

Testimony to Oversight Committee
“Defending America from the Chinese Communist Party’s Political Warfare, Part I”
Professor Timothy Snyder
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Democracy is in decline, dragged down by the autocratic lie. The autocrats offer no new visions; instead they lie about democracies and insert lies into democracies. The test of disinformation is its power to alter the course of crucial events, such as wars and elections.

Russia undertook a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the basis of a big lie about Nazis. Even as we meet today, Russian (and Chinese) propaganda shapes House debates about Ukraine, the most important foreign policy decision of our time. In domestic politics, the most important matter in coming months the coming presidential election.

To begin with the war. Beijing cares about Ukraine because it is the decisive conflict of our time. It can spread lies about Ukraine thanks to prior Russian labor. Beijing wrongly blames the war on Washington. Chinese information actions seek to attract American actors around to Russian propaganda tropes meant to justify Russian aggression and bring about American inaction.¹

Though Americans sometimes forget this, Ukrainian resistance is seen around the world as an obvious American cause and an easy American victory. So long as Ukraine fights, it is fulfilling the entire NATO mission by itself, defending a European order based in integration rather than empire, and affirming international order in general. It is also holding back nuclear proliferation.

Given these obvious strategic gains, American failure in Ukraine will lead other powers to conclude that a feckless and divided United States will also fail to meet future challenges. The fundamental goal of Russian (and thus Chinese) propaganda is to prevent American action, thereby making America seem impotent and democracy pointless -- also in the eyes of Americans themselves.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is intimately connected to a possible Chinese war of aggression against Taiwan.² As Taiwanese leaders continually and urgently remind us, Ukrainian resistance deters Chinese aggression.³ Ukraine deters China in a way that the United States cannot, without taking any action that Beijing could interpret as provocative. A Russian victory in Ukraine, therefore, would clear the way for Chinese aggression in the Pacific. It would strengthen China's ally, force Europe into a subordinate relationship to

Beijing, and discredit democracy. It would also bring into Russian hands Ukrainian military technologies that would be significant in a Chinese war of aggression.

Russia's one path to victory in Ukraine leads through minds and mouths in Washington, DC. Russian and Chinese propaganda therefore celebrates the inability of Congress to pass aid for Ukraine, and praises those who hinder the passage of such a bill.⁴ But the specific propaganda memes that China spreads (and some American leaders repeat) about the war are of Russian origin.⁵ Russia is the leader in this field;⁶ China is imitating Russian techniques and Russian tropes.⁷

A central example is the Russo-Chinese invocation of "Nazism." Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine with the grotesque claim that its aim was the "denazification" of Ukraine. (Ukraine is a democracy with freedom of expression, assembly and religion, which elected a Jewish president with more than 70% of the vote. Russia is a one-party state with a leader cult that is fighting a criminal war and suppressing all domestic opposition.) This "Nazi" meme was immediately boosted by the Chinese government.⁸ Over the weekend before this hearing, a Member of Congress tweeted this Russian disinformation trope⁹

The Russian war of destruction in Ukraine is the pre-eminent test of democracy; U.S. elections come next. Russia is also the leader here. China has no Paul Manafort. It lacks American human assets with experience in directing foreign influence campaigns and close to American presidential campaigns.¹⁰ Nothing China has done (as yet) rivals the Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee in 2016.

On social media, CCP propaganda demeans the Biden administration. But China's social media campaign on behalf of Trump in 2024 looks like a copy (a poor one) of Russia's on behalf of Trump in 2016.¹¹ CCP propaganda invokes the false charges raised in impeachment hearings, but the lies that China magnifies arose from a person in contact with Russian intelligence.¹² What China can do is try an influence campaign based on a Russian initiative -- and American impeachment hearings. Insofar as this works at all, it is a cycle: Russia-America-China -- with the Chinese hope that the propaganda it generates from Russian initiatives and American actions will cycle back to distress Americans and hurt the Biden administration.

The CCP's internet propaganda is posted on X (Twitter). Likewise, Russia's denazification meme did not need a Russian or a Chinese channel to reach Representative

Marjorie Taylor Green. Nor did she need a Russian or Chinese platform to spread the disinformation trope further. She and her American followers used X (Twitter).

Marjory Taylor Greene is not the only member of Congress to have presented the Russian "denazification" trope in public debate. In the case of Matt Gaetz, we know that the transmission belt was Chinese, because he cited a Chinese state propaganda source in congressional debate.¹³

It is not clear in what sense X is an American platform; in any event, its owner, Elon Musk, has removed prior safeguards identifying state propaganda outlets, driving much higher viewing of Russian and Chinese propaganda.¹⁴ Under Musk, X (Twitter) has been particularly lax in policing known Chinese propaganda accounts, ignoring their flagging by government and other platforms.¹⁵ Musk has also personally spread specific Russian propaganda tropes.¹⁶

Russian lies are meant not only to disinform, to make action more difficult, but also to demotivate, to make action seem senseless. Russian memes work not by presenting Russia as a positive alternative, but by demoralizing others. No one wants to be close to "Nazis," and the simple introduction of the lie is confusing and saddening.

The same holds with the Russian meme to the effect that Ukraine is corrupt. A completely bogus Russian source introduced the entirely fake idea that the Ukrainian president had bought yachts. Although this was entirely untrue, Representative Greene then spread the fiction. Senator J.D. Vance also picked up the "yacht" example and used it as his justification for opposing aid to Ukraine.¹⁷

The larger sense of that lie is that everyone everywhere is corrupt, even the people who seem most admirable; and so we might as well give up on our heroes, on any struggle for democracy, or any struggle at all. Ukraine's president, Volodymr Zelens'kyi, chose to risk his life by remaining in Kyiv and defending his country against a fearsome attack from Russia which almost all outsiders believed would succeed within days. His daring gamble saved not only his own democracy, but opened a window of faith that democracies can defend themselves. It confirmed the basic lesson of liberty that individual choices have consequences. The lie directed at Zelens'kyi was meant not only to discredit him personally and undermine support for Ukraine, but also to persuade Americans that no one is righteous and nothing is worth defending.

Insofar as legislators such as Marjorie Taylor Greene and J.D. Vance are vectors of propaganda, they are themselves playing a part of the Russian (or Russo-Chinese) operation. As such they are not merely spreading fictions; they are also modelling a "Russian" style of government, a politics of impotence, in which big lies are normal, corruption is thought to be routine, and nothing gets done. Russian lies about Ukraine are meant to prevent action to help Ukraine; but in a larger sense they are also meant to spread the view that those in power are incapable of any positive action at all.

When legislators embrace Russian lies, they demobilize the rest of us, conveying the underlying notion that all that matters is a clever fiction and a platform from which to spread it. A first step legislators can take is to cease to spread known propaganda tropes themselves. Russian (or Russo-Chinese) memes work in America when Americans choose to repeat them.

Republican leaders quite properly raise concerns about Russian memes in the Republican mouths. The chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence have warned in recent weeks that Russian disinformation has shaped the views of Republican voters and the rhetoric of Republican elected officials. Representative Michael R. Turner said that "We see directly coming from Russia attempts to mask communications that are anti-Ukraine and pro-Russia messages — some of which we even hear being uttered on the House floor."¹⁸

For this and other reasons, the problem cannot be dismissed as "foreign." Elite American actors such as Congressional representatives and billionaires know what they are doing when they spread Russian memes. Most Americans, however, confront them unknowingly.

From the perspective of Russia (and China), *all* social media platforms present an attack surface. Non-Chinese platforms are the main vectors of Russian and disinformation. During the 2020 presidential election, for example, the largest Facebook group for American Christians was run by people who were neither.¹⁹ While ByteDance/TikTok is important, it is less so than Twitter and Facebook. Social media *as such* favors hostile interventions over locally reported news. During the 2020 presidential election, for example, the main Facebook site for American Christians was run by people who are neither. ByteDance/TikTok is an attractive target for legislation, but a ban on TikTok unaccompanied by other policy will have limited effects.²⁰ It will not prevent China from carrying out

influence operations in the United States, nor would it stop China from gathering information on American citizens. To hinder Russian (and Chinese, and other) operations, all platforms would have to be regulated.²¹

In the short term, it is incumbent upon legislators not to engage in Russian or Russo-Chinese propaganda. In the medium term, Russian (and Chinese) hostile actors must be identified and disabled. It is a mistake, though, to narrow policy discussions to foreign entities. Russian propaganda works because of the design of social media and because of the choices of Americans. Russian actors understand how to exploit specific features of social media as well as the overall attention economy. It is up to American policymakers to resist Russian tropes in particular and reform the media landscape in general.

Properly understood, the problem of Chinese disinformation leads us to Russian disinformation, the two together to Russian war and American elections. The gravity of those subjects to the overall confrontation between authoritarian and democratic forms of government, and the question of the media environment we choose to build and the values we choose to affirm. Russian (and Chinese) lies are meant to bring defeat to Ukraine and disorder to America, in the service of the larger conclusion that democracy has no point since all politics is corrupt and impervious to change. All the big lies serve that biggest of lies.

In the contest between authoritarian and democratic regimes, it will ultimately be not just self-defense but creative initiative that defines and saves the democracies. The era of hostile disinformation is also the era of the decline of reporting, and the two phenomena are linked.²² An American who has access to reporting will be less vulnerable to disinformation, and better able to make navigate the demands of democratic citizenship. A victory over disinformation will be won in a climate in which Americans have access to reliable information and a reasons to trust it.²³

¹ On the connection between non-kinetic and kinetic activity in the crucial case of Taiwan, see Anne Applebaum, "[China's War](#) Against Taiwan Has Already Started," *Atlantic*, 14 December 2022. As Applebaum notes, China is seeking to replicate Russia's success in 2014 in Ukraine.

² As the 2024 [Annual Threat Assessment](#) of the U.S. Intelligence Community reminds us, "Taiwan is a significant potential flashpoint for confrontation between the PRC and the United States as Beijing claims that the United States is using Taiwan to undermine China's rise. Beijing will use even stronger measures to push back against perceived increases in U.S. support to Taiwan." (p. 8)

³ Edward Wong, "[Taiwan's Top Diplomat](#) Says U.S. Aid to Ukraine Is Critical for Deterring China," *New York Times*, 28 March 2024.

⁴ Micah McCartney, "[China's Propaganda Paper](#) Revels in US Division Over Ukraine Aid," *Newsweek*, 2 October 2023.

⁵ For example, Moscow's completely invented and entirely false examples of Ukrainian "corruption" reportedly influence Congressional debates. Catherine Belton and Joseph Menn, "Russian trolls [target U.S. support](#) for Ukraine, Kremlin documents show," *Washington Post*, 8 April 2024.

⁶ China could use deep fakes in forthcoming electoral interference. See Sze-Fung Lee, "[Deepfakes](#) with Chinese Characteristics: PRC Influence Operations in 2024," Jamestown Foundation, 28 March 2024. China is currently using techniques in the United States that Russia pioneered almost a decade ago. There is a public record of Russian hacking campaigns inside the United States, most recently one that involved the theft of the emails of federal officials. See Zack Whittaker, "US says Russian hackers stole federal government emails during Microsoft cyberattack," *TechCrunch*, 11 April, 2024. Russia-aligned hackers such as Anonymous Sudan are also carrying out attacks on federal government websites: "'Anonymous Sudan' Determined to Cripple U.S. Cyber-Infrastructure," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 18 March 2024. Russia also succeeded in 2016 in hacking the Democratic National Committee. There is no public record of similar successes by China. In other world regions, such as Africa, the Russian lead in disinformation is pronounced. See "[Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa](#)," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 13 March 2024.

⁷ On Chinese learning from Russia, see (in addition to above references) Joshua Kurlantzick, "[How Russia and China](#) Learn From Each Other on Disinformation," Council on Foreign Relations, 7 March 2022.

⁸ "Denazification" copying: Jordyn Haime, "[China adopts](#) Russia's 'denazification' myth to rationalize invasion of Ukraine," *Times of Israel*, 6 March 2022; Maria Repnikova, "How the People's Republic of [China Amplifies](#) Russian Disinformation," State Department briefing, 27 April 2022. After IS-K carried out a terrorist attack, China also followed Russia's lead and sought to blame Ukraine and the United States. See Yang An, "Chinese state, social media [echo Russian propaganda](#) on concert hall attack," Voice of America, 3 April 2024.

⁹ Marjorie Taylor Greene, [tweet](#), 14 April 2014.

¹⁰ Addressing Russian and Chinese operations means remembering financial vulnerabilities in real life. Recent investigations in Europe have revealed Russian influence schemes, some of which simply involved money for favors. Donald Trump is financially vulnerable, and has a history of receiving money from both Chinese entities (while president) and Russian entities (beforehand). Financial corruption: recent investigations in Europe reveal coordinated Russian campaigns to directly and indirectly bribe politicians. For concerning signs that the same could be happening in the United States, see Alex Finley, "[Russia Is Buying](#) Politicians in Europe. Is It Happening Here Too?" *New Republic*, 12 April 2024. See also "[White House for Sale](#): How Princes, Prime Ministers, and Premiers Paid Off President Trump," Staff Report, Committee on Oversight and Accountability, 4 January 2024.

¹¹ Elise Thomas, "Pro-CCP '[Spamouflage](#)' network pivoting to focus on US Presidential Election," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 15 February 2024.

¹² [Government's Application](#) for Review of Magistrate Judge's Bail Order, Memorandum of Points and Authorities, 7, 21 February 2024, United States of America v. Alexander Smirnov, Central District of California.

¹³ Lauren Giella, "Defense Advisor Shuts Down Matt Gaetz Citing 'Propaganda' in Hearing," *Newsweek*, 28 February 2023.

¹⁴ Miah Hammond-Errey, "Elon Musk's Twitter Is Becoming a [Sewer](#) of Disinformation," *Foreign Policy*, 15 July 2023.

¹⁵ Joseph Menn, Aaron Schaffer, Naomi Nix and Clara Ence Morse, "[Chinese propaganda](#) accounts found by Meta still flourish on X," *Washington Post*, 16 February 2024.

¹⁶ Laura Thornton, "[Kremlin Talking Points](#) Are Back in the U.S. Debate," *Foreign Policy*, 13 October 2022.

¹⁷ Olga Robinson, Shayan Sardarizadeh and Mike Wendling, "How pro-Russian ['yacht' propaganda](#) influenced US debate over Ukraine aid," BBC, 20 December 2023.

¹⁸ Yvonne Wingett Sanchez and Abigail Hauslohner, "[Top Republican warns](#) pro-Russia messages are echoed 'on the House floor'," *Washington Post*, 7 April 2024; Julia Ioffe, [interview](#) with Michael McCaul, Puck News, 2 April 2024.

¹⁹ Francis Agustin, "Troll Farms Peddling Misinformation," *Business Insider*, 19 September 2021.

²⁰ See Rose Jackson, Seth Stodder and Kenton Thibaut, "[TikTok](#): Hate the Game, Not the Player," DFR Lab, 14 February 2024.

²¹ For policy suggestions see "[Much Ado](#) About 'Somethings'," Foundation for the Defense of Democracy, 27 March 2024.

²² On news deserts see the [helpful data](#) in Penelope Abernathy's online report, "The Expanding News Desert." For positive recommendations see Timothy Snyder, *On Freedom*, New York: Crown, 2024 (forthcoming).

²³ On this point see the work of Peter Pomerantsev.