluded that it should be assumed that cyber hacks such as these are directly authorized by the President's Office in the Kremlin.¹⁷

Other potential channels of Russian influence operations: these include "agents of influence" who promote Russian interests and narratives willingly or unwittingly ("useful idiots"), be they politicians, academics, businessmen, or journalists. Russia has recruited senior German politicians like former chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who took a position as the board chairman of the Nord Stream pipeline project, or Matthias Warnig, a former Stasi (East German domestic intelligence) officer who is now the CEO of the pipeline consortium. The "Ostausschuss" (Eastern Committee) of the German Federation of Industry, is the main lobbying organization for German companies operating in Russia and a traditional voice for pro-Russian business interests. Then there are convening fora such as the "Petersburger Dialog" (funded mostly by the German foreign ministry), and the "Deutsch-Russisches Forum" (funded mainly by the business community). These were once set up to transfer Western values eastwards to post-Soviet Russia; today, critics say, they work the other way around. In June 2016, they were supplemented with a high-profile Russian export, the first of its kind in Berlin: the "Dialogue of Civilizations" research institute set up by the Yakunin Foundation.

The Left (*Die Linke*) party on the extreme left and the AfD on the extreme right regularly voice overt, sometimes even enthusiastic, support for Kremlin positions. The extremist anti-migrant and anti-Islam movement Pegida also trumpets its allegiance to Moscow; Russian flags have been seen at its rallies.

The center-left Social Democratic party (SPD) is often accused outside Germany of being a homogeneous bloc of *Putinversteher*, or Putin-sympathizers. The main reason for this is its long-standing support of *Ostpolitik*, a policy of rapprochement with the soviet Union and then Russia that—despite its undoubted historic merit as a framework for balancing détente with deterrence during the Cold War—today more often than not is invoked to condone accommodation and equidistancing.

Yet this charge is doubly simplistic. For one, the SPD is increasingly torn on Russia, and numerous Social Democrats are highly critical of the Kremlin's policies. And *Putinversteher* can be found across the established party spectrum—including in Angela Merkel's own center-right Christian Democrats or (even more noticeably) in its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). In Germany, sympathy for the Kremlin's authoritarian rule is

more often a function of cultural conservatism, anti-Americanism, or negative attitudes to globalization and European integration, than of party political preference. More simply put: These cleavages run through all the parties and their voter bases, except those on the extreme left and right fringes.

7. Attribution is elusive: No “smoking gun,” but plenty of firearms out there

The 2015 domestic intelligence report notes drily that “in most cases” it is difficult to establish direct attribution of interference by Russian intelligence agencies; yet it bluntly states that such attempts take place all the time.¹⁸ The heads of the German intelligence services have confirmed this repeatedly in recent months—while at the same time being careful to say that there is no “smoking gun.”

Also, while German experts see Russian state authorities giving quite specific and detailed orders and instructions regarding interference, they note that there appears to be rivalry and competition within the system—including in the intelligence services. Moreover, execution is more often than not loosely organized, and delegated to a broad variety of actors. Some are tied closely into a chain of command, others are linked much more tenuously to government authorities—e.g. subcontractors, businessmen, hacking organizations (Vladimir Putin’s “patriotic hackers”), freelancers, and even organized cybercrime networks. Russia expert Mark Galeotti calls this a “multidirectional brush-fire-information-warfare campaign”—as opposed to the single overarching conspiracy many observers seem to fear, and also quite unlike the “ruthless centralized command and control of the Soviet model.”¹⁹

This method allows for maximum agility, speed, adaptability, and creativity. It permits proceeding by trial and error. And it allows state actors to evade attribution, and retaliation. That said, it can also mean a sacrifice of control and effectiveness, increasing the likelihood of mistakes, and leading to different actors operating at cross-purposes, perhaps even canceling each other out—as when Kremlin-directed propaganda portrays Ukrainians as nationalists without a nation, or simultaneously controlled by Jews and Nazis.

8. Sowing the fields with salt: Russian interference is destructive, not constructive

There is wide agreement among German experts that the Kremlin’s goal is not to help a particular candidate or party to victory. According to Bruno Kahl, the head of the external intelligence agency, the aim is “delegitimizing the democratic process as such. No matter whom they help get ahead.”²⁰

No doubt the intent to damage includes Chancellor Merkel and other political leaders of political parties. But more generally, the purpose of Russian interference in the arena of German public opinion appears to be to shatter Germans’ confidence in the stability and integrity of their country and its institutions, as well as to sow confusion, doubt, and distrust. Or, as Mark Galeotti writes about the Kremlin’s meddling in the 2016 U.S. elections: it “was not to elect the supposedly unelectable Trump, but to sow the fields with salt for Hillary Clinton.”²¹

9. Russian interference is hit-and-miss: the question (and questionableness) of impact

Because of the attribution problem, assessing the precise impact of Russian interference is a difficult enterprise. But so far, the impact of Russian active measures in Europe appears to have been somewhat hit-and-miss—with an emphasis on “miss.” Certainly none of the past year’s elections has yielded outcomes favorable to the Kremlin; in fact, European voters—possibly spooked by the combination of Brexit, the U.S. election, and France’s brush with the *Front National* and Marine le Pen—have been mostly hewing to the mean.

NATO and the EU, far from crumpling into irrelevance, are experiencing a renaissance of purpose. Most member states have been increasing their defense budgets at rates not seen since the Cold War, and EU security and defense policy has just been given a considerable boost; Montenegro joined the transatlantic military alliance as its 29th member on June 5th. Russian military intervention also ended up tipping the balance in favor of a deeper European engagement with the two countries that were the object of Russia’s aggression: Georgia (2008), and Ukraine (2014-present). Ukraine, despite the continuing conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, and the manifest imperfections of the Minsk process, has become the recipient of significant Western development support and investment, not least from Germany. And both Ukraine and Georgia have just been granted visa-free travel to Europe.

German voters did vote for the AfD in double-digit numbers in several state elections at the height of concerns about refugees last year. But in the three latest state elections (all in 2017), the AfD was back to single-digit numbers.

The national race briefly looked like the kind of neck-to-neck contest where a small amount of interference might actually provide results, when the SPD challenger Martin Schulz pulled ahead of the chancellor in polls at the beginning of the year. However, Merkel has been enjoying a solid 14-point lead for weeks now. The latest national poll has her CDU at 39 percent, the SPD at 24 percent, and the Greens and the Liberals at 8 and 7 percent, respectively. The extreme left *Die Linke* and the rightwing AfD score 9 and 8 percent.²²

Nor are there currently any leaders on offer who fit the Kremlin mold *and* show a remote chance of winning elections. Martin Schulz, a long-time president of the European Parliament, is deeply committed to the idea of a European destiny for Germany. And unlike France’s Marine le Pen, the leaders of *Die Linke* and the AfD—Sahra Wagenknecht on the left, and Alexander Gauland and Frauke Petry (recently ousted by Alice Weidel) on the right—have never managed to develop a broad-based popular appeal. Wagenknecht has flip-flopped repeatedly on the question of whether her party might enter into a coalition with the Social Democrats. The AfD’s governance record in the 13 (of 16) state legislatures in which it holds seats has been abysmal. Its leadership has spent most of its energy in ugly public squabbles.

Elsewhere, Kremlin meddling has visibly backfired, producing results that are the opposite of what appears to have been intended. In the “Our Lisa” case, Russian state television had for days whipped itself into a frenzy of indignation about the supposed failure of German authorities to pursue the alleged perpetrators, when foreign minister Sergei Lavrov waded in and accused Germany of obstruction of justice—causing a rare public outburst of anger in

his normally unflappable counterpart Frank Walter Steinmeier. Ordinary Germans had already been inundated for many months with a seemingly endless toxic sludge of internet trolling (often with a recognizable Russian syntax) on their social media in response to the Ukraine crisis. To many, the Lisa story merely confirmed the malice and brazenness of Russia's efforts at manipulating public opinion.

The Russia lobby is no longer as powerful in Germany as it used to be—not least because so many German companies have been burned doing business in Russia. German exports to Russia in 2016 account for only 2 percent (down from 4 percent in 2015) of total German exports, and Russia is currently 13th (down from 11th) on the list of Germany's bilateral trade partners.²³

Germany's media—subject to an even more determined onslaught of abuse—have not been cowed into submission either. Rather, they have responded in much the same way as their French, American, and other counterparts: by adding fact-checking and investigative capabilities, and by taking on the fight. Russian outlets like RT and Sputnik, meanwhile, have had difficulty hiring German-language staff, and their output has consequently been noticeably low-grade. The Yakunin Foundation has also reportedly had difficulty hiring staff for its Berlin operations, despite the promise of substantial paychecks.

For the Merkel government, the Kremlin's interference has validated a tough stance towards Russia, and substantiated the need for improving defenses abroad and resilience at home. This year, Germany's defense budget is set to increase by 8 percent; the chancellor has publicly confirmed several times that Germany intends to meet its NATO commitment to spend two percent of its GDP on defense by the target date of 2024. And it is surely not unkind to speculate that the intelligence services, never particularly popular in Germany, might also derive some welcome (and arguably appropriate) vindication from this situation—not just for their standing, but also for their budgets.

Yet it should be remembered that the confusion and doubt sowed by Russian meddling continue to offer potential opportunities for exploitation, even when the Kremlin loses on a larger goal.²⁴ In Germany, like elsewhere in the West, there are many people whose preconceptions, attitudes, and fears make them susceptible to such messages.

10. We're on it: Countermeasures

Germany took a long time to wake up to the threat posed by interference and information warfare. In the last three years, however, it has undertaken a lot to harden its defenses and create more resilience:

- Publication of a government cybersecurity strategy (2016);
- Creation of a Cyber Defense Center and a secure government network;
- Creation of a mobile quick reaction force within the Federal Office for Information Security (*Bundesamt für Sicherheit in der Informationstechnik/BSI*);
- Identification of hybrid threats and cyberwarfare as a key security concern in the 2016 German Defense Whitebook;
- Creation of a 13,500 strong Cyber and Information Space Command as the sixth branch of the German armed forces;

- Government institutions and parties have improved their defenses and created rapid response teams;
- Germany's parties have pledged not to employ bots in the election campaign; they are discussing a promise not to exploit any potential last-minute dumps from the parliament hack;
- Think tanks like Stiftung Neue Verantwortung, the Global Public Policy Institute, the German Council on Foreign Relations and the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik have been working on analyzing the threat of Russian disinformation and articulating cyberdefense policy;
- New independent media monitoring organizations like Correctiv pursue and call out disinformation;

Public acknowledgement of Russian interference by senior officials is deliberate and aims to both raise the bar for the Kremlin and sensitize the German public; the message has been repeated on visits to Moscow. Immediate evaluation and a calm, measured response—as when the Berlin police immediately stated the “Our Lisa” accusations to be entirely unfounded—is also intended to deter future disinformation attempts.

However, German responses on the whole are very state-centric, and a number of key issues remain unresolved and/or highly controversial:

- The Bundestag (federal legislature) is not connected to the government network, and insists on running its own network(s);
- Institutions seeking to boost their cyberdefense capabilities face a shortage of qualified personnel;
- Public attribution strategy needs to be refined in a way that earns public confidence and delivers on deterrence;
- A draft German law (the *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*) seeks to force social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google to enforce existing hate speech laws and prevent the spread of fake news, threatening them with fines if they do not remove malicious content;²⁵
- Several German agencies are thinking about developing offensive countermeasures (“hackback” or “deterrence by retaliation”) capabilities—but this raises complex issues of attribution, normative framing, and escalation control;
- Media and cyber literacy as well as safety consciousness in the German public needs to be improved;
- German politicians and policymakers need to do far better at articulating their own narratives clearly and convincingly.

Some of these questions raise larger and very complex constitutional and political issues: the separation of powers, the relationship between state, business and citizens, as well as the proper allocation of responsibility and regulatory authority for securing public institutions and civil society against threats and risks. They also beg the thorny question of how to draw the line between free speech and a threat to/violation of public goods. Where does free speech end, and censorship begin? When, indeed, is “meddling” merely ineffective persuasion or soft power, and when is it a malicious influence operation? How can executive

agencies respond adequately to such inchoate threats without overreach? And what is the proper role of the legislative and the judiciary in balancing and reviewing the executive—not least the secret executive? In defining interference as a threat to public safety, how do we as a polity preserve the agency of individual citizens? Finally, engaging the German public on all this in a way that empowers citizens to make the right decisions for their own security will require enormous energy and trust.

11. Germany's strengths and vulnerabilities

In countering Russian meddling, Germany has a number of inherent strengths—strengths that some other countries lack. Its politics are far less polarized than, say those of the United States, or the United Kingdom; income and education inequality is far less drastic than in the Anglo-Saxon world. It has healthy institutions, a functioning representative democracy, and genuine political pluralism. Its economy is strong, its public education good. It possesses a large number of independent, quality media organizations which are still trusted by consumers, and social media are less relevant for public debate than elsewhere.²⁶ Unemployment is minimal, and crime is low. Germans are generally aware that European integration and globalization have brought them enormous prosperity and security.

It also helps that Germany is not the first country to face this issue in an election. We can learn from the experience of others—not least from France, where policymakers used existing election rules (a pre-vote campaign blackout period) and creative countermeasures (deliberately planted fake news to confuse hackers) to thwart interference. In gauging our overall response to external influencing attempts, we can study a variety of models, from the highly alert posture of the Baltic states to the responsive, yet comparatively relaxed attitude of Finland.

Yet we have no reason to be complacent. We should not take the stability of our institutions, the fairness of our markets, or the inclusiveness of our social contract for granted. Our deep integration with our European and Western neighbors means that to no little degree their vulnerabilities are our vulnerabilities too. In particular, we need to listen to our citizens more carefully. The double-digit votes for the AfD, and the amount of fear and hate that is articulated on German social media websites without a hint of a Russian accent should teach us that there are many Germans who feel left out or left behind—by disconnected elites, by institutions, by parties, by economic progress, or simply by globalization. Reunification in 1990 created many winners, but alienated many others. The global financial crisis, the arrival of a record number of refugees, and not least Germany's new leadership role have left many citizens worried and overwhelmed. Indeed, the successes of Russian interference—such as they are—are a measure of our failures.

12. What could happen? Scenarios, responses—and the importance of America

At this point, it is impossible to predict with any confidence what form Russian interference in the September 24 elections could take. A major terrorist attack or a return of the refugee crisis would no doubt lend itself to propagandistic exploitation. Further DDOS attacks of the kind perpetrated on the Bundestag are also conceivable, as are leaks from the 2015 hack. Yet it is just as likely that a visible Russian attempt to use such events to further its own narratives would have entirely the opposite effect—as has been seen already. So, rather than a “big splash” incident, interference might just as well take the form of ongoing careful probing and testing of our vulnerabilities, combined with a continuous slow drip of toxic disinformation.

That means Germany will have to remain vigilant, but also flexible and relaxed. It will have to continue to work on its resilience, but not over-dramatize the scope, intent or coherence of the Russian threat. In fact, to do so would be to walk into the main psychological trap of Kremlin propaganda: to see the threat as larger than it actually is. (Russia is by no means the only country meddling in the German political space: Turkey, Iran, and above all China are similarly active.) And while some aspects of the threats emanating from Russia are military and require a military response, it would be a mistake to frame all acts of Russian interference as warfare, and react accordingly. In a democracy, the battle of ideas should and can take place in the political marketplace.

Still, it is beyond question that Germany and all of Europe are experiencing a phase of historic volatility and risk, in which the threat of Russian interference is only one of many. In such times, friends and allies matter more than ever. The prospect of Brexit looks set to deprive the EU of one of its most capable members.

That makes our relationship with America all the more important. We understand that Europe needs to do more for its own defense, and take some of the burden of the transatlantic security relationship off the United States; we have already taken steps towards this goal. But the alliance as such—our political, economic, military, and intelligence partnership—is crucial for the preservation of the European project. An America that feels ambiguous about the value of this alliance could be perceived in the Kremlin as the ultimate encouragement.

Endnotes

- ¹ Dana Priest and Michael Birnbaum, “Europe has been working to expose Russian meddling for years,” *Washington Post*, June 26, 2017.
- ² Stefan Meister, “Germany: interdependence as vulnerability,” in Atlantic Council, “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses,” November 2016, page 12.
- ³ Bundesministerium des Inneren/German Interior Ministry, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2015, page 256-7.
- ⁴ Deutsche Welle, “Chancellor Merkel faces President Putin in tense Sochi press conference,” May 2, 2017.
- ⁵ BBC, “German spy chief Kahl warns of election disruption,” November 29, 2016.
- ⁶ Andrea Shalal, “Germany challenges Russia over alleged cyberattacks,” *Reuters*, May 4, 2017.
- ⁷ Bundesministerium des Inneren/German Interior Ministry, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2015, page 254.
- ⁸ See, e.g. Stefan Meister and Jana Puglierin, “Perception and Exploitation: Russia’ non-military influence in Europe,” DGAP Kompakt No. 10, October 2015.
- ⁹ Berthold Kohler and Eckhart Lohse, “Ich bin gut angekommen,” interview with German president Frank Walter Steinmeier, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 16, 2017.
- ¹⁰ ZEIT Online, “Bundestagswahl nicht durch Hacker in Gefahr,” January 1, 2017.
- ¹¹ Ben Nimmo, “The Kremlin’s Amplifiers in Germany,” Digital Forensic Research Lab, June 22, 2017.
- ¹² Patrick Beuth, Marc Brost, Peter Dausend, Steffen Dobbert, Götz Hamann, “War Without Blood,” ZEIT Online, February 28, 2017.
- ¹³ According to Nimmo (ibid.), NewsFront has 2,254 followers, Sputnik Deutsch has 14,700, and RT Deutsch 29,200—compared to the national press agency Deutsche Presse Agentur (dpa) with 258,000 or ZEIT Online with 1,890,000. He points out that they do better on Facebook: RT Deutsch has 270,000 followers, Sputnik Deutschland has 181,000, and NewsFront Deutsch has 11,000—but still lag behind major established outlets like Die Welt (868,000) or ZEIT Online (773,000).
- ¹⁴ The *Russlanddeutsche* (Russian-Germans) are descendants of German settlers who moved to Russia and modern Kazakhstan in the 18th century, preserving their original language and cultural memories; following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, an estimated two million returned to united Germany. A 2016 study by the Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom shows that Russian state television in particular remains an important source of information; see <http://nemtsovfund.org/en/2016/11/boris-nemtsov-foundation-s-survey-russian-speaking-germans/>.
- ¹⁵ Bundesamt für Flüchtlinge und Migration, “(Spät-) Aussiedler in Deutschland,” December 3, 2013, page 28.
- ¹⁶ Patrick Beuth, Marc Brost, Peter Dausend, Steffen Dobbert, Götz Hamann, “War Without Blood,” ZEIT Online, February 28, 2017.
- ¹⁷ Patrick Beuth, Kai Biermann, Martin Klingst, and Holger Stark, “Merkel and the Fancy Bear,” ZEIT Online, May 12, 2017. So far, none of the documents siphoned off in the Bundestag attack have found their way into the public domain or onto a Wikileaks site; but it is possible that the purpose of the attack was espionage rather than the procurement of compromising materials (*kompromat*). For an excellent analysis of the issues, see the Transatlantic Cyber Forum’s “Cyber Operations: Defending Political IT Infrastructures,” to be published by Stiftung Neue Verantwortung this week.
- ¹⁸ Bundesministerium des Inneren/German Interior Ministry, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2015, page 254-255.
- ¹⁹ Mark Galeotti, “The ,Trump Dossier’ or How Russia Helped America Break Itself,” *Tablet Magazine*, June 13, 2017.
- ²⁰ Esther King, “Russian Hackers Targeting Germany: Intelligence Chief,” *Politico*, November 29, 2016.
- ²¹ Mark Galeotti, “The ,Trump Dossier’ or How Russia Helped America Break Itself,” *Tablet Magazine*, June 13, 2017.
- ²² Emnid, “Sonntagsfrage” (What if the national elections were next Sunday), June 24, 2017.
- ²³ Statistisches Bundesamt (DESTATIS), “Foreign trade: Ranking of Germany’s trading partners in foreign trade,” June 21, 2017, page 2.
- ²⁴ Clint Watts and Andrew Weisburd, “How Russia wins an election,” *Politico Magazine*, December 13, 2016.
- ²⁵ Thorsten Benner and Mirko Hohmann have criticized this approach as a privatization of the enforcement of the legal limits of free speech, “Internet companies can’t be judges of free speech,” *Politico*, April 18, 2017.
- ²⁶ Tanjev Schultz, Nickolaus Kackob, Marc Ziegele, Oliver Quiring, and Christian Schemer, “Erosion des Vertrauens zwischen Medien und Publikum?,” *Media Perspektiven* 5/2017, page 246.