



# Russian Meddling in the United States

## *The Historical Context of the Mueller Report*

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### THE ISSUE

*One of the most significant—and most disturbing—aspects of the Mueller report is the confirmation that Russia attempted to influence the 2016 election, based on the Special Counsel’s exhaustive collection and review of intelligence. This campaign by a foreign adversary represents a serious threat to U.S. national security and is reminiscent of Moscow’s actions during the Cold War. As this CSIS Brief highlights, Moscow has long conducted an “active measures” campaign against the United States, including trying to manipulate U.S. domestic politics. U.S. policymakers now need a forceful response to Russia’s intelligence campaign.*

The Mueller report, officially titled the “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election,” highlights significant Russian intelligence activity in the United States. As acknowledged by Attorney General William P. Barr, the Special Counsel’s investigation identified two major Russian intelligence components. The first included “the Russian government’s efforts to conduct computer hacking operations designed to gather and disseminate information to influence the election.”<sup>1</sup> Russia conducted cyber hacking into computers from the Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party, and then publicly distributed the material. The second involved efforts by “a Russian organization, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), to conduct disinformation and social media operations in the United States designed to sow social discord, eventually with the aim of interfering with the election.”<sup>2</sup>

This activity is deeply disturbing. Moscow’s actions need to be understood as part of a long-term campaign to weaken the United States—Russia’s main strategic competitor—and Washington’s relationship with key allies. During the Cold War, Moscow conducted a similarly

aggressive campaign of “active measures” in the United States, not just overseas, including repeated attempts to influence U.S. elections. With the Mueller report now out, the question for U.S. policymakers is whether they can use the findings to better prepare for strategic competition with countries like Russia and China—or whether the United States descends into partisan politics that would only benefit Moscow and Beijing.

This CSIS Brief focuses on Moscow’s historical efforts to meddle in U.S. domestic politics, which provides important context to Russian intelligence activity today. It is based on a review of declassified documents from the White House, Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and other organizations—including KGB documents from the Mitrokhin Archives. CSIS has placed several of these documents on its website. These documents were collected from several sources: the archives at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California; the CIA Records Search Tool (CREST) database at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland; the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson

Center; and the Mitrokhin Archives at Churchill College, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

The brief is divided into three parts. The first outlines the historical campaign of Soviet active measures during the Cold War, especially in the late Cold War period. The second section examines Soviet attempts to influence U.S. domestic politics, including U.S. presidential election campaigns. And the third section highlights implications for today.

## SOVIET ACTIVE MEASURES AGAINST THE “MAIN ENEMY”

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union established a global influence campaign, referred to as *aktivnyye meropriyatiya*—or “active measures.”<sup>3</sup> They included such activities as disinformation (or *dezinformatsiya*), forgeries, agents of influence, front groups, and targeted assassinations.<sup>4</sup> These efforts were “active” in the sense that they could take on a life of their own, and disinformation might eventually spread throughout newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and other media forums without additional Soviet involvement. [For example, a KGB forgery might accuse the United States of plotting to kill a foreign government official. Yet even after the U.S. government or one of its allies exposed the document as a forgery, the content

### Soviet Meddling in 1984 U.S. Presidential Election<sup>36</sup>

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might still be repeated in other sources around the globe.<sup>5</sup>] Soviet active measures focused primarily on the United States, which it referred to as the “main enemy” (or *glavnyy protivnik*), though Moscow also targeted U.S. allies.<sup>6</sup> As one former Warsaw Pact intelligence operative noted:

Target No. 1 was the United States . . . The objective was to hurt the United States wherever and whenever it was possible, to weaken the positions of the United States and Western Europe, to create new rifts within the NATO Alliance, to weaken the position of the United States in developing countries, to cause new rifts between the United States and developing countries, to disinform the United States and the Western allies about the military strength of the Soviet bloc countries.<sup>7</sup>

The Soviets had multiple goals in conducting active measures, such as undermining support in the United States and overseas for policies viewed as threatening

to Moscow, discrediting U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies, weakening U.S. alliances and U.S. relations with partners, and increasing Soviet power and influence across the globe.<sup>8</sup> Many of these objectives are remarkably similar to Russia’s goals today.

Soviet activities were hierarchical and adaptive. “Almost everything is considered at the center, in Moscow, and it is worked up in aspects of Soviet foreign security policy,” one CIA operative explained during Congressional testimony. “So the Soviets are in a position to react and act *quickly* if it is something that is in their game plan.”<sup>9</sup> The Soviets established centralized

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#### Soviet Intervention in the U.S. Electoral Process

The Administration is harboring a growing concern about Soviet attempts to intervene in the American election process and the effects this has on the international climate. We feel that the American people deserve to know the facts of this situation and the historical context in which they appear.

#### Recent Historical Context

There is a history of Soviet efforts to influence Western elections. Just last year, the world witnessed two of the most brazen attempts by the Soviets to affect the elections in Germany and Great Britain. These efforts included: Soviet support for “peace” and unilateral disarmament movements; the focusing of the considerable Soviet propaganda and disinformation apparatus toward the target countries; the issuing of a variety of threats -- especially of nuclear cataclysm -- should the wrong party be elected to office; and other methods. This intervention was not the figment of anyone’s imagination. There has been broad consensus among scholars, experts and the electoral participants themselves that the Soviets in fact were engaging in the internal affairs of these states.

#### Soviet Consciousness of the U.S. Electoral Process

Today, we are witnessing a similar pattern of Soviet activities. These proceed from an unambiguous Soviet concern with the American electoral process. This concern manifests itself constantly in official statements by the Soviets, which portray various official acts by the President and the Administration as electioneering.

*This is a memorandum from National Security Council staffer John Lenczowski to Deputy National Security Advisor John Poindexter. It was dated August 16, 1984, and expressed alarm at Soviet efforts to intervene in U.S. domestic politics and oppose the re-election of Ronald Reagan.*



organizations—such as the International Department (ID) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the International Information Department (IID) of the CPSU, and Service A of the KGB's First Chief Directorate—to direct propaganda and other active measures.<sup>10</sup> These organizations were supervised by the Politburo. The KGB's Service A planned, coordinated, and supported operations which were designed to backstop overt Soviet propaganda using forgeries, printed press articles, planted rumors, disinformation, and controlled information media. Given the importance of propaganda and covert action in its foreign policy, the USSR was willing to spend large sums of money on its programs—over \$3 billion per year by the 1980s, according to CIA estimates.<sup>11</sup>

The aggressiveness of active measures was not constant but tended to ebb and flow depending on factors like the state of U.S.-Soviet relations. During periods of détente, there was often a decrease in the number and types of active measures.<sup>12</sup> In the early 1970s, for example, Soviet active measures were limited because of a thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations. In addition, the Soviets concluded that U.S. scandals—especially Watergate—meant that Moscow didn't need to devote as much time and resources to active

measures. U.S. domestic scandals were sufficient to discredit the country. As one Czech intelligence official noted, “The Watergate scandal and the following investigation of U.S. intelligence activities supplied the American as well as foreign mass media with such an enormous volume of damaging information that forgeries were not necessary.”<sup>13</sup>

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, [there was heightened U.S.-Soviet competition] because of tensions over Angola, Soviet unhappiness with the state of arms control negotiations, the U.S. decision to support the mujahideen following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the election of U.S. President Ronald Reagan. As one CIA analyst concluded, “we assumed that there was a reevaluation from the Soviet perspective in that period, that things weren't going their way and perhaps it was time from them to engage in more direct ideological conflict with the United States.”<sup>14</sup>

## A HISTORY OF MEDDLING IN U.S. ELECTIONS

One component of active measures was attempting to influence U.S. political campaigns. Well before the election of Ronald Reagan, the KGB and intelligence

agencies from countries like Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia) in the Warsaw Pact—the Cold War military alliance that included the Soviet Union and countries in Eastern and Central Europe—attempted to influence U.S. politics. In the 1960s, for example, the intelligence service from Czechoslovakia ran a propaganda campaign against U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate for U.S. president. Moscow was deeply concerned about Goldwater's anti-Soviet views, and Soviet and Czechoslovak agencies orchestrated a disinformation campaign labeling Goldwater as a racist and a KKK sympathizer. They produced



*Then presidential hopeful Barry Goldwater (R) and his running mate William Miller accepting the Republican Party nomination in San Francisco.*

Source: AFP/AFP/Getty Images



and distributed printed material in the United States and overseas. “It was sent to many journalists and politicians,” recalled one former Czechoslovak intelligence official. “I think the result was much more successful in developing countries than here in the United States.”<sup>15</sup> Still Goldwater lost the 1964 presidential election campaign in a landslide to Lyndon Johnson.

In the 1968 presidential election, the Soviet leadership and the KGB strongly opposed the anti-Communist Richard Nixon and secretly offered to subsidize the campaign of Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic nominee. Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, recalled that “the top Soviet leaders took an extraordinary step, unprecedented in the history of Soviet-American relations, by secretly offering Humphrey any conceivable help in his election campaign—including financial aid.”<sup>16</sup> Humphrey rejected the Soviet offer and eventually lost the presidential election, but it was a stunning example of Moscow’s attempt to directly influence a presidential campaign.

In 1976, Service A of the KGB again adopted active measures to disparage Democratic Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, an anti-Soviet hawk, in the presidential election. As Harvard historian Mark Kramer noted, “Service A prepared a wide-ranging set of measures to discredit Jackson, especially by falsely portraying him as a homosexual. The

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KGB sent forged FBI letters to leading U.S. newspapers and journalists claiming that Jackson was a closet gay.”<sup>17</sup> Service A codenamed the operation POROK. For instance, the KGB forged an FBI memorandum dated June 20, 1940 which was allegedly from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and concluded that Jackson was gay. Service A distributed the memorandum to the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Topeka Capital*, and Jimmy Carter’s Democratic campaign headquarters.<sup>18</sup> In the end, Jimmy Carter beat out Jackson for the Democratic nomination, much to Moscow’s relief.

While the Soviets may not have liked Goldwater, Nixon, or even Jackson, Ronald Reagan was in a whole different category for Soviet leaders. As Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin concluded following their review of top secret KGB documents, “Service A [of the KGB] was ordered to embark on a remarkably wide-ranging quest for

compromising material” on Reagan. “Probably no American policymaker at any time during the Cold War,” they assessed, “inspired quite as much fear and loathing in Moscow as Ronald Reagan during his first term as president.”<sup>19</sup>

The KGB hunted for compromising material on Reagan and planted articles in Denmark, France, and India during Reagan’s failed 1976 presidential campaign.<sup>20</sup> However, during Reagan’s 1980 election campaign, the KGB did not become involved in a major disinformation effort, in part because they saw little difference between a strongly anti-Soviet Reagan and a



*US President and Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy wave to supporters at an electoral meeting in November 1984.*

Source: DON RYPKA/AFP/Getty Images

Carter administration dominated by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's anti-Soviet national security advisor. It was a decision the KGB would quickly regret. As Andrew and Mitrokhin wrote, "Ensuring that Reagan did not serve a second term thus became Service A's *most important objective*."<sup>21</sup>

On February 25, 1983, KGB headquarters instructed agents in the United States to start planning activities to defeat Reagan in the 1984 presidential election. Headquarters requested that KGB agents establish contacts on the staffs of every presidential candidate and in the Republican and Democratic party headquarters. KGB leaders asked residences abroad to send agents to take part in the operation in the United States. KGB headquarters made clear that any Republican or Democratic candidate—other than Reagan—would be preferable.<sup>22</sup> As one classified CIA report concluded, "Moscow would rather deal with a new administration, even though uncertain about its actual policies, than carry on with the present [Reagan] one."<sup>23</sup> The Soviets' disinformation campaign was designed to discredit Reagan by labeling him as a warmonger and arguing that re-electing him would be a grave mistake.<sup>24</sup>

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In addition to placing sources inside the campaigns, the KGB worked with front groups and agents of influence—such as pro-Soviet journalists—in the United States to disparage Reagan. Examples included the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) and its front groups, such as the United States Peace Council (USPC) and the National Council of American Soviet Friendship (NCASF). The Soviets relied on these groups to support active measures and propaganda campaigns, and KGB officers were in frequent contact with officials from these groups.<sup>25</sup> As the FBI assessed, "[The Soviets] utilized their front organizations and publications to attempt to convince the U.S. public that the reelection of President Reagan would be a grave mistake and would have significant political and economic ramifications."<sup>26</sup> Inside the United States, the KGB active measures campaign alleged that Reagan discriminated against minorities, that his administration was corrupt, and that he was too closely tied to the military-industrial complex. Outside of the United States, the KGB campaign painted Reagan as a war hawk who was

engineering an arms race and catapulting the United States and Soviet Union toward nuclear Armageddon.<sup>27</sup>

Reagan officials—along with U.S. intelligence agencies—were acutely aware of KGB planning and activities to influence the 1984 election. As one classified White House report concluded, "The Administration is harboring a growing concern about Soviet attempts to intervene in the American election process and the effects this has on the international climate."<sup>28</sup> KGB efforts, the memo pointed out, came on the heels of Soviet attempts to influence the 1983 election in Germany and Great Britain. For the United States, however, Moscow was willing to dedicate significant time and money. "Altogether, the Soviets devote a massive amount of resources to influence American voters over the heads of the government," the memo concluded. "Their activities not only constitute intervention into the internal affairs of our country, but have done a great deal to aggravate the international climate."<sup>29</sup> A classified CIA assessment concluded that the Soviet grasp of the U.S. political system had improved over the years, which meant that "the Soviet capacity for influencing [American] votes is higher."<sup>30</sup>

As the KGB discovered following Reagan's landslide victory in 1984, however, its ability to influence a popular president was limited. But it didn't stop them from trying to influence U.S. politics in the late 1980s. As one FBI report concluded, "Soviet intelligence officers have already started to collect information on the 1988 Presidential candidates and their positions on various issues." These operations targeted "Congressmen and other elected officials by front organizations, agents of influence, Soviet influenced organizations, and the CPUSA."<sup>31</sup>

By the early 1990s, however, Russian active measures went into a deep thaw as the Soviet Union collapsed, the KGB was in disarray, and Moscow lost its Warsaw Pact allies to the expansion of NATO and the European Union.

## **BACK TO THE FUTURE**

The Mueller report's conclusion that Russia was involved in an aggressive influence campaign against the United States at home and abroad is deeply concerning. But it needs to be viewed as a continuation of Moscow's strategic competition with the United States. Nearly three decades after the Soviet Union's breakup, Vladimir Putin is attempting to re-establish Russia as a global power and compete with the United States.

An FBI assessment of KGB active measures, released in 1987, is just as relevant today as it was then in its explanation of Moscow's goals:

Although it is often difficult to judge the effectiveness of specific active measures operations, the Soviets



believe these operations have a cumulative effect and are detrimental to U.S. foreign policy and national security interests. Furthermore, the Soviets believe that their active measures operations in the United States do contribute to their overall strategy to advance Soviet foreign policy interests, influence U.S. government policies, and in general discredit the United States.<sup>32</sup>

Russia's campaign before, during, and after the 2016 election suggests several themes. First, it is an interesting historical twist that Moscow shifted its active measures campaign from demonizing Republican candidates to supporting a Republican presidential nominee in Donald Trump. To be clear, Moscow has never been motivated *per se* by U.S. political parties, but rather supported U.S. presidential candidates, politicians, and issues that Russian leaders assessed would benefit its policies. As one classified White House memo concluded in 1984, "The principal method by which the Soviets attempt to influence American voters is by campaigning against the candidate and the Party they don't like."<sup>33</sup> This is just as true today. Moscow apparently concluded that Trump was more friendly to Russia and its policies than Hillary Clinton. Americans should see Russian actions for what they are: an effort to increase their influence at America's expense.

Second, Russian active measures today are about much more than the 2016 U.S. election. They are about strategic balance-of-power competition with the United States. Russia employs a mix of technologically-sophisticated offensive cyber capabilities, covert action, and information operations in an attempt to expand its power and compete with the United States. Moscow has implemented overt information campaigns using platforms like RT and Sputnik. It has also conducted covert campaigns to support influential figures and opposition political parties in the United States and Europe; waged offensive cyber campaigns against the United States, France, Germany, and other NATO countries; and supported proxies in Ukraine, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan to increase its power in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and even Africa. In 2019, Russia even deployed soldiers and provided military equipment to Venezuela, a country that has historically been in Washington's sphere of influence dating back to the Monroe Doctrine in 1823.

U.S. national security documents have highlighted Russian goals. The U.S. *National Defense Strategy*, for example, notes that the United States is engaged in inter-state competition with countries like China and Russia. "Russia," it argues, "seeks veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental, economic, and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change

European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor."<sup>34</sup> The Director of National Intelligence's 2019 *Worldwide Threat Assessments* bluntly concluded that: "Threats to US national security will expand and diversify in the coming year, driven in part by China and Russia as they respectively compete more intensely with the United States and its traditional allies and partners."<sup>35</sup> The Mueller report's conclusions support these assessments.

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Third, Moscow likely believes its intelligence efforts today are helping undermine U.S. foreign and domestic policy by exploiting a polarized American political climate, exacerbating U.S. fissures with its allies in Europe and Asia, and contributing to a decline in American global power and influence. The United States needs to avoid devolving into the hysteria of the McCarthy years during the 1950s, which included a broad campaign against alleged Communists in the U.S. government and other institutions carried out under Senator Joseph McCarthy. Yet there are legitimate threats from countries like Russia and China. It is stiking and unfortunate that U.S. leaders, including the U.S. president, have not vowed to aggressively respond to Russian meddling in U.S. domestic politics based on the Mueller findings. Without a tough response, like Reagan did during the Cold War, it is unlikely that Moscow will be deterred from interfering again in the future.

The Mueller report highlights that the United States faces a range of threats from adversaries like Russia—along with others, like China. These U.S. adversaries are undemocratic; their populations have little or no say in electing leaders. Their officials support state-run economies, not free markets. Their governments control the media and abhor a free press. And they are directly challenging a U.S.-led international order since World War II that has been committed to free market international economic institutions, bilateral and regional security organizations, and democratic political norms.

U.S. enemies are not just at the gate, they are inside it. Americans need to put aside party policies and confront these threats to freedom and democracy.

CSIS collected these and other declassified U.S. government documents on Soviet interference in U.S. elections from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, and the CIA Records Search Tool (CREST) database at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland.

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## ENDNOTES

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