
CRITICAL FORUM: RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN 2016 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Introduction

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The Trump government has been in power for a hundred days, but nothing is certain except uncertainty. The unpredictability of US-Russian relations looms large, especially in light of the unresolved question of Russia's role in the Trump win. One of the important contexts for these questions has to do with free speech and technology. Democracies depend on openness, the exchange of ideas, freedom of speech, and the circulation of information. These principles can and should be tested and contested, and the arguments for these values and their successful embodiment in practice must be re-examined anew, especially when both the left and the right make new claims for inclusion. The circulation of information has never been free from constraints of various forms (including, for example, libel law), but digital technologies make the line between privacy and censorship, news and fake news more and more difficult to draw. What part should a scholarly journal such as *Slavic Review* play at this fraught time? We cannot offer up the minute developments, but we can provide perspectives, contexts, and reflections not otherwise available in the news media. This is the goal of the critical forum on Russian interference in US elections, one of the two forums in this special online only issue of the journal.

The key elements of the hacking scandal include: the release of emails from Democratic National Committee and the role of *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) and *WikiLeaks* in the release, payments made to Trump campaign officials and advisors, and a dossier disclosing business deals between Trump associates and Russian officials. The US national-political conversation has been deeply mired in the issue of the Russian hacking not only as a threat to democratic transparency and institutional viability, and therefore to national security and political independence, but also as to the possible involvement of the current President and his advisors and officials in the hacking. Peter Rutland traces the contours of the controversy, drawing attention to broader questions about Putin's goals for Russia's enhanced role in global politics. Syria and the fight against ISIS in the Middle East are particularly important. Rutland points out some of the consequences of the ongoing scandal. Michael Flynn's departure constrains some of the shifts Trump would have otherwise been able to make in Russia policies. Dealing with a resurgent Russia will prove particularly challenging.

Sarah Oates focuses on another dimension of the scandal—the Russian government's use of *kompromat*, compromising information, and whether and to what extent US political actors relied on similar tactics. Oates argues that the differences between US and Russian political culture, electoral politics,

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and the media—significantly weaken the effectiveness of *kompromat* in this country, however, she warns that increased attention to the role of media in electoral politics will be increasingly important.

One topic born out of the 2016 presidential election is the extent to which centrist and liberal politics and policies failed to live up to expectations of the electorate. Dissatisfaction with the government, the economy, and with less tangible cultural trends proved significant in the Trump victory. Julie Hemment sees a connection between the hacking scandal and the broader “crisis of liberalism.” Liberalism is under attack globally; populism is on the rise in Europe, and eastern Europe is leading the way. For more on the contexts and causes of global populism, see the other critical forum, edited by Anna Grzymala-Busse in this issue. Hemment underscores the significance of the “mischief” perpetrated by Russian political actors, but also highlights US use of similar tactics, and expresses concerns about the revival of old tropes about Russia, and urges caution in the new cold war.

Brian Porter-Szűcs brings the case of Poland to bear on the question about Putin and the US, offering an analysis of the structural reasons for recent ideological shifts. In Poland, Szűcs argues, the rise of antiliberal politics, buttressed by economic factors (the collapse of an industry-based economy and the failures of the welfare state), is far more important in electoral outcomes than Russian interference. That the structural argument may account in important ways for electoral outcomes in the US and across the world does not, however, mean that interference and collusion did not also play a role.

One final note. We are not on a 24 hour news cycle; as a quarterly, we require six months lead time, which means the authors contributing to this forum should not be held accountable for new information beyond April 2017. “At the time of writing” is thus a significant phrase for the essays included here, as well as the larger concern that led to the forum in the first place. “At the time of writing” also means that new and important evidence may yet be revealed.