

Using Human Virtues...



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Russian meddling is rarely as coordinated as often assumed. In Putin's personalized, institutionalized 'ad hoc' system, myriad actors – from intelligence officers to journalists, oligarchs to ambassadors – seek to deliver what they believe the Kremlin wants, often based on deliberately ambiguous guidance from the centre. When Russian 'freelancers' fail, they can easily be disowned. When they are successful, the Kremlin will reward them, and often take over and expand their initiatives. The bad news is that as a

result, the challenge is flexible, often imaginative, and hard to predict in its specifics. However, the good is that it is also often small-scale, amateurish and contradictory. Given Germany's pivotal role in Europe, and what we saw in other major polls from the 2014 Scottish independence referendum to the 2020 US presidential election, it is inevitable that some 'freelancers' will get involved in its 2021 elections. But would the Kremlin really launch a coordinated active measures campaign or be sufficiently enthused by an initiative that it throws its weight behind it (as it did in the ill-fated 'Lisa Case' in 2016)? Let us imagine how a potential scenario of Russian meddling in Germany's elections could look like.

Early in 2021, it might become clear that some kind of Russian 'active measures' – covert political subversion – campaign around Germany's elections is in train. The opportunities might seem too tempting, the risks too small. With the departure of Angela Merkel from the scene, the elections promise to be unpredictable and potentially divisive. Furthermore, with the European Union still dealing with the fallout from Brexit, tensions over post-coronavirus budgets, and Polish and Hungarian democratic backsliding, disrupting Germany could appear a means of disrupting the EU as a whole.

There may even be a personal dimension. Putin has long – unrealistically – prided himself on his

ability to 'handle' Germany. If Berlin takes a tough line on Russia in connection with the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and its support for the suppression of protests in Belarus, it could make Putin look foolish and thus anger him. Policy, after all, is often driven by such human factors. Since the Kremlin has realized that influencing the actual outcome of elections is rather unlikely, it now seeks to maximize the inevitable divisions they generate. Through division, distraction and dismay, the aim would be to punish Germany and to neutralize it, to render it unable to provide leadership within Europe and support for the countries Moscow considers within its sphere of influence, from Belarus to Georgia.

Considering that Germany is a relatively stable polity, with strong rule of law, Russia could opt for confining itself to influence campaigns. In particular, by calling the elections' legitimacy into question, Russia could challenge the legitimacy of the system as a whole. The aim would not be to replace it with anything else – Putin's regime is not ideological, is not interested in exporting any model – so much as stir up toxic national discord. *Chernaya kassa* – 'black account' – money with no obvious Russian connection could flow to particularly divisive commentators or politicians of the right or left. One of the advantages of being fundamentally non-ideological is that the Kremlin can easily support any and every side. Just tens of thousands of euros are enough to make a difference, and hopefully little enough not to be noticed.

Meanwhile, Russian state hackers might look for scandals or potentially damaging private correspondence that could be leaked or leveraged.

However, the main challenge would come from influence campaigns, from outright disinformation to amplifying extreme and radicalizing opinions. Some would come through obvious channels such as the now-infamous RT Deutsch TV channel and the usual army of trolls and bots on social media. Yet, most dangerous of all would be German citizens and news outlets inadvertently repeating and propagating 'fake news' that happened to match their assumptions or simply catch their eye.

So much for the scenario. What needs to be said, however, is that Moscow cannot create discord where none exists: it magnifies what is already there. To a considerable extent, the impact of any such active measures campaign would thus depend on the German people. It is very difficult to deter disinformation or prevent its spread through sanctions or controls, especially in democratic countries that uphold freedom of speech. Instead, the remedies are as difficult as they are obvious. People need to be cautious in taking at face value what they read and hear. German politicians and media must make the difficult choice not to use questionable information – a tempting leak, a dramatic but unproven story – even if it would seem to advance their cause or their sales. In short, the basic human virtues of restraint, respect and rationality are the best defence against any such Russian meddling. ✕

**...to hamper
disinformation campaigns**

