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Feeling the Bern? Russian Media Reporting on the U.S. Democratic Party's Presidential Primaries

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Abstract

Did Russia seek to influence voting in the Democratic Party's primaries, and if so, to what end? Would the Kremlin rather have seen Bernie Sanders take on President Donald Trump in November than presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden? To answer these questions, this article analyzes reporting by four Russian-state-directed media outlets between October 2019 and March 2020. It finds evidence of a coordinated disinformation campaign against Joe Biden and of narratives designed to undermine voters' confidence in the legitimacy of the primary process. The article concludes that Russia's aversion to Biden stems from his strong commitment to NATO, support for Ukrainian sovereignty and tough line on Russian election meddling. It further concludes that spreading distrust in U.S. democracy was the main aim of Russian interference over and above a preference for a particular candidate. Whether or not Russian media messaging affects U.S. voters, the fact of Russia's meddling itself is a source of disruption and doubt.

Coordinating Domestic and International Propaganda

Russian trolls are again meddling in U.S. elections, this time targeting the Democratic Party's 2020 primaries. Analysis by Graphika, the data analytics firm used by Facebook to identify disinformation on its platform, finds that operatives for Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) are posing as Americans on social media to stoke divisions, spread suspicion and suppress voter turnout. Using similar tactics to those deployed in 2016, Graphika finds that IRA interference aims to help re-elect President Trump and sought to boost Senator Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party nomination, while he was still in the running.

My analysis of Russian-state-owned media reporting on the Democratic primaries between October 2019 and March 2020 confirms a pro-Bernie and anti-Biden bias. To negatively frame Joe Biden, Russian government-funded international broadcaster RT and English-language news site Sputnik frequently reference the former vice president's rough language and gaffes, alleged corrupt dealings in Ukraine, and links to Wall Street and the Washington establishment. Bernie Sanders, meanwhile, is sympathetically presented as the alleged victim of socialist fearmongering and Russophobic conspiracies peddled by America's corporate media and Democratic Party elites to undermine support for his populist policies. Hoping to influence American voters, Russia's English-language media portray Biden as a compromised candidate who nonetheless receives establishment backing. Although devoting less airtime to the U.S. primaries, Russia's domestic state-controlled broadcasters NTV and *Pervy Kanal* offer similar narratives to RT and Sputnik, suggesting a choreographed disin-

formation campaign. Freely available on the internet, news broadcasts by NTV and *Pervy Kanal* are widely watched by Russian speakers in the U.S. who number more than 850,000. It is likely that propaganda concerning U.S. elections and primaries in the Russian-language media is aimed more at this diaspora than at domestic Russian audiences.

Highlighting Biden's Weaknesses

The Russian media's main line of attack against Biden is to repeat widely discredited claims that he sought the removal of Ukraine's prosecutor Viktor Shokin to shield his son Hunter from an investigation into his work for the Ukrainian gas firm *Burisma*. On NTV, 13 of the 35 stories on the former vice president during the research period use *Burisma* as a bludgeon to beat Biden. On January 31, the channel featured an interview with Shokin in which he suggested Biden could be behind attempts to poison him. RT also gave airtime to Shokin's accusations, including that Biden leveraged \$1 billion in loan guarantees to have him fired. In one RT report, Shokin claims Biden "believed that Ukraine was his private property, his fiefdom and that he could do whatever he wanted here." RT further suggested that the mainstream U.S. media are under gag orders not to report on allegations against Biden. On *Pervy Kanal*, Russia's most popular news source, 15 out of 19 news reports featuring Biden included allegations of corruption related to Ukraine. On December 16, the channel's flagship news program *Vremya* broadcast an interview with Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani accusing Biden of extortion, money laundering and blackmail. Giuliani appeared in two similar *Vremya* reports in October.

The Russian media also highlight Biden's frequent shows of machismo and verbal blunders to cast doubt on his suitability for office. On March 10, Sputnik reported on a fiery exchange between Biden and a potential voter over gun regulation. During the confrontation Biden told his gun-enthusiast interrogator, "You are full of s**t." Sputnik further noted that this was not Biden's first standoff with a voter. In November 2019, the Kremlin-backed news site reminded its readers, Biden called an Iowa voter "a damn liar" for taking him to task over his son Hunter's business activities in Ukraine. The Sputnik report included Tweets from U.S. voters condemning Biden's use of profanity and intimidation. Russia's domestic broadcasters, however, did not cover Biden's macho posturing, an unusual omission given their penchant for sensationalism and scandal. This exception may be explained by President Putin's own use of coarse language and macho displays to bolster his everyman credentials.

Biden's tendency to misspeak is another line of attack used by Russia's media to undermine confidence in his ability to lead. After he seemed to imply that voters should re-elect Trump and forgot that he was running for the White House and not the Senate, Sputnik questioned 78-year-old Biden's cognitive abilities. NTV raised similar doubts when he confused his wife and sister in a victory speech on Super Tuesday. But 77-year-old Bernie Sanders has not been spared similar questions about his age. In a report speculating on his potential running mate, Sputnik recalled that Sanders had a heart attack in 2019. Another Sputnik report unfavourably compared septuagenarians Biden, Sanders and Mike Bloomberg (78) to enfeebled, elderly leaders of the Soviet Union. But their age was not the only attribute used to attack Democratic presidential hopefuls. After winning the Iowa caucuses, Pete Buttigieg was disrespectfully described on NTV as "gay and with an unpronounceable surname." RT, NTV and Sputnik criticised billionaire Bloomberg for seeking to "buy" the Democratic nomination with his self-funded campaign, while repeating President Trump's diminutive for the former New York mayor, who he mocks on Twitter as "mini Mike."

Seeking to Divide the Democrats

A controversial figure among many Democrats, the Russian media used Bloomberg as a wedge to widen intra-party divisions. His decision to pull out of the race in favor of Biden was presented by RT and Sputnik as part of an establishment stitch-up to deny Sanders the nomination. A Sputnik report on March 9 accused centrist candidates Buttigieg, Bloomberg and Amy Klobuchar of dropping out of the race at the same time to do maximum damage to Sanders. To create a fake sense

of "Joementum", RT claimed African American senators Kamala Harris and Cory Booker, who previously accused Biden of racist associations, were pressured by party apparatchiks to endorse him. RT also reported on a purported "leak" that frontrunner Biden planned to appoint Bloomberg and other prominent Wall Street figures to his cabinet. The report included angry social media posts by American voters accusing Biden of subservience to "banksters" from Wall Street's "oligarchy."

Whilst framing Biden as the-business-as-usual choice of Democratic Party elites and their friends in finance, the Russian media presented Sanders as the people's champion, challenging the status-quo. RT noted that many of Sanders' policies are popular, with the majority of Americans supporting his plans for extending Medicare to all, eliminating student debt and raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. Russia's domestic and international media all condemned Sander's centrist rivals for labelling him a socialist, or even a communist, to demonise his radical agenda.

Reports in the U.S. media of Moscow-backed meddling in the 2020 primaries to help Sanders were widely dismissed as a hoax by their Russian counterparts. On March 7, Sputnik charged America's corporate media with playing on widespread Russophobia in the U.S. to tarnish Sanders by inferring he was the Kremlin's preference to take on Trump. An RT report on February 22 reminded audiences that Sanders was not the only anti-establishment Democratic hopeful smeared by false association with Russia, recalling that Hilary Clinton allegedly accused Hawaii congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard of being a Russian agent. The same report claimed U.S. corporate media owners stood to gain by discrediting Sanders, who was then gaining in the polls, as under his administration they would pay billions more in tax.

Clearly Russia's English- and Russian-language media backed Bernie over Biden, but why might the Kremlin have been "feeling the Bern?" Senator Sanders publicly disavowed any Russian efforts to bolster his campaign, sending a message to Vladimir Putin to "Stay out of U.S. elections." Sanders has also repeatedly warned that Russia exemplifies the global rise of authoritarianism and that Putin is seeking to weaken Western liberal democracy. Any effort by Moscow to promote Sanders, therefore, was more likely aimed at disrupting the 2020 general election and undermining voters' confidence in U.S. democracy than achieving concrete policy goals.

Advancing Russia's Interests

Yet, there are some policy difference between Sanders and Biden that might have made the former more appealing to the Kremlin than the latter. Despite warning of the threats posed by Russia, Sanders also signaled

he would work with Moscow on arms control, climate change and other issues. Joe Biden, meanwhile, is a more strident critic of the Kremlin, advocating containment over engagement with Russia. The former vice president is a long-time champion of NATO and backs its eastwards expansion. In 2009, he supported the so far unsuccessful ambitions of Ukraine and Georgia to join the alliance. Biden further argues that NATO should send more troops to Eastern Europe to deter Russian aggression and is in favor of extending the sanctions against Russia implemented by the Obama administration in 2014 following Moscow's annexation of Crimea. Biden has also touted sending weapons to Ukraine to help fight against Russian-backed insurgencies in its eastern regions. Sanders, by contrast is against expanding NATO membership and providing military assistance for Ukraine because such moves risk provoking conflict with Russia. Sanders is no friend to the Kremlin, but Biden is a clear adversary. A desire to block Biden from the Democratic nomination, therefore, may better explain Russia's meddling on behalf of Sanders than a genuine preference for the Vermont senator.

Another theory for the Russian media's bias for Bernie over Biden is that Sanders would have been an easier opponent for Kremlin-favorite President Donald Trump to defeat in the general election. The Kremlin may have calculated that Sanders' association with socialism would limit his support among moderate voters. This is perhaps the reason why Russia's media talked up Sander's populist credentials. His radicalism plays well with left-leaning Democrats and gave him momentum in early primary races. But even before the coronavirus crisis placed a premium on stability, Sanders' promises to break the capitalist status-quo limited his potential appeal to the wider national electorate. Although aggregate polling by FiveThirtyEight at the end of March showed that both Sanders and Biden would beat Trump in a general election, in most polls Biden held a stronger lead over the president.

Russia may also have believed that not only would Trump be more likely to beat Sanders, but that a head-

to-head with the democratic socialist senator would engender more division and distrust among Americans than a showdown with Biden. By his own acknowledgment, certain over-enthusiastic elements among Sanders' support-base engage in harassment against his rivals, both online and off. If Sanders had become the Democratic nominee, both major party candidates could have been framed as illegitimate for receiving Russian "help" for their campaigns. And even though Biden is his almost certainly his party's pick now Sanders has dropped out of the race, Russia's disinformation campaign will have done its job if Sanders fans stay home on election day, angry at the former vice president for repeating allegations that the Russians "like Bernie." In 2016, by staying home or voting for third-party candidates, Sanders' diehards contributed to Hillary Clinton's defeat, especially in rustbelt states. To increase the likelihood of history repeating itself, Russia's media stoke resentment that Sanders has been cheated out of the nomination by the Democratic establishment, as allegedly happened in 2016. To rub salt in the wounds of Bernie's supporters, Sputnik reported on trending anti-Sanders hashtags on social media following his losses to Biden on Super Tuesday. Calling Sanders an "anti-establishment warrior" the report published on 11 March blamed Biden supporters for sending #ByeByeBernie to number one on Twitter.

Russia's disinformation campaigns against the U.S. rely on deep political discord among Americans. Unwittingly assisted by America's partisan press, Russian propagandists, with relatively little effort, coopt real, vitriolic American voices to spread disinformation and division. Many Americans are too busy fighting among themselves to see they are being manipulated. The purpose of the Russian media's framing of the Democratic primaries has been to plant doubts and conspiracies and have them amplified by U.S. voters on social media. So far, the strategy seems to be working.

About the Author

Tina Burrett is associate professor of political science at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan.