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MYTHS AND REALITIES OF PUTINISM IN POST-TRUTH POLITICS

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Introduction

In 2016 the *Oxford Dictionaries* selected the term “post-truth” as the “word of the year” to describe the emergence of “an era of boundless virtual communication” which characterises a battle between facts and lies in different arenas and policies.¹ Post-truth politics has been defined by *The Economist* as “reliance on assertions that ‘feel true’ but have no basis in fact” and are based more on emotions than rationality.² In contemporary democracies this term also refers to the use of fake news and populist protest/movements as a reaction to the establishment’s policies which are considered unaccountable and unresponsive in comparison with citizens’ needs and demands. These new political movements try to delegitimise democratic institutions in order to pave the way to a new political order so that elements of deception and misinformation can be considered as a potential and effective threat to liberal democracies.

In the early 2000s, the Internet was considered a tool for more participation, freedom, and democratisation. Nowadays, the Internet has become a real threat due to the increased number of people who prefer getting information online, where fake news and fake accounts are more present than in newspapers. The post-truth era is also characterised by the repudiation of science-based facts, objectivity, expertise, evidence, and statistics which undermines the community of scientists.

The main effects of fake news are political and social polarised debates which shed light on moral crisis, individuality, reinforcing people’s beliefs among those who share the same opinion, and the rejection of scientific principles, analyses, research dealing with health, environment, education policies, and so on. Nowadays, the Internet has revealed the dark side of the online community, i.e. a large amount of web-based information that could be harmful and dangerous for the audience who are more oriented to believe information that appeals to their beliefs

and emotions. The ‘production of confusion’³ is a real problem for governments, industries, and private firms which must implement literacy skills for better meaningful learning and understanding of information consumption.

In foreign and domestic policies this attitude against the truth based on evidence has determined the growing feeling of anti-globalisation, xenophobic attitudes, and nationalist politicians who challenge the liberal order and create fake news in order to make people anxious and insecure about their own future. So, fake news can determine a sort of distrust in political elites and democratic decision-making. We have some examples with the false claim on the extortion of money by the EU which paved the way to the Brexit decision, as well as the news that the Ukrainian government crucified a child which was spread on social media by the Russian government (Oates and Steiner 2018: 2–5).

Nevertheless, we share Ostrovsky’s opinion (2017) about the importance of a conceptual distinction between ‘post-truth politics’ and ‘fake news’. While the two terms seem interchangeable, there is a need for clarification in regard to what they mean and involve in non-democratic political regimes, and in the Russian political environment in particular. In doing so, this chapter aims to provide an analysis of the Kremlin’s role in taking advantage of the post-fact/post-truth sphere, both in the domestic policies dealing with social, political, and economic issues and as a political/strategic tool in the international setting. As far as the latter is concerned, in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, and particularly since the election of Donald Trump as President of the US, many scholars and journalists are exploring Moscow’s manipulations of the Western mediascape (Ortting and Nelson 2018). Its foreign manipulations range from biased coverage of events, taking sides in political controversies, intentional securitisation of narratives, hacking, information warfare (cyber politics), and direct lies.

Secondly, a description of the Russian media landscape and peculiarity and its rapid change in recent years, influenced especially by the rise of digital media across the globe, is necessary to better understand *who* the main actors able to influence the political debate are and *how* this develops. Special attention will be also devoted to Internet governance policy and to its role in weaponising lies to face the domestic/foreign political dimensions between the matters of fact and the matters of concern in Russian politics.

Fake news and Russian propaganda

Strategic narratives have always been used in Soviet times. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2017: 3) define strategic narratives as “tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment.” They are based on a system of stories that in politics represent the intersection of communication and power. Kenéz in his work on Soviet propaganda, *The Birth of the Propaganda State* (1985), underlines that propaganda was part of the larger Soviet system.

Contemporary Russia has also invested in mass media propaganda because Russia's government relies on high domestic consensus to maintain its legitimacy (Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014). Although there are still some independent voices such as *Ekho Moskvy* radio station, *Novaya Gazeta*, an alternative newspaper, and online video producer *Telekanal Dozhd*, the analysis made by "Reporters Without Borders" ranked Russia as only 148 out of 180 countries assessed for its "World Press Freedom Index" in 2016. Journalism became deprofessionalised in Russia, while in the past it had always been considered a truthful speech based on accuracy, willingness to stand by one's words, sincerity, seriousness, and courage.

Roudakova admits that "what we are observing in Russia today is what the world looks like when journalism is made superfluous" (2017: 219). Nowadays, propaganda is more dynamic and organic and takes advantage of new channels of communication (the Internet and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter). After the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000, the narrative maintained the legacy of the past, i.e. the struggle against the West which does not respect and recognise Russia as a global player in the international setting. The West against Russia narrative has been used to make people aware of the fact that the West does not want "Russia resurgent as a Great Nation" (Oates and Steiner 2018: 3).

Consequently, Russian media construct modern narratives based on some specific stories of the West against Russia. The most famous concerns the term *Russophobia*, which was created by a Tsarist diplomat in the 19th century to stress that Russia was marginalised by the West in every political affair (Darczewska and Zochowski 2015: 9). Nowadays this term is used by Putin to underline the Western attempt to make Russia weaker in the international setting, focussing on the emergence of a Western prejudice against Russia. We can find some examples in the hashtag #Russophobia on Twitter, as well as the publishing of "Russophobia Digest" articles and opinions.⁴ As of 1 December 2018, the phrase "Russophobia" appeared 790 times on the *RT* website and 855 times on the *Sputnik News* website.⁵

A recent verbal meme used on Russian Twitter narratives is "highly likely". This hashtag derives from a sentence pronounced by Theresa May's after the poisoning case involving Sergey and Yulia Skripal: she asserted that "it is highly likely that Russia is responsible." Foreign Minister Lavrov responded this was "highly likely as a new invention of the British diplomacy to describe why they punish people – because these people are highly likely guilty, like in Alice in Wonderland."⁶ The divergence of media narratives between Western and Eastern media is a crucial part of a new kind of hybrid warfare, or postmodern warfare, where military actions, propaganda, political activity, and online campaigns are combined. In 2017, Lavrov stated that "propaganda needs to be clever, smart and efficient" (Isachenkov 2017: 5). Another example is the campaign started by *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the state agency responsible for Russians living abroad, titled "Highly Likely Welcome Back" to invite Russian students studying in foreign universities to go back home, in order protect them from "the negative influence of Russophobic attitudes".

Another analysis elaborated by Tatiana Dubrovskaya shows how media debate on sanctions imposed on Russia as punitive measures have been represented and have contributed to the construction of an IR debate:⁷ “The debate on the sanctions in Russian media exemplifies how ideologically opposed forces make sense of the facts and attach different meanings to them, at the same time as contributing to the construction of Russia’s international relations as a whole” (Dubrovskaya 2018: 11). Consequently, this narrative of the West against Russia is very dynamic and characterises the legacies of the past in contemporary foreign affairs.

While policy analysts, journalists, and governmental agencies are trying to understand to what extent Russian hackers were able to influence the 2016 US presidential election campaign and many speculations and official investigations took place, it is also noteworthy that television remains the Russian public’s primary source to get information.⁸ Television news is trusted by 49% of Russians, while only 24% trust online publications, and 15% social media.⁹ So, the narratives Russian broadcasters use are extremely important in influencing domestic and international perceptions of the United States and the EU, for instance.

Nevertheless, Sarah Oates stresses the fact that “we need audience studies to determine the degree to which these narratives have a direct effect on citizens in the West.” As a matter of fact, “this discussion of Russian strategic narratives cannot offer any evidence of the audience reception of these messages. While we can observe the nature of Russian strategic narrative, trace its flow through the media ecosystem through key words and even computational linguistics” (Oates, Barrow, and Foster 2018). In such a context, Russian media play a critical role in spreading half-truths and non-truths related to the dissemination of the Kremlin’s viewpoints in order to face any attempt to destabilise the regime’s stability. As Mejias and Vokuev (2017: 1) underline: “Citizens themselves actively participate in their own disenfranchisement by using social media to generate, consume or distribute false information.” This sort of ‘peer-to-peer propaganda’ is produced by ordinary people sharing posts and comments.

In March 2019, the Russian State Duma passed a set of controversial laws targeting journalists and Internet users for ‘spreading fake news’ and ‘disrespecting the authorities’. The penalty for publishing false information ranges from 30,000 rubles (450 dollars) to one million rubles (15,000 dollars), while for disrespect it is 300,000 rubles (4500 dollars) and 15 days in jail for repeat offenders. As a matter of fact, Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) presents the findings of a survey on “life without Internet”.¹⁰ The share of Russians using Internet in 2019 is around 84%, and 64% of them on a daily basis. Younger people (18–24) with higher education, high income, and living in Moscow and St Petersburg are the main users. On the contrary, 16% of respondents do not use any online resources. 11% of users cannot imagine their life without Internet while half of them would be able to adapt their life.

In April 2019, a second survey was based on the spreading of fake news in Russia: 31% of respondents have come across fake news, especially on television (20%),

newspapers (7%), and radio (5%).¹¹ When confronted with fake news, most of respondents (62%) thought that they might be fake stories; 31% realised that they were probably wrong only later. According to the survey, 74% of Russians think that fake news is published deliberately (84% of 33–44 year olds), and 17% think that fake stories are journalists' mistakes (especially among youngsters).

And what about Russians' opinion on a new 'fake news' law? The survey shows that 78% of the respondents are aware of the fake news law and 42% think that it is impossible to distinguish reliable from unreliable information. Nevertheless, 83% of Russians consider that this law is extremely important for the country in order to face threats to human life.¹² Moreover, 57% of respondents believe that after the law will be implemented the amount of fake news will be reduced; on the contrary, 29% do not believe that anything will change.

The Russian hybrid warfare

The attempt to introduce order and political/economic stability in Russia has been translated into a new 'ideology' (Putinism), able to strengthen the relationship between politics and people. The starting point of this new "ideology to the people" rather than "by the people" dates back to the legacies of Soviet history, such as patriotism, claims related to the Soviet power, political order, and the idea of a nation able to leave "Russia's doors shut on the Soviet Union's sins" (Sakwa 2008), and paves the way to the charismatic leadership appealing to the myths of the past.

The politics of memory through the narrative based on re-Stalinisation and the securitisation of societal identity played a crucial role in reformatting Russia's relations with various others – be they internal others, designated as the 'fifth column', 'national traitors', 'enemies of the people', 'Western spies', or external others, firmly identified with the West in general and the US in particular. The divergence of media narratives between Western and Eastern media is a crucial part of a new kind of hybrid warfare, or postmodern warfare, which combines military actions, propaganda, political activity, and online campaigns (Mitrokhin 2015).¹³

There are different terms used to describe hybrid warfare,¹⁴ such as 'Fourth Generation Warfare' or 'Full Spectrum Warfare' in respect to the description on how Russian military forces conducted operations in Ukraine in 2014 and in Syria in 2015.¹⁵ Many scholars agree with the fact that it is time for a reevaluation of Russia's place in the world, where new forms of power are used as cyber tactics as well as the use of energy politics. "Russian cyber power is considered to be one of the savviest and most technologically advanced in the world. Along with China and the United States, Russia is considered one of the 'heavyweights' in its abilities to deface websites, steal information, and cripple states' infrastructure via the web" (Maness and Valeriano 2015: 1).

Cyber conflict is the least costly tool for Russian foreign policy. Cyberspace is a new dimension of conflict and Russia has applied it in the realm of foreign policy.

The downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 flying over Eastern Ukrainian territory on 17 July 2014 with 298 passengers led to severe reactions in the international setting. The Ukrainian issue is very important for Russia because the shift of Ukraine towards Western institutions and influence would be considered a threat to the great power identity of the Russian modern state since Russian origins are traced back to the Kievan Rus' clan.¹⁶ Consequently, coercive measures were adopted to avoid such a path, ensuring that Ukraine remains in Russia's political orbit.

Although the use of cyber warfare has been increasing during the last decade, it has had some noticeable antecedents during the previous decade. In April 2007, the Estonian government put "The Bronze Soldier of Tallinn", a Soviet era grave marker, in a new place far from the city centre where it used to be. This statue represented the Soviet struggle against Nazi invaders during World War II and is a symbol of Russians' pride. The Kremlin reacted, relying on well-organised cyber operations attacking the private and public Estonian networks which provoked a two-week offline status of banks, businesses, and social networking. Many observers declared that this Russian operation was one of the most sophisticated to date. As a matter of fact, Estonia became the international leader in developing cyber norms and defense tools. While the international community condemned this attack, the Estonian government hosted the International Conference on Cyber Conflict, becoming a global leader in the field.

A similar cyberattack took place one year later in Georgia, where – during the South Ossetian crisis – Georgian government websites were hacked, with pictures of President Mikheil Saakashvili appearing as Hitler, and many other services were shut down. The main consequences were to reveal the Georgians' incapacity to decipher what was actually going on with the movement of soldiers and military hardware. It was the first time that such a cyber action was implemented during a military campaign. Analysts state that Russia does not use cyberattacks very often, and when it does, they are usually aimed at preventing retaliation in post-Soviet states. Cyberattacks can be defined either as "hostile actions in cyberspace that have effects that amplify or are equivalent to major kinetic violence" or as actions of "penetration of foreign networks for the purpose of disrupting or dismantling those networks, and making them inoperable" (Nye 2011: 20–21).

So, Russia is reemerging with new forms of power which are summarised in Table 10.1.

The Russian General Staff defines cyberattacks as "disruption of the key enemy military, industrial and administrative facilities and systems, as well as bringing information-psychological pressure to bear on the adversary's military-political leadership, troops and population, something to be achieved primarily through the use of state-of-the-art information technologies and assets" (Maness and Valeriano 2015: 87). Russia's offensive capabilities are also impressive since it was a Russian firm labelled Kaspersky Labs that funded the infamous Stuxnet and Flame malware incidents in Iran. Despite the Soviet system, which did not pay much attention to the cyber capabilities, Putin's administration invested in the cyber sector and implemented the 'Doctrine of Information Security of Russia' in 2016. According

TABLE 10.1 Summary of cyber incidents involving Russia 2001–11

<i>Dyad (Initiator first)</i>	<i>Name (Duration)</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Severity score</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Russia – Estonia	Bronze Soldier Retaliation (4/27/2007–5/10/2007)	Vandalism, DDoS	2	Response to Estonian removal of a Soviet-era war memorial, widespread DDoS and vandalism
Russia – Georgia	Before the gunfire (4/20/2008–8/16/2008)	DDoS	1	Ongoing DDoS tactics before the Russo-Georgian conflict
Georgia – Russia	Osinform.ru website (8/4/2008–8/4/2008)	DDoS	1	Russian ‘hacktivist’ networks shut down after Georgian troops killed
Russia – Georgia	VoIP Phone system (8/4/2008–8/8/2008)	DDoS	1	Infiltration of major Georgian mobile network
Russia – Georgia	Georgian Government Site Defacements (8/7/2008–8/16/2008)	Vandalism	1	Widespread vandalism on Georgian government sites before conflict
Russia – US	US Identities stolen in hack (8/6/2008–8/12/2008)	Infiltration	1	US government sites hacked to steal identities and vandalise Georgian sites
Russia – US	US Central Command in Iraq and Afghanistan hacked (11/26/2008–11/28/2008)	Infiltration	2	Information stolen from US Central Command, origins in Russia
Russia – US	US power grid hack (8/24/2009 – ongoing)	Infiltration	3	Eastern Seaboard power grid hacked but no damage, origins in Russia
Russia – US	Dragonfly energy grid hack (1/15/2013–ongoing)	Infiltration	3	Hacker group originating from Russia infects the US energy grid

Source: Maness and Valeriano (2015: 110)

to this doctrine, “The national security of the Russian Federation depends on a substantial degree on ensuring information security, a dependence that will increase with technological progress.”

In this respect, the FSB (Federal Security Service) monitors all Internet users within Russian borders: it requires service providers to install hardware; also, companies such as Microsoft are asked to share source codes with the FSB. The FSB relies on Kaspersky Labs, which has over 300 million customers worldwide, but tracing the origins of its hackers is difficult; as a matter of fact, it is still a matter of discussion whether or not Russia was involved in the Estonian and Georgian incidents. Russia is considered one of the most dangerous states operating in cyberspace, competing with the USA, China, Iran, North and South Korea, Great Britain, Israel, and Germany, although its ranking in the Global Cybersecurity Index declined from 12 in 2014, to 10 in 2017, and then 26 in 2018. General Valery Gerasimov stated the “the very rules of war” changed, especially the role of nonmilitary means. Without a clear declaration of war, it seems that Clausewitz concept of the ‘Fog of War’ applies: while originally it referred to the context of the battlefield, it can be used in different contexts, such as a virtual environment. Nevertheless, there is a shared opinion that “Russia is not a ‘geopolitical’ threat. It is a regional power that challenges United States in its sphere of influence, which is post-Soviet space” (Maness and Valeriano 2015: 88).

Conclusion

As Holzscheiter (2014: 144) notes, “facts do not speak for themselves”, and “facts have to be represented . . . to become socially real.” The Russian representation of both international events and domestic issues which can be related to the Russian public opinion towards the West is based on the main tools that the post-truth era has given birth to: fake news as the legacy of the Soviet propaganda and hybrid warfare measures aiming at weakening contemporary democracies. Both of them are strongly related thanks also to the role played by Russian mass media.

In Western societies, post-truth represents a dangerous surge of populism with implications that are not ‘just’ ethical but also destabilising for domestic politics and geopolitics: it is an emerging security challenge and governments must cooperate to cope with it.¹⁷ Taking advantage of new technological tools, populists have come up with new strategies in the framework of post-truth politics. It is also true that some Western populist leaders (Orbán, Le Pen, Salvini, Voigt) see Putin’s Russia as a model, where “Putinism and populism are mutually reinforcing phenomena with some shared components” (Oliker 2017: 16–20).

Putin was able to attract people’s trust thanks to the evolution of a new Russian nationalism, which combines both historical tradition and the Russian Orthodox Church and advocates conservative values, opposing them to the values characterising European liberalism (equal rights for LGBTQ people, women, religious minorities, and so on), which are considered to be disruptive for the social order. Putin is considered as an embodiment of “strength,

racial purity and traditional Christian values in a world under threat from Islam, immigrants, and rootless cosmopolitan elites.”¹⁸ Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that analysts and observers have underlined the relationship between the Kremlin and many extremist right and left parties in Europe. Russia challenges the United States interfering in elections and influencing public opinion with a new narrative based on anti-Western attitudes, to do so, it relies on Internet and social media campaigns.

The question to be better explored is whether Russia is using fake news and supporting populist opposition movements in Europe in order to determine the crisis of liberal democracies in the hope they will give birth to new types of regimes which are more similar to the Russian one. On the contrary, Russia could try to position itself in the international setting in such a way that Western populism is a tool to threaten the cohesiveness of NATO and the EU (Oliker 2017: 19).

Notes

- 1 See: www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/12/11/WOTY-16. The Oxford Dictionaries dates the first use of the term to 1992 and an essay by Steve Tesich, a Serbian-American playwright writing in *The Nation* following the Iran/Contra scandal. It was also used by a journalist stressing the way politicians deny scientific claims about climate change more than 20 years ago. In 2004, a book written by Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era*, warned that lies are told without any fear of impunity, arguing that this is the new social and human challenge to be defeated for the future of democracy.
- 2 See www.economist.com/leaders/2016/09/10/art-of-the-lie; www.economist.com/briefing/2016/09/10/yes-id-lie-to-you.
- 3 To better understand the effects of the ‘production of confusion’ it is necessary to analyse the role of journalism in the sphere of fake news as suggested by Jay Rosen, a professor of journalism who describes the attempt by Trump’s White House to manipulate news outlets and the administration’s knowledge of the ‘deep grammar’ of journalism. See: Cooke (2018).
- 4 ‘Russophobia: RT Rates the Top 10 Kremlin Critics & Their Hilarious Hate Campaigns’, *RT International*, 28 September 2017, www.rt.com/uk/404930-russophobia-kremlin-critics-paranoia/ (last consulted on 29 November 2018).
- 5 Google search within the domains: www.rt.com/ and www.sputniknews.com/, conducted on 1 December 2018.
- 6 Lavrov, S. (2018) ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with BBC HardTalk’ 4 April 2018. See a transcript here: <http://rusisworld.com/en/interview/transcript-sergey-lavrovs-interview-bbc-hardtalk/>, in Oates and Steiner (2018).
- 7 These sanctions were introduced in 2014 and extended till 31 January 2019 after the Ukraine crisis and the ‘annexation’ (term used by Westerners)/ reunification (term used by Russians) of Crimea.
- 8 An August 2018 survey by the Levada Center found that 73% of Russians consult television news more than any other information source.
- 9 In August 2009, this question was formulated as follows: “Other Internet sources”. Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center, August 2009 to 23–30 August 2018, www.levada.ru/2018/09/13/kanaly-informatsii/, published on 13 September 2018
- 10 See <https://wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1659>.
- 11 See <https://wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1654>.
- 12 See <https://wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1644>.
- 13 “The term ‘war’ is not meant as a war in the traditional sense but as a tool to use in foreign policy” to alter behaviour (Maness and Valeriano 2015: 87).

- 14 So these terms are used to describe conventional and non-conventional conflicts (conventional, irregular, terrorist, criminal, cyber, economic, diplomatic, political, social).
- 15 It was also used following the aftermath of the 2006 Israeli war in Lebanon against Hezbollah.
- 16 Kievan Rus' is the first East Slavic state which consisted of several clans struggling for the princely throne of Kiev.
- 17 So far, numerous countries have tried to tackle this independently. The Spanish and American governments have arrested a Russian hacker (alias Severa) for his involvement in the US 2016 elections with his fake antivirus software which functioned as a spam, infecting between 70,000 and 90,000 computers and sending up to 1.5 billion spam messages a day
- 18 See Feuer and Higgins (2016).

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