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Mind the Gaps

Assessing Russian Influence in the United Kingdom

AUTHOR
Rachel Ellehuus

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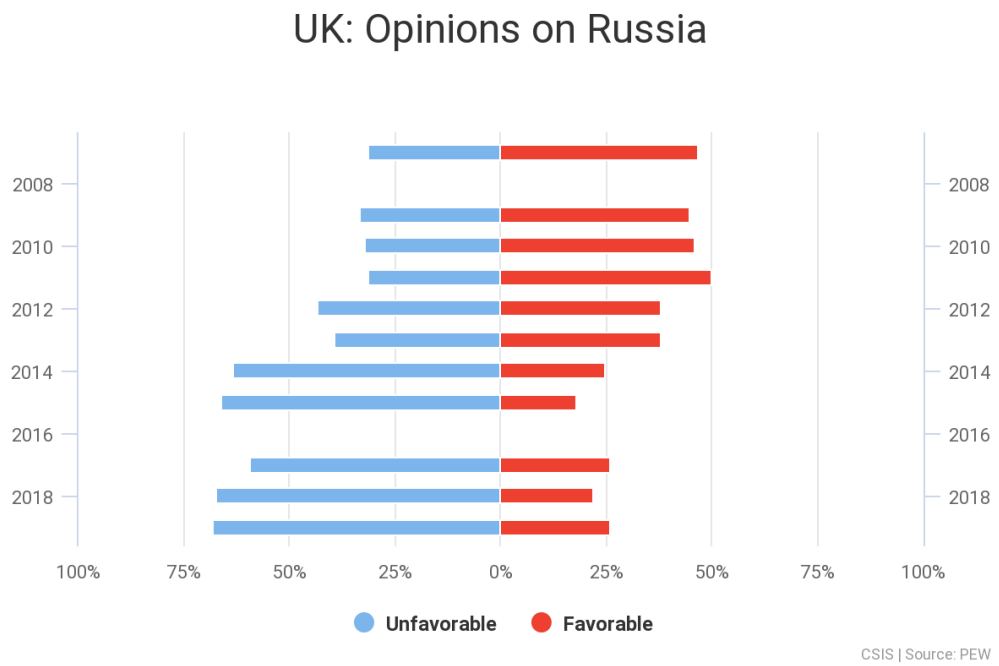
Introduction

The prevalence of Russian influence operations in the United Kingdom has increased significantly over the last 15 to 20 years. The United Kingdom is a formidable challenger for Russia for a number of reasons, including its political and economic strength; nuclear power status; membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union; seat on the United Nations Security Council; and close military, economic, and intelligence relationship with the United States. As such, it is a prime target for Russian influence operations that aim to weaken and undermine the existing international order. Moreover, the United Kingdom's "otherness," as conveyed by its dual identity as both a European and North Atlantic power as well as its composition as a constitutional monarchy consisting of four countries and multiple overseas territories and crown dependencies, provide unique differences for Russia to exploit.

While there have been periods of amity and cooperation, the bilateral relationship between the United Kingdom and Russia is today at its most strained point since the end of the Cold War. From a divergence of views on recent history and the international order to policy differences over Ukraine and Syria to accusations of interference in one another's domestic affairs, the two countries now find little basis for confidence-building measures or collaboration.

Public opinion on both sides mirrors this skepticism. According to a 2018 Pew poll, 67 percent of British people had an unfavorable view of Russia (a 66 percent European average), and 75 percent reported no confidence in Putin to do the right thing in world affairs (a 77 percent European average).[1] The picture from 2018 was equally grim from the Russian perspective, with 51 percent of Russians holding a negative (19 percent) or very negative (32 percent) view of the United Kingdom and only 25 percent holding a positive (24 percent) or very positive (1 percent) view.[2] The European Union did not fare better, with 53 percent of Russians reporting negative or very negative views and only 27 percent reporting positive or very positive ones.

1. Clark Letterman, "Image of Putin, Russia Suffers Internationally," Levada Center, December 06, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/12/06/image-of-putin-russia-suffers-internationally/.
2. "Relations with Countries (Otnosheniya k stranam)," Levada Tsentr, September 10, 2019, https://www.levada.ru/2019/09/10/otnoshenie-k-stranam-4/.



Source: "Global Indicators Database," Pew Research Center, updated March 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/custom-analysis/.

The tension and rivalry between Russia and the United Kingdom have historical roots as well. As post-imperial powers both at the periphery of Europe geographically and philosophically, Russia and the United Kingdom share a sameness in that they are at once European and "other."[3] As such, both repeatedly resisted the emergence of a single dominant power on the European continent by joining forces in the Napoleonic Wars as well as both world wars.[4] Yet throughout most of the nineteenth century, the British and Russian empires vied for influence and control of South and Central Asia, an experience that sowed the seeds of mutual distrust. Whereas Russia believed the British were trying to undermine Russia's interests, constrain its ambition, and encircle it, Britain was convinced that Russia was making a grab for India, the crown jewel of the British Empire. These latent perceptions reemerged after World War I when the United Kingdom and other Allied powers intervened to overthrow the Bolshevik government. To Russia, this was further evidence that the West was determined to thwart Russia as a unitary state.

Fast forwarding to 1989, when a sense of optimism swept across Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, many in Central and Eastern Europe rushed to embrace open societies, free markets, and membership in multinational organizations such as NATO and the European Union. At the time, the United Kingdom was among the first to advocate for Russia's integration into the international system and global economy. It quickly moved to establish diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation and create a strong bilateral partnership, including providing technical support to Russia in its transition from a planned economy to a market-based one. The United

3. Gideon Rachman, "Britain and Russia are Europe's Odd Couple," *Financial Times, October 28, 2019,* https://www.ft.com/content/2057070e-f961-11e9-98fd-4d6c20050229.
4. Ibid.

Kingdom actively supported Russia's inclusion in the Council of Europe (1996) and G8 (1997), and as NATO enlargement progressed, the United Kingdom sought to allay Russian concerns by pushing for the establishment of a formal relationship through the NATO-Russia Founding Act (1997).

Yet as the decade progressed, the "values gap" widened as it became clear that the United Kingdom and Russia had fundamentally different views on the post-Cold War environment. Whereas the United Kingdom was a proponent of self-determination for sovereign nation-states in the post-Soviet space, Russia sought deference to and validation of its sphere of influence approach to this same area. These divisions only accelerated in the 2000s as the United Kingdom supported the integration of the Baltic states into NATO and the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine.

Adding fuel to the fire was a gradual change of narrative in Russia itself that painted the West as taking advantage of Russian weakness by enlarging NATO and the European Union. During his more than two consecutive decades as either president or prime minister, beginning in 1999 through to present day, Vladimir Putin purposely amplified and promoted a narrative of Russia as a victim. This includes intentionally misrepresenting the facts (e.g., the West promised no NATO enlargement) and blaming Russia's economic problems on the West (e.g., sanctions). More recently, the rhetoric has taken on an increasingly nationalist, authoritarian approach, such as promoting the official and popular embrace of conservative religious and cultural values defined as in opposition to the West and Western liberal principles. This rhetoric has also been used to justify Russia's "peacekeeping" foothold presence in Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and to launch overseas adventures to project a great power image (partly to deflect from troubles at home) and force a seat for itself at the negotiating table, even if only as a disruptor. It is this oppositional narrative—combined with Russia's use of a range of nonmilitary gray zone tools, such as disinformation, elite capture, economic and energy coercion, and even extraterritorial assassinations—to achieve its security goals that has brought mutual trust to the low point where it is today, hindering a more constructive Russian relationship with the United Kingdom, United States, and European Union.[5]

5. Kathleen H. Hicks, "Russia in the Gray Zone," Aspen Institute, July 25, 2019, https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/russia-in-the-gray-zone/.

Objectives and Tactics

Objectives

While Russia's use of gray zone tactics is not new, the frequency of their use by Russia is more significant than any time since the end of the Cold War.[6] This report uses the term "malign influence activities" to characterize deliberate efforts by a foreign government or foreign actor (in this case Russia) to disrupt the normal democratic political processes in the target country (in this case the United Kingdom). Malign influence efforts are usually intransparent, deceptive, or manipulative in nature.[7] In terms of attribution, Russian disinformation efforts are deliberately opaque, drawing on a mix of attributed television and print media, blogs and websites with unclear attribution, and non-attributed social media accounts backed by bots and trolls.[8] Malign influence efforts include, but are not limited to, activities such as disinformation, elite capture, and illicit financing. In contrast, they do not include routine activities of statecraft such as the exercise of soft power or legitimate public diplomacy efforts.

In contrast to China, whose influence activities have been directed largely at censoring news for its own public and improving China's image in the eyes of the international community, Russia takes a more nihilistic approach. Feeling constrained by and excluded from an equal footing in the existing international order, Russia calculates it has more to gain from undermining the international system than from embracing it. According to Russia's zero-sum mentality, Russia benefits when the countries on its periphery are unstable, when strong international players such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany are weak, and when international organizations of which Russia is not a member, such as NATO and the European Union, are divided.

In the case of the United Kingdom, the least desirable scenario for Russia is an

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6. Kathleen H. Hicks et al., *By Other Means: Part 1: Campaigning in the Gray Zone* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2019), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Hicks_GrayZone_interior_v4_FULL_WEB_0.pdf
7. Former Australian prime minister Turnbull defined behavior that is "covert, coercive, or corrupting" as what separates legitimate influence from unacceptable interference. Malcolm Turnbull, "Speech introducing the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Interference) Bill 2017," (speech, December 7, 2017), www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/speech-introducing-the-national-security-legislation-amendment-espionage-an.
8. Todd C Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Social Media Influence in Eastern Europe (Santa Monica, CA:* RAND, 2018), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND_RR2237.pdf.

economically strong, politically stable, and united entity that is a productive member of NATO and a cooperative member (now partner) of the European Union and has healthy bilateral relationships with its European neighbors and the United States. As such, Russian influence activities in the United Kingdom have had two primary objectives: to weaken the United Kingdom internally and to diminish the United Kingdom's position in the world. The secondary objective is to create conditions and promote policies that are favorable to Russia.

SHAKE THE FOUNDATION

With regard to its objective of weakening the United Kingdom internally, Russian tactics have targeted minority and separatist groups who, though largely integrated and welcome, occasionally feel they are on the margins of mainstream UK society or that their concerns are unheard. Russia understands the power of minority grievance and tries to energize it in ways that amplify differences and erode these groups' attachments to mainstream society.[9] Specific targets in the United Kingdom have included white supremacist groups, the British Muslim community, and Scottish, Irish, and Welsh separatists.

To reach white supremacist groups, Russian trolls have amplified negative news about immigrants and refugees, painting these groups as threats to the traditional "British" way of life.[10] Russian disinformation efforts directed toward British Muslims push a similar "us-versus-them" narrative, with stories suggesting the UK government is trying to brainwash Muslims (e.g. through programs such as the Integrity Initiative) or outlaw traditional Muslim practices and customs.[11] RT's English-language site even has a subsection dedicated to "UK Muslim News."[12] Recent stories on the site—such as "UK Court Rules Islamic Faith Marriages Invalid Under English Law" and "Aggressive Promotion of Homosexuality: Schools Stop Lessons after Backlash from Angry Parents"—show how Russian disinformation directed toward British Muslims aims to divide not only Muslim and non-Muslim British communities but also the liberal and conservative Muslim communities.

Separatist groups in the United Kingdom are another ideal medium for helping Russia achieve its objective of weakening the United Kingdom internally. Issues related to Brexit and the United Kingdom's future relationship with the European Union—such as talk of a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland—offer ample opportunity to exploit divisions. In 2019, researchers at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab (DFRLab) revealed that Russia used fake Facebook accounts to spread disinformation about Northern Ireland aimed at inflaming Anglo-Irish relations.[13] The disinformation included false statements by the head of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party,

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9. Suzanne Spaulding and Devi Nair, "Why Putin Targets Minorities," CSIS, *Commentary,* December 21, 2018, https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-putin-targets-minorities.

10. A "troll" is a person who posts deliberately erroneous or antagonistic messages to a newsgroup or similar forum with the intention of eliciting a hostile or corrective response. "Entry ID 3551069," IATE, https://iate.europa.eu/entry/result/3551069/en.

11. Jim Edwards, "What it's like when the Russians hack your company and turn you into a fake news conspiracy story on state TV," *Business Insider,* December 23, 2019, https://www.insider.com/russia-hack-on-institute-for-statecraft-tactics-in-west-2019-12.

12. "UK Muslims News," RT, https://www.rt.com/trends/uk-muslims-islam-population/.

13. Simon Carswell, "Russians suspected of spreading fakes news about Northern Ireland," *Irish Times,* June 24, 2019, https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/russians-suspected-of-spreading-fake-news-about-northern-ireland-1.3935137.

Arlene Foster, that the party supported separating Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom.[14] Yet another false storyline was that the Irish Republican Army intended to recruit Daesh fighters to help them commit terrorist attacks.[15]

In Scotland, Russia tried to influence, and then discredit, the result of the September 2014 Scottish independence referendum.[16] Specific disinformation efforts included using pro-Russian internet trolls to circulate disinformation claiming the vote was a fraud, amplifying the voices of those disappointed by the "no" vote, and encouraging pro-independence campaigners to start petitions demanding a repeat of the referendum.[17] They also posted fake videos on Twitter and YouTube that suggested the votes had been interfered with.[18] While it is hard to discern from open sources whether the accounts were directly linked to the Kremlin or belonged to independent actors, a report by the DFRLab found that the accounts are "consistent with the behavior of accounts known to be run by the so-called 'troll factory' in St. Petersburg, Russia, during the U.S. 2016 presidential election."[19]

WEAKEN THE SCAFFOLDING

As a medium-sized power, the United Kingdom relies on its membership in multinational organizations and its partnership with the United States and others to magnify its influence and reach. The value the United Kingdom places on these networks is clearly articulated in its 2018 National Security Capability Review, which states that: (1) the United States remains the United Kingdom's single most important international partner, (2) NATO is the cornerstone of UK security posture, and (3) many of the United Kingdom's "closest and most like-minded" partners are members of the European Union. It is by weakening these organizations and relationships, that Russia hopes to diminish the United Kingdom's influence and position in the world.[20] In this space, Russian disinformation has centered on generating skepticism around the value of the U.S.-UK relationship, circulating negative stories about NATO, and supporting the Leave campaign for the United Kingdom to exit the European Union.

THE "SPECIAL" RELATIONSHIP

Even among European countries, the United Kingdom is somewhat apart when it comes to the closeness of its relationship with the United States. Shared history, culture, and values are coupled with concrete economic, military, defense industrial, and intelligence cooperation. When the United Kingdom departs the European Union at the end of 2020,

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14. "IRA, ISIS lumped together: Russian trolls take aim at UK, Ireland," Belsat TV, June 27, 2019, https://belsat.eu/en/news/ira-isis-lumped-together-russian-trolls-take-aim-at-uk-ireland/.
15. Ibid.
16. Severin Carrell, "Russian Cyber-Activists 'Tried to Discredit Scottish independence vote,'" *Guardian,* December 13, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/dec/13/russian-cyber-activists-tried-to-discredit-scottish-independence-vote-says-analyst.
17. Ibid.
18. "Election Fraud in Scotland," YouTube video, posted by hahaicamefirsthar, September 18, 2014, 0:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9RCe55y0dw.
19. Ben Nimmo, "#Election Watch: Scottish Vote, Pro-Kremlin Trolls," DFR Lab, December 13, 2017, https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-scottish-vote-pro-kremlin-trolls-f3cca45045bb.
20. Her Majesty's Government, *National Security Capability Review* (London, England: Cabinet Office, 2018), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf.

the hope is that a deeper relationship with the United States—on trade, defense, or technology—will help offset some of the loss.

Prior to Brexit, much Russian disinformation focused on painting the United States and the United Kingdom as working together against core European interests and values. The European Union's disinformation database captures many such false stories originating from Russian sources—such as claiming that "Anglo-Saxons" conducted hybrid war against Ukraine, or that Syria's White Helmets are a propaganda action by a U.S.-UK-Israeli coalition, or that the United States and the United Kingdom ordered the use of chemical weapons in Syria.[21] Current efforts appear to be directed at hampering prospects for a classified U.S.-UK trade deal by undermining trust in the relationship.[22] Currently, UK intelligence officials are investigating the posting of classified U.S.-UK trade documents on Reddit in October 2019.[23] According to Ben Nimmo of the social media analysis group Graphika, the leak follows a similar pattern to the June 2019 Russian disinformation operation Secondary Infektion.[24] Similarities between the two cases include the same English-grammar errors, reliance on single-use "burner" accounts to post the information, and attempts to amplify the post by tweeting it directly to senior UK politicians and media.

While the fact that the documents were authentic moves this out of the disinformation space, it can still be characterized as an information operation with malign intent.[25] Notably, the impact of the leak was made worse when then-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn seized on the documents as proof of his assertion that the National Health Service (NHS) was "up for sale" in the U.S.-UK trade negotiations.[26] This sort of magnification by elites can increase both reach and impact. In the coming months, UK trade negotiations with the European Union and United States—not least in the sensitive areas of health care and agriculture—remain prime candidates for exploitation, including by UK politicians on both sides of the aisle.

NATO UNITY

Within NATO, there is a subtle split between allies who advocate a harder line on Russia and those who would like to see this balanced with more dialogue and cooperation. The United Kingdom is in the former camp and a leading contributor to NATO deterrence and defense in Central and Eastern Europe.

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21. HTB, "Mesto Vstrechi," YouTube video, posted by HTB, June 1, 2017, 1:35:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laWGMgP17Zw; "Důkazy na objednávku: To jsou aktivity Bílých přileb v Sýrii," AC24, April 15, 2018, https://ac24.cz/zpravy-ze-sveta/12701-dukazy-objednavka-bile-prilby-syrie; and "Washington és London utasítja a terroristákat vegyi támadásra Szíriában," Orientalista, March 5, 2018, http://orientalista.hu/blog-post/washington-es-london-utasitja-a-terroristakat-vegyi-tamadasra-sziriaban/.
22. "EUvsDisinfo," EUvsDisinfo, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/.
23. Helen Warrell and Hannah Murphy, "Russian Operation Believed to be 'tied to' Leaked UK Trade Documents," *Financial Times, December 07, 2019,* https://www.ft.com/content/736ffc8a-1882-11ea-9ee4-11f260415385.
24. Ben Nimmo, "UK Trade Leaks and Secondary Infektion," Graphika, December 17, 2019, https://graphika.com/reports/uk-leaks-and-secondary-infektion/.
25. Information operations are defined as "actions taken by organized actors (governments or non-state actors) to distort domestic or foreign political sentiments, most frequently to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome." Jen Weedon, Willian Nuland, and Alex Stamos, *Information Operations and Facebook (Menlo Park, CA: Facebook, April 2017),* https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/facebook-and-information-operations-v1.pdf.
26. Shane Savitsky, "Corbyn accuses Tories of putting NHS 'up for sale' in post-Brexit US trade deal," Axios, November 27, 2019, https://www.axios.com/jeremy-corbyn-nhs-drug-prices-us-uk-brexit-trade-deal-b0efa8cb-3da3-4b5f-832f-5299f9b73cf1.html.

Following NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence deployment to the Baltic states and Poland in 2016, pro-Kremlin and Russian state-funded media repeatedly pushed false stories about the deployment, including targeted messages to Russian minorities in the Baltic states that painted NATO forces as unwelcome, unreliable, and aggressive.[27] The majority of these stories originated in Russian-language media but were sometimes later carried in more mainstream, local media. While this multiplied the reach of the stories, it did not demonstrably increase their impact as support for NATO force presence in the Baltics states remains overwhelming. In 2019, UK forces stationed in Estonia as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence received threatening messages that said "We are watching you" via text and social media. This might suggest a change in tactics from the media space to cyberspace that is designed to intimidate the British forces themselves. UK and U.S. forces have since adopted additional cybersecurity measures to limit the effects of such attacks.

EU COHESION

Yet perhaps the most visible of Russia's efforts to erode the United Kingdom's influence and standing in the world has been Russia's support for the Leave campaign and associated pro-Brexit parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP). While many of the factors that led to Brexit—an exaggerated fear of migration, disenfranchisement of the working class, an urban/rural divide, and sensationalist media—were already present, Russia was quick to see an opportunity to exploit these grievances and associated vulnerabilities to its advantage.

With the United Kingdom out of the European Union, the European Union itself is weakened, and the balance of power within it will shift. As a member state, the United Kingdom's positions on trade, defense, and sanctions were often closer to those of the United States than to those of its continental EU partners. Although several smaller member states share the UK positions, they lack the weight to push back individually on larger member states. As such, Russia's chances of eroding EU support on sanctions or securing a trade deal are likely to increase post-Brexit. Brexit also makes the United Kingdom a less valuable partner to the United States. With the loss of its seat at the EU table and the ability to directly influence EU policy on issues such as free trade, NATO, and sanctions, the United States will have to find other levers.

Russian tactics to magnify anti-EU sentiments and pro-Brexit messaging included producing false or inflammatory stories as well as attempts at cyberattacking the British energy, telecommunications, and media sectors.[28] Given the higher regulatory standards applied to the UK public media landscape, this disinformation circulated mainly on social media or was carried in the English-language publications of Russian state-sponsored media outlets such as RT and Sputnik. Disinformation narratives aimed to exploit the United Kingdom's preexisting vulnerability of political and societal polarization by playing up fears on migration and globalization; promulgating allegations of corrupt foreign influence on mainstream political parties and individual candidates; and trying to discredit the European Union by painting it as ineffective, corrupt, and infringing upon UK

27. Ben Nimmo, "Russian Narratives on NATO Deployment," DFRLab, April 1, 2017, https://medium.com/dfrlab/russian-narratives-on-natos-deployment-616e19c3d194.
28. David D. Kirkpatrick, "British Cybersecurity Chief Warns of Russian Hacking," *New York Times, November 14, 2017,* https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/14/world/europe/britain-russia-cybersecurity-hacking.html.

sovereignty.[29] Interestingly, this brand of sensationalist reporting on the European Union was perfected by now Prime Minister Boris Johnson in his time as a reporter for the *Daily Telegraph* in Brussels in the early-1990s. During his time there, Johnson made a name for himself publishing articles on the European Union that were "funny, mocking, and only partially based on fact."[30] At the time, Johnson's reporting was seen as entertaining, if slightly disingenuous. What leaders in Brussels and London failed to realize was the impact these stories were having in shaping the British Eurosceptic movement and setting the tone of the Brexit debate some two decades later.

A second tactic allegedly used by Russia to try to influence the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum was financial support to the Leave campaign. This tactic exploits vulnerabilities in the United Kingdom's regulatory regime. Specifically, although UK campaign finance law prohibits contributions from non-British companies and individuals, it does not require disclosure of political donations if they are from "the beneficial owners of non-British companies that are incorporated in the EU and carry out business in the UK."[31] It is suspected that this loophole enabled multiple contributions from Russian and other non-British donors—for example, funneling political contributions through shell organizations.[32] The UK Electoral Commission is also investigating (since November 2017) the origins of a nearly $10 million (£8 million) donation to the Leave campaign from pro-Brexit financier Arron Banks, the largest-ever political donation in British history.[33] Banks maintains the money came from his own bank account, but questions on the true extent of his wealth coupled with significant liabilities in several of his businesses at the time of the donations raised suspicion. This suspicion was heightened by reports that Banks was allegedly offered several profitable deals either in or related to Russia just prior to the June 2016 Brexit referendum.[34]

While not directly linked to Brexit, a more general concern in the case of the United Kingdom is the transparency (or lack thereof) of its banking, finance, and real estate sectors and its links with corruption. Without this access to the global economy, actors such as Russia would have fewer resources and levers for pursuing its malign influence activities. According to financial crimes expert Oliver Bullough, some $85 billion (£68 billion) has flowed from Russia into Britain's overseas territories and crown protectorates such as the British Virgin Islands, Grand Cayman, Gibraltar, Jersey, and Guernsey between 2008 and 2018—seven times more than what moved from Russia to the United Kingdom

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29. Committee on Foreign Relations Minority Staff, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Its Implications for the United States (Washington, DC:* United States Senate, 2018), https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf.
30. Jennifer Rankin and Jim Waterson, "How Boris Johnson's Brussels-bashing stories shaped British politics," *Guardian, July 14, 2019,* https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/14/boris-johnson-brussels-bashing-stories-shaped-politics.
31. Clare Feikert-Ahalt, *Regulation of Campaign Finance and Free Advertising: United Kingdom* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2016), https://www.loc.gov/law/help/campaign-finance-regulation/unitedkingdom.php.
32. Alina Polyakova, Marlene Laruelle, Stefan Meister, and Neil Barnett, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses (Washington, DC:* Atlantic Council, 2016, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/kremlin-trojan-horses/.
33. Neil Barnett and Alistair Sloan, *Democracy in the Crosshairs: How Political Money Laundering Threatens the Democratic Process (Washington, DC:* Atlantic Council Eurasia Center, 2018), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Democracy_in_the_Crosshairs_updated101718.pdf.
34. Ibid.

in that same period.[35] Magnifying the problem, the cash does not stay in these offshore sites—it is merely registered there (to help obscure its origins) before being reinvested elsewhere. While the United Kingdom has done much in recent years to crack down on illicit financing and to increase transparency and regulations around these havens, the fight is ongoing, as money launderers' methods continually evolve.

Tactics

Those monitoring the UK disinformation landscape have observed several trends in the evolution of Russian disinformation tactics. First, they note that Russia often simply observes and amplifies existing anti-EU narratives and other fragmentation trends in the United Kingdom. Russian disinformation often does not advocate for a specific position or take one side over the other.[36] Rather, the approach tends to simply be to "flood the zone" with a combination of accurate, half-true, and false information—with varying degrees of attribution—in order to introduce confusion and doubt into existing debates. This was evident in the wake of the 2017 Westminster bridge attack when accounts previously linked to Russia circulated disinformation on Twitter.[37] Some of the stories were anti-Muslim, while others criticized those who held anti-Muslim views. Another tactic is the use of Russian trolls to float multiple false narratives as "trial balloons" to see which would be most successful, only later doubling down on those that garner the most interest.[38] In many cases, Russia first tests potential narratives on less-regulated fringe platforms, either to avoid detection or refine the disinformation through user feedback before launching it into the mainstream.[39]

Second, experts observe that disinformation efforts have become more targeted over time. Specifically, they appear to be increasingly event-driven, spiking just before major decisions, votes, anniversaries, or just after potentially controversial events. The former was most evident ahead of the June 2016 Brexit referendum. In the days before the vote, officials saw a significant uptick in tweets linked to Russia-based accounts.[40] Researchers at Edinburgh University found that 419 of the accounts operated by Russia's Internet Research Agency, which runs troll factories in St. Petersburg, posted on the Brexit referendum.[41] According to researchers at Swansea University in Wales and the University of California Los Angeles, some 150,000 Russian-language Twitter accounts posted tens of thousands of messages urging Britain to leave the European Union in the days before the referendum.[42] This was an increase from 1,000 a day two weeks before the vote to 45,000 in the last 48 hours before the vote.

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35. Oliver Bullough, "How Britain Let Russia Hide Its Dirty Money," *Guardian, May 25, 2018,* https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/25/how-britain-let-russia-hide-its-dirty-money.
36. Interview with Home Office officials, London, January 14, 2020.
37. Leo Kelion, "Russia Meddled on Twitter After UK Terror Attacks, Study Says," BBC, December 18, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-42393540.
38. Interview with Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials, London, January 14, 2020.
39. Interview with Department of Sport, Culture, and Media officials, London, January 15, 2020.
40. David D. Kirkpatrick, "Signs of Russian Meddling in Brexit Referendum," *New York Times, November 15, 2017,* https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/europe/russia-brexit-twitter-facebook.html.
41. Carrell, "Russian Cyber-Activities Tried to Discredit."
42. Alex Mostrous, Mark Bridge, and Katie Gibbons, "Russia used Twitter bots and trolls 'to disrupt' Brexit vote," *Times, November 15, 2017,* https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/russia-used-web-posts-to-disrupt-brexit-vote-h9nv5zg6c.

In terms of post-event information manipulation, UK officials noted an increase in Russian bot activity in the weeks following the March 4, 2018, attack on former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) agent Sergei Skripal in the town of Salisbury, some 90 miles south of London.[43] Following Prime Minister May's formal accusation on March 12 that Russia had orchestrated the attack, Russia's disinformation machine sprang into action in what resembled an aggressive public relations campaign. It planted stories to deflect blame from Russia and to inundate social media with false stories that cast doubt on fact-based British and European findings. In the week after the attempted assassination, British authorities tracked eleven alternative stories about the poisoning, all of which originated in Russia.[44] In the month following the attack, Russian state-funded media outlets RT and Sputnik put out 138 different narratives, ranging from claims that the nerve agent originated in a UK lab to claims that the story was fabricated to distract from Brexit.[45]

Yet as the details of the attack unfolded, Russia proved agile at taking advantage of missteps and contradictions in the UK government's public communications. British authorities, working closely with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and other international actors, were focused on rapidly confirming the type and origin of the nerve agent used. On April 3, UK online outlet *The Independent* released a story that quoted Porton Down Chief Executive Gary Aitkenhead saying that Porton Down had confirmed the toxin used in Salisbury was Novichok but had not determined its origin.[46]

This was at odds with public statements by then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson days earlier in which he maintained that Porton Down had confirmed both the type and origin of the nerve agent. Russia seized on this contradiction to paint the UK authorities as unreliable.[47] The story from *The Independent* was circulated and promoted by Kremlin-supporters on both sides of the Atlantic, receiving a remarkable 93,999 interactions on social media.[48] While the UK government moved quickly to correct the record (Porton Down was never tasked with confirming the origin of the agent, only the type), the damage was done. As reported by *The Atlantic,* a government poll revealed that in September 2019 only 55 percent of the British population had a "perception of Russia culpability," down from 65 percent in March immediately following the attack.[49] While it is not clear whether this shift in public opinion was a direct result of Russian disinformation efforts, it speaks to a larger problem, namely citizens' lack of trust in their government to provide true and accurate information on matters of national security.

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43. Bots are automated identities that are able to "rapidly deploy messages, interact with other users' content, and affect trending algorithms—all while passing as human users." Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard, *Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary* (Oxford, UK: Project on Computational Propaganda, 2017), https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Casestudies-ExecutiveSummary.pdf; and Deborah Haynes, "Skripal Attack: 2,800 Russian bots 'sowed confusion after poison attacks'," *Times, March 24, 2018, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/2-800-russian-bots-sowed-confusion-after-poison-attacks-zf6lvb3nc.*

44. Tom McTague, "Britain's Secret War with Russia," *The Atlantic, December 03, 2019,* https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/12/britain-russia-nato-disinformation/602836/.

45. Ibid.

46. Kim Sengupta, "Salisbury poisoning: UK experts cannot prove novichok nerve agent used on Skripals came from Russia, MoD says," *The Independent, April 3, 2018,* https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/salisbury-poisoning-russia-novichok-nerve-agent-porton-down-proof-evidence-mod-latest-a8286761.html.

47. McTague, "Britain's Secret War with Russia."

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

Strengths and Vulnerabilities

By many measures, the United Kingdom is one of the most resilient societies in the world, ranking highly in terms of economic viability, political stability, and corporate governance.[50] It is also intrinsically less vulnerable to Russian influence activities than other European countries, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe where there is a legacy of communism or close historical and cultural ties with Russia. If anything, history has left a legacy of rivalry and suspicion dating from imperial times up to the Cold War. This wariness has since been magnified by Russian actions—such as the 2016 Skripal poisoning and 2006 murder of Alexander Litvinenko—that flagrantly breached international law.

Yet almost by virtue of their open nature, democracies are uniquely vulnerable to influence activities, which deliberately exploit democracies' ideological pluralism and diversity.[51] The specific societal vulnerabilities of each country will vary but can be captured in six broad categories: (1) the characteristics of the diaspora; (2) the degree of susceptibility to economic connection; (3) the level of media and digital literacy; (4) the state of the media landscape; (5) the degree of political and societal polarization; and (6) the strength of the regulatory regime. While the United Kingdom exhibits some degree of vulnerability in all six categories, political polarization and regulatory regimes stand out as the most problematic.

Diaspora

The United Kingdom is home to hundreds of thousands of Russians, with a quarter-million Russians living in London. This Russian diaspora is generally well off and integrated into broader UK society. As such, they are not politically mobilized or ideal targets for Kremlin-backed disinformation. Today, many Russian emigres to the United Kingdom are self-made entrepreneurs and professionals, frequently in voluntary exile from Russia. The tacit understanding under Putin has been that they will be left alone so long as they steer clear of politics or criticism of Russia. In contrast, those who emigrated

50. Rosie Perper, "The US, Australia, and the UK are among the 25 most resilient countries in the world," *Business Insider,* May 29, 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/the-most-resilient-countries-in-the-world-us-uk-australia-2019-5.
51. Suzanne Spaulding and Michael Bennet, "Dividing America: A Conversation with Senator Michael Bennet," (public event, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, November 10, 2019), https://www.csis.org/events/dividing-america-conversation-senator-michael-bennet.

in the years immediately after the Cold War tended to be well-connected individuals looking for a safe haven for their newfound wealth. Prior to 2015, the United Kingdom had a liberal golden visas program that offered residency in exchange for investment in government bonds. Many Russians took advantage of these Tier 1 investor visas and constituted the second largest group of applicants after the Chinese (2007-2015).[52] As concerns grew over the influx of suspected dirty money, UK authorities and banks became more diligent in checking its origins, though workarounds remained through its overseas territories and crown dependencies.

Economic Connection

While there is no evidence that Russian money entering the United Kingdom has been used to buy access or influence in British politics to the benefit of Russia, UK authorities such as the National Crime Agency have stepped up their investigations of Russian money and Russian political-business figures. Yet, one near-term concern is that a hard Brexit will have a negative effect on the UK economy, making it desperate for investment and thus laxer in regulating the influx of questionable cash.[53]

Equally, there is no indication that British businesses or academic elites have been subject to "elite capture" using economic influence, ostensibly due to high degrees of transparency and integrity in both domains. Where there has been some concern is in the courting of political elites, both in the mainstream Conservative and Labour Parties and in fringe parties such as UKIP and the British National Party (BNP).

In the ruling Conservative Party, Russia's influence activities are limited and directed toward a handful of individual current and former MPs.[54] While these voices occasionally advocate for better relations with Russia and Russia-favorable policies such as the removal of sanctions, there is no evidence of policy divergence by the Conservative Party as a whole on key issues such as Ukraine, NATO membership, or a close relationship with the United States. There are, however, indications of party donations with connections to Russia.[55] The donations occurred mainly through venture capital funds and industry lobby groups linked to Russian businesses. While technically compliant with Electoral Commission rules, the donations raise questions about how they might translate to favorable policies toward those Russian businesses down the road.

For Labour, the 2019 general election resulted in a historic loss and ultimately a change in party leadership. Former party leader Jeremy Corbyn held anti-EU, NATO skeptical, and pro-Russia positions that were not widely shared by his own MPs or Labour voters. Investigations revealed that some 6,500 Russian Twitter accounts, which were created in the weeks before polling day and were often operated by bots, disseminated

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52. Oliver Bullough, "How Britain Let Russia Hide Its Dirty Money," *Guardian,* May 25, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/25/how-britain-let-russia-hide-its-dirty-money.
53. Mark Galeotti, "Boris Johnson's Russian Oligarch Problem," *Foreign Policy,* July 24, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/24/boris-johnsons-russian-oligarch-problem/.
54. Alina Polyakova, Marlene Laruelle, Stefan Meister, and Neil Barnett, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2016), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/kremlin-trojan-horses/.
55. Holly Watt, "May Must Explain Tory Donor's Links to Russia, Says Labour MP," *Guardian, August 27, 2016,* https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/aug/27/may-must-explain-tory-donors-links-to-russia-says-labour-mp.

disinformation in an attempt to influence the 2019 election results in Corbyn's favor.[56] Under the new leadership of Kier Starmer, Labour is likely to return to its more traditional center-left positions. As a Labour MP, Starmer unequivocally supported Prime Minister May's response to the Skripal attack.

By far the most openly pro-Russia political party in the United Kingdom is UKIP.[57] Party leader Nigel Farage, who enthusiastically embraces the "Mr. Brexit" moniker, openly admires Putin and is supportive of Russian views on Syria and Ukraine. Farage is a regular guest on RT, and RT has promoted videos portraying Farage and his Eurosceptic views in a positive light.[58] While Farage may not be a direct case of elite capture in the same way as Czech prime minister Milos Zeman, much of Farage's rhetoric on Syria and Ukraine—for example, suggesting a moral equivalency between Russian actions there and U.S. or French actions in the Middle East—puppets Russian lines on these issues.[59] Additionally, questions remain about the origins of some funding to UKIP and the Leave campaign. As noted above, investigations are ongoing regarding Arron Banks, a close associate of Farage and the single biggest donor to the Leave campaign, looking into his suspected ties with Russia.

Media Landscape and Digital Literacy

The United Kingdom's media landscape—spanning radio, print, and broadcast media—is robust, diverse, and widely utilized by the public. There is a particularly strong tradition of public service broadcasting, with nearly 50 percent of adults in the United Kingdom (from all sides of the ideological spectrum) relying on BBC as their main news source.[60] The statutory regulations governing public service broadcasting require impartiality and balanced coverage and are strictly enforced by the United Kingdom's Office of Communication or "Ofcom." In December 2018, Ofcom fined RT £20,000 ($25,000) for violating UK impartiality rules, though it stopped short of revoking the outlet's license.[61] The ruling noted that the violations were particularly egregious in the six weeks following the Skripal poisoning.

More troubling is the UK commercial press, which is highly partisan.[62] Readership tends to break down by political class and traditional left/right divides. Critics note there are fewer distinctions between opinion pieces and fact-based news in the commercial press, and the degree to which a diversity of views is represented depends largely on their ownership.

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56. Camilla Turner, "Russian Twitter 'Bots' Attempted to Influence Election by Supporting Jeremy Corbyn, Investigation Finds," *Telegraph,* April 28, 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/28/russian-twitter-bots-attempted-influence-election-supporting/.
57. The far-right BNP is also openly pro-Russian but has no seats in parliament.
58. Patrick Wintour and Rowena Mason, "Nigel Farage's Relationship with Russian Media Comes Under Scrutiny," *The Guardian,* March 31, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/mar/31/nigel-farage-relationship-russian-media-scrutiny.
59. Neil MacFarquhar, "How Russians Pay to Play in Other Countries," *New York Times, A* https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/world/europe/czech-republic-russia-milos-zeman.html.
60. "News Media and Political Attitudes in the United Kingdom," Pew Research Center, May 17, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/fact-sheet/news-media-and-political-attitudes-in-the-united-kingdom/.
61. Patricia Nilsson, "Kremlin-backed RT Fined by UK for Breaching Impartiality Rules," *Financial Times*, July 26, 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/8fa19cc4-af87-11e9-8030-530adfa879c2.
62. "United Kingdom," Media Landscapes, https://medialandscapes.org/country/united-kingdom.

With a growing number of British people getting their news from social media platforms (55 percent), there are concerns about the future viability of traditional publications as well as the public's susceptibility to disinformation.[63] In a 2017 Pew poll, 29 percent of those who get their news on social media said they do not pay attention to the sources.[64] Similarly, a 2019 Ofcom report on media use and attitudes revealed that 10 percent of users do not consider the truthfulness of the online content they encounter, though those who do are more likely to check and verify suspect information.[65]

Equally concerning is growing distrust in the media not only in the United Kingdom but in most Western democracies. In the 2017 Pew poll, 70 percent of British respondents said they trust the BBC, but numbers quickly fell to 50 percent or lower for commercial press outlets, with upmarket publications such as *The Guardian* (50 percent) and *The Times* (49 percent) faring better than tabloids such as *The Daily Mail* (30 percent) and *Daily Mirror* (24 percent).[66] A YouGov poll held the same year revealed that those holding populist views were more likely to dismiss the news media's importance and say they do not trust it, suggesting this group may be more susceptible to disinformation from less accountable sources.[67]

Amid a rapidly changing, less accountable social media landscape, media literacy of the public and its leaders is critical. If citizens are unable to accurately identify misinformation and disinformation, they are more likely to inadvertently spread it.[68] It is equally important to educate politicians on how using or distributing false information could impact their credibility, much less their ability to achieve their political agendas (e.g., on migration or climate).[69] As such, the United Kingdom has rightly focused on improving media literacy among both children and adults. In April 2019, the UK government released its Online Harms White Paper that recommends specific measures to improve media literacy.[70] While the implementation of the White Paper's recommendations is still underway (and in some cases generating controversy), the UK plan to address media literacy and other disinformation-related challenges via partnerships with government, the private sector, and users is the right approach.[71]

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63. MacFarquhar, "How Russians Pay to Play in Other Countries"; "United Kingdom," Media Landscapes.
64. "News Media and Political Attitudes in the United Kingdom," Pew Research Center.
65. Ofcom, Adults: *Media Use and Attitudes Report 2019* (London, UK: Ofcom, 2019), https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/149124/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report.pdf.
66. "News Media and Political Attitudes in the United Kingdom," Pew Research Center.
67. Connor Ibbetson, "Do Britons Trust the Press?" YouGov, December 16, 2019, https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/16/do-britons-trust-press.
68. As defined in the United Kingdom's RESIST toolkit, disinformation is "the deliberate creation and/or sharing of false information with the intention to deceive and mislead audiences" whereas misinformation is "the inadvertent sharing of false information" without malign intent. Government Communication Service, *RESIST Counter-disinformation toolkit* (London: Government Communication Service, 2020), https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/RESIST-Counter-Disinformation-Toolkit.pdf
69. Interview with Home Office officials, London, January 14, 2020.
70. Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Secretary of State for the Home Department, *Online Harms White Paper* (London: Her Majesty's Government, 2019), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/793360/Online_Harms_White_Paper.pdf.
71. Gian Volpicelli, "The UK's war on online harms seems destined to fudge and fail," *Wired*, February 14, 2020, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/online-harms-uk.

Political and Societal Polarization

On the whole, UK society is resilient to political polarization in that its citizens enjoy popular representation, free speech and open debate, and transparent governance. While fringe and separatist groups exist, they are rarely radical or extremist. Nevertheless, there are pockets of British society where polarization is present, making them more vulnerable to disinformation and other malign influence activities.

A polarized political environment—characterized by increasing divides between opposing political camps and an inability to find common ground—engenders polarization in society. This phenomenon is not unique to the United Kingdom. Across the globe, polarization among different groups has hamstrung politics and created an "us-versus-them" mindset. Adversaries operating in the disinformation space capitalize on these divisions, offering narratives that reinforce each side's respective prejudices, fears, and opinions.

A look at the vote breakdown between Leave and Remain in the Brexit referendum is instructive of some of the specific polarizations at work in Britain.[72] On average, those who voted Leave tended to be older, male, who lived in less densely populated areas, and had lower levels of income and education. Conversely, those who voted Remain were younger, lived mostly in cities and areas with sizable immigrant populations, and had higher levels of education and income. Interestingly, there was less of a correlation with specific political parties, with Leave and Remain votes cutting across party lines.

By focusing on these preexisting divides and vulnerabilities, Russia was able to target its disinformation messaging. Resultant narratives promoted anti-elite sentiments and magnified fears about immigrants and a resultant erosion of British "culture." In the end, the Brexit referendum became less about whether it was best to remain in or leave the European Union and more about identity. Researchers at King's College London refer to such divisions as "affective polarization," whereby individuals segregate socially and distrust/dislike those from the opposing side, regardless of their positions on issues.[73] Such identity-based politics is more susceptible to disinformation, as facts matter less and emotions more.

Post-Brexit, a remaining vulnerability—namely the presence of separatist groups in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales—is likely to reemerge as a disinformation target. All three groups voted in the Remain in Brexit referendum, so they are natural targets for Russia's objective of dividing the United Kingdom internally. In this regard, it will be important during negotiations on the United Kingdom's future relationship with the European Union to monitor disinformation targeted at separatist groups and to ensure these groups are part of the discussion.

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72. Shannon Schumacher, "Brexit Divides the UK, but Partisanship and Ideology are Still Key Factors," Pew Research Center, October 28, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/28/brexit-divides-the-uk-but-partisanship-and-ideology-are-still-key-factors/.

73. Bobby Duffy, Kirstie Hewlett, Julian McCrae, and John Hall, *Divided Britain? Polarisation and Fragmentation Trends in the UK* (London: The Policy Institute, 2019), https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/divided-britain.pdf.

Regulatory Gaps

As highlighted previously, the United Kingdom's failure to adequately regulate sources of campaign financing has raised questions about funding received by the Conservative Party, Labour Party, and UKIP as well as the Leave campaign. Specifically, the law covering donations to political parties prohibits contributions from non-British companies and individuals, but it does not require disclosure of political donations if they are from "the beneficial owners of non-British companies that are incorporated in the EU and carry out business in the UK." This provision may have enabled foreign money to flow to UK political parties, particularly from companies incorporated in the European Union with opaque ownership structures.

The UK Electoral Commission, which is responsible for regulating and enforcing political campaign finance rules in the United Kingdom, has acknowledged that the rules are fragmented and outdated, particularly given the increased role social media and digital campaigning now play in elections. Since 2018, the Electoral Commission has increased its oversight role, launching investigations into the spending returns of the major political parties and levying fines for inaccurate filings.[74] It has also tried to update the rules for the digital age—for example, requiring digital imprints on all political advertising so it is transparent who financed them.

A related challenge is the need to crack down on illicit financing activity in general. In 2016, the United Kingdom took an important step toward greater transparency by introducing open registers of beneficial ownership such that anyone can see who owns a specific property.[75] Importantly, this will also apply to beneficial ownership on the United Kingdom's overseas territories (by 2021), and the crown dependencies have agreed to implement open registers (by 2023). Similarly, the 2017 Criminal Finance Act aims to crack down on money laundering, tax evasion, and financial crime through the issuance of Unexplained Wealth Orders (UWOs).[76] These are meant to target the beneficiaries of state corruption in places such as Russia, who are in turn investing in the United Kingdom. In April 2020, the United Kingdom's High Court, based on the advice of the United Kingdom's National Crime Agency (NCA), issued UWOs related to three London properties, which reportedly were worth $100 million (£80 million) and owned by relatives of Kazakhstan's former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Among those required to appear in court was Andrew Baker, a legal adviser connected to the Nazarbayev family. While the High Court ultimately exonerated Baker due to lack of evidence (the NCA plans to appeal the court's decision), the issuance of the UWO to an adviser of the actual suspect is an indication of the UK government's intent to also go after the "professional enablers" of financial crime such as their lawyers, advisers, and accountants.[77]

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74. Sam Power, "British Election Spending Laws Explained – and Why They Need Updating," *The Conversation*, May 27, 2018, https://theconversation.com/british-election-spending-laws-explained-and-why-they-need-updating-93980.
75. Ben Judah, Nate Sibley, and Andrew Mitchell, "Transatlantic Initiatives to Counter Kleptocracy: A Post-Brexit Discussion with Andrew Mitchell MP," (public event, The Hudson Institute, Washington, DC, February 24, 2020), https://www.hudson.org/events/1782-transatlantic-initiatives-to-counter-kleptocracy-a-post-brexit-discussion-with-andrew-mitchell-mp22020.
76. Criminal Finances Act of 2017, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/22/contents/enacted.
77. Ben Rose, "The Aliyev Fraud Case Shows that Financial Advisors Could Get Caught Up in Criminal Probes – View," EuroNews, April 27, 2020, https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/23/the-aliyev-fraud-case-shows-financial-advisors-

A final area of the regulatory regime that is essential to combatting disinformation is the regulations surrounding social media content and advertising. Traditional broadcast media in the United Kingdom is subject to legislation that requires it to ensure that any news is accurate and impartially provided. It is also subject to limitations on political broadcasts and advertising. Social media content is not held to these same standards. The United Kingdom does not have any legislation that regulates the veracity of news posted online, and its electoral law does not prohibit false or misleading information in political advertising. Compounding the difficulty of regulating the spread of misinformation and disinformation in the social media environment is the role of artificial intelligence (AI). On the one hand, AI algorithms can help identify both bots and trolls. On the other, AI increases the speed with which misleading or false stories and advertisements can be generated and disseminated. Additionally, social media's use of algorithms risks creating "echo chambers" in which the user is constantly directed to the same type of content as opposed to exposing them to a range of opinions and voices.[78] The April 2019 Online Harms White Paper, published by the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) in cooperation with the Home Office, makes a number of recommendations aimed at ensuring social media is held to the same standards as broadcast and print media.[79] While the United Kingdom has made significant progress in strengthening its regulatory networks based on lessons learned from the Brexit referendum and the 2017 and 2019 general elections, success lies not only in the regulations themselves but also in their effective enforcement.

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could-get-caught-up-in-criminal-probes-view.

78. Pablo Barbera, John T. Jost, Jonathan Nagler, Joshua A. Tucker, and Richard Bonneau, "Tweeting From Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber?" *Psychological Science 26, no. 10 (2015),* doi:10.1177/0956797615594620.

79. Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Secretary of State for the Home Department, *Online Harms White Paper.*

The United Kingdom's Response

As outlined above, the United Kingdom's awareness of and response to Russian influence activities have increased and evolved over the last two decades. What began as a focus on curbing illicit financing, money laundering, and tax evasion following the fall of the Soviet Union and an influx of wealth into the United Kingdom gradually grew into an awareness of the other malign influence activities this money might be enabling. The 2006 poisoning of former Russian Federal Security Agency (FSB) agent Alexander Litvinenko was an early wake-up call regarding Russia's disregard for international law and willingness to use disinformation to cover its tracks, but the emergence of the United Kingdom as a Russian target in its own right only emerged a decade later.

By 2017, both the presence of and fight against influence activities in the United Kingdom were in full swing. The UK Electoral Commission was investigating Russia's interference in the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign and 2017 general elections, and the 2018 National Security Capability Review (NSCR) captured Russian malign behavior among the key security threats facing the United Kingdom.[80] Rather than approaching disinformation simply as a strategic communications problem, the NSCR recognized it for what it is: a hostile state activity that requires handling as a security and counterintelligence issue and, consequently, a collective, whole-of-government approach to national security.[81] To this end, the 2018 NSCR introduced the Fusion Doctrine, which set about reorganizing Her Majesty's Government (HMG) to make best use of all its capabilities, including economic levers, military resources, and wider diplomatic efforts.[82]

The July 2019 launch of the United Kingdom's Defend Democracy Program is one example of the Fusion Doctrine in practice. Under the program, the Cabinet Office is charged with heading up all counter-disinformation and counterinfluence efforts for HMG.[83] It is supported in this effort by the Home Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and DCMS. The Home Office leads on the UK domestic response to disinformation and other influence activities, drawing on its experience in counterterrorism and radicalization. The FCO is responsible for the United Kingdom's international response

80. Her Majesty's Government, *National Security Capability Review.*
81. Interview with Cabinet Office official, London, January 15, 2020.
82. Her Majesty's Government, *National Security Capability Review.*
83. Oliver Dowden, "Written Statement to Parliament: Update on Tackling Intimidation in Public Life," Cabinet Office, November 5, 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/update-on-tackling-intimidation-in-public-life.

to disinformation, including capability and resilience building in nine countries abroad. Through this engagement, the United Kingdom is also culling lessons learned from Russian tactics abroad in order to inform the UK approach to combatting disinformation and influence activities.[84] DCMS plays a coordinating role and has the lead for UK counter-disinformation strategy and other new legislation.

In addition to this whole-of-government approach, another hallmark of the UK strategy to combatting malign influence activities is its focus on building resilience (i.e., the demand side) as opposed to simply focusing on limiting the supply or distribution of the disinformation.[85] Broadly speaking, the UK approach can be summarized along four lines of effort: expose, limit, counter, and punish. In the language of classic deterrence theory, measures must include both "deterrence by denial" (expose, limit) and "deterrence by punishment" (counter, punish) in order to be effective. The experience of countries on Russia's periphery demonstrates that Russia pushes until it meets costs and only then stops. Deterrence by denial alone will not be sufficient to change its behavior.

On the supply side, the goal is to limit the occurrence and spread of disinformation. Throughout 2018, the government took several steps to improve its ability to monitor, identify, and remove disinformation. Measures included expansion of the National Security Communications Team (NSCT) to tackle the strategic communications aspects of information operations and the Cabinet Office's establishment of a Rapid Response Unit (RRU) to quickly monitor, identify, and respond to misinformation and disinformation online.[86] For example, the RRU was instrumental in countering disinformation about the type and origins of the nerve agent used in the 2018 Skripal poisoning as well as false narratives about the Syrian airstrikes that same year. Importantly, the RRU's mandate to monitor trends enables it to act preemptively in countering disinformation, getting ahead of adversary tactics to strike either just before or immediately after a major decision, vote, or event. A final novel element in the UK approach is the requirement to *risk assess* the scale of the disinformation to determine whether it is even worth countering. Not only is responding to every incident unsustainable, in some cases, it risks amplification of the false story—what Margaret Thatcher dubbed "the oxygen of publicity." The United Kingdom learned this from dealing with the Irish Republican Army as well as with terrorist groups in Iraq and Afghanistan.[87]

A major component to the success of supply-side measures is the government's partnership with the private sector (e.g., getting them to remove disinformation and manipulated content, block and shut down fake social media accounts, or identify bots and trolls). While cooperation has been voluntary to date, the 2019 Online Harms White Paper calls for stronger measures such as a compulsory code of ethics for tech companies, the ability to launch legal action against those who breach the code, and requirements for social media companies to remove proven sources of disinformation.[88] Legislative and

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84. Interview with Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials, London, January 14, 2020.
85. Interview with Home Office officials, London, January 14, 2020.
86. Oliver Dowden, Penny Mordaunt, Cabinet Office, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, "Government Cracks Down on Spread of False Coronavirus Information Online," Cabinet Office, March 30, 2020, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-cracks-down-on-spread-of-false-coronavirus-information-online.
87. Interview with Cabinet Office official, London, January 15, 2020.
88. House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *Disinformation and 'Fake News': Final Report (Lon-*

non-legislative measures recommended in the paper are currently under consideration by parliament in consultation with other stakeholders. Beyond this cooperation between the government and the technology sector, more collaboration among social media platforms themselves is needed in order to compare tactics in containing the spread of disinformation.[89] A model for such collaboration exists in the form of the United Kingdom's Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, which exchanges best practices on tackling extremist and violent content on social media platforms.[90]

Yet perhaps more important are actions on the demand side. Insofar as some degree of disinformation will always be circulating through the information space, governments must also focus on building societal resilience.[91] This begins with enhancing media literacy, namely educating the public and politicians about the existence of disinformation in the media landscape and empowering them on how to identify it. In this regard, the UK government runs a number of digital media literacy campaigns for politicians and the public, such as the popular Don't Feed the Beast campaign, which encourages consumers to determine the reliability of online information before sharing it online.[92] Specifically, readers are encouraged to use the so-called SHARE checklist in order to verify the *source*; read beyond the *headline*; *analyze* the facts; check for *retouched* images; and look for *errors* in spelling, grammar, or URLs.[93] Complementing this are commercial media initiatives such as *The Guardian*'s NewsWise and the BBC Young Reporter project, which both help young people to navigate and think critically about the news they encounter.[94]

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don: House of Commons, 2019), https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1791/1791.pdf.

89. Interview with Department of Sport, Culture, and Media officials, London, January 15, 2020.

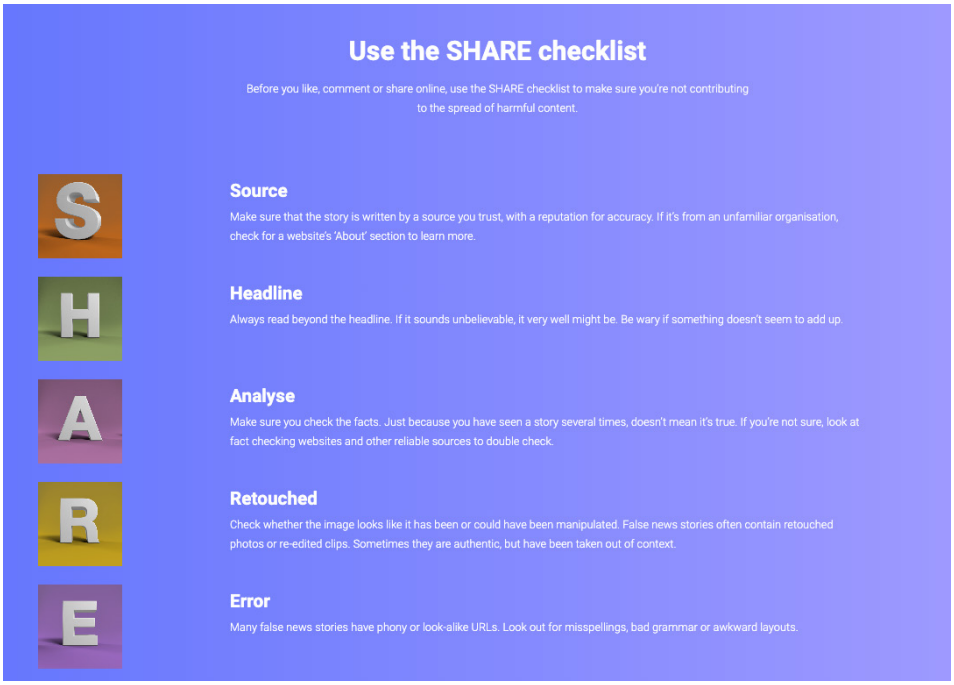
90. Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), https://www.gifct.org/.

91. Annina Claesson, "Coming Together to Fight Fake News: Lessons from the European Approach to Disinformation," CSIS, *New Perspectives in Foreign Policy* 17, April 2019, https://www.csis.org/coming-together-fight-fake-news-lessons-european-approach-disinformation.

92. "Don't Feed the Beast Campaign" video at the bottom of "SHARE Checklist," HMG, https://sharechecklist.gov.uk/..

93. See checklist on ibid. Graphic URL: https://kbiyx86als2gtl9f1owsrxmd-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/themes/Faded_WP_May_12_2019/faded/theme-assets/images/share-list-image.png.

94. "NewsWise," Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/newswise; and "What is BBC Young Reporter?" BBC, September 09, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/education-41001549.



Source: Cabinet Office, HM Government, "The Checklist," SHAREChecklist, https://sharechecklist.gov.uk/.

Common to all these efforts is the understanding that media literacy is a shared responsibility. As the UK government prepares to develop a new online media strategy, it will do so in close cooperation with relevant stakeholders, including digital, broadcast, and new media; educators; academics and researchers; community leaders; and civil society. In addition to resulting in a more informed strategy, this approach will help remedy the aforementioned problem of declining trust in the media.

The final element of the United Kingdom's counter disinformation strategy is "deterrence by punishment," namely imposing costs on malign actors to signal that the costs of their actions outweigh the benefits. Unfortunately, this is not easy in a hybrid environment where adversaries deliberately operate below the threshold of armed conflict and purposely obfuscate both the attack and its origin. As such, the responding country must be precise and resolute in their accusation and proportional in their response.

Fortunately, an analysis of the UK experience offers some indicators as to what deters Russia. In the case of the Skripal poisoning, UK officials' success was due to several factors.[95] First, there was coordinated messaging. Rather than each department issuing its own response (creating gaps for Russia to exploit), the various stakeholders ultimately coordinated their response through the Cabinet Office, resulting in a single unified message issued out of the Prime Minister's Office. Second, the messaging was followed by the public release of evidence to include the identity of the Russian agents, closed-circuit television footage of them around the crime scene, and records of their hotel and flights. Finally, the international community called out Russia on the international norms it had violated. Their words were then followed by punitive measures in the form of multiple

95. Tom Swarbrick, Elizabeth Braw, and Tom McTague, "A Pandemic Looms & Russia Using Chemical Weapons and Spin," Rule Britannia (podcast), January 24, 2020, https://open.spotify.com/episode/3oMrA7MI1v71ajERO4ORLt.

countries expelling Russian diplomats in retaliation for the attack. Taken together, this swift, coordinated national response backed by the weight of the international community and imposition of punitive measures exposed Russian malign influence activities and incompetence, embarrassing Russia in the eyes of its citizens. Over time, such reputational damage could cause more serious problems for the Russian government vis-à-vis the Russian people.

Measuring Impact

Measuring the impact of disinformation is methodologically challenging. While there may be a positive correlation between disinformation and a certain outcome, it is hard to prove causation between the two. As one UK official put it, disinformation is "non-linear, so it has more of a drop of water effect."[96] Consequently, researchers must draw on other indicators such as influence, spread, and consumption in order to assess risk and impact.

Voting records, public statements, and opinion polls can be useful in identifying influence. For example, in October 2019, Nigel Farage and other UKIP Members of the European Parliament (MEP) voted against a European Parliament resolution that called for greater action against Russian disinformation and election interference.[97] The vote was remarkable in that UKIP often abstains from votes in European Parliament, with an average abstention rate of 40 percent.[98] Likewise, public statements can be good indicators of influence—for example, when leaders repeat terms or lines of argumentation that originated from a known disinformation source. Farage's vociferous defense of Russian actions in Syria—namely equating the rationale for Russian military presence in Syria to that of NATO's presence in Afghanistan—channels the "moral equivalency" line of argumentation often invoked by Russia in defending its actions overseas. Other MEPs have made similar statements blaming the European Union for the Ukraine crisis and defending Russia's right to intervene in its "near abroad," a term not usually used by Western leaders in a positive manner.[99] Yet in all these examples, it is important not to equate influence with impact. For while disinformation may influence an individual's thinking on a certain issue, it is impossible to determine whether the disinformation, another factor, or a combination of factors was the decisive element in changing the individual's vote or opinion on that issue.

With regard to public opinion, there are indications that targeted disinformation efforts may have a small influence on public opinion in some cases. As mentioned previously, a

96. Interview with Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials, London, January 14, 2020.
97. Jennifer Rankin, "Brexit Party MEPs Vote Against Plans to Tackle Russian Propaganda," *Guardian,* November 10, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/10/brexit-party-meps-vote-against-measure-to-combat-russian-propaganda.
98. "EU Political Data," VoteWatchEU, https://www.votewatch.eu/.
99. Polyakova et al., *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses.*

government poll in the wake of the Skripal poisoning showed that perceptions of Russia's guilt in the attack decreased from 65 percent to 55 percent between March and September 2019 following an aggressive Russian information operation.[100] That said, it is impossible to determine whether there is a causal relationship between Russian disinformation efforts and the shift in public opinion. An equally plausible conclusion is that the shift is a reaction to the government's inconsistent messaging on the facts of the case in the days and weeks following the poisoning.

Finally, some analysts believe that tracking the spread and consumption of disinformation may give an indication of its reach and impact.[101] In many cases, the disinformation remains confined to a niche audience that already holds the same views, and it is only circulated on fringe platforms. When the spread and consumption are limited in this way, the disinformation is less likely to have an impact on headlines, policies, and debates. Conversely, disinformation is more likely to have an impact when it is picked up by mainstream media, spread across platforms, or amplified by well-known politicians, academics, or business leaders.[102] The case of the White Helmets, a volunteer rescue group that operates in rebel-held areas of Syria, shows the importance of tracing cross-platform information trajectories (i.e., across YouTube, Twitter, and non-mainstream media) in order to understand the full reach and potential impact of Russia's anti-White Helmets campaign.[103]

These observations have shaped the UK response to disinformation. Interlocutors across HMG observed that, while they rarely see evidence of impact, they can discern intent, consumption, and spread of disinformation. Thereafter, they use this picture to assess the level of risk the disinformation poses and direct resources to those cases likely to have the greatest (negative) impact.[104] This is the approach behind HMG's RESIST framework.[105] This framework provides "structured analysis techniques" to help users assess the goals, impact, and reach of the disinformation in order to decide whether and how to act.

Under the RESIST process, the first step is to consider the goal behind the disinformation. This might be economic gain, discrediting experts and leaders, increasing polarization, undermining national security and wellbeing, or a combination of motives. With this hypothesis in mind, the user should then assess the likelihood that this goal will be achieved by ascribing a level of risk on a scale ranging from "highly unlikely" to "almost certain."

The second step is to consider the impact or effect of the disinformation. Does it pose a significant risk to the general public in terms of national security, public safety, public health, or the ability to have a fair and balanced debate? Here, special attention should be paid to vulnerable audiences or key stakeholders whose changing views could suddenly impact outcomes.

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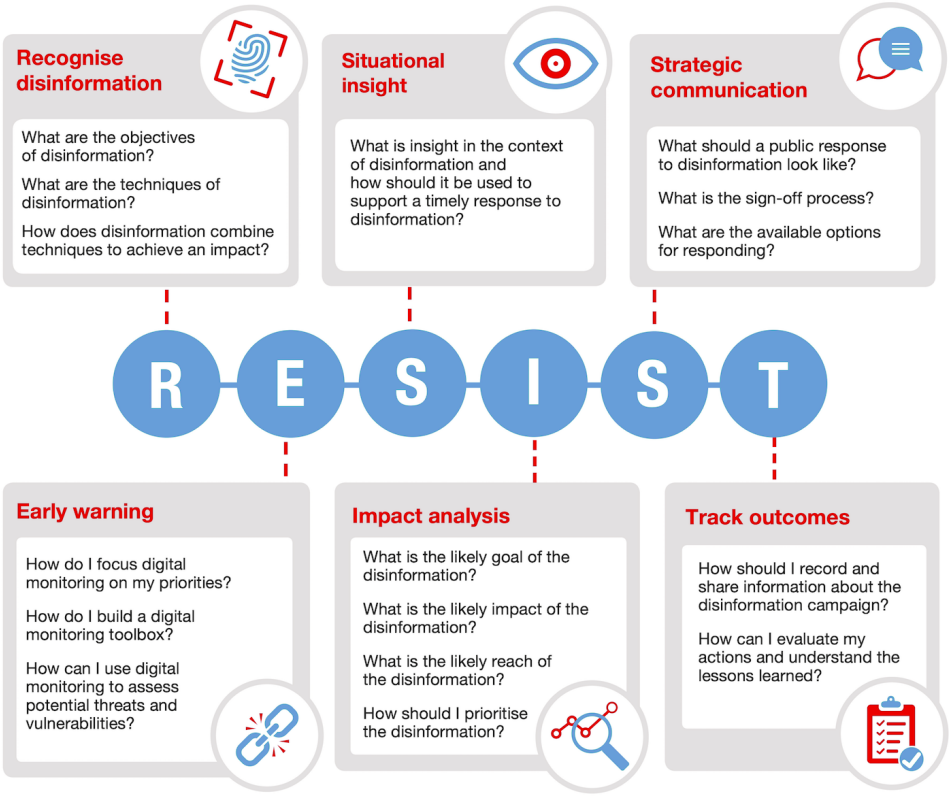
100. McTague, "Britain's Secret War with Russia."
101. Interview with Ben Nimmo, Atlantic Council, Skype, January 15, 2020.
102. Ibid.
103. Tom Wilson and Kate Starbird, "Cross-Platform Disinformation Campaigns: Lessons Learned and Next Steps," *The Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, January 14, 2020, https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/cross-platform-disinformation-campaigns/.
104. Interview with Home Office officials, London, January 14, 2020.
105. Government Communication Service, *RESIST Counter-disinformation toolkit.*

Finally, the RESIST framework demands an assessment of reach, namely how extensively will the disinformation spread? If the conclusion is that it will remain relatively confined to a niche audience and fringe social media platforms and see limited circulation and low engagement from users, there is less need for a robust, rapid response. Conversely, disinformation that spreads quickly to mainstream platforms and is widely recirculated among multiple groups is more concerning and requires action. An example of an incident that would rate as a high priority under the framework is the disinformation campaign in the days and weeks after the Skripal poisoning. Analysts recognized that the disinformation circulating in the days and weeks after the incident had the potential to affect national security and capture headlines and thus required immediate attention. Senior staff across the government were then briefed on the scale and impact of the disinformation, and an effective cross-Whitehall response was prepared. What made the UK response so effective in this instance is that, rather than try to counter every bit of disinformation, the government merely very publicly and repeatedly reasserted the facts.[106]

While not infallible, this framework provides a common method for vetting disinformation in a coherent and consistent way across the government. In the absence of better tools for measuring impact, drawing on a classical risk assessment model allows the United Kingdom to focus its response on those cases that are both high probability and high consequence (e.g., election interference).



Source: Government Communication Service, RESIST: Counter Disinformation Toolkit (Crown Copyright, Her Majesty's Government, 2019), 8, https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/RESIST-Counter-Disinformation-Toolkit.pdf.

106. Interview with Ben Nimmo, Atlantic Council, Skype, January 15, 2020.

Conclusion

For the last 15 years or so, Russia has waged a sustained and deliberate disinformation campaign in the United Kingdom that is designed to weaken the United Kingdom internally and diminish its position in the world. Specific disinformation efforts have included exploiting minority grievances, encouraging separatist movements, amplifying anti-EU sentiments, and trying to inflict reputational damage upon the United Kingdom's role in NATO and the value of its relationship with the United States. Through these efforts, Russia hoped to sow division within the United Kingdom, exacerbate distrust between the public and leaders, and distort the public conversation.

However, Russia did not create the conditions that allowed disinformation and other malign influence activities to thrive in the United Kingdom. Rather, it merely capitalized upon longstanding divisions, political and societal vulnerabilities, regulatory gaps in campaign financing and advertising, and a less regulated social media landscape to further its objectives. This suggests that identifying and repairing a country's specific vulnerabilities may be equally if not more important in combatting malign influence activities than identifying which malign influence activities have the greatest impact.

At the regulatory and organizational level, the United Kingdom has made significant progress. On the economic front, it has increased oversight on campaign donations, created greater transparency through open registers of beneficial ownership, and introduced the Criminal Finance Act to crack down on money laundering, tax evasion, and other financial crimes. While transparency on campaign financing and political advertising is still lagging, legislative and non-legislative measures are underway to address these issues. HMG has also taken steps to better organize itself to spot, assess, and counter disinformation by implementing a whole-of-government approach. On the supply side, efforts have focused on limiting and exposing the most damaging disinformation, with the government working closely with social media companies to monitor and remove false or misleading content and fake accounts (though discussions are ongoing as to whether this cooperation should remain voluntary or become compulsory). On the demand side, the United Kingdom rightly focused on building resilience by improving the media literacy of both children and adults, teaching them how to determine the reliability of online information and think critically about the news they encounter before sharing.

At the international level, the United Kingdom has improved its ability and willingness to work with other countries and multinational organizations to impose costs when certain

lines, such as a breach of international law, are crossed. The UK response to the Skripal poisoning demonstrates what a successful response looks like. Following the incident, UK government officials worked rapidly with the international community to confirm the source and origin of the nerve agent used, and they drew on independent work conducted by the investigative journalist collective Bellingcat to confirm the identities and trace the movements of the perpetrators.[107] Upon observing a flurry of malign influence activity in the information space, they smartly resisted responding to every bit of disinformation and instead constantly reasserted the facts. The result was a swift, coordinated national response backed by the weight of the international community and an imposition of punitive measures in the form of diplomatic expulsions and sanctions for Russia.

On the question of impact, the lesson from the UK case study is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to accurately measure impact. There are too many contributing factors in what is a non-linear environment. And while metrics and anecdotes on the reach, spread, and consumption of disinformation can tell us something about its influence and likely impact, these are not conclusive. For now, the United Kingdom's RESIST structured analysis technique, coupled with classic risk assessment methods, has helped it determine whether and how to respond and where to best allocate its limited counter-disinformation resources.[108] In many low-risk cases, the decision is to not respond at all and simply to let the false story fizzle out. This leaves more room to focus efforts on high-risk cases, namely where it is determined to be highly likely or almost certain that the disinformation will spread widely and affect national security.

In order to better understand the impact, there is a need for long-term, sustained studies to look at the effects of disinformation over time. Additionally, more pooling and sharing of information internationally and among various national stakeholders would be helpful in building a better picture of impact. This could include information sharing on specific incidents, patterns of behavior, and best practices for responding.[109] Over time, this will also improve countries' abilities to anticipate attacks and their tools for responding.

Yet to truly erode the basis upon which disinformation flourishes, action needs to go beyond combatting the disinformation itself. In the first instance, it is about recognizing and addressing one's own shortcomings. For the United Kingdom, this means improving societal resilience by addressing underlying vulnerabilities and polarization such as societal polarization, distrust in the media, or a lack of faith in electoral processes and elected leaders. At its core, building resilience entails constantly reinforcing the key elements of good governance, such as accountability, transparency, and citizen participation.

Another challenge is finding the right balance between combatting disinformation and preserving the fundamental aspects of an open, democratic society. These include political freedom, freedom of expression, and allowance for a plurality of views and opinions. It is equally counterproductive to mimic Russia's own behavior in countering disinformation

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107. Bellingcat Investigation Team, "Full Report: Skripal Poisoning Suspect, Dr. Alexander Mishkin, Hero of Russia," Bellingcat, October 9, 2018, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/10/09/full-report-skripal-poisoning-suspect-dr-alexander-mishkin-hero-russia/.
108. Government Communication Service, *RESIST Counter-disinformation toolkit.*
109. Interview with Keir Giles, Chatham House, London, January 14, 2020.

(e.g., censoring critical or unpopular voices, banning certain platforms, or bypassing rules and norms in the name of security). Likewise, on the technical side, it is important to preserve the conditions that encourage innovation and creativity.

In the end, disinformation and other influence activities are not about a single incident but rather the cumulative effect. Left unchecked, it will gradually erode the United Kingdom's position in the world as well as internal measures of resilience. These include the credibility of the government and elected leaders, citizens' confidence in democratic processes, the existence of free and fair elections and an independent judiciary, a diverse and independent media environment, and vibrant public discourse. If the distinction between false and genuine is permitted to erode—and the commitment to pursue the truth is abandoned—the broader consequences for open, democratic societies will be severe.

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Rachel Ellehuus is deputy director and senior fellow with the Europe Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Her research focuses on the future of NATO; the transatlantic relationship; U.S.-European Union relations; and regional security and defense dynamics, particularly in Northern Europe and the Arctic. Before coming to CSIS, she served as principal director for European and NATO Policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense at the U.S. Department of Defense. From 2009 to 2012, Ms. Ellehuus was based in London, assigned to the Strategy Unit in the UK Ministry of Defense. Prior to her work at the Department of Defense, Ms. Ellehuus was a researcher at the Danish Institute of International Affairs and lived in Prague, Czech Republic, where she worked at the EastWest Institute. She holds a BA in international relations and German from Colgate University and an MA in political science and European affairs from the College of Europe (Bruges/Natolin).

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