


Russian Influence Operations Are a Joke

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Ken Klippenstein

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American politics doesn't need Moscow's help to be dysfunctional

[Ken Klippenstein](#)

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In unveiling its offensive against Russian influence, the Justice Department's Election Threats Task Force uttered the word "threat" 43 times during its public meeting on Wednesday. Despite the steady *threat* drumbeat, the task force at no point claimed that Moscow's efforts have had any impact on the election. Ever. It's not hard to see why: Russia's influence operations are a joke.

Russia (and Iran and China and others, even Israel) are surely trying to influence American public opinion — that's what nation states do — and the effort since 2016 has now become bread-and-butter talking points for the threat machine. But are any of these foreign actions a threat to the *elections*? The answer is no.

On Wednesday, Attorney General Merrick Garland announced sweeping efforts to crack down on Russian influence campaigns targeting the 2024 election. The Justice Department alleges in an indictment that two Russian nationals working for Russia's state-controlled media outlet, RT, used shell companies to pay an American media company \$10 million to publish content advancing Russian interests. The company, which launched in November of last year, went on to post "nearly 2,000 videos that have garnered more than 16 million views on YouTube alone," the indictment says.

Numbers like those might sound impressive, but my Twitter analytics informs me that over the past year, my posts garnered 463 million views. So Russia's dastardly scheme reached a small fraction of the people my dumbass posts do — on an app with a far smaller user base than YouTube. And I'm just a guy with a pretty niche following! Both the U.S. government and the news media have failed to put the "16 million views on YouTube" into perspective.

The Justice Department went further: "As alleged, the covert operations by RT employees exploited our free and open press and targeted millions of Americans as unwitting victims of Russia's psychological warfare," Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen said in the press release accompanying the indictment.

I don't doubt for a second that Russia directed the influence operation, but *psychological warfare*? That's really how the Justice Department wants to characterize videos posted to social media by a small company consisting of six influencers most people have never heard of?

The (unwitting) Russian agents reportedly includes such luminaries as Benny Johnson, the disgraced former "Viral Politics Editor" of BuzzFeed who was fired for plagiarism. Another is Tim Pool, the perpetually beanie-donning YouTuber who I just spent 15 minutes reading about and still couldn't tell you what he's known for. A third is Dave Rubin, a commentator who apparently worked at The Young Turks shortly before I did and now hosts a talk show, but who I only knew as the guy people make fun of on Twitter occasionally. The other three — Lauren Southern, Tayler Hansen, and Matt Christiansen — are even lesser known, names I had never heard before today. This is the brain trust that carried out "psychological warfare"?

Michael van Landingham, a former CIA analyst who authored the intelligence community's 2017 assessment of Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election, shares my skepticism. A Russia expert, he says Moscow has and will continue to work on American public opinion because they believe influence campaigns work (and because the U.S. acts as if they do). Whether they are actually successful is another question, as Landingham explains:

"What impact these actions have is less clear, and painting the creation of YouTube videos as 'psychological warfare' on millions of Americans overstates the gravity of the threat. Unlike working with a [political] campaign in 2016, Russia is currently reduced to shoveling money at the US Internet's most breathless voices, and trolling. We must weigh the necessity of enforcing FARA [Foreign Agent Registration Act] laws with the downside of writing the Russian meddlers' performance appraisal report for them in the form of a DOJ indictment."

Van Landingham raises an interesting point you won't find in the tsunami of hysterical media coverage — that Moscow sees such theatrics from the Justice Department as an affirmation that their influence campaigns must be working.

That's the basic problem. High-profile responses to foreign influence operations create the aura that Russia and other countries are having an impact on American public opinion, that their operations are working. The paradox of the government's very public obsession with election security is that the more attention paid to these supposed threats, the more likely people are to question the legitimacy of the outcome. In fact, this is an effect foreign adversaries undertaking influence operations hope for.

All the breathless press releases and media commentary are doing Russia's job for them. The U.S. intelligence community has itself made this clear, including in their assessment of foreign threats to the last presidential election, which states (emphasis added):

*“Key Judgment 3: We assess that Iran carried out a multi-pronged covert influence campaign intended to undercut former President Trump’s reelection prospects — though without directly promoting his rivals — **undermine public confidence in the electoral process** and US institutions, and sow division and exacerbate societal tensions in the US. We assess that Supreme Leader Khamenei authorized the campaign and Iran’s military and intelligence services implemented it using overt and covert messaging and cyber operations.”*

In other words, Iran's goal wasn't just to undermine confidence in Trump, but in the electoral process itself. And that's the predictable result of blowing these influence operations out of proportion: people start to wonder if their preferred candidate had a fair shake after all.

Another goal of these operations, stoking division, is something we're perfectly capable of doing ourselves. Labeling all discontent “election interference” and “foreign malign influence” turns the “threat” into a national security issue rather than a civil/political one. That just empowers the threat machine while disempowering Americans.

There's no reason to believe foreign influence has or ever will alter the outcome of an election, even in the more extreme cases of targeted hack-and-leaks. Gavin Wilde, formerly the National Security Council director for Russia, Baltic and Caucus affairs who focuses on foreign malign influence, writes:

“Foreign hack-and-leak operations targeting political campaigns are conceivably a threat to the integrity of elections. But they are also the subject of domestic media scrums and partisan attacks, a watering hole for padding bureaucratic budgets, and a marketing bonanza for the cybersecurity industry...Shielding American public discourse from this kind of subversion—whatever the impact may or may not be on election outcomes—probably depends as much, if not more, on incentivizing restraint far closer to home.”

With the U.S.'s high-profile rollout of the indictments and the predictable media firestorm, restraint is definitely a word Washington might want to look up.

— Edited by William M. Arkin