



By: *John Sipher*

Putin's Next Step



Vladimir Putin and his disinformation machine has long targeted Donald Trump. Following the now-infamous meeting between Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky in the Oval Office, and the Trump Administration's radical policy shift away from supporting Ukraine, it is clear that Putin's subversion efforts have met with alarming success.

However, Putin knows there is more work to do. While he has seemingly manipulated Trump, he understands that the American public and security apparatus remain skeptical of aligning with Russia.

Consequently, I assess that the next phase of Russia's hybrid warfare will likely focus on convincing the American public that President Zelensky is corrupt, and has embezzled millions, if not billions, in U.S. aid.

This information warfare campaign could launch in the coming weeks, if not days. This conclusion is not based on insider information but rather on Russia's historical patterns and practices dating back to the founding of the Soviet Union.

We can predict the following steps by Putin and his intelligence services:

1. **Disinformation Campaign:** Leverage private Russian companies, such as the sanctioned Social Design Agency, to flood the internet with fabricated documents alleging corruption by President Zelensky and his closest aides.
2. **Amplification by U.S. Supporters:** Ensure that Putin's supporters in the U.S., including prominent figures in the MAGA media sphere such as Tucker Carlson, Elon Musk, Ben Shapiro, and Marjorie Taylor Greene, amplify this information across various media platforms.
3. **White House Involvement:** Utilize the White House's communication channels, including briefings attended by supportive media figures, to further propagate these narratives.
4. **Mainstream Media Coverage:** Rely on

mainstream media to cover the story, which will inevitably lead to further dissemination of the malign Russian message.

Although the White House has already shifted its stance in the conflict, Putin has two main reasons to continue these efforts:

1. **Shaping Public Perception:** The American public has not fully embraced Trump's alignment with Putin or the narrative that Ukraine is to blame for Russia's unprovoked invasion. By launching a targeted information campaign against Zelensky, Russia aims to reshape public perception, transforming Zelensky from a hero standing against Russian aggression to a mere grifter.
2. **Long-term Strategic Goals:** Russia's ultimate objective is the defeat of Ukraine and its reintegration into Russia. To achieve this, Putin needs the Trump administration to shift from a position of hostile neutrality to openly siding with Russia. Securing a cessation of military assistance, intelligence sharing, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine is essential but insufficient for Putin's ambitions.

Intelligence sharing with Russia

A fully successful information operation could even pave the way for intelligence sharing with Russia.

Regrettably, the chances of this campaign succeeding are high. The Trump administration has already taken substantial steps to facilitate Russia's efforts:

- The Republican-controlled Congress has dissolved a small yet significant section of the State Department that tracked and exposed foreign influence operations targeting Western democracies, including the United States.
- Under Kash Patel, the FBI has significantly reduced its counterintelligence capabilities, much of which was focused on combating Russian espionage and propaganda within the U.S.

- The Attorney General has signaled that the Department of Justice, effectively under Trump's influence, will not enforce the Foreign Agents Registration Act or the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.
- Social media platforms play a crucial role in this scenario. Elon Musk's platform has been aptly described as a hub for hate and discrimination. Meanwhile, Mark Zuckerberg has considerably scaled back efforts to counter disinformation on his platforms. Numerous observers have already warned that these actions are reminiscent of Russia's unscrupulous oligarchy.
- On Capitol Hill, we can expect the usual actors to hold hearings aimed at reinforcing the narrative that Zelensky is a corrupt leader who must be ousted.

The Italian political philosopher Machiavelli wrote that, "Though fraud in other activities be detestable, in the management of war it is laudable and glorious, and he who overcomes an enemy by fraud is as much to be praised as he who does so by force."

The most powerful weapon

What Machiavelli called fraud goes by many names to those who study the Kremlin – political warfare, information warfare, hybrid warfare active measures and reflexive control.

The Russian way of war is to envision a goal, and do whatever is required to achieve it. Armed force might be only one piece of the larger effort. The most powerful weapon of all is getting inside your enemy's head, confusing and changing their assumptions, and forcing them to make hasty decisions that go against their own interests.

Putin's ultimate goal seems to be a 21st-century version of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

We have been the victims of Putin's political

warfare for over a decade, and can expect him to persist and escalate now that he has captured the occupant of the Oval Office.

In summary, the amplification of corruption allegations against Zelensky appears inevitable. The real question is whether this campaign will succeed in reshaping American public opinion and policy.

Historically, Putin has already maneuvered Trump to a position akin to Munich. But that is not enough. His ultimate goal seems to be a 21st-century version of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio playing the unwitting accomplice.