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## HACKING, FAKE NEWS, DISINFORMATION: Business As Usual in the US-Russian Relations or a Deeper Democratic challenge?

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**I**t has been two months since the end of the highly contentious presidential race and the US still has not yet come to terms with its outcome. A debate about the main factors that led to Hillary Clinton's defeat does not seem conclusive at this point. On the eve of Donald Trump's inauguration as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Americans are still confused and divided about the allegations regarding Russia's meddling in the US electoral process and the potential impact that Putin might have had on the final result. There are also additional concerns related to an unverified US intelligence dossier containing allegations that Russian intelligence possesses compromising materials on Donald Trump and general anxiety about the possibility of Vladimir Putin being able to blackmail and control the incoming US President. At this point the consequences of the recently published US Intelligence Report on Russia's interference in the US elections are difficult to predict and they might play out long past inauguration day. However, the beginning of 2017 has indicated that we may be witnessing an unfolding crisis not only in the US-Russia relations, but also a deeper crisis of trust to the US mainstream media and intelligence agencies which have been repeatedly blamed by the President-elect of being biased and in some cases, most recently, accused, as he did with CNN, of producing 'Fake News'. Trump basically equated CNN reporting to deliberately published **hoaxes**, **propaganda**, and **disinformation** from the outlets using **social media** to drive **web traffic** and amplify their effect.

During the last months of the elections, there has been a widespread concern in the US intelligence community, and in Washington more broadly, that Russian intelligence, via hacks and selective release of information, was aiming to undermine the presidential race and to delegitimize the democratic electoral process. According to the US intelligence agencies, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) was hacked by two state-sponsored hackers in Russia in 2015 and 2016. These hackers are believed to have created outlets on the Internet to make Democratic documents public. The New York Times reported on December 30<sup>th</sup> that leaks of documents stolen from the DNC potentially caused backlash against Democrats in nearly a dozen House races, leaked emails forced the DNC chairwoman to resign and fuelled a rift between the supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton. Moreover, the hacked emails from the account of Hillary Clinton

campaign chairman revealed the campaign's internal dynamics and dominated news for days. In September 2016, Barack Obama issued a warning to the Russian President to stay out of the American elections. In the meantime, Donald Trump has consistently attempted to cast doubt on the intelligence showing that the Russian government was deeply involved in the hacking.

Based on intelligence available to President Obama by the end of December, the White House announced a number of punitive actions against Russia for its efforts to influence the 2016 elections. The Obama administration decided to expel 35 suspected Russian intelligence operatives from the United States and to impose sanctions on Russia's leading intelligence services. The administration also penalized four top officers of one of those services after concluding that the G.R.U. ordered attacks on the DNC. These actions escalated to the strongest American response yet to a state-sponsored cyber-attack. President Obama had also issued a new executive order that allows him, and his successors, to retaliate for efforts to influence elections in the US, or those of allies and partners. One of the aims of this move was to respond to concerns of the US allies regarding a potential Russian interference in the forthcoming elections in France and Germany. In striking contrast, Donald Trump's reaction to the sanctions was sceptical. He stated that "it's time for our country to move on to bigger and better things". Nevertheless he agreed to meet with the intelligence community in order to be updated on the facts of this situation. Russian officials at first criticised the sanctions and vowed retaliation but Vladimir Putin on his side announced that Russia would do nothing in response to the new American measures and decided to simply await the next administration, prompting positive reaction from Donald Trump.

As a prelude to Trump's briefing by the chiefs of the US intelligence, on January 5<sup>th</sup> the Senate Armed Service Committee held its own hearing on the alleged Russian cyber-attacks. The public hearing displayed a bipartisan support for the intelligence community. The day after, as the US Intelligence briefed Donald Trump, a partly declassified joint US Intelligence Report was made public. The report was expected to provide a much-needed clarification and evidence regarding the Russian government involvement in the US elections yet it did not attempt to quantify the impact that the DNC hacks might have had on the result of the elections. **According to NYT**, "what most Americans may have seen as a one-time effort of brazen meddling by Russia in the core of American democracy was, the report says, only part of a long running information war that involves not just shadowy hackers and pop-up media, but also more conventional news outlets, including the thriving Russian television network Russia Today (RT)".

While the CIA, NSA and FBI prepared an unprecedented intelligence community assessment in US history, the declassified report did not provide enough hard evidence to back up the agencies' claims that the Russian government engineered the elections attack. For the supporters of the idea that Kremlin's interference was significant, the report shows that Russia was indeed aggressive and pushed the boundaries in the cyber space of what was previously acceptable. **Sceptics on the other hand believe that** by overplaying the influence of Russia's disinformation campaign, the report plays directly into the hands of the Russian propagandists that it hopes to combat. The absence of concrete evidence in the report was met with mockery by Russian politicians and commentators who tried to ridicule the report.

In addition to the shortcomings of the main report, merely days before the Inauguration Day, a two page appendix to the Secret Intelligence Report presented to both President Obama and the President-elect was leaked to the press. Months earlier, in October 2016, **Mother Jones magazine broke the story** about the unverified dossier that was known to some media outlets, house representatives and the intelligence community but it was not made public because of unproven claims

such as, among the others, that Russian intelligence had compromised Trump during his visits to Moscow and could blackmail him. The publication of the secret dossier by BuzzFeed in early January and the CNN's report on the fact that Obama and Trump had been given the two page appendix to the Report, without clarifying that content of this dossier remains unconfirmed, **sparked another controversy about the mainstream media** publishing the allegations coming from unverified sources in order to attack Trump and/or score publicity. **As rightly pointed out by Glenn Greenwald**, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist from the Intercept, "there is a real danger here that this manoeuvre could harshly backfire, to the great benefit of Trump and to the great detriment of those who want to oppose him. If any of the significant claims in this "dossier" turn out to be provably false (...) many people will conclude, with Trump's encouragement, that large media outlets (CNN and BuzzFeed) and anti-Trump factions inside the government (CIA) are deploying "Fake News" to destroy him". According to Greenwald, "in the eyes of many people, that will forever discredit — render impotent — future journalistic exposés that are based on actual, corroborated wrongdoing". Therefore he suggests that all of the claims about Russia's interference in U.S. elections and ties to Trump should be fully investigated by a credible body, and the evidence publicly disclosed to the fullest extent possible.

The publication of the reports related to the allegations about Russia's interference in the US elections and Trump's campaign ties with Kremlin exposed a deeper crisis of trust in intelligences services and the news media outlets in the US. Many argued during and after the elections that the FBI acted to influence the presidential race; first, because of the FBI director James B. Comey's handling of Clinton's email inquiry and secondly, by not making public the investigation related to Trump's alleged ties to Russia. Currently, Director Comey is under investigation by the Justice Department inspector general, which will review his actions in the Clinton case. Since becoming the President-elect, Trump has repeatedly attempted to undermine the intelligence services and media as dishonest and politicised and the latest events unfortunately seem to play in his favour. As sharply observed by Masha Gessen in her NYT opinion *Into the Trumpian Fog*, 'the President-elect was repeating something that he'd said for months, and that appears to reflect his perception of reality: News outlets are his adversaries, and the only way to win against them is to use a bigger megaphone (...) Mr. Trump (much like Mr. Putin) thrives on cacophony, in an environment of ever-shifting realities that makes other people feel disoriented and helpless". Taking into account that Donald Trump is openly hostile to intelligence agencies and news media we can unfortunately expect that the unfolding crisis will deepen further in the forthcoming months.