

**Statement of Lea Gabrielle
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USAID Management, International Operations, and Bilateral International
Development
“Executing the Global Engagement Center’s Mission”**

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Chairman Portman, Ranking Member Booker – Thank you for inviting me to testify before your Subcommittee about the Global Engagement Center’s (GEC) work to lead and coordinate U.S. government efforts to counter state-sponsored and non-state propaganda and disinformation. This is an important topic with potentially grave implications to U.S. national security interests which this Administration is prioritizing confronting. I appreciate the Subcommittee devoting time to it.

The GEC is dedicated to the mission of leading and coordinating the interagency to decisively expose and counter foreign state and non-state disinformation and malign propaganda.

Consistent with the FY 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, and in support of the President’s National Security Strategy Information Statecraft efforts the GEC works to “direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and foreign non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States and United States allies and partner nations.”

We have the full support of Secretary Pompeo who is committed to deploying a broad suite of tools to stop America’s adversaries from using disinformation, malign propaganda, and other tools to undermine free societies.

Since I became the Special Envoy and Coordinator of the GEC just over one year ago, my team and I have made significant progress towards building international partnerships, executing dynamic programs and deploying robust analytical capacities globally to address the serious threats we face from malign influence and propaganda. To achieve this success, I have worked to ensure my team has the necessary tools and resources to do the job given to us by Congress.

Although this hearing is focused on countering Russian government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) disinformation and propaganda, as well as propaganda from foreign terrorist organizations, the GEC also counters Iranian disinformation and I am happy to provide information on those efforts.

At the State Department's Global Chiefs of Mission Conference last week I had the chance to speak with U.S. Ambassadors representing us around the world. I shared updates on our threat assessments and listened to their perspectives on how developments are playing out on the ground. We at the GEC recognize the crucial role that our Missions and Public Diplomacy Officers play as our representatives on the front lines of this information battleground. My teams are working with Embassies overseas daily to execute and coordinate activities.

In my testimony today, I'll outline how we in the GEC view the disinformation the Kremlin and the CCP are propagating and what we are doing to counter each. I will also highlight how we use analytics and technology in our efforts, how we have approached resourcing issues, and the role of the GEC in coordinating a whole of USG effort to respond to foreign propaganda and disinformation.

The Threat

The intent, scope, and style of the disinformation and malign propaganda spread by the Kremlin and the CCP are distinct from one another.

The Kremlin often swamps the media environment with a tsunami of lies. Outside of Russia, the Kremlin seeks to weaken its adversaries by manipulating the information environment in nefarious ways, polarizing domestic political conversations, and attempting to destroy the public's faith in good governance, independent media, and democratic principles.

The Kremlin wants the world to think of Russia as the other global superpower, but those days are long gone. Lurking behind the Kremlin's bravado and rhetoric is a fundamental weakness across almost all measures of national power in Russia – a stagnant economy, a continuous brain drain, and a demographic shift that leaves the country vulnerable to its eastern neighbors.

Another reason the Kremlin spreads its lies is to try to hide the truth of its activities to enrich a small circle of cronies at the expense of the welfare of the Russian people. As part of this effort, the Kremlin seeks to create a fictitious “enemy” – the West more broadly, and the United States more specifically – of the Russian nation and Russian people, and to discredit the “enemy’s” form of governance and actions at every turn in order to justify the system in place in Moscow and distract from any troubles inside Russia.

The Russian government directs and supports these propaganda activities globally, but especially targets and seeks to nurture the most extreme or divisive elements of society in the United States, Europe, and other regions in which they operate. We see in many Western Hemisphere countries the same tactics used by the Kremlin and its proxies. These include cyber-enabled disinformation operations; propaganda campaigns that seek to rewrite history; coordinated social media swarms that inflame existing fault lines of societies, and an array of other actions that fall within the scope of their malign information operations.

We have seen these tactics time and time again, from right here at home to the streets of the capital cities of our allies. The Kremlin does this to hide its own role in tragic events, such as the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) and the nerve-agent poisoning of UK citizens in Salisbury, England. They do this in support of the murderous Assad regime by smearing credible voices on the ground in Syria with false information. They do this to prop up the regime of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela and suppress legitimate democratic voices, and they do this in attempt to weaken solidarity within NATO.

While the Kremlin seeks to chaotically disrupt the current world order to accomplish its goals, the CCP seeks to deliberately shape it to Beijing’s advantage. Beijing is pursuing a comprehensive and coordinated influence campaign to advance its interests and undermine the United States. The CCP is employing a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic, military, and information tools to advance its influence.

The CCP’s propaganda apparatus is a critical component in promoting and maintaining the Communist Party’s narrative domestically and globally. Its efforts to use censorship, intimidation, coercion, economic incentives, and propaganda to control the information space are a significant component of the CCP’s attempts to expand its influence worldwide. This information control actively seeks to downplay concerns regarding the PRC’s state abuse and surveillance of Tibetans, Uighurs and members of other ethnic minorities.

It also seeks to downplay the risks of One Belt One Road Initiative projects, the dangers of CCP-entwined ownership structures like that of Huawei, criticism leveled against the PRC's provocations in areas like the South China Sea, and other examples which counter the pro-CCP narrative. Importantly, this effort to counter and silence criticism is paired with a push to portray the PRC as a benign, positive, and non-interventionist power.

CCP efforts to silence criticism can be seen in its influence operations targeting Hong Kong last summer. Twitter identified nearly 1,000 accounts originating from within mainland China that were "deliberately and specifically attempting to sow political discord in Hong Kong, including undermining the legitimacy and political positions of the protest movement on the ground." This was one of the first times Beijing had been identified as using techniques to manipulate information across mainstream international social media platforms.

Even more recently, the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in Wuhan, China also provides an example of how Beijing attempts to censor the sheer extent of this global public health crisis – from downplaying the number of casualties, limiting criticism of the CCP's response, and silencing Dr. Li Wenliang's initial red flags about the deadly outbreak. These actions underscore Beijing's sensitivity to being portrayed as anything other than a responsible actor at home and abroad.

Over the last decade, the CCP has used its information tools to silence criticism and project a narrative favorable to Beijing and its interests. We know that the PRC spends billions of dollars developing and expanding its international information infrastructure and the global footprint of its state-run malign propaganda machine. The CCP also mobilizes front groups and leverages its economic influence to promote Beijing's global vision.

These efforts include the CCP's attempts to leverage ties to local businesses and businessmen to gain political advantage with regional and national governments. As you may know, Secretary Pompeo just spoke at the National Governors Association about these concerns. As he said, "the Chinese government has been methodical in the way it's analyzed our system, our very open system, one that we're deeply proud of. It's assessed our vulnerabilities, and it's decided to exploit our freedoms to gain advantage over us at the federal level, the state level, and the local level." This is not just happening in the United States. It is a tactic they are using widely around the world, often employing corrupt, coercive, and covert methods to gain that advantage.

Now, I will describe some specific examples of our work to counter Russian and PRC influence operations abroad.

Overview of GEC approach

The GEC's approach to taking on these challenges is focused on building an international network of partners best positioned to counter malign influence operations emanating from Russia and the PRC.

Broadly speaking, the GEC's initiatives include:

- 1) Deploying data analytics tools to provide early warnings of foreign disinformation to our Allies, partners, and domestic stakeholders;
- 2) Analyzing the attempts by our adversaries to target susceptible foreign audiences and sharing that information with stakeholders; and
- 4) Building the technical skills of civil society organizations, NGOs, journalists, and other local actors best positioned to shine a light on, and counter, the spread of disinformation.

Specific GEC Counter Kremlin Initiatives

The GEC is actively working with Allies and partners in Europe to identify, recognize, and expose Russian disinformation, and to counter such disinformation with accurate messages about the United States and our Allies and partners in the pursuit of freedom, prosperity, and security.

The GEC has been working closely with the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and the Bureau of European Affairs (EUR) and other partners via the Russia Influence Group on coordinated lines of effort to counter Russian disinformation, moving from "studying" the problem to actually "addressing" the problem.

We have also partnered with select European partners to establish an operational working group that actively shares insights on Russian disinformation tactics and coordinates on countermeasures.

The GEC has kicked off a number of initiatives related to Russia. These include:

- A two-year project to build resistance to disinformation in the most vulnerable European societies by increasing direct person-to-person engagement on this issue.
- Creating strategic partnerships with foreign governments to enable the information sharing and response coordination that allows us to get ahead of Russian information operations.
- The GEC is providing support to our missions abroad and international partners for a wide range of efforts to counter Russian disinformation. These include supporting civil society groups in Central and Eastern Europe that build resiliency in their local communities, running joint communications campaigns with allies to counter Russian historical revisionism, and empowering fact checkers in Latin America to stem the surge of Russian disinformation in that region. With increased funding we intend to provide these types support to additional allies and partners so they can quickly and effectively increase their own ability to resist these Russian tactics.
- We continue to administer the Information Access Fund, utilizing the authority provided by Congress in the FY 2017 NDAA, via a capable implementing partner. Working with an established implementing partner allows the GEC to be faster and more flexible in executing grants to respond quickly to new priorities and opportunities as they arise.
- The investments we have made have also allowed us to expose elements of the Russian information operations ecosystem, helping inoculate audiences against this threat.

A good example of the synthesis of multiple lines of our effort came last fall, when we worked with other State colleagues and the UK and Baltic States governments on a joint campaign to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Baltic Way, a milestone on the road to the breakup of the Soviet Union. We knew that the Kremlin was attempting to re-write the history of this occasion. We worked with our partners to ensure that the truth was heard before the Kremlin could attempt to fill a vacuum with its messages. The GEC's ability to coordinate campaigns like this helps to drown out Russian propaganda and present a united front with allies.

Specific GEC Counter PRC Initiatives

The GEC has significantly expanded our work on the PRC problem set with programs to counter CCP influence over the last year. Not only do we compete in the information space in the East Asian and Pacific region, but our operations, activities, and investments are global in scope and continue to pick up momentum through FY 2020.

Our approach and priorities are driven by our ongoing collaboration with the NSC and regional and functional bureaus, all of whom have identified specific priorities in efforts to counter CCP information operations. We routinely coordinate with the China Desk in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP), regional and functional public diplomacy teams, our missions abroad, and relevant interagency partners to coordinate strategies and responses to this problem set.

Beijing has used direct and indirect methods to invest heavily in the global information architecture, whether that's underground cables or media outlets in third countries. It has matched those investments with a willingness to use economic coercion and political pressure to silence criticism and promote a narrative of its inevitable rise with "win-win" benefits for its partners.

Our efforts to counter CCP propaganda include increasing awareness of the problematic aspects of the One Belt One Road Initiative, human rights abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China, as well as Beijing's abuse of open research and academic environments to achieve its military objectives. We also have programs to build global resilience to PRC disinformation through media training and other support to investigative journalists; and to map PRC influence in the information environment to guide current and future approaches.

Recognizing Beijing's efforts to shape third-country perspectives of U.S. foreign policy, the GEC also supports efforts to provide accurate information about US policies and the contributions of U.S. businesses to local communities to restrict the space where CCP propaganda can take root. In all of this, our success depends on leveraging analytical tools as well as networks of credible partners and local voices overseas, capabilities we are refining and expanding each day.

Analytics & Research

At the GEC, we have an emphasis on making sure we are data-driven. There is an increasing demand from our U.S. government and foreign partners for data analytics and targeted advertising technologies to counter propaganda and

disinformation. To that end, the GEC created an Analytics & Research Team comprised of analysts, subject matter experts, and data scientists. I am pleased to report that the GEC's data-driven approach to understanding and addressing the problem of disinformation has been well received. The demand for GEC analytic support from the interagency community and our foreign partners has boomed.

Today the GEC's Analytics and Research team enables the GEC with some unique capabilities, such as:

- Capture disinformation-focused, threat-based analytics at the unclassified level of any given information environment.
- Discover coordinated adversarial campaigns;
- Analyze public opinion outside of the United States;

Information-sharing platform

To support and enable our work, the GEC has also been hard at work building an online analytics and information-sharing platform. This platform provides the GEC, the U.S. interagency, and select foreign partners with the open-source tools and capabilities they need to understand how foreign adversaries are pushing disinformation and propaganda in their countries. The platform also enables a coordinated a response by international partners.

The Analytics and Research team has deployed this platform to dozens of foreign partners in the past six months. It has also provided training on how to utilize the platform's tools so that our partners can conduct their own data analysis and identify disinformation and propaganda in their local environment. These partners are now part of our analytic community—a community which is building a shared understanding of our adversaries' malign influence efforts through shared analytical approaches.

These capacity building measures enable a large number of our foreign partners to be increasingly self-sufficient and proactive in this fight, and that is no small feat. Recently one foreign partner used this online platform to analyze disinformation narratives in the lead up to their elections to help protect the integrity of their democratic process, a capability they did not previously have.

Technology

The GEC also has a Technology Engagement Team (TET) which is tasked with facilitating the use of a wide range of technologies and techniques in our efforts. TET does this by fostering the sharing expertise among Federal departments and agencies, leveraging expertise from external sources, and implementing best practices.

Since May 2018, the GEC has hosted 29 “Tech Demos” of more than 62 technologies aimed at addressing the problems of disinformation and malign propaganda and tested over 124 technologies. The GEC has implemented a technology Testbed, which enables the rapid identification and testing of particular tools to identify and counter disinformation and propaganda campaigns. The Testbed runs structured short-duration experiments to understand potential tech uses against specific operational challenges. Consistent with the GEC’s mission to coordinate efforts of the federal government in this area, the GEC has run tests in support of the Departments of State and Homeland Security, the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), the Census Bureau, and other U.S. government departments and agencies.

To date, TET has evaluated and tested technologies including: blockchain-based content validation tools, counter censorship tools, web-enabled literacy training tools, dark-web monitoring tools, social listening tools, crowd-source content assessment tools, and web annotation tools.

The GEC has also run Tech Challenges, whereby the GEC convenes workshops with international partners, foreign tech companies, and other stakeholders to understand, assess, and implement tech solutions tailored to local environments in foreign countries. In 2019, the GEC held a joint Tech Challenge with the UK where the GEC awarded a grant to a Czech-based data analytics company advancing our work with the UK’s counter-Russia efforts. Just last month, the GEC held a similar Tech Challenge in Taipei, Taiwan and later this year, the GEC is planning a Tech Challenge in Nairobi, Kenya.

The GEC has established the U.S. government’s online repository for information about technologies for use against disinformation and malign propaganda, at www.disinfocloud.com. With over 335 government users currently, the GEC has brought together interagency partners, tech partners, private industry, and academics from around the world. In addition to U.S. government users, external pages have been viewed by audiences in more than 30 countries.

Finally, in December 2019, the GEC deployed a full-time liaison to Silicon Valley. The TET's strategic focus on Silicon Valley engagement will accelerate the implementation of the Global Engagement Center's overall mission. The GEC's aim is to identify novel technologies and approaches, in close coordination with other USG-Silicon Valley relationships. This effort seeks to leverage and utilize respective technical capacities and information streams in order to accelerate momentum for solutions around countering malign propaganda and disinformation.

Resources

Fortunately, as we have made progress toward executing our mission we have also, in part, seen the GEC's resources increase in kind.

In FY 2016, the GEC's base budget was approximately \$20.2 million, in FY 2017 it was approximately \$35.8 million, in FY 2018 it was approximately \$55.3 million, and in FY 2019 it was approximately \$55.4 million. In addition to its base budget, the GEC received \$20 million from DoD in FY 2018, and \$5 million from DoD in FY 2019.

In a tight Public Diplomacy budget landscape, the GEC's FY 2020 budget has increased to \$64.3 million which represents an incremental but significant increase of \$8.9 million over FY 2019. With that said, the Administration is requesting a greater increase for the GEC budget in FY 2021 to a total request of \$138 million to match the growing challenge of countering foreign propaganda and disinformation. The Administration's request specifically provides funding to alleviate the need for future transfers from the Department of Defense. We hope that Congress will support this requested increase in the GEC's budget for FY 2021.

With additional funding, the GEC will be able to apply the best practices in countering Russian and PRC disinformation and propaganda from its existing programs and expand those effort to new countries and regions beyond where the GEC is already operating.

Additionally, the GEC seeks to leverage the resources and expertise of other State Department bureaus, including EUR, EAP, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), the Bureau of Global Public Affairs (GPA), and interagency partners such as USAID and USAGM. For example, my team is also collaborating closely with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) which receives direct appropriations for programs specifically designed to counter disinformation.

The GEC also works closely with the Department of Defense's Combatant Commands and components to inform and leverage their information operations efforts.

The GEC is seeing strong growth on the personnel front. In early 2017, the GEC had a staff of approximately 83 personnel, a mixture of Civil Service employees, Foreign Service Officers, detailees, and contractors. Today, the GEC employs 118 personnel, a roughly 40% increase from the 2017 levels. The GEC is also currently in the process of recruiting and hiring Personal Services Contractors within budgetary constraints, an authority granted to the GEC by Congress in the FY 2017 NDAA.

A Whole of Government Response

Before I conclude my testimony, it is also important to note some of the many other activities the U.S. Government undertakes in relation to the overall effort to counter foreign malign propaganda and disinformation.

For example,

- The GEC, in coordination with the Department of State, works with Allies and partners to build collective resilience, share best practices, and communicate and impose costs on actors that carry out Russia's and the PRC's malign influence campaigns.
- The Department of Justice has aggressively pursued cases against PRC and Russian spies.
- USAGM's mission is to inform, engage, and connect people around the world with accurate, objective, comprehensive journalism in support of freedom and democracy, which is obviously a key component to all of this.
- The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) promotes informational integrity in its partner countries by designing activities that enable access to credible information and counter disinformation. USAID also supports objective, fact-based media outlets, which produce credible news and information, and advances initiatives which increase citizen awareness of and demand for professional journalism, including media literacy programs which increase resilience to disinformation and propaganda.

- The Department of State's suite of public diplomacy and public affairs activities and programs convey truthful information to foreign audiences daily about U.S. policies and values.
- The DoD conducts military information support operations and promotes fact-based narratives about U.S. military activities.
- The National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) advises and informs decision makers about foreign intelligence threats to the U.S. and, helps U.S. government partners to identify approaches to counter those threats.

This is just a sampling of the various efforts underway, and while a lot has been done, we can always do more.

The GEC also spends significant time working to ensure that these efforts are well coordinated across the U.S. government interagency. Our coordination efforts are focused on ensuring U.S. government activities are complimentary and align with the overall U.S. strategy to counter propaganda and disinformation. To that end, the GEC is expanding its footprint of interagency detailees who work to ensure the U.S. government's counter disinformation efforts are streamlined across the interagency and duplication is minimized.

Conclusion

Both the Russian government and the CCP view censorship, media manipulation, and propaganda as appropriate tools to control public opinion. Both exploit open, democratic societies to further their own ends while tightening controls around their own countries.

In our modern age, the Russian government and the PRC have clearly found ways to leverage new technologies to deepen and accelerate the impact these tactics can have. As has always been the case, free nations must unite and work together to defeat this threat to our societies and institutions, including by coming up with new and innovative approaches of our own, while building upon the lessons of prior generations of public servants who faced novel challenges of their own from America's adversaries.

Like any of the world's great challenges, these ones are complex and constantly evolving, but I am pleased to report that we are making progress—in building up the GEC's capabilities, in crafting strategies tailored to the specific approaches of our adversaries, and, most importantly, in regaining the initiative.

Working closely with the State Department's regional and functional bureaus and across the interagency, the Global Engagement Center is honored to have a key role in this important effort.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to any questions you may have.