



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

THE AGE OF POST-TRUTH

COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES ON EUROPE'S EASTERN FLANK

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States cannot enjoy great power status unless they act and operate across a complex power base that includes elements such as military power, a large and competitive economy, innovation, a relatively youthful and educated population, and a model of government that is aspired to by other states. Other factors, such as a language spoken in other countries and cultures, can also be beneficial. It is also essential that the country be able to reach out to others and that its messages carry credibility. A large part of the former Soviet Union remains a community in many ways, with widely used, shared social media platforms and shared internet providers. However, a state that does not invest in a broad power spectrum cannot sit at the “high table.”

Smart states can reallocate resources from their strengths to their weaknesses, called horizontal strengthening. They may also allocate resources to areas of strength to make them even stronger, known as vertical strengthening. For example, China has for some time been the production hub of world industry, but it has successfully

diversified its power base and developed a performant military to become the second largest spender on defense and has also promoted Chinese culture and language.

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Russia has major strengths, such as possessing the world's largest arsenal of nuclear weapons, its large land mass, its large oil and gas production, large armed forces, a large and well-trained diplomatic and intelligence service, and a sphere of influence in the former Soviet republics and to some extent elsewhere, such as Syria and the Western Balkans.

Russia's predecessor, the Soviet Union, spread an ideology that was not at all credible. Its propaganda was successful only where it was backed by the force of arms. As former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union George Kennan once noted: "Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise." Russia, which tripled its total gross domestic product between 1999 and 2013, has used its resources to diversify its activities to areas with perceived weaknesses, compensating for the flaws of its foreign policy outreach. Since 2014, an assertive strategic international communications program has formed part and parcel of Russia's grand (and military) strategy.

It consists of four notable aspects:

1. Russia's external relations can be characterized as pragmatic, in sharp contrast with those of the Soviet Union. This gives more opportunity to communicate various messages without having to adhere to a set of incredible ideological tenets.
2. Strategic communications have been strongly integrated within a revised defense doctrine that has created the impression that it is more confrontation than cooperation. This was unfortunate and alerted Russia's partners in Europe and North America.
3. Strategic communications are on the visible end of a political process that includes a broader array of measures and activities to which the world at large must be prepared to respond.
4. Russia's leadership, due to the background of several of its members, including President Vladimir Putin, favors a more assertive campaign to communicate the country's messages to the world.

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A SERIOUS CHALLENGE

The use of strategic communications and their influence is not easy to measure. Russia wants to influence its environment. In this sense, Moscow is not different from any other state. However, its ambitious and assertive posture on the international stage is different. Moscow has embraced active measures, the establishment and financing of front organizations, and psychological operations, including generating hate, fear and hope. Russia has lately also actively engaged in a very broad spectrum of communications means and methods.

Moscow relies on various media sources tailored to different audiences. Cost efficiency is important. Russia gives preference to electronic media, including social media and television. Russian national television is widely available throughout the states of the former Soviet Union, including in the Baltic states. Its influence is noticeable when we look at opinion polls reflecting

Chinese soldiers carry the flags of the Communist Party, the state, and the People's Liberation Army during a military parade in China's northern Inner Mongolia region. China is diversifying its power base, increasing its defense spending, and promoting Chinese culture and language.





sympathy with Russia and the views of the Russian state, which is regularly greater where Russian programming is available. Russian television, first and foremost channels such as Perviy Kanal (Channel One) and RTR Planeta, have the most influence in Russia's immediate neighborhood. Russia also uses international television broadcasting in various foreign languages. Established and generously funded by the Russian state, Russia Today — or RT as it has been renamed — is now available in Arabic, English, French, German and Spanish and is available on satellite and cable packages. RT also has an internet site in all these languages and Russian.

RT is internationally notorious for spreading propaganda and often fake news. French President Emmanuel Macron even called Russian state-backed media outlets RT and Sputnik “agents of influence” that spread falsehoods about him throughout his election campaign — during a press conference with Putin no less. Russia presents this activity more innocently, emphasizing RT's contribution to improving the country's image in the world. But international concerns are not so much about RT's broadcasting, per se, but about it being used as a platform to interfere in the internal politics of other states in combination with other, often more covert measures — an amalgamation of Russian power potential of which television programming is only a part. The question is whether media is a central element or complementary to a package of more clandestine means — a question underlined by RT's relatively unimpressive viewership numbers. For instance, in the United Kingdom, RT has

French President Emmanuel Macron, right, at a press conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Versailles Palace near Paris in 2017. Macron called Russian-run media outlets RT and Sputnik “agents of influence” that spread falsehoods.

never been watched by more than 4,300 households, indicating it is not a source of major influence. Russia also uses internet platforms such as Sputnik (including Sputnik news) and various social media websites to project certain viewpoints. When these sites are compromised or their “shelf lives” expire, they simply disappear and are replaced with new, more credible ones.

The unity of its own messaging, versus divided views in the West, gives Russia an asymmetric advantage for which it is difficult for the West to compensate.

In print media, which has more limited influence, Russia also applies a variety of measures. These include providing sympathetic foreign journalists access to Russian leaders, as well as feeding them Russia's version of different events. Critically, Russia provides journalists



with information in many languages (and of steadily improving quality), enabling Western journalists, often pressed for time, to utilize “ready-made” information rather than investing time and energy on checking facts. Consequently, Russia’s version of the “facts” can benefit from a multiplying effect in the media of other countries.

The unity of its own messaging, versus divided views in the West, gives Russia an asymmetric advantage for which it is difficult for the West to compensate. This contributes to the impression that the West is reactive and hesitant in the face of unfriendly, or outright hostile, Russian strategic communications. In addition, information overload makes it is ever more difficult to identify reliable sources of information, especially as social media has disaggregated old patterns of communication and new actors can directly reach out to the population of other countries. Similar concerns appeared in the 1980s in conjunction with satellite television.

These three factors call for attention:

1. Social media has made access more cost effective, lowering the cost of “buying” influence.
2. It is easier to send tailor-made messages.
3. Some social media networks, including widespread ones such as Facebook, facilitate the reinforcement of perceptions by preselecting messages based on what one has previously viewed. Other social media select what messages to emphasize based on which websites have been visited. This results in viewing content that reaffirms prior views, further deepening convictions.

Directors at RT, the state-run television network previously known as Russia Today, monitor video feeds in Moscow. RT is available in Arabic, English, French, German, Russian and Spanish, on satellite and cable packages, and has an internet site in multiple languages.

All of this contributes to a deepening of political division within societies.

A MULTITUDE OF PROBLEMS

The new opportunities for strategic communications involve numerous challenges that require adequate responses. However, finding the most effective responses can be difficult.

Consider:

1. Strategic communications is part of a broader political strategy, sometimes called a grand strategy, and thus its role can only be assessed in light of the relationship between the two. Do states have grand strategies? Are their strategic communications in line with and do they contribute to the grand strategy of the state, or are there discrepancies?
2. The focus of strategic communications has changed over time. Whereas in 2014 Russian strategic communications focused primarily on spreading “fake news,” it has since become more diversified and better integrated with other state activities.
3. The nature of hostile communications activities makes it difficult to react. Rather than spreading

a cohesive alternative view of events/developments, a variation that aims to undermine the still dominant — usually Western — discourse is often disseminated. In other cases, it aims to deprive the West of the monopoly of its message. It also occasionally appears as a “moving target,” often changing the message just to retain media attention.

4. Messages often combine elements of reality with falsehood. In addition, entirely factual information is presented in such a way that unrelated issues are misleadingly made to seem closely related to each other.

Russia’s grand strategy dates to the consolidation of Russian statehood following Putin’s rise to power. Its starting point is that strong statehood is Russia’s only guarantee of respect and international recognition. This is partly a reflection of recent and not so recent history. Because in the 1990s post-communist Russia was a place of chaos as it liberalized its economy and politics, and that time is therefore identified with weak statehood by Russians, a discourse is being built that arbitrarily identifies weak statehood with liberalism and as the cause of chaos. By this logic, strong statehood counters malaise; and if liberalism means weakness, then strength would come with the denial of liberalism. A thorough analysis of this precept would fundamentally disprove the truth of equating weakness with liberalism and strong statehood with its denial. However, what matters to Russia’s leadership is the perception of its people.

Although Russia’s objectives have evolved over the past two decades, some have remained largely unchanged. Russia’s grand strategy prioritizes status over achievement, making it essential to the Russian leadership to depict the country as highly successful. The need for this depiction is plausible, because ostensible political stability — including leadership stability — helps create such an impression. Domestic strength is also portrayed as power internationally (which is not unusual for many states). However, due to the uneven level of Russia’s development, its strategic communications emphasize achievements and deemphasize weaknesses. That is why it is often said that the Russian leadership plays “a weak card strongly.”

Russia’s most important international objectives are to retain its independence and political sovereignty, and to restore its international standing through power and strength. This is underlined by Russia’s belief that when it took a conciliatory attitude toward the West in the 1990s, it was not “rewarded”; on the contrary, its weakness was exploited. Russia feels justified in its more aggressive posture because of its perception of Western encroachment. Russia’s main aspiration is to be a pole in a multipolar international system. To realize this objective, Russia aims to maximize its relative power in the international system. There are limits to how much Russia can strengthen its own position, due to its limited role in the world economy and its weakness as a role model (an

important element of soft power). Therefore, according to Russia’s understanding, it must weaken other centers of power. Russia’s targets may include individual states and multinational organizations that contribute to international cohesion, including alliances. Russia applies various means to weaken states and alliances, however appropriate or proportionate they may or may not be.

Many would like to see Russia integrated into the international system and thus avoid turning Moscow into an alienated pariah or a leader of those nations that coalesce against the West-dominated international order. The question is whether internal progress within Russia can provide a foundation for such developments. The main worries relate to economic matters that are fully subordinated to politics.

Russia has failed to realize its significant potential, even within the post-Soviet space. It enjoys recognition for its symbolic leadership but is less successful in turning leadership into economic opportunity. In Kazakhstan, Chinese investments are seven to eight times larger than Russian investments. The effects of the Western sanction regime, often blamed for economic malaise by Russian leaders, are apparently more lasting than Moscow expected. Furthermore, there is a consensus among macroeconomists that the eventual lifting of sanctions would not result in increased Russian exports. Although Russia will continue to generate modest growth of about 1.5-2% per year, it will not be sufficient to keep up with the competition. According to estimates, sanctions reduce Russia’s gross domestic product growth by approximately 1.2% every year. This will not undermine Putin’s regime; however, it will make it difficult for Russia to realize its socio-economic objectives and deliver on ambitious promises. If social dissatisfaction increases, there is a danger that the regime could “tighten the screws” and further increase reliance on authoritarian measures. Furthermore, Russia insufficiently invests in human potential, including education and health care, further harming sustainability.

Russian interference varies from the disagreeable to the morally questionable, on to the illegitimate and the outright illegal.

The gap between Russia’s performance and its self-claimed status creates a situation where Moscow finds the broad array of communication means indispensable. While Russia has generally not successfully diversified its strengths, it has increased the role of communications substantially. However, the world does not have a problem with Russia’s strategic messaging, nor necessarily with its so-called fake news because such cases can be exposed



and Russia's leadership embarrassed. The problem is with the broad array of measures, ranging from untrue messages to active measures and interference in other countries' domestic processes. Further, Russian interference varies from the disagreeable to the morally questionable, on to the illegitimate and the outright illegal.

RESPONDING TO RUSSIA'S CHALLENGE

The West faces a number of sensitive asymmetries when responding to Russia, ranging from the unity of Russia's messaging against the potential disunity of Western messaging, because it must consider whether to react individually or collectively. As Russia aims to mobilize (and demobilize) public opinion with its messages, the West simply cannot stand idle. Furthermore, the West is united by values, including the freedom of expression and the press, and thus must accept, or at least tolerate, freedom of expression from other countries, including ones that pursue malign objectives with their messaging.

Modern societies are exposed to more information than ever before. We continuously receive news from a wide variety of sources, many of which are not verified regarding their content and intent. The quality and accuracy of print and mainstream electronic media content is expected to be verified. From its onset, social media has been regarded as uncontrolled and thus the most free. However, as developments have illustrated, some freedoms must be limited to safeguard the freedoms of others, and to protect the public interest. For states, it can be difficult to agree on matters such as how to protect the public without depriving it of access to information. Societies also face the problem of protecting people without resorting to censorship, but lack dedicated organizations and resources to respond to threats in a focused and time-sensitive manner. Societies are inadequately prepared to

cope with the information their members receive, and people are inadequately educated and face difficulties in selecting or deselecting the news and interpretation presented by the media. Furthermore, genuine multilingualism is an issue because most people tend to consume news in their first language, potentially creating an informational bias in favor of media content in the mother tongue of its audience. However, in several post-Soviet states, the use of the Russian language remains widespread, and in at least one, Belarus, it is actually used as a first language. This presents a challenge because Russia may have significant media influence in states ranging from Tajikistan to Ukraine. It is questionable whether administrative measures, such as removing Russian channels from cable television packages, are adequate. Such radical steps would go against the instincts of the democratically minded. However, what if two countries are in high-intensity conflict (war) and one intends to undermine the resolve of the other's society to fight? Ukraine, facing this situation with Russia, removed Russian channels with significant news and propaganda content. Moldova followed Ukraine's example with a more limited effort of removing Russian news programs. However, Russian television programs were not banned in those two countries; they remained accessible via internet and satellite and households were not prohibited from owning satellite dishes. Unwelcome exceptional circumstances may make temporary constraints necessary, such as those introduced by Ukraine and Moldova. Though less well-known, the number of available Russian television channels has also been reduced in some other former Soviet republics, such as Tajikistan. In others, such as Georgia, the demand has dropped as Russian fluency has declined, particularly among the younger generation, replaced by interest in media in English and other languages.



The West faces delicate choices beyond administrative measures. As a diverse entity, the West and its constituent states may be exposed to Russian strategic communications to different degrees and, hence, not feel compelled to react to each in the same manner. There is also some division between the United States and its European allies, most notably regarding the use of fabricated messages for active countermeasures. But there are foundational points where consensus prevails: Credibility of public electronic media and trust in the veracity of government communications are essential preconditions. In those countries where people generally trust their government and do not have reason to often doubt its words and deeds, it is more difficult to sow discord between the government and the governed. This point is well illustrated by RT's failure to gain influence in Sweden, where efforts have been made to improve media literacy among the youth, develop resilience and address fake news in a timely manner.

There is also a complex link between the existence of a deeply divided political class and vulnerability to external political influence. When there is a broad political consensus regarding a country's socio-political and socio-economic foundations and its international alignment, there is less room for external interference. Conversely, deep-seated internal divisions, societal cleavages and an unsettled international orientation make a country more vulnerable to the malign influence of external actors. For example, building social cohesion has been unsuccessful in some Western Balkans states. In some cases, the lack of success has ethnic grounds and historic roots. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia is backing the Bosnian Serbs to maintain internal division and put pressure on the Bosnian state. In Serbia, Russia manifests Orthodox Christianity as a civilizational foundation, and in Croatia it appeals to the solidarity of Slavic nations. In Northern Macedonia, deeply divided

Opposite: Estonian riot police respond to a protest near a monument to World War II Soviet soldiers in Tallinn in 2007. Plans to remove the monument brought a strong rebuke from Moscow, inflaming internal divisions within the country.

Center: Lithuania welcomes several hundred German troops in 2017 as part of a multinational NATO battalion to deter Russia. Fake news accounts falsely accused German troops of raping a Lithuanian woman.

Above: Workers in biohazard suits affix a tent over the bench in Salisbury, England, where Russian-British double-agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter were found stricken by a nerve agent in what British authorities called a "brazen and reckless" murder attempt by Russian agents.

internal politics and mutually exclusive agendas have provided Russia with the opportunity to interfere.

Communications are the most visible of an array of Russian influence tools, supported by less visible tools ranging from diplomacy and intelligence to financial credits and investment. A corrupt establishment makes a country more vulnerable to outside influence, particularly in such small and poor countries where corrupting leaders is relatively inexpensive. When the leadership of a country is dependent on Russia, Russia usually pays less attention to achieving and maintaining influence in its media space. Hungary is an example where the multi-channel dependency of the government, complemented by remarkable political stability, makes focusing on bottom-up influence in the society redundant. Russia is satisfied to use Hungarian proxy media channels to widen its influence there. To prevent dependence on Russia, a state needs resilience, which requires good governance (credibility, communication), national unity and low levels of corruption. Media literacy in the society — being able to tell the difference between truth and distorted messages — is an essential component of resilience.

Russia's attempts to increase its influence have had a rather limited effect in some places, many of them in the Nordic and Baltic regions, where Russia has returned to more traditional means of influence. In the Nordic, Russia uses public policy channels to warn the Finnish and Swedish governments against joining NATO. In the Baltics, the situation is more complex due to the existence of large — though shrinking — ethnic Russian minorities. However, in states that have demonstrated proactive determination and where there is a tradition of good governance, such as Estonia — with its large Russian-speaking population influenced by Russian media — Russian influence attempts have become more nuanced. But there is little doubt that dedicated Russian institutions and personnel are waiting for their opportunity.

In recent years, the West has had the opportunity to learn more about how Russian strategic messaging operates by viewing spikes in Russian messaging during relevant events. The first such event was the 2007 crisis with Estonia, when Estonian authorities removed a Soviet World War II monument from the Tallinn city center. Demonstrations by approximately 1% of the city's population were skillfully presented by Russia as much larger and were a prelude to Russia's first large-scale cyber attack. In 2016, the so-called Lisa case was exploited by Russian propaganda when a 13-year-old Russian-German girl went missing and falsely claimed, upon her return, that she was abducted and raped by migrants to avoid being punished. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov called her "Our Lisa," even after the truth had been revealed. In 2017, German forces deployed on the NATO mission in Lithuania, were falsely accused of raping a local woman with the seeming intention of driving a wedge between the German troops and the local population. And in the spring of 2018, Sergei Skripal, a former Russian-British double agent, and his daughter were poisoned with a nerve agent in Salisbury, in the U.K., where they lived in exile. The British and their allies found the evidence convincing that Russia was behind the assassination attempt. The Russian media tried to undermine the British accusations by raising doubts about the provenance of the Novichuk nerve agent and trying to gain access to the crime scene for Russian experts while simultaneously fighting examination by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. They also asserted that Russian operatives would not have botched the job and left survivors. Rapid dissemination of a large number of varying stories produced a smokescreen intended to obscure what had really happened. In the end, Russia succeeded in confusing opinions (except within the expert community) until much of the public lost interest. Later, however, due to the poor organization of Russian military intelligence, the case was more fully revealed and the results publicized by the British investigative news organization Bellingcat.

What can be learned from these four cases? First, a country's own media must be constantly monitored to be

able to respond to an attack in a timely manner. Second, various hostile activities are often linked. Consequently, when hostile activities begin in one area or via one channel, there is potential spillover. Third, a strategic opponent's messaging must be countered in a timely manner. Fourth, it is essential to remain factual with messaging and countermessaging and not to reciprocate an opponent's lies. Fifth, it must be determined whether it is worth revealing one's own sources and capabilities to convincingly attribute a strategic communications attack to another state. Sixth, the entire exchange must be made transparent to the public — which consists of domestic and international audiences, including the adversary's citizens — to establish that you are acting honestly, ethically and in accordance with the law. Seventh, if communications are simplified to contrasting two rival versions of the facts, the audience will remain divided, which necessitates presenting a message that is reinforced by a superior set of norms, principles and values.

Even bearing in mind current divisions in the West, collective reaction to hostile strategic communication challenges is preferable to individual national responses. This is true of the Skripal poisoning case, in which the British reaction was supported by a massive demonstration of allied solidarity. When a national reaction is necessary due to urgency, as when false rumors were spread about German troops in Lithuania, international institutions can still play a role, though it may have to remain complementary and confined to those areas where they provide genuine comparative advantage. International organizations are often too hesitant in divisive matters and Russia attempts to prevent the establishment of unity in Western institutions.

Both NATO and the European Union have addressed matters of strategic communications under the fast-changing conditions of recent years. Their activity has reflected the potential of the institutions, but also the limits of accord among the member states. NATO has enhanced its capacity to collect and analyze information. It established its Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia, and together with the EU, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki, Finland — the first such institution beyond NATO's territory. In Riga, the focus is on in-depth research of communications and the development of methodology for member states. The Alliance does not have large amounts of resources to allocate to this activity and, hence, member state commitment is essential to countering the Russian challenge. NATO has also become more active on the web, setting the record straight regarding Russian misinformation about the Alliance and its policies, and contrasting it with facts.

NATO's position, presented as a rebuttal and in contrast to Russia's, makes it more compelling. The objective is partly to make the Russian media understand that it cannot spread falsehoods without response. NATO also asks such media to correct false stories. While it is

not the prime objective, there is a “name-and-shame” element because a media source that regularly presents counterfactual information and biased assessments will be exposed by Alliance public diplomacy. In one such case, U.S. Gen. Philip Breedlove, then NATO supreme allied commander Europe, declassified satellite imagery to clearly document Russia’s military presence in Ukraine’s Donbas region. NATO’s objective is to present its messages credibly and accurately, avoiding counterpropaganda and clearly contradicting Russia’s disinformation.

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The case of the EU is no less peculiar. As in many cases, the EU reacted belatedly to the emerging challenge from Russia due to its complex institutional framework and need for excessive coordination among its institutions and member states. The European Council established the East StratCom Task Force of the European External Action Service in March 2015.

Its main objectives are:

1. Communicating EU policy in the Eastern Partnership.
2. Strengthening the media environment.
3. Forecasting and addressing Russian disinformation with an emphasis on the crisis in and around Ukraine.

Russian strategic communications present a problem for the EU by using nonmilitary means to achieve politico-military goals and being backed by massive resources. Russia invested 191 million euros in Twitter and is also active on Facebook. Russia also takes advantage of the more rapid dissemination of fake news (according to a 2018 study by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, fake news travels an average of six times faster than truth), aiming to disorient and influence policymakers and societies and create confusion over what is factual and what information can be believed. Russia uses frequently repeated stereotypes, which have recently entailed comments such as “the EU is a U.S. vassal,” “human rights defenders are targeted in the West” and “the economic

situation in the Baltic states is worse than in Soviet times.” These stereotypes address matters whose details are unknown to most people. Although perhaps insufficiently visible, the EU has a website (<https://euvsdisinfo.eu>) that has published analyses and maintained a database of more than 6,900 cases of disinformation since September 2015. This helps provide access to sources for those who want to understand how the spreading of disinformation works and sends a message to its originators that they cannot get away with their falsehoods for long.

CONCLUSIONS

Russia has not extensively diversified its power base but has broadened its capabilities primarily in strategic communications. Russia has focused on reaching out to the world with an emphasis on its own region and particularly on countries and societies more easily targeted through such means. It has taken advantage of its ability to project a unified message, of the West’s commitment to freedom of speech and of the media, and benefited from the asymmetry of open Western media markets versus the tightly controlled Russian one.

Russia’s primary objective is to increase its influence in the international system and demonstrate its importance. As this can be achieved only partially by demonstrating Russia’s undeniable strengths, it must simultaneously meet two requirements: reconfirm Russia’s power through communications and with this, generate support, particularly in states and societies where Russian influence is historically well-established, or where it can be established, and weaken the influence of the West.

The West’s influence is perceived by Russia to stem partly from its unity, including its own institutions and those global ones where Western influence is strong, such as international financial institutions. Communications is one of many Russian means of influence used to counter the West. Media influence is among the most visible new weapons in the Russian arsenal and, as recent evidence shows, it is part of a spectrum where morally unacceptable, illicit and illegal means coexist. Russia finances certain political movements and parties (as the Soviet Union used to finance Western Communist parties), interferes politically and technically in elections, provides patronage, and makes corrupt deals with foreign countries and their leaders.

The West has remained hesitant, slow and divided in its response to Russia partly because the obvious responses contradict its foundational values, including an array of human rights, and partly because it is more difficult to agree on a coordinated response when the threat is not perceived as existential. In recent years, the West has gradually begun to mount a response. It remains to be seen whether the focus will be on hostile strategic communications or other highly annoying activities, such as election interference, and how the division of labor between national and coordinated, international actions will evolve. □