
Russian Foreign Election Interventions Since 1991

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Russian interference in the 2016 election in the United States is part of a long pattern of interference dating back to the early 1990s. What did Russia seek to achieve and what were the impacts? Utilizing a range of publicly available sources, we compiled an original [dataset](#) of all 27 instances of Russian interference in foreign elections since 1991. We describe the nature of the interferences and whether the results of the elections were in line with the apparent Russian intentions. We include an admittedly subjective assessment of the degree to which Russian actions had a decisive impact on the results.

We identify two waves of Russian efforts to influence regime outcomes beyond its borders. The first wave targeted only post-Soviet countries and relied on a relatively conventional set of strategies. A second, dramatically expanded wave began in 2015 that targeted a range of established democracies in the West and involved a variety of new and sophisticated strategies. Despite the frequency of Russian meddling, we find that Russia's activities have so far had a limited impact. The first wave of Russian interference sought to promote pro-Russian candidates but not autocracy *per se*, and in some cases actually fostered greater political pluralism. Furthermore, these interventions often did more to undermine than to bolster Russia's geopolitical interests. In contrast, the second wave is clearly aimed at undermining democratic governance in the West. At the same time, there is little evidence that Russia has had much of an impact on Western democracies.

Overall, Russian information warfare is often a drop in the bucket in Western democracies that have high levels of political competition and dynamic medias. In most of these cases, there already exist many sources of misinformation and support for populist positions. At the same time, the potential for Russia to compromise key Western politicians and disrupt the voting process itself presents a potentially serious threat to democracy.

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The First Wave, 1991-2014: Former Soviet States

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia began interfering in the domestic politics of countries in its “near abroad” (see **Table 1**). These early interventions relied on relatively conventional financial and diplomatic efforts to shape events and often reflected a somewhat crude understanding of the dynamics of public opinion in the target countries. For example, the Russian government [provided](#) assistance to pro-Russian politicians in the presidential elections in Belarus and Ukraine in 1994. Moscow provided cheap energy supplies to support the campaign of incumbent Viacheslav Kebich in Belarus, and positive [media coverage](#) to the opposition leader Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine.

Many observers argue that the first wave of Russian interference was the result of a desire to [promote](#) authoritarianism. While it is almost certainly the case that President Vladimir Putin, as Mark Kramer of the Harvard Davis Center [says](#), “has been most comfortable dealing with authoritarian leaders who will support Russian interests,” the Russian government gave little priority to promoting autocracy as such. In fact, the Kremlin’s goal was to [support](#) pro-Russian candidates rather than autocracy. Indeed, in a few cases such as Ukraine in 1994 and Moldova in 2005, Russian intervention inadvertently [bolstered](#) pluralism by attempting to undermine anti-Russian autocrats.

Many of Russia’s interventions failed. Despite Moscow’s geopolitical dominance in the post-Soviet region, only four out of eleven cases of interference in the first wave turned out in Russia’s favor. For example, the [three elections](#) that are widely seen as clear examples of Russian interference in post-Soviet elections—Ukraine in 2002 and 2004, and Moldova in 2005—were all elections that saw victories by anti-Russian forces. Only once, in Ukraine in 1994, is there [plausible evidence](#) that Russian intervention was decisive. In this case, Russian television blanketing Ukraine gave the pro-Russian candidate Leonid Kuchma media exposure he otherwise lacked due to President Leonid Kravchuk’s control over Ukrainian television stations.

The Second Wave, 2015-Today: Western Democracies

Beginning in 2015, Russian interference expanded dramatically in scope (see **Table 1**). Russian interventions began to target consolidated Western democracies for the first time [since](#) the Cold War. Over the last three years, Moscow intervened in elections in the United States, Germany, France, and Britain, among others. Russia has [given money](#) to far right parties such as the National Front in France (including [loaning](#) it millions in 2014) and the neo-fascist Northern League in Italy. Russian strategies have varied widely, including the [likely sponsoring](#) of a failed October 2016 [coup attempt](#) in Montenegro to [prevent](#) its NATO ascension and [waging](#) disinformation campaigns in other Western democracies. In the 2016 U.S. election, the disinformation campaign included the [creation](#) of fake Facebook accounts that may have reached 126 million

Americans (similar tactics were apparently [used](#) in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), [organizing](#) anti-refugee protests, [disseminating](#) leaked emails and fake documents to WikiLeaks, and [engaging](#) in cyberattacks against state voter registration systems. Finally, in [France](#), [Germany](#), and [Norway](#), political parties have been the victim of phishing attacks.

Have Second Wave Interventions Had Any Impact?

While much has been written about recent Russian interventions, few have examined whether such activities have actually influenced the politics of targeted countries. At first glance, Russia would seem to have had an enormous impact. Indeed, 10 of the 16 cases of interference since 2015 turned out at least partially the way that Russia apparently hoped. For example, the Brexit referendum, which was the [target](#) of Russian intervention, threw the EU into disarray. Similarly, the [Czech](#) elections in 2017 saw the victory of the populist Eurosceptic Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. The remaining seven cases of Russian intervention brought mixed results. For example, in the United States in 2016, Russia got a Trump victory but failed to secure an end to sanctions. Similarly, in France in 2017, the National Front did better than in the past but it still [lost](#) by a large margin to the pro-EU Emmanuel Macron.

Most importantly, upon closer examination, it is far from clear that the Kremlin's efforts were decisive in accounting for these outcomes. First and foremost, a variety of other factors contemporaneous with Russian interference [likely affected](#) these elections and referenda, such as a wave of migration into Europe and an increasing distrust in mainstream parties. Of the nine cases that turned out in Russia's favor, just three—Bulgaria, the Netherlands, and the United States in 2016—can plausibly be tied to Russian intervention. However, a closer look at these three cases shows little clear evidence of Russian influence.

First, Russian meddling in Bulgaria has been long running, and Sofia is highly [dependent](#) on Moscow for energy imports. Russia was accused of bankrolling protests in 2012 and 2013, and has [backed](#) the far right, anti-EU Ataka party since the mid-2000s. Ultimately, Rumen Radev and his Eurosceptic, pro-Moscow platform [defeated](#) Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) candidate Tsetska Tsacheva. However, since taking office, Radev has [offered](#) "expressions of strong support for NATO and the EU [which] indicate an intention to maintain the status quo with these institutions." Moreover, Borisov's party [won](#) a plurality in the March 2017 elections and he [returned](#) as prime minister.

Next, Dutch voters in April 2016 resoundingly rejected an EU-Ukraine Association Agreement that had been the [target](#) of a Russian disinformation campaign. However, the turnout was very low (32 percent) and many voters [said](#) "they were opposing not only the treaty but wider European policymaking on matters ranging from the migrant

crisis to economics.” As such, it is difficult to separate the specific role played by Russian disinformation relative to general anti-establishment protest voting. Moreover, as the referendum was nonbinding, the Dutch parliament ignored the results and backed the Association Agreement, which came into force on September 1, 2017.

Finally, the 2016 U.S. election represents the most successful Russian undertaking in this second wave. Many commentators, including well-versed researchers like [Ezra Klein](#) at Vox and [Harry Enten](#) at FiveThirtyEight, believe that Russian intervention played a key role in the election. In fact, the sheer breadth and extent of the Russian interference—hacked emails, fake Twitter and Facebook accounts, attacks on the voting system—makes it is hard to believe that such actions did not have some kind of impact. Nonetheless, there is little direct evidence that Russian interference was critical to Trump’s victory. At worst, the role of Russian influence is equivalent to the impact of pneumonia in killing those afflicted with AIDS: it only has influence because the body politic is already in deep crisis.

Above all, American politics was extremely [polarized](#) long before Russian forces began distributing provocative posts in social media. Furthermore, domestic and other sources of polarizing rhetoric and fake news [dwarf](#) the scale of the Russian activities. Indeed, homegrown misinformation was “[vastly more prevalent](#)” than Russian misinformation in the run up to the 2016 election.

There is insufficient proof that the hacked emails had any impact on the election. The two biggest releases of emails occurred in late July with the release of the DNC emails and in early October with the publication of the “John Podesta” emails. If the release of these emails had a major impact on Clinton’s approval, we would expect her support in polls to fall when their content became widely known. Indeed, in the week after FBI Director James Comey’s announcement that he had found new evidence related to the Clinton email scandal, Clinton’s poll numbers [plummeted](#) just before the election. By contrast, the evidence of Russia’s impact is far less clear. While Clinton’s support noticeably declined in the week following the release of the DNC emails in July, her support quickly [rebounded](#) during the Democratic Convention. And following the release of the “Podesta emails” in October, support for Clinton *increased*—largely as a result of the release the Access Hollywood video of Trump confessing to sexual assault. Thus, whatever impact the hacked emails had, their influence was swamped by other campaign events.

None of this [shows](#) that Russia had no influence on the outcome. It is possible that the hacked emails reduced Clinton’s bounce in the polls after the Democratic Convention and the release of the Access Hollywood tape. Furthermore, the release of the DNC emails (that were incorrectly interpreted as evidence that the DNC “rigged” the primaries in favor of Clinton) may have hardened Bernie Sanders’ supporters’ opposition to Clinton. But as of yet, we simply do not know.

One of the reasons why these various arguments warrant attention is that the close margin of the election means that virtually *any* factor, no matter how small, can be argued to have tipped the election. This close margin, however, had nothing to do with Russia. Polarization in American politics [existed](#) decades before either Trump or Putin entered the scene. Finally, it is worth pointing out that Russia clearly failed to achieve its main strategic goal of its interference in U.S. politics. Even if Russia *did* tip the election in Trump's favor, this result has done little to ease U.S. sanctions (although Trump has arguably been effective at hindering new sanctions).

Conclusion

While the 2016 election is surely the most successful example of Russian second wave interference, there is very little clear evidence that such meddling had a decisive impact on the outcomes. The fact that Russian influence is even an issue stems much more from the long-term crisis of American democracy than anything Russia has done. Russia is much more of a symptom than a cause of this crisis.

But all of this does not mean we should ignore Russian interference. While Russian information warfare is unlikely to have much of an impact in open democracies with independent media sources, Russian interference can still undermine elections in other ways. In particular, the hacking of an election count, attempted by Russia [in Ukraine](#) in 2014 and [in the United States](#) in 2016, could potentially throw into doubt electoral results. If successful, such a measure would create a serious and unprecedented crisis. Furthermore, even if Russian actions do not affect electoral results, the Russian government can still compromise democratically elected decisionmakers. Thus, a central question right now is whether Trump's policies toward Russia are affected by blackmail material (such as evidence of money laundering by Trump) or Russian financing of Trump owned businesses. While Russia may not be able to alter the results of elections, it can still damage democracy in other ways.

Table 1. Russian Interference in Foreign Elections Since 1991

Year	Target Country	Target Event	Description	Outcome Favorable to Russia?	Evidence of Russian Impact?
2017	Czech Republic	General election	Disinformation campaign	Yes	Low
	France	Presidential election	Cyberattacks, disinformation campaign, financial support to FN	Partial	Low
	Germany	Federal election	Cyberattacks, disinformation campaign	Partial	Low-Medium
	Malta	General election	Cyberattacks	No	Low
	Netherlands	General election	Disinformation campaign	Partial	Low
	Spain	Catalonia independence referendum	Disinformation campaign	Partial	-
2016	Austria	Presidential election	Support for FPÖ	Partial	Low
	Bulgaria	Presidential elections	Disinformation campaign, cyberattacks on Central Election Commission (2015)	Partial	Medium
	Italy	Constitutional referendum	Disinformation campaign, ties to far right parties	No	Low
	Montenegro	Parliamentary elections	Cyberattacks, coup attempt	No	Low
	Norway	Labour party operations	Cyberattacks	No	Low
	Netherlands	Nonbinding referendum on EU-Ukraine Association Agreement	Disinformation campaign	Partial	Medium
	United Kingdom	Referendum on EU membership	Disinformation campaign	Yes	Low
	United States	Presidential election	Disinformation campaign, cyberattacks	Partial	Medium
2015	Germany	CDU party operations	Cyberattacks	No	Low
	United Kingdom	General election	Disinformation campaign	No	Low
2014	Moldova	Parliamentary elections	Direct financial support to pro-Moscow party (Patria)	No	Low
	Ukraine	Presidential election	Cyberattacks, attempts to fake vote totals	No	Low
2010	Ukraine	Presidential election	Direct support to Yanukovich, criticism of opponents	Yes	Low
2009	Moldova	Parliamentary elections	Direct election support to PCRM	No	Low
2006	Belarus	Presidential election	Favorable media coverage, direct election support, assistance in post-election repression	Yes	Low
2005	Moldova	Parliamentary elections	Direct election support for opponents	No	Low
2004	Ukraine	Presidential election	Direct election support to Yanukovich, favorable media coverage	No	Low
2002	Ukraine	Parliamentary elections	Direct election support for Kuchma's allies	No	Low
1996	Moldova	Presidential election	Direct election support for Lucinschi	Yes	Low
1994	Belarus	Presidential election	Direct election support for Kebich	No	Low
	Ukraine	Presidential election	Direct election support for Kuchma	Yes	Medium
Cases of interventions in which outcomes favorable to Russia (yes and partial):			14 out of 27		
Share of favorable outcomes with some evidence of a Russian impact:			5 out of 14		
Share of total interventions with a favorable outcome and evidence of a Russian impact:			5 out of 27		

NOTES:

[Our dataset](#) appears to be the only one to cover the whole post-Soviet period and includes all types of electoral interference but excludes interventions not focused on elections or electoral processes.

There have been several attempts by analysts to compile all cases of Russian interference abroad. Laura Rosenberger and Jamie Fly of the Alliance for Securing Democracy [identify](#) Russian interference (including non-electoral interventions) in 27 countries since 2004. The EU East StratCom Task Force has a running [list](#) of all known cases of Russian disinformation, and the German Marshall Fund [runs](#) the Hamilton 68 dashboard which tracks Russian influence campaigns on Twitter. Finally, Senator Benjamin L. Cardin's staff has recently [provided](#) a non-exhaustive overview of the variety of forms of Russian interference abroad.