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Confusion, Destabilization and Chaos: Russia's Hybrid Warfare against Canada and its Allies

by Marcus Kolga
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

CONFUSION, DESTABILIZATION AND CHAOS: RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE AGAINST CANADA AND ITS ALLIES

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O perating in the shadows of the grey zone that lies between war and peace, Russia's hybrid warfare aims to undermine targeted societies and democracies through a toxic mix of disinformation, cyber-attacks, transnational repression, economic pressure and the use of both regular and irregular military force. These operations are intended to support the Putin regime's ultimate objectives: to erode Western alliances, re-consolidate Russia's Soviet-era regional and global influence and remain in power as long as possible.

The Russian government's use of non-kinetic strategies and tactics to advance its interests and gain an advantage over its enemies is not new and can be traced back to the Soviet era. However, evolving technologies, shifting media landscapes and the growing emphasis placed on hybrid warfare in Russia's modern military doctrine represent a persistent and expanding threat to liberal Western democracies and societies, including Canada.

Vladimir Putin's domestic political authority and legitimacy rely on his regime's ability to demonstrate and project strength and control – both domestically and geopolitically. Putin's guiding ambition has been to reverse what he believes is the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century: the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin's effort to restore Russia's bygone czarist and Soviet imperial glory is as much a tactical domestic propaganda operation intended to support Putin's effort to extend his reign to 2036, as it is meant to further enrich Russia's corrupt oligarchs and kleptocrats. What has so far prevented Putin from fully realizing his goal is a strong and united transatlantic alliance – one that is committed to deterring Putin's foreign aggression against allied Western democracies. Breaking down our alliances and the cohesion within them is a critical component of the Putin regime's strategy to survive, compete, and when possible, dominate. Undermining and subverting the democratic processes and societies in NATO member states are part of this strategy.

During his first 21 years in office, Putin has frequently challenged unity within the transatlantic community and the commitment to collective defence. Cyber-attacks, influence operations and information warfare are deployed to destabilize and undermine democratic processes and erode Western trust in media, government and societies in allied nations, and those like Ukraine and Georgia, which seek to join them.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine are extreme examples of Russian hybrid warfare. The mixture of irregular kinetic warfare with information and psychological warfare has resulted in a grinding, low-intensity conflict that is intended to perpetually sabotage Ukraine's goal of becoming a full member of the transatlantic community.

The impact of the Russian government's hybrid activity against Western liberal democracies was felt most notably in 2016, when Kremlin cyber- and information operations targeted the U.S. presidential elections, resulting in extreme political polarization. The divisions that Russian hybrid operations kindled in 2016 ultimately led to explosive violence that befell the U.S. Capitol on January 6. As noted in the U.S. Senate investigation into the Kremlin's 2016 interference, the

destructive impact of the Kremlin's operations has been significant while the cost has remained extremely low.

As Canadian experts and the intelligence community have repeatedly warned, Canada is also a target of Russian disinformation and influence operations. In addition to its membership in G7 and NATO, Canada's leadership of Operation Unifier to train Ukrainian forces and its leadership of NATO's enhanced forward presence mission in Latvia make Canada a target for Russian government propagandists. Russia's recent claim to resources under the entire Arctic Ocean, up to the edge of Canada's 200-mile exclusive economic zone, may create the conditions for an escalation of Russian hybrid warfare against Canadian interests.

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered new opportunities for the Kremlin and its allies to flood the information environment with toxic narratives that have contributed to vaccine hesitancy and the rejection of public health protocols introduced to protect us.

A Modern Spin on Hybrid Warfare's Soviet Roots

A critical element of Soviet-era hybrid warfare included the clandestine use of disinformation, propaganda, espionage and sabotage, also known as "active measures." Moscow deployed these tactics to destabilize and undermine enemy nations and discredit activists and leaders who were critical of the Soviet regime.

A well-known example of post-Soviet use of hybrid warfare took place in April 2007, when the Kremlin and its proxies in Estonia attempted to destabilize the Baltic nation through a manufactured ethnic crisis between Estonian Russian speakers and indigenous Estonians. Research published by Estonia's International Centre for Defence and Security has demonstrated that the Kremlin's preparations to exploit the relocation of a Soviet-era Second World War monument known as the Bronze Soldier were undertaken well in advance while the Estonian government debated the issue. The Estonian National Security Authority stated in its 2007 annual report that Russian special forces were involved in provoking the riots and that Russian diplomats met with Russian nationalist extremists in Tallinn in advance of them. Simultaneously, the Russian government engaged in the first-ever state-backed cyber-attack against Estonia, targeting government, media and banking websites with denial of service (DDoS) attacks to maximize the destabilization caused by the rioting. Estonia endured and learned from the crisis, as did the Kremlin.

The following year, Russian forces invaded Georgia under the pretext of assisting separatists. Then in 2014, Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms and private military contractors masquerading as domestic "insurgents" invaded Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, after which the Kremlin staged a referendum to justify the illegal occupation of Crimea. The Kremlin continues to support and supply the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine while actively seeking to destabilize the government in Kyiv in efforts to pull Ukraine back into Moscow's geopolitical orbit and control.

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After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO responded by expanding its air policing missions over Baltic Sea region nations and by establishing enhanced forward presence missions to deter further Russian action against member states. Combined with targeted sanctions, the response has thus far been effective in deterring further Russian military aggression.

Disinformation and Influence Operations in Canada

In its 2020 report, Canada's National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NISCOP) warned that "foreign interference activities pose a significant risk to national security, principally by undermining Canada's fundamental institutions and eroding the rights and freedoms of Canadians." The report identifies Russia, China and Iran as the primary threats to Canadian democracy. In a 2018 speech, Canadian Security Intelligence Service director David Vigneault identified espionage and foreign interference as the greatest threats to Canada's prosperity and national interests.

Over the past decade, foreign regimes have used disinformation and influence operations to discredit elected Canadian officials, activists and critics of those regimes, and to influence debate on important national issues. Polarizing disinformation targeting sensitive national issues causes confusion and intensifies divisions. In extreme cases, it can cause physical harm.

Earlier this year, Twitter released a large dataset of tweets belonging to banned accounts once controlled by the Kremlin-linked Russian Internet Research Agency, also known as the St. Petersburg Troll Farm. The IRA was a major part of Russia's interferenc e operations in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. A recent study of several thousand deleted tweets revealed that issues related to Canadian interests and targeting both Conservative and Liberal MPs demonstrated the Kremlin's interests in manipulating and distorting Canadian debate.

Russian state media and independent platforms aligned with the Kremlin have repeatedly targeted Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, who is Ukrainian-Canadian, and the Ukrainian diaspora. Disinformation aimed at discrediting Freeland as a "Nazi whitewasher" when she was Foreign Affairs minister was peddled to Canadian journalists by a Russian diplomat in Ottawa in 2017. The story was spread by fringe conspiracy theory websites and later emerged, albeit briefly, in Canada's national media.

Russia's leading state-produced news program, Vesti Nedeli (News of the Week), hosted by Dmitry Kiselyov, who is on Canada's sanctions list, aired a program in January 2019 to discredit Canada's Ukrainian community. The segment rehashed Soviet-era anti-Ukrainian propaganda conspiracies, falsely claiming that Canada's Ukrainian community is composed of neo-fascists who control Canada's foreign policy. Such narratives support the Russian government's efforts to delegitimize and mute the views of Canada's Central and Eastern European communities and their status as Canadians, in support of Russia's broader hybrid warfare against Ukraine and the Baltic nations.

COVID-19 and Russian Hybrid Warfare

Most recently, the Russian government has taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic as part of its information warfare against Western nations. The European Union's External Action Service warned about Russian COVID-19 disinformation in March 2020, stating that "the overarching aim of Kremlin disinformation is to aggravate the public health crisis in Western countries … in line with the Kremlin's broader strategy of attempting to subvert European societies."

The Kremlin's COVID-19 propaganda narratives have ranged from conspiracies about the virus's origins to the amplification of anti-mask and anti-vaccination movements. These have resulted in toxic social divisions which have morphed into significant anti-government movements. Worse yet is that Russian state-backed narratives promoting vaccine hesitancy are making both Westerners and Russians sicker. Articles like these about Western vaccines have been published in both Russian and English on the website of Russia's embassy in Canada.

The Kremlin has also exploited COVID-19 to spread disinformation to discredit Canadian Forces in Latvia. On September 24, 2021, the European Council publicly attributed a widespread global disinformation campaign known as "Ghostwriter" to the Russian government. In April 2020, the "Ghostwriter" group produced disinformation in Latvia that falsely claimed Canadian soldiers were responsible for introducing COVID-19 in Latvia. The article included a fabricated quote attributed to the Canadian commander of the NATO eFP which was later exposed and corrected by Latvian Defence Minister Artis Pabriks.

Such narratives are designed to stoke fear and anger towards Canadian and allied NATO troops serving in the Baltic States and to help the Kremlin achieve its objective of eroding alliance cohesion.

Cyber-Threats

As our reliance on the internet grows, so does our exposure to attacks from criminal and state-backed actors. From ransomware attacks that seize personal computers to those that target our critical infrastructure and affect the lives of millions, foreign state-supported and sanctioned cyber-attacks have become common occurrences that we have so far failed to deter.

In 2007, Russian government hackers took down several Estonian media, government and financial websites in the first cyber-attack attributed to a foreign government. In 2015, Russian state hackers shut down Ukraine's power grid in the first major public infrastructure cyber-attack by a foreign state. In 2018, the U.S. government reported a large-scale Russian government attack on "multiple U.S. critical infrastructure sectors, including the energy, nuclear, commercial facilities, water, aviation, and critical manufacturing sectors."

Cyber-attacks that compromise critical infrastructure, including power, municipal services and hospitals, can cause significant economic damage and put lives at risk. Russian criminal hackers

have seized and frozen hospital systems, while a recent ransomware attack against a U.S. pipeline company threatened to bring transportation on the U.S. eastern seaboard to a standstill.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, several Russian government hacks were detected, targeting coronavirus and vaccine researchers, while Chinese hackers targeted vaccine cold chains.

Canada's Communications Security Establishment warned in its 2020 report that "State-sponsored actors are very likely attempting to develop cyber capabilities to disrupt Canadian critical infrastructure, such as the supply of electricity, to further their goals."

Weaponization of Migration

The latest hybrid threat to NATO countries in the Baltic Sea region is the weaponization of migration by Russia's close ally, Belarus. Lithuania, Latvia and Poland have all declared states of emergency over concerns about the effect of large numbers of migrants who have suddenly appeared on their borders with Belarus. Since July, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has engaged in an effort to destabilize Lithuania, Latvia and Poland by flooding the borders with migrants.

Migrants, mostly from Iraq, are offered trips to Europe via Belarus. Once in Belarus, the migrants are transported in government vehicles to Belarus's border where they are released. A recently released video by Lithuanian authorities clearly shows Belarusian authorities aggressively threatening and pushing foreign migrants across its border with Lithuania in broad daylight.

Former Lithuanian foreign minister Linas Linkevičius said in an interview for this report that in September 2021, his country had "more than 4,000 migrants inside our territory." He said that Belarusian authorities "issue visas to the migrants and provide them a hotel in Minsk and basically convert them into migrants. They are brought to the border and are instructed where they should cross the border illegally at night time." Linkevičius says that Belarus has become bolder, more aggressive and is "now forcing migrants across more openly, even in the presence of Lithuanian border guards."

In early August, Iraq suspended all flights to Belarus after EU officials pressured Iraq to terminate them. Lithuania's foreign minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, also visited Baghdad and asked the Iraqi government to "promise that they will launch an investigation into a possible criminal network organised by Belarus in Iraq, which exploits the people of Iraq, selling them trips to the European Union, although they do not travel farther than a migrant camp." While the flow of migrants has slowed since Iraq suspended the flights to Belarus, Linkevičius says there are still attempts to cross the border and that he is concerned about the future exploitation of refugees from Africa and Afghanistan.

The crisis also threatens to expose Lithuania, Latvia and Poland to disinformation that distorts and manipulates their efforts to defend their borders against the manufactured crisis, characterizing them as "anti-refugee." Russian state media have already exploited the crisis by

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publishing narratives that accuse the Baltic nations of hypocrisy in their dealings with migrants. Such narratives are intended to manufacture a moral conflict between Western allies on the issue of migration and are part of the Kremlin's hybrid efforts to erode NATO's cohesion.

Canada and its NATO allies should prepare for a significant rise in refugees fleeing Afghanistan. In August, 32 Afghan migrants appeared on Poland's border with Belarus. According to UNHCR, 270,000 Afghans have become displaced since January 2021. This number is expected to rise significantly and foreign adversaries could use the coming crisis to destabilize Western nations.

As shocking as the weaponization of migration may be for Canadians, this tactic is not new for the Kremlin. In 2016, the U.S. supreme allied commander in Europe, Gen. Philip Breedlove, told Congress that Putin was exploiting the bloody crisis in Syria and "deliberately weaponizing migration from Syria in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve." Over 1.4 million Syrian refugees arrived in Europe during that time. The Syrian refugee crisis directly impacted the 2015 Canadian elections after the body of a young Kurdish refugee, Alan Kurdi, was photographed washed up on a beach in Turkey. The child's family hoped to come to Canada as refugees but failed to submit a completed application. Canada's opposition parties capitalized on the confusion and misinformation about the status of the application and incorrectly blamed then-minister of Immigration Chris Alexander for mishandling the case. The Syrian refugee crisis influenced the outcome of the 2015 Canadian federal election.

How Canada Can Prepare for Future Hybrid Warfare

Regarding Russian aggression in Europe, the Canadian government and its allies have successfully stopped the Kremlin's advance through a combination of sanctions and physical deterrence. Those same principles should be applied to all areas of hybrid warfare. The cost of engaging in hybrid warfare against Canada and its allies remains low and those who seek to undermine our democracy can do so without consequences.

Canada should place and actively enforce sanctions on foreign officials and entities that engage in information warfare and interference operations. This includes all state-sponsored platforms, like Russia's RTR Planeta, RT and Sputnik, which produce and promote disinformation that is harmful to Canadian interests and our democracy. Additionally, Chinese state media CCTV and CGTN and Belarusian state platform BelTA, which have all broadcast forced confessions, should be immediately removed from Canadian airwaves and placed on our sanctions list.

Long-term citizen and democratic resilience against information warfare depends on developing broad fundamental awareness of it, and the ability among all members of society to recognize and filter out bad information.

Sweden, Taiwan, Finland, Lithuania and Latvia offer successful examples of how to foster broad social digital literacy from early childhood. Through digital and media literacy training, they provide their citizens with cognitive defence resources they need to critically assess the

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information they are exposed to on social media platforms and beyond. Also, all Canadian elected and senior public officials and their staff should undergo regular training to recognize malign foreign information and influence operations, and defend themselves against it.

To ensure complete transparency in foreign influence operations, all former elected and public officials, diplomats and academics should be required to register their activities when employed by non-allied governments and organizations supported by them, to advance Canada's interests. This includes those who receive positions on corporate boards and organizations that promote trade and other foreign interests.

Canada and its allies should also intensify their efforts to support civil society activists who advocate for human rights and basic democratic values in Russia and Belarus, as well as the independent journalists and publications targeted for repression by the Putin and Lukashenko regimes.

Finally, the new Canadian government must heed the repeated warnings of our intelligence community and experts about the threat of foreign interference. The threat is not simply limited to the digital realm of social media platforms nor is it limited to election cycles; it is persistent, growing and endangers the very fabric of our society and democracy.

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▶ About the Author

Marcus Kolga *is a documentary filmmaker, journalist, human rights activist and a leading Canadian analyst of foreign disinformation and influence operations.*

He is a regular commentator on international affairs and human rights and his articles have been published by The Toronto Star, The National Post, The New York Daily Mail, Macleans, The Atlantic Council, The Globe and Mail, and other European publications.

Marcus led the Canadian civil society campaign for Magnitsky human rights sanctions legislation and has actively led and contributed to similar efforts in Estonia, Latvia, Sweden and Australia. He has spoken and testified in the U.S. Capitol and the UK, Australian, Canadian and Estonian Parliaments about Magnitsky Sanctions, foreign disinformation and Interpol reform.

He has produced several internationally screened and broadcast documentary films that have focused on international affairs and human rights including the Soviet Gulag, and NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan.

In 2018 he received a Magnitsky Global Human Rights award for his advocacy work on human rights.

He is a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute Center for Advancing Canada's Interests Abroad.

▶ Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

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