KREMLIN WATCH STRATEGY

FOR COUNTERING HOSTILE RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE

20 SUGGESTED MEASURES FOR THE NEW EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND EU MEMBER STATES

EUROPEAN VALUES
Protecting Freedom

Kremlin Watch Program 2019

EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY

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KREMLIN WATCH PROGRAM

Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Center for Security Policy which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

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[1] Editors of the Kremlin Watch Strategy would like to thank the team of Henry Jackson Society for their work on editing the final version of this document.

INTRODUCTION

2019 marks five years of highly aggressive behavior by the Russian Federation towards Western democracies. When Russia started a war against Georgia and subsequently occupied a fifth of its territory in 2008, the West failed to respond, naively believing that it could appease an aggressor. In 2014, the authoritarian regime led by President Vladimir Putin started the war against Ukraine, and at the same time, Moscow began to mobilize intensive hostile influence operations against Western democracies.

Five years into Russia's increasingly aggressive activities against Western democracies, we draw the following conclusions about the Western reaction to this threat. Given the West's relative weakness in responding to Russia's malign influence activities, China is now also actively seeking to exploit the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Western democracies.

FIVE TROUBLING FACTS ABOUT WESTERN RESPONSES TO RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

1. Most European allies are not willing to impose a sufficient price on Russia for its ongoing hostilities. **Europe does have the capability for strong non-military deterrence against Russia, but so far has chosen not to use it**. In military terms, NATO has mobilized, and Moscow's response shows that it clearly understands the importance of the military alliance. In non-military terms, by operating below the Article 5 threshold, **Russia has learned that Europe will not respond with dissuasive measures,** thus encouraging Moscow to continue its massive intelligence, strategic corruption, and disinformation operations. Most European countries (with several bright exceptions) have levied a perfunctory level of sanctions against Russia and have shown an unwillingness to perform more than symbolic actions beyond expelling small numbers of Russian intelligence officers after the 2018 Salisbury attack or symbolic personal sanctions after Russia's illegal assault against Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait. The only legislative body attempting to significantly raise the costs of Russian hostilities is the U.S. Congress.

2. Most European countries are not willing to comprehensively investigate and expose Russian influence networks in their countries. Beyond the U.K.'s parliamentary bodies, and, to a lesser degree, the U.S. Congress, no comprehensive official investigations into Russian influence networks have been carried out on the European continent. The fact that European counter-intelligence and security specialists are urgently ringing the alarm has still not led to the launch of any such official investigations into evident Russian influence operations, such as organizing support for Russia's geopolitical project Nord Stream 2, Russian links to major European political parties, or Russian interference in various European elections and referendums. Therefore, governments and parliaments are failing to deliver on their responsibility to defend their democratic polities and are not providing their citizens with public information on these major threats.

3. Continental **Europe lacks a country willing to take the lead on countering Russian hostile activities.** This fact is exacerbated by the imminent departure of the U.K. from the EU (a decision that Russia attempted to influence). Most of the countries that understand the Russian threat are small to mid-size, and most of them are net-receivers of the EU budget. Large member states such as France, Spain, Italy, or Germany are failing to exercise the necessary leadership. One of the biggest disappointments within the security community focusing on the Russian threat is the lack of a coordinated and decisive response by Germany, which contrasts strongly with the rhetoric of the German political establishment. Chancellor Angela Merkel is the reason EU sanctions are in place, but at the same time, the German political establishment pushes for Russia's geopolitical project Nord Stream 2, which is in clear contradiction of European geopolitical and security interests. Germany should be a leader in punishing and deterring Russian aggression, but it is self-interestedly pushing Nord Stream 2 forward despite strong objections by many allies. Because of its economic and political strength, Germany could have led a strong and principled full-scale response to Russian aggression, but it has failed to do so, in part because Russian penetration of German politics and business interests has been notably successful.

4. Despite the fact that EU member states have repeatedly and unanimously agreed on practical measures against Russian disinformation to be taken by the EEAS, outgoing EU High Representative Federica Mogherini failed the fulfillment of this mission over the last five years. Since its creation in 2015, the EEAS East STRATCOM Task Force has been staffed with leading European experts primarily seconded from EU members states, but its work and funding were systematically hamstrung by EEAS leadership for political reasons during the Juncker Commission. While the Task Force did obtain dedicated funding from the European Parliament (€1.1 million in 2018, upped to €3 million in 2019), this budget will expire at the end of 2020, with no permanent budget line for the team currently on the horizon. **If EU member states want the EEAS to respond to the ever-growing threat of foreign disinformation and hostile influence against European democracies, the incoming EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy must commit to supporting this team with resources and political backing,** so that it may continue exposing and raising awareness about the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, as well as related malign influence operations. We consider it a positive development that the EEAS is now also looking into Chinese information operations, which should be of increasing concern to the international democratic community; however, this initiative should only run parallel to the East STRATCOM Task Force and not occur impede its work or resources. At present, Russia unequivocally continues to pose the greatest threat to Europe in terms of foreign disinformation operations.

5. EU member states agree on what should be done on the EU level, but due to the lack of political will, **most member states are not willing to fund practical measures countering this threat**. Therefore, the majority of funds are contributed by the US and the UK's public bodies, while most of mainland Europe's public bodies have spent the last five years finding excuses as to why civil society activities against the threat of hostile Russian influence cannot be financially supported. As a result, much of the European civil society response is under-funded or even volunteer-led. That is a clear failure of European public institutions.

FIVE POSITIVE FACTS ABOUT
WESTERN RESPONSES TO RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

1. Five years into the Russian aggression, there is considerable evidence available – in the public domain – such that **it is impossible to deny the existence and urgency of this threat.** The EU Action Plan Against Disinformation, adopted in 2018, officially names Russia as the main threat source. While in the early years there was a heated debate about the level of Russian aggression, today almost nobody denies it due to the evidence from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the launch of massive Russian influence operations. While there might still be a few people asking for more "proof", the volume of evidence is overwhelming. Still, there is a huge discrepancy between talk about the threat and action taken against it in Europe.

2. The US Congress is leading the Western pushback against Russian aggression. Its actions, from imposing various levels of sanctions against Russian hostilities and the establishment of systematic funding for the response, to detailed inquiries and investigations on the nature of the threat, are a blueprint of how a democratic parliament should act in a time of hostile activities against its public and allies. Sadly, almost no European parliament has decided to follow suit, with the exception of the UK Parliament which has at least carried out an investigation.

3. The civil societies of the Baltic States, Sweden, and Ukraine have been at the forefront of sharing their experiences, essentially becoming a role model for responding to Russian non-kinetic influence activities.

4. Notwithstanding its troubles with Brexit, **the UK has been a clear European leader in responding to this threat in the European theatre.** Despite hesitation to respond to dirty Russian money inside the country, the UK has mobilised Europe's response, especially regarding the Skripal attack, is assisting the EU, Western Balkans, and Eastern Partnership countries in a practical way, and is funding much of the European civil society responses.

5. Despite the fact that most of the European governments have not been providing sufficient funding to their respective civil societies to combat this issue, the driving force behind European understanding of and response to the threat has been the general public. **Civil society in European countries has awoken to this threat,** oftentimes in sharp contrast to their own political establishment.

Here are **four response areas and twenty specific measures** for national governments which European countries must implement. As specialists on this issue, we believe that allied governments should take the following measures:

2019 marks five years of highly aggressive behavior by the Russian Federation towards Western democracies.

RESPONSE AREA #1: DOCUMENTING AND INCREASING THE GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE THREAT

Why: State institutions and parliaments, as well as civil society and the general public are not able to effectively contribute to resilience and defence unless they have a sufficient understanding of what the threat is, what it looks like, and what its goals and motivations are. Awareness and understanding are the building blocks of resilience, and they are also crucial for shifting the political culture in a country, which might have notable implications for other response areas. Specifically, for state institutions, it might even be impossible to act and address the threat unless it is explained in strategic documents like defence or foreign policy strategies. Around half of EU member states have already taken this threat seriously in their strategic or policy documents,[2] and many allied intelligence agencies have clearly and publicly described the nature of the Russian threat.[3]

Ideal end-goal: Among the political, policy, media, and civil society establishments there will be a clear, simple, and common understanding of the Russian hostile influence toolkit, its proxies in targeted countries, main methods of malignant influence, the urgency of the threat, and experience gained from the most successful Russian influence operations in the targeted country.

Proposed measures:

- **Measure #1: The main governmental driver.** Each country should establish a government entity that cooperates closely with the intelligence community but is itself independent, so that it can develop and drive policy and operational activities. Examples include: the Global Engagement Centre (GEC) at the US Department of State, Counter-disinformation and media development team at the U. K. Foreign Office, the Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) under the Swedish Justice Ministry, and the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threat (CTHT) at the Czech Interior Ministry.

- **Measure #2: "A European StopFake":** Every country and the EU as a body need to have daily situational awareness and myth-busting capability with practical countering of disinformation incidents. The EEAS East STRATCOM Task Force has developed a wide network of experts from Georgia to Belgium as part of its weekly Disinformation Review, but misguided decisions by the EEAS leadership have undercut this effort by not allowing the relevant funding for this network of front-line experts for several years. The national governments should make sure that this already existing and proven network, including a solid analytical team at the EEAS East STRATCOM Task Force, is appropriately funded and delivers analysis and counters Russian propaganda narratives on a daily basis. Without a wide and specialised network, which has at least basic funding, the NGO network cannot operate

[2]European Values Think-Tank, 2018 Ranking of countermeasures by the EU28 to the Kremlin's subversion operations, 13. 6. 2018, WWW: https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/2018-ranking-of-countermeasures-by-the-eu28-to-the-kremlin-s-subversion-operations.pdf

[3] The Nature (2019), Geir Hågen Karlsen, Divide and rule: ten lessons about Russian political influence activities in Europe, WWW: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0227-8.pdf

professionally and systematically. Moreover, there should be more focus put on exposing the disinformation sources and attribution in order to raise political costs on those who create and spread hostile disinformation.

- **Measure #3: The under-funded EEAS East STRATCOM Task Force should become the EU's main analytical and response body.** While Federica Mogherini has sabotaged this team,[4] it is clear that the next High Representative must make this, the only EU-wide and European Council-mandated body, the real headquarters of the EU response to Russian disinformation. The EU member states should make sure that the EEAS triples the personal capacity of the team and that at least 5 million EUR annually[5] are used for countering Russian disinformation, not general PR for the EU.

- **Measure #4: Regular polling and in-depth sociological research to evaluate the scope of the problem:** Each country should conduct regular polling and sociological research to measure public support for the most common Russian disinformation narratives. In practice, the top 10 Russian disinformation narratives should be tested with regard to which portions of the target population believe them; follow-up sociological research, e.g., focus groups, should aim to explain the reasons behind the success of specific disinformation narratives. This exercise should be conducted every six months, so that the progress of both the threat and the tailored counter-measures can be regularly evaluated.

- **Measure #5: All EU member states should launch their own parliamentary investigations of Russian influence networks in their respective countries.** The US and UK parliamentary inquiries have shown why such a process is needed – it opens the public discussion about the threat, new details and the complex picture of the situation emerges, if done correctly, and the national security institutions are required to explain the nature of the threat in an adequate parliamentary setting. The intelligence community should never be asked to conduct a public inquiry (even with sensitive details classified), and journalists or experts can never see the whole picture, therefore it should be led by parliaments with the power to constitutionally check the executive branches and their readiness to defend national security.

- **Measure #6: National intelligence agencies should be as transparent as their Baltic counterparts.** Naturally, no intelligence agency will ever willingly disclose its methods or sources. Nevertheless, the Baltic intelligence communities are leading the way among allies in publishing detailed annual reports and making arrests of Russian operatives as public as possible, in order to show their society what the threat looks like. Many other European agencies are slowly following this trend.

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[4]POLITICO: Federica Mogherini 'soft' on disinformation, critics say, 22.3.2017, WWW: https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-opponents-pile-onto-federica-mogherini-eaststratcom-sandra-kalniete-jakub-janda-estonia-atlantic-council-ben-nimmo-fake-news-russia-putin-europe-foreign-policy/

[5]European Values Think-Tank, Open Letter by European Security Experts to President of the European Commission J. C. Juncker and High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, WWW: https://www.europeanvalues.net/openletter/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=kremlin_watch_briefing_the_eu_has_to_start_taking_pro_kremlin_disinformation_seriously&utm_term=2019-03-24

The under-funded EEAS East STRATCOM Task Force should become the EU's main analytical and response body.

RESPONSE AREA #2:
MOBILISATION OF OUR SELF-DEFENCE

Why: Mobilisation of the democratic response is one step further than awareness. First, we need to be aware of the threat, then we can start perceiving it as a priority of safeguarding the internal security of our country. If Russian influence operations are seen as a priority by the civil society or the public in general, they will have stronger tendencies to demand more practical steps to be conducted by their political representatives. If mobilisation can begin before any major incidents or attacks, it can also contribute to the readiness of the country and alleviating crisis management later.

Ideal end-goal: Russian hostile influence activities are perceived as one of the top national security threats, any public figure collaborating with the threat has to bear political costs of such behaviour (such as peer and media pressure), specific policies and measures are adopted because the public and political debates demand action to safeguard national sovereignty and security from this threat.

Proposed measures:

- **Measure #7: Every country should appoint an Ambassador-level Special Envoy for this agenda.** Due to this issue crossing several natural policy fields, and debates between allies being highly intensive, every country should have a go-to representative who serves as a spokesperson for their country's approaches and plays a domestic role for the government's voice on this issue. Baltic and Scandinavian states have already appointed similar Special Envoys; other allies should do so as well.

- **Measure #8: The new Council disinformation working group (ERCHT) should be used for practical steps**. This new specialised working group at the Council of the EU is currently dedicated only to the disinformation agenda, but should be used for creating regular joint threat assessment and sharing practical case studies and best practices. Additionally, EU institutions need to receive regular briefings and guidelines from national specialists, which is currently not happening on a sufficient scale.

- **Measure #9**: **All EU member states should set up regular funding mechanisms for their respective civil societies regarding this issue.** Currently only a minority of EU member states fund civil society initiatives to counter this threat. Nevertheless, much of the political rhetoric in Europe is led by rhetoric about "civil society-driven response". Ironically, within this field the EU often provides much more funding for activities outside of the EU than it does for work within the EU. This is based on the belief that EU member states are responsible for their own domestic situations. Nevertheless, due to political sensitivities and often a lack of political will, real funding for civil society countering this threat is almost non-existent. Even though it is possible for NGOs to get funding for research or media literacy issues, it is significantly harder to secure funding for myth-busting, accountability, or security activities. Every EU member state should set up a funding mechanism, possibly in cooperation with its like-minded allies or the private sector, to practically support the capacity-building of its own civil society. For example, many Western European countries clearly lack the expertise on Russian matters. The role models for such specialised centres are the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding (CPRDIP), the Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, or the Polish Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW).

- **Measure #10:** **Every EU member state should support the establishment of groups similar to the Baltic Elves.** Citizen-led bottom-up initiatives for myth-busting and countering extremist tendencies in society are a key response to this threat. Governments should not run or organise its civil society, but there are ways in which they can incentivise and support similar projects – from providing funding for capacity building and training to protecting its own citizens from foreign or extremist harassment. Proven concepts such as community policing and crowd-sourced social work are relevant examples from other policy areas.

RESPONSE AREA #3:
DETERRENCE AND PUSHBACK AGAINST
THE AGGRESSOR AND ITS PROXIES

Why: Efficient military defences are extremely important. However, based on the series of events so far, the Kremlin will always try new ways to avoid military confrontation and will favour exploiting socio-political gaps wherever possible, abusing communication technologies to support their efforts. Therefore, it is not only important to defend against the Kremlin's operations; as history teaches us, the main objective of the defenders of freedom should be to make the cost of aggression too great to sustain. While we can and must keep hardening the target, the West's priority should be to raise the cost for the Russian political establishment and change its cost-benefit calculus to stop the aggressive behaviour. This non-military deterrence is currently almost non-existent and, unless major costs are inflicted on the Russian government and its proxies, the attacks on Western democracies will not stop.

Ideal end-goal: Western democracies will develop active defence of their own ground by significantly raising the costs for the Russian political and economic establishment and their proxies to make them stop their hostile influence activities.

Proposed measures:

- **Measure #11:** **European allies should significantly harden their approach to personal and financial sanctions against Russian hostilities.** Firstly, European countries should level their sanction-related actions with the US. For example, it is a sad indicator of European weakness that one of the key Kremlin proxies in Europe, Vladimir Yakunin, is only on the American, not the EU's sanction list. Leaders of Russian disinformation efforts should be personally sanctioned, so that each of them understands that conducting hostilities against European democracies has personal consequences. Many Russian "NGOs", "private foundations", "private enterprises", and "media" are either state-owned, have hidden ties through complex schemes, or depend on state funds, the cooperation of the Russian state, or Putin's personal entourage for their activities, and so report to the Russian state and state agencies, and have to adjust their policies accordingly. There are very few organisations that stay clear of Russian governmental interference (like Memorial), and Western states need to draw a distinction between the two when they talk about "dialogue" with "civil society", since MGIMO, as an example, or various Kremlin-linked think-tanks effectively do not represent civil society, but rather the Russian regime and its intelligence community.

- **Measure #12: Western allies should escalate their pushback, including sanctions, until Russia ceases hostilities.** Western allies should draft a joint list of Russian oligarchs connected to the Kremlin (such as the one the US has) and announce that, until Russia stops specific hostilities (for example, until it releases Ukrainian sailors and other Ukrainian political prisoners), Western allies will escalate the sanctions by a certain percentage every week. Such pin-pointed economic action would bring the initiative to the Western side in demanding and pushing the Russian government with legitimate and clearly defined end-goals. Similarly, all relevant family members of leaders of Kremlin-linked organisations living in the West should be put on a list, and if Russia does not cease hostilities, legal ways should be found for them to be sent back to Russia. Western democracies have legitimate reasons to attack the Kremlin's weak points to make it cease hostilities, ranging from the killings and occupation in Ukraine to hostile interference activities in the West.

- **Measure #13: Western governments should make the fortune of Vladimir Putin and all of his associates public.** It is clear that the regime led by Vladimir Putin has been stealing from the Russian state on a large scale, in sharp contrast to the transparency of liberal democracies. Therefore, Western institutions should make sure that it is publicly known how much and in what ways Vladimir Putin, along with his associates and shadow supporters, has stolen from Russia. A bill with this goal is currently being discussed in the US Congress.[6] It can take the form of official records or be leaked to the press who would verify it and make it public. The objective of this tool is to make sure that the Kremlin elite understands that it is going down a one-way street and it (or its families and proxies) will never be able to enjoy its stolen money for a comfortable life in the West.

- **Measure #14: Like-minded European countries should prepare massive expulsions of Russian intelligence officers.** Many European countries face disproportionately large Russian diplomatic missions where between one third and one half of the members conduct hostile intelligence tasks. Since even President Putin calls for "diplomatic parity", like-minded countries should prepare for joint action, so that once they decide to go ahead (for example, after another Russian hostility), they can expel large numbers of Russian intelligence officers to "clean house". Russia will retaliate by sending European diplomats home, but if it is done in collective action by at least 5-7 EU countries, it will be hard for Russia to severely punish only one member state. Therefore, the expected outcome will be the annulling of a number of Russian diplomats in the targeted European countries and vice versa, which will lead to a fresh start after a couple of months – EU countries will start proportionally staffing their embassies one by one – in parity with Russia. The goal for European countries is to achieve a de-facto disbanding of the majority of Russian intelligence networks in their countries. In reality, however, it is neither practical nor desirable to band all Russian intelligence networks; those which function as part of the SVR's "illegals" programme, for example, are often highly integrated into their target countries.

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[6] The U. S. Congress, H.R.1404 - Vladimir Putin Transparency Act, WWW: https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1404?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22putin%22%5D%7D&s=2&r=1

- **Measure #15: Each European country should have its own Mueller-style in-depth investigation into Russian interference incidents.** It is important that parliaments publicly investigate the scope of the Russian influence threat using an in-depth special inquiry similar to the one the US Department of Justice has launched after Russian interference in 2016 US presidential elections. Often law-enforcement might not be skilled or equipped to inquire specific incidents related to complex Russian interference operations, therefore, a team of specialists from law-enforcement or counter-intelligence should be assembled to investigate specific recent cases of Russian offline and online influence operations, for instance, Russian influence operations related to Nord Stream 2, the Dutch 2016 EU-Ukraine Association Agreement Referendum, and the 2017 French presidential elections.

- **Measure #16: All European countries should stop legitimising Russian disinformation tools posing as "journalistic platforms".** Communication channels effectively run by the Russian government, be it RT, Sputnik, or Russian state-run TV channels, do not represent journalism, they merely pretend to. Therefore, European countries should not consider them to represent free media; they should ban them from press conferences and not give access that is granted only to journalists, which they are not. This would also send a clear message that working for the Russian government is a one-way street for any journalist. No Western public official should ever legitimise these entities with an interview.[7]

- **Measure #17: Each parliament should exercise their ethical standards, including against those parliamentary members serving Russia and Russian interests, and not their constituents or allies.** While parliamentarians are free to express any opinion, they must be under scrutiny by their peers if their loyalty towards Russia's aggressive foreign policy interests exceeds their loyalty to the institution they have sworn to represent. For example, if somebody acts as a Kremlin proxy in the security committee or by travelling to legitimise Russian occupation of Ukrainian land in Crimea, such a parliamentarian should be subject to a public hearing and potentially expelled from specific committees or bodies of the parliament.

- **Measure #18: Every Western country should adopt its version of the Magnitsky Act and Mechanism for Screening of Risky Foreign Investments.** Democracies have a clear right to defend human rights and their own sovereignty. Therefore, each Western democracy should implement its own version of the Magnitsky Act and Mechanism for Screening of Risky Foreign Investments. Western governments should stop ignoring the threat posed by dirty Russian money.

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[7] Example: then German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel providing RT with an exclusive interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBtNQaaahX4

RESPONSE AREA #4:
IDENTIFICATION OF OUR WEAKNESSES AND RESILIENCE BUILDING

Why: The Kremlin does not create our socio-political problems, but has learned quickly to exploit them to its advantage. Russia uses pre-existing weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the democratic system as its targets. The same weaknesses and vulnerabilities can and are being used by other actors, both foreign (like China) and domestic (such as domestic radicals and extremists). It is necessary to keep repairing those vulnerabilities and vulnerabilities to establish long-term resilience to any hostile activities.

Ideal end-goal: While any open democratic society will naturally always have vulnerabilities, social cohesion and domestic grievances can be mitigated by comprehensive strategies which will aim to close down the opening for hostile actors.

Proposed measures:

- **Measure #19:** **Western governments must put principled pressure (including hard regulation) on tech-giants enabling and benefiting from the massive spread of disinformation.** While Russia is the main source of hostile disinformation, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google are the principal enablers of this phenomenon hostile to liberal democracies. Each country should appoint a national coordinator for policies regarding tech platforms and each country should adopt a comprehensive strategy that aims to mitigate the spread of disinformation and protect personal data.

- **Measure #20**: **Western governments must fund effective and systematic digital and media literacy programs.** Most Western governments are failing to deliver modern civic education to its citizens on issues surrounding the information environment. Large but effective programs should be part of a well-thought-out national strategy helping citizens understand the rapidly changing information environment.