Conference Report

Roundtable to Discuss Russian Involvement in Ukraine’s Elections

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Published in 2019 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.

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RUSI Conference Report, February 2019
Roundtable Discussions

This report represents a summary of informal roundtable discussions held at RUSI on 17 January 2019. The conversation was led by Oleksandr Danylyuk from the Center for Defence Reform in Kiev, who outlined his perceptions and concerns about Russian involvement in Ukraine’s elections, noting the national elections due to be held in March 2019. While the conversation ranged widely, there were four main areas considered which will frame this report. First, there was discussion of the political context in Ukraine, followed by an analysis of the main elements of Russia’s toolkit. This was followed by consideration of both the vulnerabilities and resistance of Ukrainian society to information manipulation before considering ways in which Ukraine and friendly states could mitigate the threat.

Political Context

The context of politics in Ukraine was briefly outlined as being largely divided between pro-Western and pro-Russian groupings. While there was some discussion about the breadth of the term ‘pro-Western’, it was generally recognised as a desire to align Ukraine politically and economically with Western Europe in contrast to the previous integration with Russia that was an outcome of its position in the Soviet system. It was noted that while there was an apparently clear majority in favour of pro-Western parties, previous experience with election outcomes in Ukraine had highlighted how fragmentation within this grouping could lead to unexpected outcomes, such as the coming to power of Viktor Yanukovych in 2006.

It was suggested that Russia now recognised that establishing an overtly pro-Russian government in Kiev was tricky, with the candidate seen as leaning that way the most, Yuri Bokyo, polling between 4% and 11% according to Danylyuk. Therefore, the Kremlin’s intent was instead to ensure that the government in Kiev was at least neutral towards Russia, and in particular that it favoured continued negotiations on the status of the Donbas and Crimea. Danylyuk characterised this as encouraging a strategy of capitulation. He noted that some of the pro-Western political parties were proposing talks without preconditions or guarantees from Russia, and that these differences of approach could be one avenue for Russia to divide the pro-Western parties. Overall, it was noted that Russia’s strategy appeared to be to keep Ukraine destabilised and its politics divided, something that reflects its broader strategy regarding Western Europe.

Money and the Media: Key to Russian Political Influence

It was noted that Russia’s approach to influencing politics in third countries showed some significant continuities from that of the Soviet era. It was possible to draw parallels between Soviet involvement in the Spiegel affair, which destroyed a conservative coalition in West Germany in 1962, and other Soviet activities, with the effort to compromise Ukrainian politicians through false allegations of paedophilia in 2009–10. While this use of kompromat (compromising
material) can be seen in the broader context of the Soviet strategy known as ‘active measures’,¹ the discussion on this occasion focused on two key elements in the Russian approach: control of money (and hence the economy), and control of the media.

It was noted that the interconnections between the Ukrainian and Russian economies were deep and varied, reflecting, at least in part, the legacies of the integration of the Soviet era. However, Russian investment in Ukraine and other countries in the region has a depth and breadth that led a 2016 report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies to suggest it can verge on ‘state capture’.² Further, the report argues that this is a deliberate strategy on the part of the Kremlin to provide it with leverage and influence in those states. In the case of Ukraine, it was noted that a number of oligarchs who own significant sectors of the economy either have close ties to the Russian Federation or at the very least are beholden to Russia as their principal market. While this latter is to a certain extent inevitable given the regional economic links, it was argued that it also represents a point of leverage. One example outlined was that the bulk of the Ukrainian aluminium industry is owned by Oleg Deripaska, who has close ties to the Kremlin. Another businessman, Rinat Akhmetov, has major business holdings in the Sea of Azov region, and it was suggested that recent Russian activity designed to control Ukrainian economic activity was intended at least in part to put pressure on him to return to a more overtly pro-Russian political stance.

It was further highlighted that this Russian ownership extends to the traditional media sector which therefore can become a vehicle for Russian influence. There was some debate about the relative influence of the traditional media versus digital/social media, and this will be discussed further in this report. However, it was noted that Ukraine’s most popular television channel, Inter, was under Russian ownership and that the family of former President Viktor Yanukovych also owned a substantial media group, UMH, and that these outlets were considered to be influential.³

Ukraine’s Vulnerability and Resistance to Influence

There was considerable discussion among those present as to the relative vulnerabilities and resistance of Ukrainian society to Russian influence. This was based in part on arguments from academics about the different ways in which societies engage with media content and perceive

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1. There is no single agreed definition of the term ‘active measures’, which has been described broadly as including overt propaganda, covert action, strategic deception, and other types of political warfare. *Kompromat* was a tool for manipulating individuals to act according to Soviet wishes. For a discussion of its Soviet-era roots and contemporary manifestation, see Steve Abrams, ‘Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin’s Russia’, *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* (Vol. 15, No. 1, 2016), pp. 5–31.


information. It was argued that the Western tendency (identified in this case as Western Europe and North America) was for society to be more reliant on facts, with a tendency to accept facts when first presented until they are disputed or disproved. In contrast, the Eastern European tendency is to associate more with opinions and opinion-formers than facts. It was suggested that this is reflected in the popularity of stage-managed talk shows as a form of entertainment which seek to create association with an opinion through emotion.\

It was suggested by some that this difference and failure to understand it may have impacted upon the success or failure of some Western-supported strategic communications efforts. In particular, there was considerable discussion about the relative penetration and influence of social media in Ukraine, which is in many ways the focus of those efforts. It was felt by most participants that it was likely to be a more complex picture and one that was dynamic and changing over time. Understanding this would be key to Ukrainian efforts to counter Russian disinformation, and to effective Western support.

**Conclusion: What Can Be Done?**

Danylyuk argued that Ukraine is effectively at war and that while there was a clear need for stronger interagency cooperation within Ukraine, this needed to be led by the Ministry of Defence as the only organ with sufficient focus on the problem at hand. Some participants noted that the geopolitical and conflict position was more complex and highlighted that an over-reliance on military solutions could be counterproductive. While it was recognised that disinformation associated with the elections was an ongoing problem, there was less clarity among the group on the precise approaches necessary. It was agreed that there needed to be informed debate on issues including the potential conflict resolution in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, but there was less clarity as to how it might be achieved.

This lack of clarity extended to consideration as to how friends of Ukraine could assist. It is clearly necessary to quickly and effectively identify and highlight Russia’s disinformation efforts, but perhaps key to this in Ukraine is to develop a better understanding of the precise conduits through which different sectors of the population are influenced to better understand the Russian approach. There was also some consideration of looking at methods adopted by others under the broad headings of Total or Comprehensive Defence, including Sweden’s efforts at societal psychological defence.\

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4. It should be noted that this discussion was led by two academics with backgrounds in communications. It was felt that further research was needed to understand the subtle nuances of the argument and in particular the extent to which social media was a more significant influence in Eastern Europe than some participants suggested.

About the Author

Ewan Lawson is a Senior Research Fellow at RUSI where, among other things, he researches information warfare and cyber security issues.