



United States Mission to the OSCE

Responding to Kremlin-Supported Media Organizations' Covert Activities

As delivered by Political/ Economic Counselor Erin Webster-Main
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 26, 2024

I would like to update the Permanent Council on a series of actions the United States took to defend our democracy from foreign attempts to undermine confidence in our democratic institutions and sow division among Americans.

We now know the Russian state-media outlet RT, formerly known as "Russia Today," has moved beyond being simply a media outlet and has engaged in information operations, covert influence, and military procurement. These operations are targeting countries around the world, including in Europe, Africa, and North and South America.

On September 4th, we revealed a sophisticated covert influence operation under the cover of RT. RT contracted private U.S.-based commercial entities to pay unwitting U.S. citizens to amplify the Kremlin's messages.

What makes this particularly concerning is the covert nature of this Russian influence operation. It used unsuspecting U.S. citizens to increase the scope, scale, and reach of its malign activity. It attempted to conceal the Kremlin's operation by acting under the guise of a state-media organization.

RT leadership and staff, including members of its English-language broadcasting department, created, managed, and carried out these covert influence activities and used Russians - posing as third-country nationals - to deceive audiences.

RT took these actions to covertly influence U.S. citizens without disclosing the hidden hand of the Russian government.

Based on the evidence, we took the following actions to defend our democracy:

- We announced indictments of two individuals who engaged in these covert activities.
- We sanctioned 10 individuals, including six RT executives, who engaged in covert influence activities.
- We restricted visa issuance to certain individuals who have acted on behalf of Kremlin-supported media organizations and used those organizations as cover for covert activities.

- We designated the U.S. operations of Rossiya Segodnya, RT, and four other Russian outlets controlled by the Kremlin, as foreign missions under the Foreign Missions Act.
- We announced a new Rewards for Justice offer seeking information on foreign efforts to interfere in the U.S. elections.

Madam Chair, we did not take action against any individuals for the content of their reporting, or even for openly spreading disinformation. We acted exclusively to target those conducting covert influence activities and who use media organizations as clandestine cover. We will always stand for freedom of expression, including for those with whom we disagree. We welcome – we encourage – dissent, open debate, and free discourse. But we will not stand for attempts by state actors to carry out covert or illegal activities with the goal of hijacking that discourse.

Our laws, including the 1938 Foreign Agents Registration Act, are designed to ensure the U.S. government and the people of the United States are informed about the source of information and the identity of people attempting to influence U.S. public opinion, policy, and laws. U.S. laws serve to promote openness and transparency, important democratic principles. Our commitment to freedom of expression and press freedom is unwavering because it's the bedrock of a healthy democracy.

Russian efforts, combined with recently revealed Iranian activity, demonstrate that some states will go to any length to rattle public confidence in democratic institutions. We will continue to work with like-minded partners and civil society to erode Russia's capacity to conduct covert influence activities through these media outlets.

###