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### **Information Operations against the United States: Defensive Actions are Needed**

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Countries long have tried to influence important foreign audiences, often by using their intelligence services. They have had different targets and goals, used various methods, and experienced different degrees of success. Communist countries have been especially prominent users of such methods. Soviet intelligence services conducted “disinformation” operations as part of lengthy “active measures” campaigns that largely were information-oriented. Many such efforts became institutionalized, meaning they continue to influence targeted groups long after the demise of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> More recently, information operations have attracted popular attention as Russian intelligence services tried to influence elections in Western countries and the “hybrid warfare” campaigns Russia waged in Ukraine in 2014 and elsewhere had appreciable information components.<sup>2</sup> Also recently, Chinese “influence” operations have generated increased scholarly and government attention globally.<sup>3</sup> China prominently uses legal techniques designed to avoid politically embarrassing flaps over illegal actions.

The United States, as a major world power, an open democracy, and a land of immigrants, is a lucrative and relatively easy target of influence operators. While friendly countries such as Norway seek innocuously to inform Americans of issues of interest to them, adversary states have insidious goals, including the literal destruction of the United States. Hence, this paper focuses on U.S. vulnerabilities that the influence operations of China and Russia, including previous Soviet operations that remain on-going, seek to exploit and suggests ways to ameliorate and counter them, respectfully.<sup>4</sup>



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While the three programs share some characteristics, they have appreciably different strategies, tactics, and key targets.<sup>5</sup> The Soviets aimed to defeat and destroy their capitalist adversaries, uniting the world under Moscow-led socialism. Russia has lesser but still substantial goals, mainly in Europe. In contrast, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aims to remake world institutions in its image by co-opting, rather than defeating, its enemies.<sup>6</sup> All these influence campaigns focus on Americans who can influence large numbers of other persons—especially politicians, journalists, and educators. Each has sought, in different ways, to manipulate foreign elections. Consistent with their substantial ambitions, China and Russia now target a wide range of institutions, including businesses and think tanks.

The influence operations of all three countries, i.e., including the Soviet campaigns that remain on-going, are large, expensive, and are designed to work over long periods of time. The Soviets expected their efforts to destabilize the United States to take “decades” to accomplish.<sup>7</sup> China’s program initially had an even longer time horizon—a century from victory in 1949 in the most recent Chinese civil war to 2049—although in recent years President Xi Jinping has shown impatience and seems to want to achieve major strategic goals more quickly. Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to have the shortest time horizon of the three, but one that is considerably longer than those of most Western politicians.

We know little about the specifics of how Russia and China measure the performance of their influence operations, but each clearly believes its activities have been successful in aggregate. Russian and China, and the Soviet Union earlier, would not have devoted the massive resources they have committed unless they felt the efforts were achieving their strategic objectives. Some programs have failed, but most appear to have achieved what they were designed to do. Moreover, most efforts complement other operations, generating complex webs of influence.

All three influence campaigns have indeed been successful in many ways. The Soviet long-term efforts to destabilize the United States appear to be nearing success, although long after it would help Soviet leaders. The fissures in U.S. society appear to be starker now than at any time since the Civil War. Among many indicators, the Greater Idaho Movement seeks to have conservative eastern Oregon join the state of Idaho and some in Texas want to secede entirely from the United States.<sup>8</sup> Russia’s program, rejuvenated about a decade ago, has generated many successes but has been damaged by recent Russian aggression, especially against Ukraine since 2022. Chinese influence operations appear to be both the most ambitious and to have had the greatest success to date, although President Xi’s recent aggressiveness has damaged their credibility and produced growing global skepticism about China’s “peaceful rise” meme.<sup>9</sup> China’s influence operations pose the greatest contemporary threat to the world at large, but Western countries have just begun to respond to them. Large and well-considered responses are long overdue.



## Recognizing Exploitable Vulnerabilities

Malign foreign influence operations identify and exploit psychological, societal, and political vulnerabilities in their targets. In the U.S. case, identification of vulnerabilities is relatively easy: there are few obstacles to free flows of information and many Americans are obsessed with real and imagined deficiencies of the United States, sometimes talking about them nearly incessantly. Malign states use their intelligence officers, diplomats, journalists, scholars, businesspeople, and visitors to generate insights and advance domestic unrest. They hire Americans willing to advise them and to push their story lines at other Americans. Even imaginary American deficiencies are helpful to influencers—they identify useful groups to target and goals to be achieved. Once vulnerabilities are identified, attackers build exploitation mechanisms to generate desired objectives.

Deflecting malign foreign influence operations requires recognition of both American vulnerabilities and the influence mechanisms adversaries use to exploit them. This requires a considerable degree of collective introspection about the extent to which traditionally highly-valued, core American institutions—such as freedom of speech—are key avenues of malicious influence operations. And, given that many such operations are longstanding in nature and have achieved considerable successes, an additional challenge is identifying ways to persuade Americans who have become agents of foreign influence, knowingly and not, to change their belief patterns and their activities. This latter task may be the most difficult of all, especially if core American institutional freedoms are not to be trampled upon. There is a non-trivial danger that excessive reaction may be worse than the disease. But foreign influence operations, a nuisance when they were weaker and unifying American societal strengths were greater, now may pose unprecedented, existential threats to the United States, raising uncomfortable questions and suggesting that unprecedented defensive actions may be needed.

What are key American vulnerabilities? What are their causes? And what obstacles do they present to coherent remedial action? At an aggregate level, these can be lumped into three categories: ideology, gullibility, and interests. The first two are toughest to identify and to address. The third, while potentially addressable, also is largely ignored by the U.S. government.

A key challenge is addressing the many communities in the United States that have ideological or ethnic connections to malign actors. From the 1920s, the Soviet Union tried by many means to wreak political havoc in the United States. Its initial subversion element, the Communist International, or Comintern, was formally abolished in 1943 in deference to its Western wartime allies, but Soviet leader Josef Stalin simply reassigned the subversion mission to his intelligence services. From the 1920s, the Soviets also directed and financially supported the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), which still conducts Soviet-like information campaigns long after the demise of the Soviet Union. It has been especially active in the union movement and in Hollywood—a great place to influence many people.<sup>10</sup> CPUSA members Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie played major roles in popularizing folk music, whose lyrics frequently contain political messages.<sup>11</sup>



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The CPUSA and unaffiliated Marxists established a major presence at many American universities. A large body of evidence indicates that Marxian ideas, which had of course existed on campuses for many years, took deep root in the 1960s, the result of several factors including a heightened Soviet disinformation campaign targeting the American war in Vietnam and the rise of the New Left.<sup>12</sup> Prominent influences on American universities include the “critical” thinking of the so-called Frankfurt School of German Marxists, who cooperated with the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow and who criticized existing bourgeois society in ways designed to develop action programs that could foment and win Marxian revolutions.<sup>13</sup> Prominent legacies of Frankfurt School thinking are “critical legal studies,” which argued that the law should become a tool of social change, and critical race theory.<sup>14</sup> Of special importance for the spread of malign ideas is the development of “critical pedagogy,” which teaches teachers how to indoctrinate their students with Marxian ideas.<sup>15</sup> This line of Marxian practice, or *praxis*, stems from teachings of Brazilian Marxist Paulo Freire.<sup>16</sup> Marxists also wrote widely-used textbooks. A prominent example is *A People's History of the United States*, first published in 1980 by Howard Zinn, an overtly Marxian re-framing of American history that has sold more than two million copies in five editions.<sup>17</sup> Many others, often more subtle, were written decades ago.<sup>18</sup>

But while most CPUSA members are true believers, their ideology-generated faith occasionally is shattered. Two events cost the CPUSA dearly. Stalin’s 1939 pact with Nazi Germany blatantly contradicted the CPUSA’s previous anti-fascist position, which was a Soviet line. Many CPUSA members were unable to reconcile the apparent contradiction and left the party, although some returned to the fold after Germany invaded the USSR in 1941. The second event led to more permanent disillusionment. In February 1956, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev delivered a long speech to the 20<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress that denounced Stalin’s “crimes.” Historians of American communism Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes report that the CPUSA lost over three-quarters of its membership in the two years after Khrushchev’s speech was published in the West.<sup>19</sup> Hence, a core challenge for defenders of the American way of life is to find new versions of Khrushchev’s speech that will change the course of modern American Marxists who still seek the Soviet goal of revolution in America. Their views are protected by the First Amendment, even when they rhetorically advocate revolution, so long as they do not specifically plan or commit violence—security against sedition in practice—meaning they will have to be persuaded to abandon the goal of Marxian revolution.

A similar challenge is to find ways to disabuse the evidently growing number of Americans who believe that Putin’s Russia is wonderful and that his war against Ukraine is a legitimate response to allegedly aggressive American/NATO pressure. The war and its brutality surely have damaged Putin and Russia in the eyes of many people, but influence operations designed to generate Russian “soft power,” which Putin rejuvenated and accelerated about a decade ago, have achieved notable successes in generating apologists for Russia on the political Right in Europe and the United States.<sup>20</sup> Defeating Russian influence mechanisms, like the religion-like faith of Marxists, will require deep understanding of thought processes as well as of political beliefs.



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Other instruments of foreign influence include persons in the United States on temporary visas, including students. Of these, students from China arguably are the most important. They have been indoctrinated extensively on the CCP's version of Marxism-Leninism in public schools by the "Patriotic Education Campaign," which was created in 1991 and features strong doses of revisionist history and ideological orthodoxy; it is a legacy of the trauma of the large-scale student unrest that culminated with the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 1989.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, President Xi pointedly identified Chinese students studying abroad as valuable agents of influence.<sup>22</sup> Students sometimes pressure university administrators to squelch speech inconsistent with CCP interests; Chinese diplomats in host countries often trigger planned outbursts.<sup>23</sup> Chinese owned, Chinese-language media provide ideological guidance. The CCP believes the large ethnic Chinese diaspora, wherever they may be and whatever their current citizenship, owe allegiance to the CCP as the legitimate ruler of China. The CCP Central Committee's United Front Work Department works diligently to entrench and exploit this loyalty.<sup>24</sup>

Many people are influenced unknowingly by ideologically-driven influencers. These groups prominently include students and readers of, and listeners to, "journalists" who have abandoned traditional journalistic standards in favor of advocacy. China, Russia (and the Soviet Union earlier), target American universities and the press, knowing their power to amplify their messages and increase adherents of beliefs consistent with their interests. For example, the Soviets were convinced that demographic diversity was the single greatest political vulnerability of the United States, and they worked hard to stoke racial tensions in the United States.<sup>25</sup> Former Soviet intelligence agent and CPUSA member Louis Budenz, who renounced communism in 1945, said the Soviets and the CPUSA long had two race-based goals: 1) exacerbating racial tensions to the point of generating race-based civil war; and/or (2) creation of a geographically large black separatist state in what is now the American south as a way to literally fragment the United States.<sup>26</sup> The modern "diversity, equity, and inclusion" agenda, which is indisputably divisive in the United States, appears to serve past Soviet (and now Russian) interests, but is not remotely consistent with past Soviet or current Russian domestic policies.

Many Americans appear to have vested, pecuniary interests in catering directly or indirectly to adversary influence operations – consciously or not. These include public relations firms, corporations, politicians, and universities. Public relations or lobbying firms make good livings providing advisory services and influencing American policymakers in Congress and the executive branch of government, and they often prepare messages designed to advance adversary goals using their knowledge of American culture and the ways of Washington to generate entre and credibility. Examples include Ketchum Inc., a Washington-based firm that reportedly has for years provided Russia with a variety of consulting and promotional services.<sup>27</sup> Even former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's firm apparently has worked for the Russians.<sup>28</sup> Businesses, especially banks such as Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan Chase, have become de facto influence organs for China, especially, as they appear to tout China and its



policies to keep in the good graces of the CCP to maintain lucrative business arrangements in China.<sup>29</sup> Politicians receive campaign contributions.

U.S. universities, like many others in Europe and Australia, have been highly vulnerable to Chinese influence operations on grounds of both ideas and interests. Indeed, Chinese influence operations aimed at scholars may be more intense and effective than on any other major group.<sup>30</sup> Researchers Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg believe many academics display “extraordinary naivety” about China, but their actions are easily explained.<sup>31</sup> Virtually all major Western universities are collectively leftist in political orientation and sympathetic to the CCP’s “liberal” facade. Professors and university administrators often appear to believe the CCP’s “peaceful rise” meme, displaying often severe cases of confirmation bias. And many appear motivated transparently by money, which China dispenses in large quantities in many ways. Since the early 2000s, for example, China has paid to establish Confucius Institutes at American universities that supposedly teach Americans about Chinese culture but appear more to be influence peddlers and venues for intelligence activities.<sup>32</sup> More recently created Russian Centers operate similarly.<sup>33</sup> University administrators are able easily to rationalize actions that may compromise principles of academic integrity and freedom of expression to avoid offending China—like denying talks by the Dalai Lama on campuses.<sup>34</sup> And, while generating cash by paying full tuition and promoting politically correct variants of demographic “diversity” on campus, students from China are especially welcome!

### **Countering Influence Operations**

Two types of counters to such activities are needed. First, the federal government should change laws and regulations that enable adversary influence operations by pointedly damaging key influence mechanisms. Second, amelioration of exploitable vulnerabilities is essential. Both are needed because even successful attacks on specific adversary influence operations will be fruitless if underlying vulnerabilities remain and can be exploited in other ways.

Sweden’s Psychological Defence Agency offers a potential model for doing both of these things.<sup>35</sup> The agency has two missions. The first is identifying (mainly) Russian information operations aimed at Sweden—a function that involves monitoring Russian information-related activities, some of which are clandestine in nature. Second, it has an educational mission; it briefs key elements of Swedish society, including the press, on the nature of information operations that target them, helping them to understand the techniques of information warfare and thereby be less susceptible to them. This agency is an excellent example of defensive operations by a country whose citizens trust their government to do the right thing for them. Not all peoples, perhaps including many Americans, are so trusting.

Countering influence operations rarely requires law enforcement capacities. Indeed, according to Darren Tromblay, an expert on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the primary U.S. domestic counterintelligence and federal law enforcement agency, the FBI is poorly equipped to address influence operations.<sup>36</sup> It focuses on enforcing the law, which is



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rarely at issue in the overt influence operations of America's major adversaries. Moreover, according to former Attorney General William Barr, the FBI prefers to avoid investigations of seditious left-wing groups, a legacy of its negative experience investigating such groups in the 1960s.<sup>37</sup> And, because institutional fixes available to the federal government under current law and practice do not address significant vulnerabilities, the best ideational counters to adversary influence operations likely are widely-trusted nongovernment institutions – which generally do not now exist.

Past Soviet and contemporary Russian information operations remain potent influences on the United States and much of the world. But the CCP's influence campaign is global in scope and greater in potential impact. At some point the Chinese will have to be confronted, a major step that should be the result of much internal government and international deliberation and planning. The confrontation is likely to be difficult even if war is avoided, but it will be less bad than the alternative of letting the CCP win its hundred-year marathon of influence operations. Defensive steps that make much sense include:

- Exposing adversaries' influence operations—one of the Swedish agency's tasks—thereby enabling better popular understanding of the threat and better enabling the development of socially acceptable defensive and counter-measures.
- Trying again to create a disinformation-identifying unit and educational units within or outside of government that can gain the support of most of the American electorate, avoiding the apparent error of bias evidently displayed by the short-lived Disinformation Governance Board of the Department of Homeland Security.
- Prohibiting establishment of intrusive institutions in the United States, such as the Confucius Institutes and Russian Centers at American universities, which clearly are not what they claim to be.
- Prohibiting lobbying, public relations, and related companies from advising or producing media campaigns in support of adversary nations. This should not affect friendly countries. Legislation that enables the president or State Department to specify such countries may be needed.
- Adding reporting requirements or special taxes or other mechanisms that make foreign investment in adversary countries unattractive, thereby reducing business incentives to help adversaries conduct influence operations in the United States.
- Strengthening foreign investment laws to prohibit known information manipulators from owning domestic media of all sorts including print, electronic, and social media. These are strategic assets to influence peddlers and should be treated as such.
- Eliminating federal funding to universities that do not strictly enforce U.S. laws and regulations on espionage, technology transfers, and visa controls.
- Tightening campaign financing laws to prohibit contributions by all foreign nationals.



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- Improving public communications, or public diplomacy, capabilities. This has been a long-time U.S. weakness, and other democracies have also had a hard time developing coherent, consistent national messages.
- Building capacities to go on the offensive against adversary information operations. NATO countries surprisingly effectively attacked Russian information operations at the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – an effort that may provide useful lessons more generally.
- Supporting independent journalists in adversary countries, where they exist, to provide domestic alternatives to influence themes. While this is not likely to be possible in China or Russia, it may well be effective in third countries vis-à-vis the diaspora communities the CCP and Putin have sought to harness to their will.

These are first steps.<sup>38</sup> The United States has a long way to go to both defend itself and to make the predatory influence operations of Russia, China, and the Soviet Union transparent, at home and globally.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); John A. Gentry, "Belated Success: Soviet Active Measures against the United States," *American Intelligence Journal* 39:2 (2022): 151-170.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World* (London: Oneworld, 2021); Alex Joske, *Spies and Lies: How China's Greatest Covert Operations Fool the World* (Hardie Grant: Richmond, Victoria, Australia); Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Darren E. Tromblay, *Political Influence Operations: How Foreign Actors Seek to Shape U.S. Policy Making* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> John A. Gentry, *Influence Operations of China, Russia, and the Soviet Union: A Comparison, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/papers/influence-operations-of-china-russia-and-the-soviet-union-a-comparison/>.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*, 259-260; Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985), 2; Rid, *Active Measures*, 160.

<sup>8</sup> Kyung Lah and Jack Hannah, "Partisan rancor in Oregon spills over into Idaho effort to absorb its rural neighbors," *CNN Politics*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/15/politics/oregon-secession-idaho-partisan-divides/index.htm>; Mychael Schnell, "Texas lawmaker files 'TEXIT' bill to spur vote of secession from US," *The Hill*, March 6, 2023, <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/3886527-texas-lawmaker-files-texit-bill-to-spur-vote-on-exploring-secession-from-us/>.

<sup>9</sup> Pillsbury, *Hundred-Year Marathon*, 162-163, 165; Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (Richmond, Victoria, Australia: Hardie Grant, 2018), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 25-27, 30-34, 64-65, 82, 96, 101, 122, 134-135.



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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 90; Ronald Radosh, “The Communist Party’s Role in the Folk Revival: From Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan,” *American Communist History* 14:3 (2015): 3-19.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown), 41-85; Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Butcher and Mike Gonzalez, “Critical Race Theory, the New Intolerance, and Its Grip on America,” Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 3567, December 7, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/civil-rights/report/critical-race-theory-the-new-intolerance-and-its-grip-america>.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Antonia Darder et al., ed., *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> For example, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Penguin, 1968).

<sup>17</sup> Evita Duffy-Alonzo, “High School History Teacher Throws Out Textbooks For Radical Marxist ‘History’ Book,” *The Federalist*, June 19, 2020, <https://thefederalist.com/2020/06/19/high-school-history-teacher-throws-out-textbooks-for-radical-marxist-history-book/>.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Francis Budenz, *The Techniques of Communism* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), 208-249.

<sup>19</sup> Klehr and Haynes, *The American Communist Movement*, 182.

<sup>20</sup> Van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine*.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton, *Silent Invasion*, 9-11, 38; Joshua Kurlantzick, *Beijing’s Global Media Offensive: China’s Uneven Campaign to Influence Asia and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 92.

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*, 119.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 231-234.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>25</sup> Oleg Kalugin, *Spymaster: My Thirty-two Years in Intelligence and Espionage against the West* (New York: Basic, 2009), 35, 53-55, 103-104, 117, 297-298.

<sup>26</sup> Budenz, *The Techniques of Communism*, 254-261.

<sup>27</sup> Van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine*, 48, 51, 53-54.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 48-50.

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*, 100, 103-106, 110.

<sup>30</sup> Joske, *Spies and Lies*, 130; Kurlantzick, *Beijing’s Global Media Offensive*, 117-124.

<sup>31</sup> Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*, 157-158; Hamilton, *Silent Invasion*, 199, 229; Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, ed., *China’s Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance* (Stanford CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2019), 51-70.

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*, 152, 196, 226, 228-231, 237, 243.

<sup>33</sup> Van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine*, 122.

<sup>34</sup> Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*, 226-243.

<sup>35</sup> See the agency’s website, <https://www.mpf.se/en/>.

<sup>36</sup> Tromblay, *Political Influence Operations*.

<sup>37</sup> William P. Barr, *One Damn Thing After Another: Memoirs of an Attorney General* (New York: William Morrow, 2022), 485-486.

<sup>38</sup> For other ideas, see Marcel H. Van Herpen, “The Many Faces of the New Information Warfare,” in Olga Bertelsen, ed., *Russian Active Measures: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 55-56; Michaela Dodge, *Russia’s Influence Operations in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 2022), 127-133, available at <https://nipp.org/papers/russias-influence->



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