



What Biden And Putin Didn't Discuss

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At his summit with Vladimir Putin in Geneva, Switzerland last week, President Biden pressed his Russian counterpart on a number of critical issues. He stressed the importance of protecting U.S. infrastructure from Russian cyberattacks — and signaled that the White House was prepared to take retaliatory measures in response to continued Russian cyber-mischief. He emphasized his support for *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, the U.S. broadcaster whose continued functioning and independence within Russia is now being threatened by the Kremlin. And he warned of "devastating consequences" for Russia if opposition critic Alexei Navalny, now languishing in a penal colony on questionable charges, ends up perishing behind bars.

One thing that didn't make it onto the meeting agenda, however, was the question of disinformation — and Russia's ongoing efforts to promote "fake news" and divisive narratives within the United States. Yet that topic is a critical one, because recent years have seen the Kremlin erect a massive disinformation campaign aimed at the U.S. and other Western nations.

This effort involves multiple institutions, from the notorious "Internet Research Agency" of pro-Kremlin oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin to more obscure ones, such as Global Research website affiliated, via cutouts, with Russia's foreign intelligence service, the SVR. It entails the promotion of a wide range of pernicious narratives, ranging from false data casting doubt on the efficacy of Western vaccines to sensationalized, distorted accounts of social and racial strife within the United States.

The goal of these efforts is both singular and clear: to undermine trust in democratic institutions on the part of the American people. "They are constantly exploring, looking, poking, prodding — not just systems but also the American public — looking for ways to cast doubt, to divide us along racial lines, along political lines, along whatever societal divisions we already have in existence," Matthew Masterson of the Stanford Internet Observatory explained recently to the *Financial Times*.

So far, however, the extent of Russia's disinformation offensive hasn't garnered nearly enough critical attention in the United States. To be sure, more and more Americans are now aware of Russian persistent efforts to meddle in the 2016 election (and, to a lesser extent, in last year's political contest as well). Additionally, Russia's false narratives and the actors disseminating them are now better tracked by governmental bodies (like the State Department's Global Engagement Center) and NGOs, such as the German Marshall Fund. Yet it would be fair to say that a serious, coordinated response to what has been dubbed Russia's "firehose of falsehood" is still very much conceptual, at least here in the United States.

It's a strategy that's sorely needed. A recent report by social media giant Facebook singled out Russia as the most active source of disinformation on its platform over the past four years. Nor is there any sign that Russia plans to reverse course, despite the diplomatic pleasantries exchanged by Biden and Putin in Geneva. As Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Moscow Center has put it, disinformation "is becoming one of the principal tools in this hybrid war, [this] confrontation between the United States and Russia. I see no real let-up in this confrontation. I think it will intensify ... I'm afraid, before we find a new normal."

The mid-June summit offered Biden an opening to signal to Putin that the United States sees disinformation as a real strategic threat, and that it is prepared to mobilize a serious governmental response. Sadly, it was one that the U.S. President didn't take.

But opportunities still abound for the White House to convince the Kremlin that its disinformation offensive is no longer a cost-free project. Working in tandem with Congress, the administration has the power to put in place measures — ranging from a blacklisting of Russian media outlets to a reinvigorated campaign to fund independent, pro-Western media voices in foreign nations — that ratchet up the costs to Russia of its weaponization of fake news.

Doing so will be an important barometer of whether the White House is truly serious about changing Russia's behavior.