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MASTER THESIS

Titel der Master Thesis / Title of the Master's Thesis

„Sowing Seeds of Discord: How Russian state-sponsored propaganda campaigns during Brexit, the Catalan referendum, and the French 2017 presidential elections flared up or faded due to domestic factors“

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Advanced International Studies (M.A.I.S.)

Wien 2019 / Vienna 2019

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt
Postgraduate programme code as it appears
on the student record sheet:

A 992 940

Universitätslehrgang lt. Studienblatt
Postgraduate programme as it appears on
the
student record sheet:

Internationale Studien / International Studies

Betreut von / Supervisor:

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diplomatische
akademie wien

Vienna School of International Studies
École des Hautes Études Internationales de Vienne

On my honour as a student of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes under which domestic conditions are foreign state-sponsored political propaganda campaigns able to disseminate their messages through the targeted information ecosystems. I conducted three case-study analyses of the Russian state-sponsored propaganda campaigns in the lead-up to the ‘Brexit’ referendum, the Catalan independence referendum and the 2017 French presidential elections. This thesis uses an interdisciplinary approach combining international relations and history with the theoretical lens of constructivism, and more specifically of symbolic politics, political communication theory and propaganda studies to shed light on the problem at hand. In the cases of the Brexit and Catalan referenda, deeply entrenched social divides—be they ethno-nationalist tensions or socio-economic inequalities—led to a polarized domestic (social) media environment, which facilitated the implantation and dissemination of Russian state-sponsored (c)overt online propaganda campaigns that framed the Manichean political choice in ways similar to local actors. However, in the case of France, the “Macron Leaks” campaign was stopped short in large part thanks to strong inter-institutional cooperation and responsible media output and consumption, but also because the content of the leaks did not trigger the electorate’s symbolic predispositions.

Abstrakt

Die vorliegende Masterarbeit versucht aufzuzeigen, unter welchen inländischen Bedingungen staatlich geförderte politische Propagandakampagnen in der Lage sind, ihre Botschaften gezielt über Informationsökosysteme zu verbreiten. Dazu wurden drei Fallstudienanalysen erstellt, welche insbesondere vom russischen Staat geförderte Propagandakampagnen im Vorfeld des Brexit-Referendums, des katalanischen Unabhängigkeitsreferendums und den französischen Präsidentschaftswahlen 2017 untersuchen. Diese Masterarbeit ist von einem interdisziplinären Ansatz geleitet, der Internationale Beziehungen und Geschichte kombiniert, um das vorliegende Problem aus der Sicht des Konstruktivismus, insbesondere der symbolischen Politik, der politischen Kommunikationstheorie und der Propagandastudien zu beleuchten. Sowohl bei dem Brexit- als auch bei dem Katalonien-Referendum führten tief verwurzelte soziale Unterschiede, entweder nationalistische Spannungen oder sozioökonomische Ungleichheiten, zur Polarisierung der inländischen sozialen Medien. Dies erleichterte (in)offiziell vom russischen Staat finanzierten Medien den Zugang sowie die Verbreitung von öffentlichen Online-Propagandakampagnen, die in ähnlicher Weise wie innerstaatliche Akteure den politischen Manichäismus prägten. In Frankreich wurde die Kampagne „Macron Leaks“ einerseits zum Großteil aufgrund der engen inter-institutionellen Zusammenarbeit und des verantwortungsvollen Medienoutputs und -konsums gestoppt und andererseits entsprach der Inhalt der Leaks nicht der (politischen) symbolischen Neigung der Wählerschaft.

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1.1 Introduction

The 2016 US presidential elections placed Russian state-sponsored (RSS) covert and overt propaganda operations in the limelight. Ever since, online “disinformation” and “Russia meddling” claims have been hotly discussed in the US and foreign media. However, the 2016 elections were just the tip of the iceberg of the growing, yet still relatively understudied field of new propaganda designed through online (social) media. This thesis will conduct a comparative analysis of domestic factors that facilitate or hinder the implantation of foreign state-state sponsored propaganda operations, with three case studies to compare: RSS propaganda operations during the Brexit Referendum, the Catalan Independence Referendum, and the 2017 French presidential elections.

My initial interest in these three case studies stems from an interview carried out with Jaakko Lehtovirta,¹ according to whom there are generally speaking two types of countries in which Russia carries out propaganda operations. The first group is comprised of states that border Russia and are located within what Russia considers its “near abroad,” or what detractors call its “sphere of influence,” i.e. the Caucasian states, Belarus, Ukraine, the Baltic states, Finland, and Poland. RSS propaganda operations here are generally created and disseminated for Russian domestic consumption or to influence the Russian minorities within these countries.

The second group of nation-states is beyond Russia’s traditional ‘sphere of influence:’ they are Western countries within NATO or the EU that were never historically under Russian rule, i.e. the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Portugal or Spain. The target audience for RSS propaganda campaigns in these countries is the respective country’s citizens. I find the second type of propaganda operations more puzzling and wonder why Russia would try to influence the citizens of nation-states outside of its ‘sphere of influence.’

A limited number of academic studies have been conducted on RSS propaganda in type-one countries.² However, when it comes to type-two countries, few academic articles

¹ Jaakko Lehtovirta, Visiting Finnish Fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security and former Director of the Unit for Russia in the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 2018.

² See for instance Julia Summers, “Countering Disinformation: Russia’s Infowar in Ukraine,” *The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington* website, October 25, 2017. <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/russia-disinformation-ukraine/>; Todd C. Helmus et al., “Russian Social Media Influence, Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe” Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2237.html or Andrei Yelisseyeu and Volha Damarad (scientific

have been published to date, with the exception of the wave of academic endeavor to analyze the 2016 US election interference.³ Furthermore, the academic literature on RSS propaganda to influence Brexit, the Catalan referendum and the French 2017 elections is sparse, and to the best of my knowledge, there has not yet been any comparative analysis of these three cases.

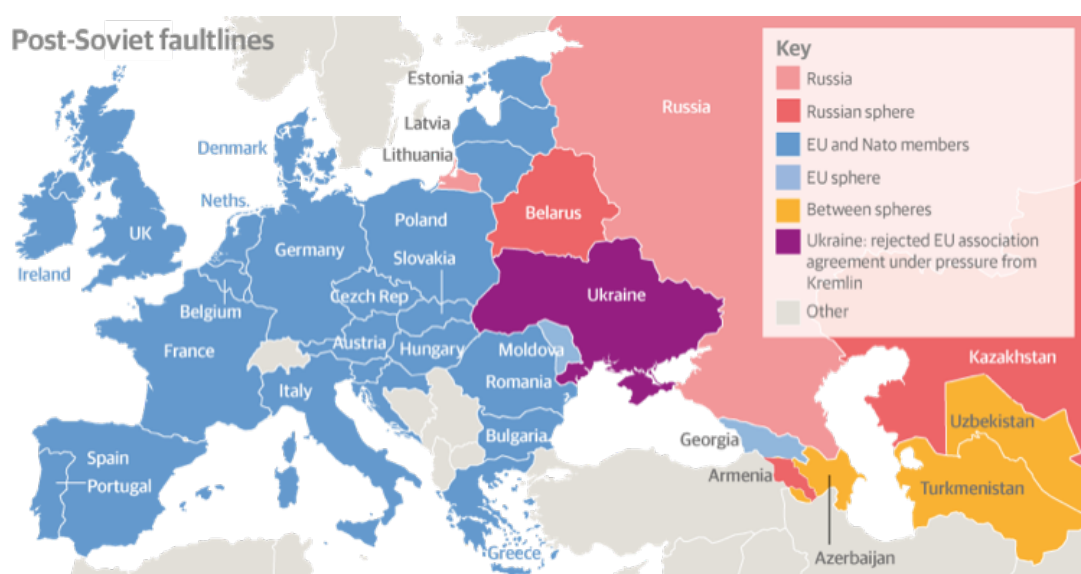


Figure 1 A map representing competing spheres of influence in Europe (source: The University of Texas Library)⁴

Because academic literature on political propaganda in the Internet age is still relatively sparse, the Hewlett-Packard Foundation issued a literature review report of understudied topics within the field. Amongst many other literature gaps, I found one to be particularly intriguing:

‘Comparative research would not only establish whether U.S. findings generalize to other countries, but also to better understand what kinds of institutional and systemic conditions facilitate or hinder polarization and misinformation, thus yielding policy recommendations that can be relevant to the U.S. context.’⁵

eds.), *Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe* (Kyiv, Ukraine: Ukrainian Prism Foreign Policy Council, 2018). http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf.

³ See for instance Hall Jamieson 2018; Nir Grinberg et al., “Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election,” *Science* 363 (6425) (2019), DOI: 10.1126/science.aau2706 or R. Kelly Garrett, “Social media’s contribution to political misperceptions in U.S. Presidential elections,” *PLoS ONE* 14(3) (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0213500>.

⁴ University of Texas Library Map found in Nicholas Dima, “Ukraine: American Illusions and Russian Delusions,” *SFPPR News and Analysis*, May 7, 2014. <http://sfppr.org/2014/05/ukraine-american-illusions-and-russian-delusions/>.

⁵ Joshua A. Tucker et al., “Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature,” report prepared for the William + Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2018, 61.

The authors of the report recognize the need for more work to be conducted in a comparative manner with countries other than the United States. However, this report suggests using the non-US comparative cases studies to create policy recommendations specifically *for* American policy formulation. My approach will differ from this, as this non-US literature gap is worth exploring on its own terms. As the researcher Ruben Arcos aptly states, “[e]ffective influencing requires understanding the deeper characteristics of a country or region,”⁶ which points at the essential link between domestic conditions and effective propaganda. Or as the authors of *Network Propaganda* ascertain about RSS propaganda in the US case,

“[i]n order for Russians to be influential, their efforts must flow through the media ecosystem Americans inhabit. It is there that stories flourish or falter. [...] Willing embrace of divisive Russian propaganda, not innocent error because of Twitter and Facebook manipulation, is the core challenge.”⁷

As the authors hint at, the flourishing of RSS propaganda hinges on the propagandists’ ability to pass their message off as organic and domestic for it not only to “flow through the media ecosystem,” but also to smoothly coincide with the local consumer’s symbolic predispositions (SYP’s)—a term that we will return to in theoretical framework section (1.3). The following sheds more light on Benkler, Faris and Roberts’ argument:

“When Russian propaganda efforts are consistent with right-wing American framings and beliefs, these falsehoods are able to insert themselves, propagate, and gain credence in the right-wing media ecosystem. By contrast, similar efforts aimed to leverage left-wing biases have to overcome the basic checks provided by a media ecosystem inhabited by professional-norms-oriented media outlets.”⁸

Although the overall points are excellent, the politicization of journalistic ethics weakens the argument—indeed, researchers have found that left-wing SYP’s linked to feminism and black power were preyed on by RSS propaganda during the 2016 US presidential elections.⁹ However, the two points are crucial to reinforce Benkler, Faris and Roberts’ argument: first, propaganda messaging must be consistent with the framing and priming of a certain local

⁶ Rubén Arcos, “Post-event analysis of the hybrid threat security environment: assessment of influence communication operations,” *Strategic Analysis* (October 2018): 3.

⁷ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 267.

⁸ Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 236.

⁹ Workshop 1C, Atlantic Council StratCom Conference, October 2-3, 2018, Washington DC.

group's SYP's to successfully disseminate the message. Second, ethical media, or journalistic deontology, have an essential role to play. Both of these points will be corroborated in the case studies.

Because this thesis falls into a literature gap, the following literature review draws from the related burgeoning strands of research into identifying the existence of online propaganda operations and gauging their effect and effectiveness. Most studies in the field of contemporary foreign state-sponsored propaganda expose *how* to discern foreign political propaganda platforms and content, such as bots, and what defines bot activity.¹⁰ Other studies analyze the effects of online propaganda on the target population.¹¹ There is a relative consensus that RSS propaganda has a limited direct effect.¹² However, some researchers have found that RSS propaganda—in the case of Ukraine—was damaging to democracy because it accentuates internal divisions: “[Russian] propaganda doesn’t always change minds; [...] However, it does further polarize its audience. And that might make it harder for democracies to build consensus — and remain democracies.”¹³ This conclusion, whereby RSS propaganda is in and as of itself a threat to democracy, differs significantly from that of Thomas Rid, who stated that:

“we overestimate the effect of active measures. During the Cold War, we usually arguably underestimated the effect of active measures—that was the norm. [...] By deciding to blame domestic weaknesses [...] on foreign interference, [...] we are defaulting into a mindset [...] that we see in non-democratic societies.”¹⁴

¹⁰ For instance, see Marco T. Bastos and Dan Mercea, “The Brexit Botnet and User-Generated Hyperpartisan News,” *Social Science Computer Review* Vol. 37(1) (2019) or Philip N. Howard and Bence Kollanyi, “Bots, #StrongerIn, and #Brexit: Computational Propaganda during the UK-EU Referendum,” *ComProp Research Note* 2016.1 (2016).

¹¹ See for instance Leonid Peisakhin and Arturas Rozenas, “Electoral Effects of Biased Media: Russian Television in Ukraine,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (July 2018) or Zannettou et al., “Disinformation Warfare: Understanding State-Sponsored Trolls on Twitter and Their Influence on the Web” (Companion Proceedings of The 2019 World Wide Web Conference, San Francisco, May 13-17, 2019).

¹² See for instance Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Zannettou et al. 2018, or Bastos and Mercea 2019.

¹³ Leonid Peisakhin and Arturas Rozenas, “When does Russian propaganda work — and when does it backfire? Here’s what we found,” *Washington Post*, April 3, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/04/03/when-does-russian-propaganda-work-and-when-does-it-backfire-heres-what-we-found/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.22d878ba1a20.

¹⁴ Thomas Rid, “Defending Sovereignty and Information Space” (talk with Victoria Nuland and Riho Terras, Atlantic Council, November 13, 2018) min. 19. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/events/webcasts/defending-sovereignty-and-information-space>.

To nuance Rid's argument, here is a similar approach to the effect and effectiveness of RSS propaganda:

"the primary goal of Russian disinformation is to instill a sense that "Nothing is True and Everything is Possible," or to "dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay." If that is the case, then to overstate the prevalence and effect of Russian attacks is to aid their success. Just as terrorism succeeds most when it evokes an overreaction and causes a society to respond from fear and anger rather than calculation."¹⁵

These two arguments converge in their constructivist appraisal of RSS propaganda: reactions to RSS propaganda—which in the United States have at times been hyperbolic—are perhaps more telling than the propaganda itself and the divisions it managed to accentuate. In this sense, the propaganda operation—at least in the US—has been effective insofar as it cultivated widespread fear and weariness in the functioning of democracy. Thus, the question of effect and effectiveness of RSS (c)overt online propaganda, which is in fact just a drop in the ocean of social media posts and interactions, is pulled between those who argue that it has a direct effect on democracy by sowing divisions and those who see it as a catalyzer for overreactions that are dangerous to democracy in and as of themselves. Both of these literature strands inform the case study examinations of propaganda operations and the analyses of how they fared in light of domestic conditions.

One literature niche that informs my fluid approach to analyzing covert and overt propaganda is the burgeoning research branch that examines the interaction between official RSS media outlets Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik News¹⁶ and RSS covert propaganda on social media through bots—i.e. "simple algorithms programmed to scrape data from internet sources and post them via social media platforms."¹⁷— and sock puppet accounts, which are "a phony name or identity created by an online user as another person"¹⁸ to interact with online communities. This interaction between covert and overt propaganda is created "to disseminate and add credibility to false information and propagate destabilizing

¹⁵ Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 236.

¹⁶ From now on, I will be calling "Sputnik News" just "Sputnik" not only for the sake of concision, but also because the word "news" provides the channel's name with an automatic credibility quotient that I do not wish to bolster.

¹⁷ Marco Bastos and Dan Mercea, "The public accountability of social platforms: lessons from a study on bots and trolls in the Brexit campaign," *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. A* 376:20180003, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2018.0003>, 2.

¹⁸ "Sockpuppet definition," *Techopedia*, <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/29043/sockpuppet>.

disinformation,”¹⁹ because “RT intentionally serves as a source and hub of a much more diffuse network of sites that reuse narratives the station produces.”²⁰ This is corroborated by Zannettou et al, who have found that:

“[t]rolls actually bear very small influence in making news go viral on Twitter and other social platforms alike. A noteworthy exception are links to news originating from RT (Russia Today) [...]: indeed, Russian trolls are quite effective in “pushing” these URLs on Twitter and other social networks.”²¹

Therefore, I have chosen to analyze both covert and overt forms of RSS propaganda in the case studies to account for their interconnectedness.

1.2 Research question, structure and methodology

This thesis will seek to answer the question, “Under which domestic conditions do foreign state-sponsored political propaganda campaigns implant themselves in and are disseminated through the targeted information ecosystem?” More specifically, my thesis will explore the cases of RSS propaganda campaigns aimed at influencing Brexit, the Catalan Referendum and the 2017 French presidential elections to tease out which conditions within the three respective states facilitated or hindered the implantation and dissemination of RSS propaganda.

In order to answer the above-stated research question, I must first flesh out the precise aims of the RSS political propaganda campaigns. To do so, I will first cover the goals of RSS (c)overt political propaganda operations in foreign countries. I will then move into my three case-study chapters, which will all three be written according to the following structure: first, I will provide my analysis of the historical context surrounding the political event before providing details about the specific propaganda campaigns that I choose to analyze. The third sub-section of each of these three chapters will examine the role of domestic conditions in providing fertile or infertile breeding ground for the RSS propaganda campaigns. These domestic factors can be found in bold in section 1.3.

¹⁹ Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 239.

²⁰ Ibid., 244.

²¹ Zannettou et al., 1.

As this thesis is in a real literature gap, it is both exciting to explore and challenging to write because there is still very little publicly-accessible material on the three case studies. It is important to note that this stage of the research branch, academic work is more concentrated on mapping out the terrain. In order to gather as much publicly-available information as possible, I conducted extensive online research in English, Russian, French and Spanish using newspaper articles, academic articles, books published on the specific case studies, on RSS propaganda and on propaganda studies. I have also reviewed the publicly available material from the British parliamentary inquiry into “disinformation and ‘fake news,’” which contained valuable information not only on the case of Brexit but also on the Catalan crisis. Because a lot of scholarship has been published on RSS propaganda during the 2016 US elections, some of that material has proven useful as well in informing my approach.

In order to dig deeper into the general topic of RSS propaganda abroad, I chose to attend the talk “Defending Sovereignty and Information Space” and the 2018 StratCom Conference in Washington DC, which were opportunities that I was afforded through an internship with the Atlantic Council’s Cyber Statecraft Initiative in the Fall of 2018. The conference was an especially valuable resource because over two days I listened world-class experts discuss their latest research into RSS propaganda operations abroad. At the Atlantic Council, I was also able to conduct an informal interview with Jaako Lehtovirta from the Finnish MFA and attend a briefing by the DFRLab, which is a world-class organization within the Atlantic Council focusing on digital forensic analysis with a strong focus on RSS online propaganda. To complete the mainly qualitative approach to the topic, I also conducted a recorded telephone interview with David Alandete who broke the news about RSS propaganda during the Catalan referendum. The full transcript of the interview is annexed to the thesis. These conferences, talks, briefings and interviews are invaluable qualitative sources.

For the case studies, I conducted mostly qualitative and some small-scale quantitative social media analyses via Twitter Advanced Search. The reason for why I chose to analyze Twitter data is because it is the most easily searchable big social media platform. Although ideally I would have conducted research across all the major social media and Internet research platforms, i.e. Facebook, Instagram and Google, too, this is impossible due to difficulties in gaining access to their data. This is a stumbling block that most other researchers

in online propaganda studies come across, except for those who are granted a research fellowship embedded at Facebook.

This thesis' general methodology is inductive as it primarily uses case studies to answer the research question, i.e. it aims to use data to arrive at some generalizable conclusions. Because these case studies are real-world, they each contain an almost infinite number of possible independent variables, which is why "[b]eyond a doubt" is not a standard that works when as many different factors are simultaneously at play."²² Although theoretically, the social media and Internet companies have all of the data to objectively prove what kind of RSS propaganda affected which populations, what their interaction with said propaganda was, and how successfully it spread, my limited resources mean that I will not be able to answer the research question beyond a doubt.

Another methodological weakness inherent to studies of such complex online phenomena is attribution, which is a major point of contention in the world of cybersecurity and online propaganda operations. To this day, the British, Spanish and French governments have not publicly attributed any propaganda operations to the Russian state.²³ This is probably in part for political reasons, but it is also difficult to ascertain beyond a doubt. In my syntheses of the operations, I cannot be entirely certain that Russian-state-related actors are behind them—this is only to the best of my knowledge. Second of all, it is crucial to understand that because of the Internet's network or web structure, with multiple sending and receiving ends of information, seemingly distinct propaganda operations reinforce each other through interlinkages, so it is difficult to clearly delineate their scope. Therefore, although I will separate them into operations, I will also highlight the at-times blurred borders.

The question of which domestic conditions "invite," "prompt," push, or halt RSS propaganda campaigns is truly significant insofar as it touches upon the urgent and growing issue of (foreign state-sponsored) online propaganda operations that aim to influence political life. The reader will learn more about which political, cultural, and socio-economic factors seem to provide fertile breeding ground for foreign information operations. Indeed, as "[e]ach country has to make its own internal assessment of its genuine susceptibility and tailor its

²² Hall Jamieson, 14.

²³ DCMSC, "Disinformation and 'fake news': Interim Report: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2017–19," 16, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcmucmeds/1630/1630.pdf>.

responses to its real threat model,”²⁴ this study will attempt to tease out the idiosyncrasies and similarities of domestic conditions the UK, Spain and France and how they favor or disfavor the spread of RSS online propaganda. This study will hopefully enable the reader to better grasp the mechanics of propaganda operations and understand which policy solutions nation-states may adopt to defend themselves against such operations. Although this thesis will focus on three cases of RSS propaganda that seeks to influence three Western democracies, I hope that this thesis can contribute not only towards the growing body of scholarship on RSS propaganda abroad, but also towards the literature on online disinformation more broadly.

1.3 Hypothesis and theoretical framework

My hypothesis is that **ethno-nationalist tensions**, **socio-economic inequality**, and a **divided media landscape** all contribute to increasing the chances for a foreign state-sponsored political propaganda campaign to take root and spread. At the same time, the stronger and more centralized the **state’s institutions**, **legal framework for media and Internet oversight**, and the **public’s trust in “mainstream media,”** the more chances there are for a foreign state-sponsored covert propaganda campaign to wither away or even backfire.

Testing the hypothesis through an analysis of the three case studies presupposes that they are of a similar and comparable nature and that the actor(s) producing the propaganda put the same amount of effort into the operations. However, the case studies are real-world, messy, and therefore necessarily different both in nature and scale. Indeed, the scale seems to have perhaps been the greatest in the case of Brexit—although scale is exceedingly hard to measure in online propaganda operations. The type of propaganda differs, most significantly in the case of the French elections where the major propaganda campaign was the release of a large amount of data stolen from *En Marche!*—as opposed to social media amplification of partisan stories channeled through RT and Sputnik. Social media penetration is very similar in the cases of France and the UK, whereas Spain is somewhat lower: it was 58.95% in the UK in

²⁴ Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 268.

2016,²⁵ approximately 41% in Spain in 2017,²⁶ and 58% in France in 2017.²⁷ Finally, in both Spain and the UK, the political phenomenon the propaganda was disseminating messages about was a referendum, whereas in the case of France it was a general election. However, I argue that the bulk of the propaganda operations in the French case—namely the Macron Leaks—was carried out during the final election round between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, which opposed centrist to extreme-right political views. In this sense, the French political environment was also that of a referendum of sorts.

The international relations theoretical framework that this thesis builds its arguments upon is constructivism because it best accounts for fluidity in levels of analysis—online propaganda itself plays on the interconnectedness of the individual and the group—and for the emotional appeal in most propaganda and knee-jerk reactions to it. Indeed, the study of propaganda has to do with how actors embedded in a social system react to messages intended to influence them individually, so this object of study falls intrinsically under the constructivist umbrella. In my study of local domestic factors and how RSS propaganda played into them, I am inspired by the constructivist sub-branch of symbolic politics theory, which draws from the fields of psychology and neuroscience and ties into political communication theory. Propaganda and political communication theory and terminology also enrich this thesis' discussion of RSS propaganda. However, the discussion of propaganda theory is in section 1.4.

Some unifying assumptions of constructivism are that “actors [...] are embedded in a system of meaning [...] that makes it possible or impossible for them to change the world” and that “what the world is like [...] ultimately depends on the actors who make the world.”²⁸ Simply put, “reality is always under construction”²⁹ by the actors who define this fluid sense of reality. When studying how local factors interplay with RSS propaganda, I will essentially be undertaking a study of how local systems of meaning interact with narratives inserted by

²⁵ “Social media usage in the United Kingdom (UK) - Statistics & Facts,” accessed April 30, 2019. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/topics/3236/social-media-usage-in-the-uk/>.

²⁶ “The Spanish Social Network User,” June 27, 2017. Telecoming. <https://www.telecoming.com/blog/the-spanish-social-network-user/>.

²⁷ “Penetration of leading social networks in France as of 4th quarter 2017,” accessed April 30, 2019. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284435/france-social-network-penetration/>.

²⁸ Markus Kornprobst, “International Relations,” (lecture, International Relations, Scopes and Methods, November 9, 2017).

²⁹ Sarina Theys, “Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” E-International Relations Students, February 23, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/23/introducing-constructivism-in-international-relations-theory/>.

actors outside of these local social and informational systems, so the levels of analysis of the individual and of society as a whole become intertwined.

Symbolic politics informs the hypothesis and approach to the case studies because it provides a solid basis upon which to analyze the interaction between propaganda, society and the individual. The theory's key tenet is, "when people make decisions on political issues, symbolic predispositions guide the decisions most of the time; facts and material interests matter much less. As Westen puts it, "In politics, when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins."³⁰ Indeed on the clash between reason and emotions, psychology and neuroscience indicate that the brain has both the "intuitive" and "reflective" systems for decision-making.³¹ According to Kaufman's synthesis of the decision-making system, "[n]euroscientists consider the intuitive system so much more powerful that psychologist Jonathan Haidt refers to the relationship as one between an elephant and its rider, with the reflective rider often acting not as the intuitive elephant's controller but as its "public relations firm."³² This is where symbolic predispositions (SYP's) come into play: SYP's are, according to David Sears, "stable affective responses to particular symbols"³³ which, if cultivated through priming and harnessed in the framing political issues, can yield desired political outcomes for propagandists or political communicators. SYP's are stable and linked to an individual's identity as part of a larger social group. Prejudice is a major SYP in ethnic politics or ethno-nationalism,³⁴ and indeed, "[a]nything that raises the salience of ethnic identity, whether the stark fact of inequality or a politician or media outlet harping on ethnic difference, makes people think more in ethnic terms and rouses whatever prejudices they may hold."³⁵ Therefore, I argue that correct SYP identification and message framing are key for RSS propaganda to take hold within the target population, which is why my hypothesis outlines ethno-nationalist tensions, socio-economic inequality, and a divided media landscape as three crucial catalyzing factors in dissemination of foreign state-sponsored propaganda.

I chose to integrate historical backgrounds into each case study although they are recent political events because they are highly partisan so are rich in historical symbols that

³⁰ Stuart J. Kaufman, *Nationalist Passions*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015, 39.

³¹ Kaufman, 34.

³² Ibid.

³³ David Sears in Kaufman, 36.

³⁴ Kaufman, 36.

³⁵ Kaufman, 44-5.

feed into SYP's. It is therefore of the utmost importance to grasp the origins of these symbols, prejudices and SYP's. Furthermore, the historical overview will provide a broader picture of the situation beyond the symbols used to frame political messages. I do realize that all history is framed through certain angles as opposed to others, so even the historical analyses in this thesis will contain bias. However, all I can promise is that as this is an academic analysis, I will strive towards providing historical outlines that are as balanced and objective as possible.

Political communication theory provides a more granular analysis of the mechanics that symbolic politics relies on, most notably framing and priming. Indeed, "[s]cholars of framing have much to tell us about the details of how symbolic politics works."³⁶ Kathleen Hall Jamieson provides a definition of framing in the following way: "[f]rames are organizing structures that 'through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration' tell audiences how to think about issues."³⁷ A complementary tool from the political communications playbook is priming: "[p]riming occurs when exposure to a stimulus produces an effect on memory and hence on subsequent responses. By making them more cognitively accessible, priming is able to make some issues [...] more salient [...] than others in decision making."³⁸ Framing and priming play a major role in how successfully propaganda exploits the political event at hand and SYP's.

1.4 Terminological choice

Before delving into the matter, it is essential to justify and define the choice of the word "propaganda" as opposed to a myriad of other terms, such as "influence operation," "meddling," "tampering," "interference," "disinformation," "misinformation," "fake news," or even "cyberwar," as Kathleen Hall Jamieson has chosen to call it.³⁹ As with many emerging fields, semantics and definitions are still fluid and evolving because the subject itself is still hard to grasp. In this thesis, I decide to veer away from more trendy terms such as "disinformation," "misinformation," or even "influence operations" to return to the older term "propaganda."

³⁶ Kaufman, 49.

³⁷ Hall Jamieson, 44.

³⁸ Hall Jamieson, 40.

³⁹ Hall Jamieson, 9.

Common terms to characterize the RSS actions taken in foreign information spheres can be too specific—“disinformation” and “misinformation” ascribe judgement to the content of the information, which will necessarily artificially limit the scope of content and necessarily mischaracterize some of it. Indeed, disinformation is defined as “[f]alse information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media”⁴⁰ and misinformation is “[f]alse or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive”⁴¹ Additionally, one weakness of using these words is that they focus on the truthfulness of the content as opposed to the intent in the form of dissemination.

“Cyberwar” is an uncommon term that Hall Jamieson chooses to adopt because “the nature, urgency, and extent of the invited response all change when one abandons ‘meddling’ and ‘interfered’ for ‘cyberattacked’ and engaged in ‘cyberwar.’”⁴² However, I believe that this word, which ascertains that the Russian state is engaged in a war against Western democracy, contains a heavy burden of proof, which I would be unable to defend here. Additionally, my academic ethos to strive towards objectivity through observation cannot, at least for now, lead me to demonstrate that there is a war. Finally, calling it “cyberwar” implies that the West should respond through war—I believe that the issue warrants more caution. However, “meddling,” “tampering,” “interfering,” and “influence operation” do not satisfy my quest for the correct term either: they ascribe a result—some form of interference or influence—without enlightening us on with what or how.

A contender for the most accurate and productive term is the *en-vogue* expression “fake news,” which is being thrown around in political and media discourses worldwide. Axel Gelfert valiantly attempts to define the new term in his article “Fake News: A Definition,” in which he states that “fake news” is a subcategory within the larger framework of disinformation, the definition being “the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design.”⁴³ Although this definition is interesting because it attempts to tackle a term that remains vague, “fake news” remains an inherently judgmental expression that is, as of yet, difficult to use in a scholarly

⁴⁰ “Disinformation,” in *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/disinformation>.

⁴¹ “Misinformation,” in *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/misinformation>.

⁴² Hall Jamieson, 9.

⁴³ Axel Gelfert, “Fake News: A Definition,” *Informal Logic* 38 (1) (2018): 85-6.

debate. Therefore, although “fake news” is an interesting new term worth exploring, I will prefer “propaganda” for my own work:⁴⁴ indeed “[p]ropaganda analysis demands objectivity if it is to be undertaken effectively.”⁴⁵

This is why I returned to the less trendy yet better adapted term “propaganda.” As Philip Taylor reflects, “[p]ropaganda, as one British Foreign Office official put it in the late 1920s, is a ‘good word gone wrong’. We are all in fact propagandists to varying degrees, just as we are all victims of propaganda.” Indeed, Taylor borrows the botanical definition to place “propaganda” back into a more neutral, and arguably objective, territory: “[p]ropaganda thus becomes a process for the sowing, germination and cultivation of ideas.”⁴⁶ Thus this botanically inspired definition emphasizes the dynamic process of the spread of information from a series of senders to receivers. Taylor’s general definition for propaganda is “the communication of ideas designed to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way.”⁴⁷ This also means that propaganda is not exclusive in the type of content it vehiculates: it can be disinformation about a given situation, “real” information utilized for a certain political purpose, or the reinforcement and propagation of a certain grassroots message through disingenuous social media profiles.

Another useful aspect of choosing the term “propaganda” is gaining access to the body of scholarship in propaganda theory. Especially valuable to this study is the conceptual distinction between white, gray and black propaganda:

“In Cold War–era propaganda studies, “white” propaganda referred to communications by an outlet acknowledged to be of one party or another, where the information was more or less accurate but framed to favor that party. “Black” propaganda referred to spreading lies and deception through falsely described sources. “Gray” propaganda was somewhere in between.”⁴⁸

Broadly speaking, RT and Sputnik are white bordering on gray propaganda, whereas bots, sock puppet accounts and Macron Leaks are a mix of gray and black propaganda. The terms covert

⁴⁴ Because this lexical choice only pertains to my own writing, I may use some of the other afore-mentioned terms in quotes and mentions of other scholarly work.

⁴⁵ Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 2003, 6.

⁴⁶ Taylor, 2.

⁴⁷ Taylor, 6.

⁴⁸ Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 243.

and overt correspond roughly to white and black, so I will be using these terms to describe RSS propaganda as well.

2. The Russian state's motives and goals for (c)overt political propaganda operations in foreign countries

In order to analyze what the Russian state's goal is for its propaganda operations abroad, it is first essential to understand Russia's "idiosyncratic information culture and media environment."⁴⁹ Being a semi-authoritarian regime, the Russian state and people's relationship to information is radically different from that of a liberal democracy and of its citizens. In Russia, information is perceived of as part and parcel of the state. The following anecdote may shed some light on the gap in information cultures and perceptions between Russia and the West. In 2018, I had a conversation with a taxi driver in Saint Petersburg—he was a factory worker for a large Korean car manufacturer and earned some extra income as a driver. As we inevitably slid towards politics, he extolled Putin because he was strong and had established order. The taxi driver had lived in Saint Petersburg in the 1990's and assured me that it used to be truly dangerous with high unemployment. He disliked "young people's" opposition movements, such as Alexei Navalny's campaign against corruption, because they failed to appreciate how much better life was in 2018. As we broached the topic of media coverage, he cynically stated every state controls its own media to defend policies and the ruling party. This last thought struck me because it embodies not only disbelief in freedom of the media, but also the view that the media are an extension of the state's apparatus, thus creating no distinction between journalism and propaganda, objectivity and subjectivity, or truth and untruth. The taxi driver valued security over freedom, so as long as Russia was secure, he was politically content.

Russia's information culture goes hand in hand with the notion of state or regime security—as Katherine Ognyanova writes, this has always been the case in Russia for geopolitical reasons: "the harsh living conditions and the immense territory of the country, which had to be defended from constant attacks on all sides" led to a need for constant and total political unity. This underlies Russia's "deep-rooted authoritarian traditions" that turned

⁴⁹ Katherine Ognyanova, "Careful What You Say: Media Control in Putin's Russia – Implications for Online Content," *International Journal of E-Politics*, 1(2) (2010, UPDATED June 2014), 3.

“[c]ensorship and control [into] implicit dimensions of Russia’s lived experience for centuries.”⁵⁰ However, here we are faced with a puzzle: if Russia sees *domestic* information control as part and parcel of *domestic* regime security, why would it seek to conduct propaganda operations *abroad*? If for instance we turn to the example of China—an authoritarian state that wants control over domestic information flows in order to ensure regime security, as evidenced by its great firewall⁵¹ and new individual social credit surveillance system⁵²—, China has historically not sought to conduct covert propaganda operations abroad to the same degree nor as brazenly as Russia did and does.⁵³ In the following pages, I will provide geopolitical, historical and cultural analyses in order to shed light on Russia’s behavior and aims.

Russian perception of domestic security ties into a quasi-messianic culture of expansion and imperialism, thus pulling foreign policy into domestic politics, making the border between foreign policy and domestic politics porous. In schematic terms, Russia’s national identity has been woven into expansionism and imperialist greatness. Muscovy, which was dubbed the messianic title “the Third Rome”⁵⁴ in the 15th century for being the center of Orthodoxy and the “heir” to the fallen Roman and Byzantine empires, espoused a vision of conquest. The USSR and Russia, as its successors, continued with territorial expansions through to this day, the most recent instance being the invasion of Crimea in Ukraine. I believe that it is no coincidence that Muscovy’s expansionism started around the same time as it became known as “the Third Rome” because the name legitimized Muscovy and Russia’s transformation into an empire, which lasted approximately from Peter the Great’s reign to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Many scholars have argued that the USSR was also imperial in nature, at least in its relationship to the concept of authority.⁵⁵ The country’s greatest territorial expansion westwards was performed in the time of the communist regime of the USSR in the 20th century, as it controlled six satellite states. Thus

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁵¹ For more information on the topic see James Griffith’s 2019 book *The Great Firewall of China: How to Build and Control an Alternative Version of the Internet* (Zed Books).

⁵² Nicole Kobie, “The complicated truth about China’s social credit system,” *Wired*, January 21, 2019. <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/china-social-credit-system-explained>.

⁵³ Peter Mattis, “Contrasting China’s and Russia’s Influence Operations,” *War on the Rocks*, January 16, 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/contrasting-chinas-russias-influence-operations/>.

⁵⁴ Alar Laats, “The Concept of the Third Rome and its Political Implications,” *KVÜÕA toimetised* 12 (2009). https://www.ksk.edu.ee/en/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/KVUOA_Toimetised_12-Laats.pdf.

⁵⁵ Mark R. Beissinger, “Soviet Empire as ‘Family Resemblance,’” *Slavic Review* 65:2 (2006). www.jstor.org/stable/4148594.

throughout history Muscovy, and later Russia, the USSR and post-Soviet Russia have engaged in expansionistic and at times imperialistic state-building, with a necessary interdependence between foreign and domestic politics.

The relatively recent dissolution of the USSR in 1991 dealt a huge blow to the self-esteem of the Russian population. Throughout the chaotic and semi-anarchic nineties to nowadays, a sense of Russian exceptionalism and pride of past glories pervades public sentiment, which Putin and his government foment and play up partly to deflect attention from the country's declining economy, innovation, demography⁵⁶, and overall lighter weight on the international arena⁵⁷. Indeed, according to the Danish intelligence service's report, "[Russia's] claim to be a world-power rests on weak foundations, politically, economically and militarily."⁵⁸ Regardless of Russia's bleak perspectives, the well-respected and only independent Russian polling organization Levada Center⁵⁹ showed that in 2018, 88% of respondents believed that "Russia should maintain its role as a superpower"—this position gained 16 percentage points since 1992. Additionally, when asked the question "In your opinion, is Russia a superpower in the present day?," 35% of respondents in 2018 replied "definitely" and 40% replied "probably," which is an increase in 44 percentage points since 1999.⁶⁰ As the population's self-perception that Russia is and should remain a superpower, the government must try to perform in an impactful way on the international arena to live up to the expectations of grandeur. However, it can also be argued that it is a question of the chicken or the egg because the government purposefully cultivates this SYP by priming a nostalgic and nationalist Russian identity to legitimate its actions abroad.⁶¹ Yet, the pragmatic question remains of how Russia can best project its authority to remain a "superpower" in the

⁵⁶ Alexey Timofeychev, "Why is Russia's population destined for a sharp decline?" *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, Lifestyle section, February 3, 2019. <https://www.rbth.com/lifestyle/329934-will-russias-population-decline>.

⁵⁷ Andrey Movchan, "Decline, Not Collapse: The Bleak Prospects For Russia's Economy" (report for The Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, February 2017).

https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Movchan_2017_web_Eng_2.pdf.

⁵⁸ Danish Defence Intelligence Service in Geir Hågen Karlsen, "Divide and rule: ten lessons about Russian political influence activities in Europe," *Palgrave Communications* 5:19 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0227-8>.

⁵⁹ Cyrus Newlin, "La vie en rose: Why the Kremlin blacklisted Levada Center," *CSIS*, December 16, 2016. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/la-vie-en-rose-why-kremlin-blacklisted-levada-center>.

⁶⁰ "National Identity and Pride," *Levada-Center*, January 25, 2019. <https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/01/25/national-identity-and-pride/>.

⁶¹ "Patriotic Mobilisation in Russia," *International Crisis Group* Report number 251, July 4, 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/russianorth-caucasus/251-patriotic-mobilisation-russia>.

eyes of its own people and the world. The answer lies in the question: it *projects* power, much like a film projector shows enlarged images on a screen. Or were we to turn to ancient Greek philosophy, Russia projects power much like the puppet showmen in Plato's allegory of the cave.⁶² Indeed, to a large extent, Russia's power only exists for those who are duped into believing that it is reality. This is where the constructivist tool of narrative-shaping propaganda come into play.

Influence operations and propaganda have a rich history of theory and practice in Russia—the 20th century was especially fecund as the age of ideology in which the USSR under Lenin's rule sought to expand the reaches of communism abroad. The USSR did so through what it termed "active measures," which were "'agent-operational measures aimed at exerting useful influence' on a wide variety of subjects in the political life of the target country."⁶³ These took varied forms, including "mailing copies of authentic or forged documents (the antecedents of 'fake news') and articles to the media and political establishment promoting views similar to the Kremlin's"⁶⁴ or setting up networks of influence within organizations like communist parties in other European countries—most notably in France, Italy, Finland and Austria.⁶⁵

The strategic culture of extensive propaganda creation was informed by "reflexive control theory," which was formulated by Soviet-born mathematical researcher Vladimir Lefebvre who emigrated to the United States in 1974.⁶⁶ It sought to "shift [the] adversary's decisions in an advantageous direction" based on "mapping how an adversary's system framed problems and processed information"⁶⁷ or in Lefebvre's own words, reflexive theory is about "assigning restrictions on the free choice being made by the system."⁶⁸ Thus, a systemic analysis can lead to an understanding of how the target country's population or decision-makers *frame*, conceive of or reflect on their domestic problems—the concept of framing has persisted and developed into a keyword from political communication and psychology theory. The development of active measure techniques and of reflexive control

⁶² Plato (trans.: Benjamin Jowett), *The Allegory of the Cave* (Los Angeles, USA: Enhanced Media, 2017).

⁶³ <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Strategic-Analysis-2018-4-Juurvee.pdf>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archives: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1999), 360.

⁶⁶ Vladimir A. Lefebvre, "About the author," *Algebra of Conscience*, <http://algebraofconscience.org/>.

⁶⁷ Mattis.

⁶⁸ Vladimir A. Lefebvre, "Reflexive systems" (Presentation at the American Society for Cybernetics Joint Conference with Bateson Idea Group, Asilomar, CA, July 10-13, 2012), <http://algebraofconscience.org/>.

theory took part in shaping a strategic culture within the Soviet and Russian intelligence services and subsequently also within the post-1991 Russian political elite. Indeed, Russia's political elites have close ties to the intelligence services, the president himself having served in the KGB—it is argued that Russia under Putin returned to the “intelligence state”⁶⁹ it once was during the times of the USSR, so it is no surprise that “active measures” never truly disappeared from Russian strategic thinking, albeit no longer in order to spread communism.

Active measures adapted to changing times: now RSS white, gray and black propaganda operations abroad are largely conducted through digital means because the cyber domain is cheap, globally networked and asymmetric. For a country with a GDP more than ten times smaller than that of the United States that nevertheless tries to “keep up with the Joneses” on the world stage, online propaganda operations are a boon. Anyone with access to the Internet can freely upload videos to Youtube or post on social media, as well as set up websites. Also, the network structure of the Internet means that propaganda is often difficult to attribute to one given source and it can spread through any user connected to the network—i.e. now it must no longer pass the initial filter of the traditional media. They are also an asymmetric tool that authoritarian states can deploy against democracies because the latter have an open information model where freedom of expression and a diversity of opinions is encouraged and protected.⁷⁰ Bots more specifically are a tempting propaganda option because they “feature as the most simple, cost-effective and flexible approach to gaming the social media attention economy.”⁷¹

Propaganda is Russian state-*sponsored* because the state contracts the work out, partly to make attribution more difficult. The IRA, more popularly dubbed the “troll factory,” is a Russian company that was indicted by the District Court of Washington, D.C. on February 16, 2018 for “engag[ing] in operations to interfere with elections and political processes”⁷² of the United States. There are very strong suspicions that this private company is operating for the state because the owner of the IRA is Yevgeniy Prigozhin, is a billionaire businessman with

⁶⁹ John Sipher, “Putin’s One Weapon: The ‘Intelligence State,’” *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/opinion/putin-russia-security-services.html>.

⁷⁰ Rid.

⁷¹ Bastos and Mercea 2018.

⁷² United States of America vs. Internet Research Agency LLC, Case 1:18-cr-00032-DLF (2018), 2, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>.

close ties to President Putin⁷³ and to the Russian state. Prigozhin is known as Putin's chef because he owns Concord Catering, which has catered for official state dinners as well as for schools in Moscow and the military.⁷⁴

In the propaganda sphere from a political strategy standpoint, Russia uses a divide and conquer strategy⁷⁵ within the United States, the European Union and member-states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) because Russia's 2015 National Security Strategy "identifies the U.S. and [NATO] as Russia's main threat."⁷⁶ However, it is difficult to disentangle Russian fear of the EU and NATO as threats as opposed to Russia's desire to engage in the international arena to maintain an already waning great power status, which is crucial for domestic politics and regime security needs. From a more tactical perspective, Russia exploits the structural weakness of pluralism in targeted democracies⁷⁷ not necessarily to influence the outcome of political events so much as to "to create confusion, disorder and distrust."⁷⁸

Although Russia's engagement in propaganda operations in foreign information spheres can afford Moscow some short-term gains, this activity will prove to be counter-productive in the long run. In other words, these (c)overt propaganda campaigns seem more tactical than strategic, as the country is being called out by citizens, academics, and even heads of state—think Theresa May or Emmanuel Macron, for instance. In the 2018 international ranking of states based on soft power, Russia came in 28/30 because, according to the report, "effective public awareness campaigns about Russian disinformation efforts have turned the country into a pariah state."⁷⁹ However, in the short run as affected countries learn how to handle such operations, they will continue to act as de facto stress tests for democratic societies, in which Russia gambles against the democratic system.

⁷³ "Navalny asks FSB to investigate Putin's cook," *Crime Russia*, October 5, 2016, <https://en.crimerrussia.com/gromkie-dela/navalny-asks-fsb-to-investigate-putin-s-cook/>.

⁷⁴ "Yevgeniy Prigozhin, Russian Oligarch and Putin's Chef," Committee to Investigate Russia, <https://investigaterussia.org/players/yevgeniy-prigozhin>.

⁷⁵ Karlsen.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Rid.

⁷⁸ Hall Jamieson, 5.

⁷⁹ Jonathan McClory, "The Soft Power 30," *Portland Communications*, 2018, <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2018.pdf>.

3. Brexit

3.1 Historical background

I have chosen to analyze the historical background to Brexit up until June 23, 2016, which was the day of the European Union membership referendum—more commonly called Brexit. In this historical analysis, three main threads will be explored: first of all, the UK's tumultuous path towards EU accession. Secondly, the opening of the UK to immigration from Central and Eastern Europe, especially Poland, in the early 2000's, and finally the peak of anti-EU sentiment with the growth of Nigel Farage's far-right UK Independence Party, or UKIP.

In 1967, then-president of France Charles de Gaulle, after examining the UK's application for membership to the European Economic Community (EEC) rejected it for a second time, partly because of what he saw as the UK's different economic nature: "In order for the British isles to truly anchor themselves to the continent, it still requires great and profound change."⁸⁰—this was essentially the same argument as the one that he used to reject the UK's application to accede in 1961.⁸¹ What started off in 1951 as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was a purely Western-European continental affair between Western Germany, Benelux, Italy and France. Britain's insular geography meant that it had always been in the comfortable geopolitical position of not feeling militarily threatened by its neighbors. Therefore, Britain did not adhere to the European project from a geopolitical perspective as the other founding countries did. Additionally, having a global empire meant that Britain was at its most content when continental Europe was stable and prosperous enough for peaceful relations and trade opportunities, but essentially allowed Britain to occupy itself with its colonies and later its Commonwealth. As Winston Churchill wrote in the article "The United States of Europe" in 1930,

⁸⁰ My translation, Charles de Gaulle in Marie-Aude Bonniel, "Il y a 50 ans, le général de Gaulle s'opposait à l'entrée de l'Angleterre dans la CEE," *Le Figaro*, November 27, 2017, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/histoire/archives/2017/11/27/26010-20171127ARTFIG00054-il-y-a-50-ans-le-general-de-gaulle-s-opposait-a-l-entree-de-l-angleterre-dans-la-cee.php>.

⁸¹ Indeed, during a press conference on January 14, 1963, de Gaulle stated that "the nature, structure and conjuncture that are specific to England fundamentally differ from those of the continent" (my translation, Charles de Gaulle, "Press Conference of January 14, 1963 (about the United Kingdom's accession to the CEE)," <https://fresques.ina.fr/de-gaulle/fiche-media/Gaule00085/conference-de-presse-du-14-janvier-1963-sur-l-entree-de-la-grande-bretagne-dans-la-cee.html>).

The prosperity of others makes for our own prosperity [...]. We see nothing but good and hope in a richer, freer, more contented European commonalty. But we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not comprised. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed. [...] The scheme of a British Empire economically self-conscious, a commercial unit, even perhaps a fiscal unit, can never be widely expressed in exclusive terms.⁸²

Churchill, then former British Chancellor of the Exchequer,⁸³ viewed Britain's relationship to Europe through an economist's eyes with a heavy influence of British liberal political thought. Churchill's view is comparable to Britain's position during the Concert of Europe when Lord Castlereagh, who was Foreign Secretary at the time, understood that he had to keep Britain at arm's length from the European continent: "Great Britain [...] was not comfortable with a system of European government, because it came too close to the unified Europe that the British had consistently opposed."⁸⁴ This was the political thought that informed British foreign policy towards Europe, which translated into a form of incredulity and dismissal when Charles de Gaulle had rejected the UK in 1967. Six years later, Britain joined the European Communities (EC), partly thanks to the friendship that had grown between Georges Pompidou, then president of France, and the British Prime Minister Edward Heath.⁸⁵

From the start, British membership to the EC was a hotly-debated topic in domestic politics. The public debate about whether the UK was benefitting from the EC had been simmering since the 1970's, when 70% of the EC's budget was spent on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)—essentially a set of subsidies for the agricultural sector—when the UK was contributing a proportionately large amount through its high VAT tax. The in-or-out debate plagued British politics and became a bone of contention running through political parties. In 1984, the then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, also known as the Iron Lady, succeeded in negotiating a significant and permanent rebate in British contributions to the EC—as she famously claimed at a press conference in 1979, “we are not asking for a penny piece of Community money for Britain. What we are asking is for a very large amount of our money back.”⁸⁶ Thus, the European question has been a constant topic of debate in British

⁸² Winston Churchill, “The United States of Europe,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 15, 1930, https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-c4rDWePh_pRV9pcnlhM2N0MVE/view.

⁸³ a position equivalent to US Secretary of Treasury or to that of a Minister of Finance

⁸⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1994).

⁸⁵ “A look back at the last referendum the UK had on EU membership,” *thejournal.ie*, January 6, 2019, <https://www.thejournal.ie/history-when-the-uk-joined-the-eu-4392827-Jan2019/>.

⁸⁶ Margaret Thatcher, “Press Conference after Dublin European Council,” November 30, 1979, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104180>.

party politics since the UK's accession to the EC. It is therefore somewhat unsurprising that in 2013, David Cameron promised new negotiations with the EU and a referendum on the UK's membership to the Union in his bid to become Prime Minister. This campaign promise was both a political allusion to the Iron Lady's negotiations just about three decades before and a carrot for swing votes between Conservative and UKIP. To Cameron's surprise, on June 23, 2016, 51.9% of British voters choose to leave the EU.

A significant aspect of the history leading up to Brexit and of the political cleavage during the vote is the 2004 EU enlargement and subsequent wave of immigration to the UK. As anti-immigrant sentiments rose amongst Britons, the UKIP party surfed on a wave of popularity. In 2004, the EU8⁸⁷ suddenly gained access to the free labor market of the EU. Whereas most EU states imposed temporary quotas on immigration to preemptively control the risk of mass immigration, the UK was one of only three EU countries to create no such quotas.⁸⁸ Following 2004, tens of thousands of Eastern and Central European immigrants arrive every year, reaching an estimated total of 1.4 million EU-8 immigrants in the UK by 2015.⁸⁹ Compared to previous EU-8 immigration, these new immigrants were "less likely to live in London," "more likely to be in paid employment," "more likely to be temporary" and "receive lower wages on average"—according to the authors of the study, such economic immigration can constitute barriers to integration.⁹⁰ Anti-immigrant sentiment swelled—"immigration was often named as Britain's 'most important issue' between 2001 and mid-2016"⁹¹—so UKIP banked on it.

Whereas the *raison d'être* of UKIP at its founding in 1993 was to secure withdrawal from the EU,⁹² the party's popularity skyrocketed in the early 2000's with the wave of EU-8 immigration and the 2008 financial crisis. Nigel Farage was one of the three UKIP candidates

⁸⁷ The EU8 comprises the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

⁸⁸ Simonetta Longhi and Magdalena Rocicka, "European immigrants in the UK before and after the 2004 enlargement: Is there a change in immigrant self-selection?" *ISER Working Paper Series*, No. 2012:2 (2012), 1, <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2012-22.pdf>.

⁸⁹ Helen Warrell, "Eastern European migration to the UK in 5 charts," *The Financial Times*, July 10, 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/14b558c8-6585-11e7-8526-7b38dcaef614>.

⁹⁰ Longhi and Rocicka, 26-7.

⁹¹ Scott Blinder and Lindsay Richards, "UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern," *The Migration Observatory Briefings*, June 7, 2018, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/>.

⁹² Rob Merrick, "Ukip: A timeline of the party's turbulent history," *The Independent*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/ukip-timeline-party-westminster-alan-sked-nigel-farage-conference-key-events-brexit-leadership-a7974606.html>.

to win a seat at the European Parliament in 1999 and became the chief figure of UKIP, for which he led a twenty-year campaign for Brexit with the slogan "I want my country back,"⁹³ a pastiche of Thatcher's "I want my money back."⁹⁴ In 2014, Farage's UKIP attained its peak in popularity as it came in first at the European elections, before Labour and the Conservatives.⁹⁵ In 2016, Farage "achieved [his] Holy Grail:"⁹⁶ his party, which had served as a rallying cry for the disenfranchised,⁹⁷ had exerted enough pressure on the Conservatives that Cameron caved in to holding a Brexit referendum.

3.2 Overview of the propaganda operation(s)

Some three years later, the propaganda operations preceding the Brexit referendum and their link to Russia are still murky. Whereas the Russian state has persistently denied any intervention and has claimed that it is the victim of "sensationalized fits of hysterics,"⁹⁸ the British House of Commons' Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (DCMSC) produced a report containing evidence of Russian-state sponsored attempts at swaying the Brexit referendum.⁹⁹ For the sake of clarity, I will synthesize here the propaganda operations that seem to be linked to Russia. There are currently two different known strands of propaganda operations to influence Brexit which are probably linked to the Russian state—namely covert bot and sock puppet activity and overt RT and Sputnik propagandistic coverage—, as well as one suspicious financial influence tool. The financial issue is not of direct interest to this paper so will only be mentioned, whereas the former two will be discussed in more detail.

There are suspicions of high-level illegal and perhaps corrupt practices within the Leave.EU campaign, which is one of the many political campaigns advocating for Brexit: the UK National Crime Agency is currently investigating the provenance of Arron Banks' £8 million donation to Leave.EU, as he is suspected of having ties to Russian diplomats and spies who

⁹³ "The Nigel Farage story," *BBC*, July 4, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36701855>.

⁹⁴ In fact, although Thatcher is famous for this slogan, what she really declared was "[w]hat we are asking is for a very large amount of our money back," as was cited earlier in the thesis.

⁹⁵ Merrick.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ "The Nigel Farage story."

⁹⁸ Sergei Lavrov in "Russia accused of using Twitter accounts to influence Brexit ref," *Russia Today*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPscckhy5B5k>.

⁹⁹ The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (DCMSC), "Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report," February 14, 2019, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1791/1791.pdf>.

could perhaps have provided him with some funding.¹⁰⁰ Leave.EU is also suspected of having worked with Cambridge Analytica, a company that fraudulently procured the data of 5 million Facebook users.¹⁰¹ However, there is hardly any verified information about the case as it is still under investigation, so it is mentioned here just to provide additional context.

Bogus social media groups and accounts, be they part of a botnet or sock puppets set up and run directly by human administrators, represented a propaganda threat before the referendum. We know from research by Marco Bastos and Dan Mercea that a botnet of 13,493 accounts was created on Twitter right before the referendum and was removed by Twitter right afterwards.¹⁰² Although Bastos and Mercea do not attribute the botnet that they discovered, it is not unreasonable to believe that it may have been run by a RSS entity. Moreover, Twitter presented evidence to US Congress of 400 tweets about Brexit created by the Russian state-sponsored Internet Research Agency (IRA) out of a total database of 22.6 million IRA tweets,¹⁰³ according to Yin Yin Lu. However, according to Prof. Laura Cram, there were at least 3,468 IRA tweets about Brexit in the same database—78% of which happened after the referendum vote.¹⁰⁴ This factual inconsistency between Lu and Cram’s counts of Brexit-related tweets is interesting to note and highlights the need for greater synchronization of research methodology in the conduct of social media data studies. In addition to the Bastos and Mercea botnet and the IRA sock puppet accounts, DFRLab confirmed the existence of 1102 confirmed IRA tweets with the hashtag #ReasonsToLeaveEU on the day of the referendum based on a new database of IRA tweets released by Twitter on October 17, 2018.¹⁰⁵ Even as British Members of Parliament (MP’s) reacted on Twitter to the evidence that the IRA held sock puppet accounts to weigh in on Brexit, they were trolled—i.e. received

¹⁰⁰ Luke Harding, “Investigators bound to scrutinise Arron Banks’s Russian links,” *The Guardian*, November 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/nov/01/investigators-will-scrutinise-arron-banks-russian-links>.

¹⁰¹ Andrew MacAskill, “What are the links between Cambridge Analytica and a Brexit campaign group?” *Reuters*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-cambridge-analytica-leave-eu/what-are-the-links-between-cambridge-analytica-and-a-brexite-campaign-group-idUSKBN1GX2IQ>.

¹⁰² Bastos and Mercea 2019, 51.

¹⁰³ Yin Yin Lu in “Russian Tweets on Brexit,” *Sky News*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/videos/russian-tweets-on-brexite/>.

¹⁰⁴ Laura Cram in Robert Booth et al., “Russia used hundreds of fake accounts to tweet about Brexit, data shows,” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/how-400-russia-run-fake-accounts-posted-bogus-brexite-tweets>.

¹⁰⁵ Ben Nimmo, Graham Brookie and Kanishk Karan, “#TrollTracker: Twitter Troll Farm Archives, Part 1” @DFRLab on *Medium*, October 17, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-twitter-troll-farm-archives-8d5dd61c486b>.

aggressive online comments—by what are believed to be IRA sock puppet accounts.¹⁰⁶ This covert online propaganda existed partly to propagate and popularize overt online propaganda from RT and Sputnik, two channels which are the second known case of RSS propaganda in the run-up to Brexit.

There is substantial proof of RT and Sputnik propaganda amplification through bot and sock puppet activity, as evidenced in impact agency 89up’s extensive report, which found that “[t]he Kremlin’s propaganda channels had three times more impact on Twitter than both the official Leave campaigns combined.”¹⁰⁷ Just by using the data publicly delivered by Twitter, the report’s authors deduced that “Russian bots are responsible for 0.0117% of tweets related to Brexit (in all languages),” which may seem numerically insignificant—approximately one in 10,000 tweets is proven to be an RSS bot tweet—but is presumably higher because one can assume that there were, and perhaps still are, many pro-Brexit RSS sock puppets or bots that escaped Twitter’s scrutiny. These bogus accounts were propagating RT and Sputnik’s articles, “261 [of which had] a clear anti-EU bias to the reporting.”¹⁰⁸ This goes to show the mutual amplification of overt and covert propaganda operations.

3.3 Domestic factors and their interplay with the dissemination of RSS propaganda

I argue that high socio-economic inequality, which is reflected in a divided media culture, and ethno-nationalist tensions between “real” Britons as opposed to immigrant populations contributed to create fertile breeding ground for RSS propaganda campaigns.

Socio-economic inequality

The high level of contemporary socio-economic inequality in the UK is a well-known and documented phenomenon, which some historians such as Pat Thane parallel to turn-of-the-century Britain, when “two thirds of private wealth rested with 17,000 property holders out

¹⁰⁶ Ben Nimmo, “Russian Trolls Target British MPs,” @DFRLab on *Medium*, December 21, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/russian-trolls-target-british-mps-d16713a051a0>.

¹⁰⁷ Mike Harris, “89up releases report on Russian influence in the EU referendum,” 89up, February 10, 2018, <https://89up.org/russia-report>.

¹⁰⁸ “Putin’s Brexit? The influence of Kremlin media & bots during the 2016 UK EU referendum,” 89up, February 10, 2018, <https://89up.org/russia-report>.

of a population of 44.4m.”¹⁰⁹ As of 2014 data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with a Gini coefficient of 36%, “the UK is Europe’s most unequal country in terms of disposable income (apart from Estonia).”¹¹⁰ The UK is also “the most unequal English-speaking country within the OECD, except the United States.”¹¹¹ Inequality in the UK translates into “[divides] along the lines of income, geography, gender, ethnicity and age.”¹¹² In 2014, the richest area in Northern Europe in terms of GDP per capita was Inner London, whereas nine out of ten of the poorest areas in Northern Europe were located in the UK.¹¹³ Socio-economic inequality translates into educational, social, political and media consumption divisions.

These divisions lay the groundwork for RSS and similar propaganda campaigns because, simply put, Russia’s main goal is to “sow division and discord,”¹¹⁴ and online propaganda, especially through social media advertisements, can play on socio-economic fractures to its advantage. With targeted advertising using data analytics provided by the social media companies themselves and data firms like Cambridge Analytica, RSS and similarly intentioned propaganda could have easily provided personal profile-based advertising. For instance, in areas that were in economic stagnation like Ebbw Vale in Wales, the journalist Carole Cadwalladr discovered that locals had been targeted with Facebook advertisements with “quite scary stuff about immigration, and especially about Turkey,”¹¹⁵ most probably from the Vote Leave campaign, which was fined by the Electoral Commission for exceeding the spending limit of 7 million pounds. Although Ebbw Vale has a remarkably low rate of immigration, online propaganda through Facebook still managed to foment fear in the area.

¹⁰⁹ Pat Thane, “Poverty in modern Britain: despite the march of history, much remains the same,” *The Conversation*, August 6, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/poverty-in-modern-britain-despite-the-march-of-history-much-remains-the-same-100620>.

¹¹⁰ Nicholas Sowell, “An up-to-date account of economic inequalities in Britain since 2008,” LSE Blog, January 12, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/an-up-to-date-account-of-economic-inequalities-in-britain-since-2008/>.

¹¹¹ Sowell.

¹¹² Richard Partington, “How unequal is Britain and are the poor getting poorer?” *The Guardian*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2018/sep/05/qa-how-unequal-is-britain-and-are-the-poor-getting-poorer>.

¹¹³ “The poorest regions in the UK are the poorest in Northern Europe,” Inequality Briefing 43, August 22, 2014, http://inequalitybriefing.org/graphics/briefing_43_UK_regions_poorest_North_Europe.pdf.

¹¹⁴ Ellen Nakashima, “Dark Forces: Exposing the Kremlin’s Influence Operations,” (panel, the Atlantic Council’s 2018 StratCom Conference, October 2, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOpX8ZbQMnA>.

¹¹⁵ Carole Cadwalladr, “Facebook’s role in Brexit — and the threat to democracy” (talk, TedTalk, April 2019), https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy/transcript?language=en#t-896712.

Thus, the high level of socio-economic inequality in the UK was a factor that created a fertile breeding ground for personalized online political propaganda, be from within the UK or RSS.

Divided & tabloid-heavy media landscape

The UK's media landscape is very divided and has a strong tabloid culture, partly because it caters to a large pallet of socio-economic groups. Indeed, a "less educated readership is traditionally associated with tabloids, which account for a substantive portion of the British press."¹¹⁶ I argue that such a socio-economically and politically divided media landscape represents the ideal environment for online RSS propaganda operations, as their major aim was to sow discord, the seeds of which were already built into the socio-economic and media landscapes, but also to amplify pre-existent popular Eurosceptic messaging, thus blending into the most popular online local political discourse. Thus, RSS propaganda just had to go with the flow of domestically-brewed clashing political discourses. According to research, the number of pro-Remain as opposed to pro-Leave newspapers was more or less balanced.¹¹⁷ However, "when weightings for circulation are factored in, the fact that the highest circulating newspapers have tended to support Brexit means that the gap between the two positions widens into a substantial difference of 18% pro-Remain and 82% pro-Leave." In addition to this, most British tabloids, including the Mail, Telegraph, Express and Star, had been "[campaigning] against Brussels for decades."¹¹⁸ Additionally, researchers found after analyzing 7.5 million tweets "the predominance of Euroscepticism on social media mirrored its dominance in the press."¹¹⁹ Therefore, the British online and print media landscape made for the ideal environment for RSS Eurosceptic and havoc-wreaking propaganda campaigns.

In this context, the 1102 confirmed Russian troll farm tweets with the hashtag #ReasonsToLeaveEU that were posted on the day of the referendum¹²⁰ seem to indicate that

¹¹⁶ M.T. Boykoff, "The cultural politics of climate change discourse in UK tabloids," *Political Geography*, 27, 549–569, 2008. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2008.05.002.

¹¹⁷ David Beacon et al., "Hard Evidence: analysis shows extent of press bias towards Brexit," *The Conversation*, June 16, 2016, <http://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-analysis-shows-extent-of-press-bias-towards-brexite-61106>.

¹¹⁸ Jane Martinson, "Did the Mail and Sun help swing the UK towards Brexit?" *The Guardian*, June 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jun/24/mail-sun-uk-brexite-newspapers>.

¹¹⁹ Max Hänska-Ahy and Stefan Bauchowitz, "Tweeting for Brexit: how social media influenced the referendum," in John Mair et al. (eds.), *Brexit, Trump and the Media* (Bury St Edmunds, UK: Abramis Academic Publishing, 2017), 27.

¹²⁰ Nimmo, Brookie and Karan, Part 1.

the actors behind the campaign attempted to surf the wave of anti-EU discourse already present in the most popular media in print and online. However, as the researchers at DFRLab aptly point out, it is not because RSS propaganda vehiculated #ReasonsToLeaveEU that the tweets actually had any real effect on the vote: indeed, “[t]he Russian troll farm only posted [...] “Brexit” 4,437 times and mostly after the vote, suggesting that there was no concerted campaign around the issue.” The researchers believe that “[t]hese opportunistic attacks had little to no discernible impact on the target populations’ political behavior.”¹²¹ Nevertheless, this small campaign is still a worrying sign that such actions, were they on a larger scale or better timed, may persuade people to vote in a certain way.

Ethno-nationalist tensions

Emotional appeals to deep-seated ethno-nationalist tensions in British society constituted a key aspect of the successful framing of the Leave campaign—overt and covert RSS propaganda tried to play this card in an attempt to push for Brexit. As was discussed in 2.1, UKIP successfully fomented and harvested ethno-nationalist tensions in the context of growing discontent surrounding EU-8 immigration to become a major British political party. Similar messaging and framing techniques, where Britain was pitted against a wave of dangerous immigration and a decaying Europe, were used in the run-up to Brexit by local political actors such as UKIP, the pro-Leave campaigns and press, but also by overt and covert RSS propaganda. According to research conducted on IRA tweets about Brexit, “[b]laming terrorist attacks on Islam or railing against immigrants were favorite themes.”¹²² Cram’s preliminary analysis of the released IRA tweets was that there was “a lot on refugees and immigration,” although she could find no “absolutely clear thrust”¹²³ amidst the messaging. These same themes of immigration and a weak decadent Europe were evoked by Vote Leave Facebook advertisements, such as ones that provided erroneous information by asked the following rhetorical question: “Turkey has a population of 76 million. Turkey is joining the EU: Good

¹²¹ Ben Nimmo, Graham Brookie and Kanishk Karan, “#TrollTracker: Twitter Troll Farm Archives, Part 4” @DFRLab on *Medium*, October 17, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-tweets-troll-farm-archives-d1b4df880ec6>.

¹²² David D. Kirkpatrick, “Signs of Russian Meddling in Brexit Referendum,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/europe/russia-brexit-twitter-facebook.html?login=email&auth=login-email>.

¹²³ Cram in Booth et al.

idea???"¹²⁴ Similarly, the pro-Leave newspaper Daily Mail wrote on its first page just a few days before the referendum: "If you believe in Britain, vote leave," mentioning "lies" and "greedy elites" of a "broken, dying Europe."¹²⁵

These fear-mongering themes were successful because, according to research, "high arousal emotions" like disgust or anger "spread faster than messages focusing on rational or economic arguments, particularly on social media."¹²⁶ The emotional appeal to "take back control"¹²⁷ of British political life and, when extended to the immigration question, of the borders and indeed of whom is British, "facilitated the viral spread of Leave ideas."¹²⁸ Simultaneously, as discussed earlier in 2.1, anti-immigrant sentiment was at record highs shortly before the referendum: in September 2015, 56% of Britons named immigration as the biggest issue their country was facing.¹²⁹ This raises the question of whether ethno-nationalist tension was running especially high in the UK during the run-up to the referendum, and consequently propaganda touching upon this issue was bound to be more successful, or whether the tension could have been artificially whipped up by effective fear-mongering propaganda. In other words, could similar online political propaganda be tested in countries with very little to no immigration, yet yield the same results of rising anti-immigrant sentiments and effective spread of the propaganda?

I argue that the British context was especially receptive to anti-immigration Leave messaging because there was indeed, as was pointed to in section 2.1, a great influx of EU-8 immigrants to the UK at the time, as well as a general increase in non-EU immigration since the 1997 Primary Purpose rule had been relaxed.¹³⁰ However, this does not explain why populations in certain areas with hardly no immigrants like Ebbw Vale¹³¹ were effectively fed anti-immigration Leave propaganda and a great majority ended up voting for Brexit. In this case, researchers have found that contact theory provides some answers. Contact theory

¹²⁴ Vote Leave Turkey advertisement in Cadwalladr.

¹²⁵ Martinson.

¹²⁶ Polonski.

¹²⁷ Tim Haughton, "It's the slogan, stupid: The Brexit Referendum," University of Birmingham, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/eu-ref-haughton.aspx>.

¹²⁸ Polonski.

¹²⁹ Blinder and Richards.

¹³⁰ "Immigration Rules Relaxed," BBC, 1997, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/news/06/0605/straw.shtml>.

¹³¹ "Census 2011 Statistics Overview: Blaenau Gwent Profile," Office for National Statistics, 2011, https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/fileadmin/documents/Council/Statistics_and_Data/Blaenau_Gwent_Overall.pdf.

studies prejudice through the individual level of people-to-people contact, where “casual contact” increases prejudice, whereas “true acquaintances decreas[e] prejudice.”¹³² Research by Meleady et al. applying contact theory to the Brexit referendum has shown that “[a]nti-immigrant prejudice was a strong correlate of support for Brexit,” and that “positive intergroup contact,” i.e. true acquaintances, increased people’s likelihood to vote for Remain, whereas “negative intergroup contact,”¹³³ i.e. casual contact, correlated with the Leave vote. Thus, areas with low immigration rates like Ebbw Vale, where the population had more casual contacts than true acquaintances, provided an environment that was receptive to anti-immigration Leave online propaganda, which I argue also artificially increases people’s number of “negative intergroup contacts,” which made them even more likely to vote Leave. This corroborates that if RSS online propaganda was in fact able to harness this anti-immigration insight just as the Vote Leave campaign did, its message could have effectively spread. However, as researchers of the IRA tweets involving Brexit have said, no significant conclusions can be drawn so far because the number of these tweets is still too insignificant.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, the more extensive IRA data concerning the US elections point towards the fact that political debates were often strategically framed through an anti-immigration lens. Therefore, we can tentatively conclude that RSS covert propaganda seems to have understood and utilized national and local factors of ethno-nationalist tensions in the UK to spread messages that coincided with the Russian state’s strategic preferences.

¹³² Jennifer Miller and Lars Rensmann, “Xenophobia and Anti-Immigrant Politics,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, January 11, 2018, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-368>.

¹³³ Rose Meleady, Charles R. Seger and Marieke Vermue, “Examining the role of positive and negative intergroup contact and anti-immigrant prejudice in Brexit,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 56:4 (2017), DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12203.

¹³⁴ Cram in Booth et al. and Lu in “Russian Tweets on Brexit,” Sky News

4. Catalan Referendum

4.1 Historical background

The history underpinning the 2017 Catalan independence referendum and the political thought behind Catalan nationalism run deep and arguably flow back to at least three centuries ago.¹³⁵ The major themes underpinning the recent rise in Catalan nationalism are the historical oscillation between Catalan autonomy and tutelage, which is linked to the significant question of the economic vitality of Catalonia in comparison to other regions in Spain. A key nexus point between economic history and political autonomy is the issue of taxation. Finally, recent years have witnessed a shift in Catalonia's nationalist strategy, which has turned its back on autonomy to focus on independence. Since "[t]he power of these national identities to break apart states and empires comes from the usefulness of identities in symbolic politics,"¹³⁶ this analysis exposes Catalan identity from a historical standpoint, which will then be harnessed through SYP's.

Political autonomy and its loss zigzag in and out of Catalan history. In 1716, Catalonia lost its autonomy with the Nueva Planta decree after having fought on the side of the Habsburgs against the Spanish Bourbons. In 1913, Catalonia regained limited autonomy just to lose it again in 1925 under the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera.¹³⁷ In 1932 as Spain entered into its Second Republic, Catalonia regained autonomy. However Franco's 1936 military coup and subsequent dictatorship signed the death knell of Catalan autonomy and was subject to a ruthless central Spanish government that committed what Catalan historians Josep Maria Solé i Sabaté and Joan Vilarroya i Font characterized as "cultural genocide."¹³⁸ Finally in the post-Franco period, Catalonia regains autonomy thanks to the new Spanish constitution of 1978, which bestowed autonomy on all regions of Spain. Although it restored autonomy to Catalonia, granting autonomy to all regions of Spain meant removing some of Catalonia's regional exceptionalism.¹³⁹ In 2006, popular political mobilization led to the

¹³⁵ Sebastian Balfour, "A Brief History of Catalan Nationalism," *Foreign Affairs*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/spain/2017-10-18/brief-history-catalan-nationalism>.

¹³⁶ Kaufman, 41.

¹³⁷ "Catalonia profile – Timeline," *BBC*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20345073>.

¹³⁸ Josep Maria Solé i Sabaté and Joan Vilarroya i Font, *El franquisme a Catalunya (1939-1977)*, 1.: *La dictadura totalitària* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2005), 12.

¹³⁹ Balfour.

passing of a new Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia. It provided the region with an increased and exceptional level of autonomy from a political and financial standpoint—it established in its first article that “Catalonia is a nation”¹⁴⁰ and provided the region with greater autonomy in taxation and linguistic policies.¹⁴¹ However, this heightened level of autonomy was short-lived: in 2010 Mariano Rajoy, then Prime Minister of Spain, brought the Statute before the Constitutional Court because it declared Catalonia as a nation. The 2006 Statute was ruled to be unconstitutional and subsequently revoked.¹⁴²

The ruling down of the statute marked a watershed moment in Catalan nationalism: the Catalan regional government presided by Arturo Mas changed its strategy. Whereas previously the political direction of Catalonia had been to aim for greater autonomy, Mas’ government chose to push for outright independence¹⁴³ after failed talks with Rajoy regarding greater tax autonomy.¹⁴⁴ With the 2012 flash elections, the idea of Catalan independence entered into popular political discourse: as Enric Ucelay-Da Cal aptly stated, “for the first time ever, the open expression of pro-independence sympathies [...] became a majority sentiment in Catalan society, when heretofore such a viewpoint was held only by [...] tiny insurrectional organizations [...]”¹⁴⁵ In 2015, the pro-independence *Junts pel Sí* and *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (CUP) formed a coalition to push for independence.¹⁴⁶ Two years later, the Catalan Parliament decided to hold a popular independence referendum on October 1, 2017, which the Spanish Constitutional Court ruled as illegal on September 7.¹⁴⁷

To understand Catalan nationalism and its modern form of independentism, it is essential to grasp the economic history of Spain. Industrialization happened at very different paces: from the mid-nineteenth century, Catalonia and the Basque Country industrialized—Catalonia developed a cotton industry, whereas the Basque Country went into coal

¹⁴⁰ My translation, “Estatuto de Autonomía de Cataluña de 2006,” Wikipedia [last edited: December 17, 2018], https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estatuto_de_Autonom%C3%ADa_de_Catalu%C3%B1a_de_2006#Pre%C3%A1mbulo.

¹⁴¹ Balfour.

¹⁴² “Catalonia profile – Timeline,” BBC.

¹⁴³ Balfour.

¹⁴⁴ “Spain's Catalonia region to hold early elections on Nov 25,” Reuters, September 25, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/spain-catalonia-elections/spains-catalonia-region-to-hold-early-elections-on-nov-25-idUSE8E8GI01L20120925>.

¹⁴⁵ Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, “Catalan Nationalism, 1886-2012: An Historical Overview,” *Pôle Sud*, 2014/1:40, 3, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-pole-sud-2014-1-page-13.htm>.

¹⁴⁶ “Catalonia profile – Timeline,” BBC.

¹⁴⁷ “Spain Catalonia: Court blocks independence referendum,” BBC, September 8, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41196677>.

mining¹⁴⁸—, yet the rest of Spain encountered numerous obstacles to industrialization and remained relatively poor by the time Franco comes to power.¹⁴⁹ Nowadays, Catalonia is the richest region of Spain in terms of GDP¹⁵⁰ and contributes approximately 50% of its total income tax, VAT and special manufacturing tax to the federal government's "interregional solidarity" fund.¹⁵¹ This has been turned into a strong argument for independence, quite akin to that of Brexiteers with regards to the EU.

4.2 Overview of the propaganda operation(s)

In the case of the 2017 Catalan referendum, the nature of the alleged propaganda operation is clear: Sputnik, Julian Assange, RT, Edward Snowden and Wikileaks contributed towards similar biased pro-independence narratives. All of the above-mentioned actors do cooperate to a certain degree—"While neither Assange nor Snowden, a US citizen, have been known for links to Spain, they do have links to Russia,"¹⁵² as do of course Sputnik and RT. It is now also known that Wikileaks is perhaps less ideologically neutral than it claims to be because it has only gingerly published data troves on Russia,¹⁵³ whereas it has released tremendous amounts of data on the US government and other state and non-state entities.¹⁵⁴ Beyond this, Assange quite often shares his outlook on world affairs with Russian state-sponsored media and "has connections with the Russian propaganda machine"¹⁵⁵—the most blatant of which was hosting *The Julian Assange Show* on RT.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁸ "La industrialización en los países atrasados de Europa: El caso español," Universidad de Zaragoza, https://ocw.unizar.es/ocw/pluginfile.php/88/mod_label/intro/T.12.pdf.

¹⁴⁹ James Simpson, "Economic development in Spain, 1850-1936," *The Economic History Review*, L, 2 (1997), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0289.00058>.

¹⁵⁰ "PIB de las comunidades autónomas," Expansión/datosmacro.com, 2017, <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/pib/espana-comunidades-autonomas>.

¹⁵¹ Javier Santiago Vélez, "¿Roba España a Cataluña?" *El Imparcial*, June 25, 2014, <https://www.elimparcial.es/noticia/125547/opinion/roba-espana-a-cataluna.html>.

¹⁵² Chris Zappone, "On Catalan independence, Julian Assange, Edward Snowden emerge as surprise backers," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/on-catalan-independence-julian-assange-edward-snowden-emerge-as-surprise-backers-20170926-gyoqxs.html>.

¹⁵³ Fred Weir, "Is it the Kremlin's turn to get WikiLeaks?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2017/0921/Is-it-the-Kremlin-s-turn-to-get-WikiLeaked>.

¹⁵⁴ Wikipedia contributors, "List of material published by WikiLeaks," [last edited May 16, 2019], Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_material_published_by_WikiLeaks&oldid=897315891.

¹⁵⁵ Ben Nimmo in Natashya Gutierrez, "Bots, Assange, an alliance: Has Russian propaganda infiltrated the Philippines?" *Rappler*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/196576-russia-propaganda-influence-interference-philippines>.

¹⁵⁶ For more information, see <https://assange.rt.com/>.

Julian Assange was a key figure on Twitter during the Catalan crisis, with hyper-partisan tweets like “[w]hat is happening in Catalonia in the most significant Western conflict between people and state since the fall of the Berlin wall[...]”¹⁵⁷ or “[t]he future of Western civilization is being revealed in Catalonia as all modern control elements come into play and are resisted.”¹⁵⁸ Researchers found that “[t]wo machine scans of Twitter traffic using the word “Catalonia” on September 20 and September 24 2017 revealed the Wikileaks founder was the most-mentioned user, with more retweets than any other.”¹⁵⁹ According to research broken by Spanish newspaper *El País* and confirmed by the DFRLab,¹⁶⁰ Assange’s tweets on the Catalan referendum did not follow typical organic propagation, but rather tended to go viral and ebb out very rapidly, which “is evidence of the intervention of bots.”¹⁶¹ Although it is exceedingly difficult to identify the creators of bots retweeting Assange, it would not be far off to infer that some of these bots could be Russian state-sponsored.

As for the RSS media’s direct involvement in the online discourse surrounding the Catalan referendum, RT and Sputnik “[were] the fourth most-used source, [their] content virally distributed as part of the digital debate.”¹⁶² All in all, the Twitter accounts of RT and Sputnik spread more than 47,000 tweets related to the Catalan referendum.¹⁶³ However, Nimmo found that the two RSS media outlets framed the topic somewhat differently: whereas RT seemed relatively balanced in its referendum coverage, whilst keeping a general anti-Western perspective that turned the referendum into a case in point “of a broader decline in the West,” Sputnik in Spanish created eleven stories between September 11 and 27 that contained Assange tweets in their headline, which, according to Nimmo, is “remarkable”

¹⁵⁷ Defend Assange Campaign, “What is happening in Catalonia in the most significant Western conflict between people and state since the fall of the Berlin wall--but its methods are 2017, from VPNs, proxies, mirrors and encrypted chat to internet surveillance and censorship, bot propaganda and body armor,” September 30, 2017, 2:15am, Tweet.

¹⁵⁸ Defend Assange Campaign (@DefendAssange), “The future of Western civilization is being revealed in Catalonia as all modern control elements come into play and are resisted,” September 21, 2017, 8:47am, Tweet.

¹⁵⁹ Ben Nimmo, “#ElectionWatch: Russia and Referendums in Catalonia?” @DFRLab on Medium, September 28, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-russia-and-referendums-in-catalonia-192743efcd76>.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ David Alandete, “Russian meddling machine sets sights on Catalonia,” *El País*, September 28, 2017, https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/09/26/inenglish/1506413477_994601.html.

¹⁶² Javier Lesaca, “Why did Russian social media swarm the digital conversation about Catalan independence?” Washington Post, November 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/11/22/why-did-russian-social-media-swarm-the-digital-conversation-about-catalan-independence/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c46ff769b0c9.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

because “Sputnik’s headlines give more prominence to Assange than either of the chief actors in the Spanish drama; and Assange’s comments are fiercely one-sided.”¹⁶⁴ It is legitimate to wonder why RT and Sputnik featured so heavily in the Twittersphere in the run-up to the referendum. The researcher Javier Lesaca looked into the top one hundred accounts that retweeted RT and Sputnik from September 29 to October 19, 2017: he found that 84 of them seemed to follow the behavior pattern of bots. Of these presumed bots, approximately one quarter mostly retweeted positive stories about Venezuelan Nicolás Maduro, and over one third of the bot accounts retweeted mostly RT and Sputnik.¹⁶⁵ Thus, RSS media seem to have conducted a white and gray propaganda campaign with narratives that supported the Catalan referendum and secession.

My own qualitative analysis of the Twitter accounts of RT in Spanish @ActualidadRT and of Sputnik in Spanish, @SputnikMundo has yielded additional information to complete the picture of RSS propaganda and also raises new questions. First of all, the two Twitter accounts, and indeed the outlets themselves on television and in print, cater not only to Spain but also to Latin America. This factor contributes towards explaining why @ActualidadRT has a following of 3.02 million—as opposed to @RTUKnews only has 90,900 followers. Similarly, @SputnikMundo is followed by 84,100 accounts, whereas @SputniknewsUK only has 8,603.¹⁶⁶ However, the geographic factor probably does not justify in and of itself the large number of followers, which is almost identical to that of the BBC World’s Spanish-language Twitter @bbcmundo. Therefore, one may wonder whether a significant percentage of the followers are in fact bots, keeping in mind that bots have boomed because of an almost entirely unregulated activity dominated by marketing agencies in countries like Mexico.¹⁶⁷ This somewhat complicates the attribution of bot activity highlighted by Lesaca, although the final result is the same: either these bots directly emanate from Russia or they are contracted out of a Latin American country by a Russian state-sponsored entity. From my own anecdotal qualitative research in 2019 of Twitter profiles of @ActualidadRT followers, it is extremely difficult to tell which accounts are bots—I strongly suspect marketing companies to have

¹⁶⁴ Ben Nimmo, “#ElectionWatch: Russia and Referendums in Catalonia?”

¹⁶⁵ Lesaca.

¹⁶⁶ These numbers are from May 30, 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Ryan Broderick and Iñigo Arredondo, “Meet The 29-Year-Old Trying To Become The King Of Mexican Fake News,” BuzzFeed News, June 28, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/meet-the-29-year-old-trying-to-become-the-king-of-mexican>.

recently changed their tactics: because bots are easily recognizable and removed by Twitter if they exceed approximately 50 Tweets a day,¹⁶⁸ I believe that nowadays bots are more difficult to recognize because they may have scaled back on their individual activity and created private profiles. Although Alandete ascertained in an interview that “[b]ot activity [is] not a thing anymore because the big platforms [...] have detected it and they can take measures against it,”¹⁶⁹ I found that my suspicion is confirmed by Emilio Ferrara’s research into botnets during the 2017 French presidential elections:

“in the case of MacronLeaks the historic trend [of easily-detectable bots] appears to be reversed: [b]ots seem to try “fly under the radars”, posting comparable or less content than humans in the same conversation. We hypothesize that this can be a strategy to avoid detection and suspension from the platform.”¹⁷⁰

Whilst researching the publicly-known facts and hypotheses about the RSS propaganda operation in the Catalan crisis, I came across some problematic aspects in certain actors’ research and presentation methodologies, which I have chosen to elaborate on here to shine light on as much of the picture as possible and raise some relevant questions pertaining to contemporary online propaganda studies. Indeed, a majority of articles correlating Russian foreign propaganda activity with the Catalan referendum were written by David Alandete, who was in 2017 the Deputy Director¹⁷¹ or Managing Editor¹⁷² of *El País*, which is the most widely read and second most widely distributed newspaper in Spain.¹⁷³ The fact that it is almost exclusively the Managing Editor who breaks one specific investigative news story and writes a series of articles on the given topic may be somewhat concerning from a deontological perspective due to a possible conflict of interests or lack of oversight. Secondly, *El País* has “a strong voice against Catalan secession”¹⁷⁴—which Alandete agreed with—; John Carlin, who was fired from *El País* after having written an opinion piece critical of the

¹⁶⁸ Ben Nimmo, “#BotSpot: Twelve Ways to Spot a Bot,” @DFRLab on Medium, August 29, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/botspot-twelve-ways-to-spot-a-bot-aedc7d9c110c>.

¹⁶⁹ David Alandete, telephone interview by author, June 8, 2019.

¹⁷⁰ Emilio Ferrara, “Disinformation and Social Bot Operations in the Run Up to the 2017 French Presidential Election,” *First Monday*, 22(8), July 1, 2017, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1707.00086>.

¹⁷¹ Alandete, “Russian meddling machine sets sights on Catalonia.”

¹⁷² *El País*, “Russian public media spread Catalan pro-independence propaganda,” *El País*, January 2, 2018, https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/01/02/inenglish/1514877717_186245.html.

¹⁷³ “Número de lectores diarios de los principales periódicos españoles en 2018 (en miles de lectores),” Statista, 2019, <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/476795/periodicos-diarios-mas-leidos-en-espana/>.

¹⁷⁴ Marc Herman, “Spain’s most famous paper stumbles amid Catalonia independence crisis,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 27, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/catalonia-independence-el-pais-spain.php.

government and king's handling of the Catalan crisis, characterized the newspaper as a "Democratic Socialist Pravda"¹⁷⁵ that "defines itself as defending the establishment."¹⁷⁶ Thirdly, the investigative results upon which Alandete based his news stories¹⁷⁷ stem from what Alandete characterized as a "detailed analysis of more than five million [Twitter] messages by George Washington University."¹⁷⁸ This analysis, which was commissioned by the newspaper and conducted by the visiting scholar Javier Lesaca and by the big data firm Alto Data Analytics¹⁷⁹ is unpublished¹⁸⁰—although they are reputable, it being unpublished points towards a lack of peer review and transparency, which is still common in the field of contemporary online propaganda studies. British MP Paul Farrelly highlighted this point during Alandete and others' oral testimony for the UK Parliament's inquiry into "Disinformation and 'fake news'," when he said "[m]y second observation about papers like Señor Lesaca's is that, unlike a scientific paper, there is no control, no comparator."¹⁸¹ However, Alandete affirmed that the data that Mariano Rajoy—then-Prime Minister—and then-Foreign Minister Alfonso Dasis cited regarding botnets during the Catalan crisis, which was 55% of fake profiles in Russia and 30% in Venezuela,¹⁸² was from the Spanish National Cryptologic Center (CCN).¹⁸³ This final piece of information does seem to confirm the data's accuracy and existence of RSS bots—however, greater transparency in online propaganda research seems essential to establish a common ground of facts upon which to build analyses and draw conclusions.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ David Alandete, "La maquinaria rusa ganó la batalla 'online' del referéndum ilegal," *El País*, November 13, 2017, https://elpais.com/politica/2017/11/12/actualidad/1510500844_316723.html and "La trama rusa empleó redes chavistas para agravar la crisis catalana," *El País*, November 11, 2017, https://elpais.com/politica/2017/11/10/actualidad/1510341089_316043.html.

¹⁷⁸ My translation, David Alandete, "La trama rusa empleó redes chavistas para agravar la crisis catalana," *El País*, November 11, 2017, https://elpais.com/politica/2017/11/10/actualidad/1510341089_316043.html.

¹⁷⁹ Lesaca, 2019.

¹⁸⁰ M C McGrath, written evidence for DCMSC, "Disinformation and 'fake news'" inquiry, March 2018. <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/fake-news/written/80989.html>.

¹⁸¹ Paul Farrelly in <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/disinformation-and-fake-news/oral/74926.html>.

¹⁸² Rajoy on Cope Radio, in https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/britain-and-spanish-leaders-say-russian-trolls-meddled-in-their-elections/2017/11/14/51ffb64a-c950-11e7-b506-8a10ed11ecf5_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0107b10b54b5.

¹⁸³ Alandete, 2019.

Research methodology can turn political, as was the case during the UK parliamentary inquiry—the following incident further highlights the importance of transparency, objectivity and critical thinking in contemporary propaganda research. M.C. McGrath, a young hacker and Wikileaks sympathizer who created a database to track the LinkedIn profiles of people in the American intelligence community,¹⁸⁴ submitted a probing written testimony that points towards deficiencies in Alandete and Lesaca’s work on botnets. After seemingly valid methodological critiques of parts of Lesaca’s research, McGrath concludes that “[c]laims about fake news, especially those published in the media and brought before legislative bodies, need to be more thoroughly scrutinized” and “[d]isinformation is not a technique unique to Russia, Venezuela, or any one country or group. It is necessary to explore how claims of fake news can themselves be used as a manipulative tactic and understand the impact this has on society.”¹⁸⁵ This conclusion is thought-provoking and raises a series of questions relating to propaganda studies: how should we ascertain that material published about propaganda is objective? And how do we make sure that researchers and journalists do not fall into the trap of cherry-picking evidence to support their own suppositions and worldviews? These questions warrant philosophical, ethical, deontological and ontological research branches within propaganda studies. However, it is crucial to note that McGrath “was one of the people that visited Assange the most [at the Ecuadorian embassy] those days”¹⁸⁶—this points towards collaboration with Assange and Wikileaks, and therefore indirectly helping the Russian and Venezuelan cause. Alandete’s response to McGrath’s written testimony was that it “[was] like going into details and trying to cut out of the whole story by discrediting a little detail.”¹⁸⁷ As this is a case where data and politics collide, I will concentrate in section 4.3 on the overt propaganda operation which are what Alandete views in any case as the most impactful RSS propaganda in the Catalan crisis.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ <https://exposingtheinvisible.org/films/group/mc-mcgrath/>

¹⁸⁵ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/disinformation-and-fake-news/oral/74926.html>

¹⁸⁶ Alandete, 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

4.3 Domestic patterns/factors and their interplay with the spread/halt of propaganda campaigns

Ethno-nationalist tensions that fed a highly-polarized media landscape

In times of renewed Catalan nationalism with the strategic aim of separatism/independence, ethno-nationalist tensions were at their peak right before the referendum. As was analyzed in 4.1, the Catalan cause is deep-rooted and was recently retriggered by the 2015 pro-independence coalition—Catalan nationalism is a narrative that has been primed in recent history. Along with the linguistic division between Catalan and (Castilian) Spanish, the economic argument that Catalonia would do better on its own than with (the rest of) Spain, and of course the territorial demands, these elements contribute to an overall picture that radically pits Catalan against Spanish nationalism. With the political form of a popular referendum—which is inherently polarizing because of the yes-or-no form—asking the question “Do you want Catalonia to be an independent state in the form of a republic?”¹⁸⁹ nationalist polarization led to intense media polarization.

The Manichean political tensions over Catalonia meant that the Spanish media landscape was under immense pressure and exceptionally divided in the run-up to the referendum—“Spanish television and Catalan television seem like different worlds,” [according to] University of Salamanca communications professor Carlos Arcila.”¹⁹⁰ As another commentator stated, “because of all the feelings from both sides [...], people are willing to believe any story that favors their argument[,] and social media consumers have been taken in by a lot of fake news from both sides.”¹⁹¹ According to a report by Reporters Without Borders, ““The Spanish press is manipulative” has been the slogan that the demonstrators repeatedly chanted”¹⁹² in Barcelona, and “[t]he climate for journalistic freedom [...] suffered

¹⁸⁹ My translation, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f2/Papeleta_Referendum_2017.png

¹⁹⁰ <https://www.thelocal.es/20171012/catalonia-crisis-a-breeding-ground-for-fake-news>

¹⁹¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/19/how-fake-news-helped-shape-the-catalonia-independence-vote/?utm_term=.1c7625c2e1a0

¹⁹² “INFORME RSF #RespectPressCAT | 11/12 | Un clima envenenado para el libre ejercicio del periodismo,” *Reporteros sin fronteras*, October 13, 2017, <https://www.rsf-es.org/news/informe-rsf-respectpresscat-11-12-un-clima-envenenado-para-el-libre-ejercicio-del-periodismo/>.

as a result of the dramatic polarization of Catalan politics and society.”¹⁹³ This same view is shared by Arcos, who goes further in assessing foreign interference:

“It is unlikely that the effects of external information influencing have been decisive in the case of Catalonia. Rather, the evolution of events has responded to pre-existing internal logics in which the dissemination of inaccurate, biased, purposely deceitful, or partial information, either by external or internal actors, has had the effect of reinforcing pre-existing biased beliefs and attitudes, igniting existing tensions[...].”¹⁹⁴

I do adhere to Arcos’ assessment that Spain already had a highly partisan political and media environment, which meant that messages about the referendum—be they from Spanish or foreign media—would be categorized into and utilized by those pre-existing political echo chambers. However, where I disagree is regarding the possible effect of foreign propaganda in this context.

Lesaca’s claims that RT and Sputnik were the “fourth most-used source”¹⁹⁵ in the online conversation about the referendum and the map of pro- and anti-referendum messages in online discussions indicating that 78.2% of messages were pro-referendum¹⁹⁶ are significant. Although these two data-driven findings are to be taken with a slight grain of salt, as has been discussed earlier in this chapter, they still indicate that RSS white propaganda was heavily disseminated online, and their almost exclusively pro-referendum stance fits into the overwhelmingly pro-referendum sentiment in online messaging. Therefore, RSS propaganda through RT and Sputnik did participate in providing partial stories to benefit one side of the discussion, which probably had an effect on the volume of pro-referendum messages online, which may in turn have effected people’s perception of the number of Spaniards and Catalan who were in favor of the referendum. So although RSS propaganda, or foreign propaganda in general, most certainly did not alter the structure of the Manichean framing of the Catalan referendum, RSS propaganda did add fuel to the debate by supporting one side, and in doing so it weighed in on the overall volume of messages, and therefore perhaps also on people’s perception of the debate.

¹⁹³ “RSF publishes report on “Respect for media in Catalonia,”” *Reporters Without Borders*, September 28, 2017 [updated September 29, 2017], <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-publishes-report-respect-media-catalonia>.

¹⁹⁴ <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Strategic-Analysis-2018-10-Arcos.pdf>

¹⁹⁵ Lesaca

¹⁹⁶ https://elpais.com/politica/2017/11/12/actualidad/1510500844_316723.html

My own small-scale research into the Spanish-language Twitter accounts of RT (@ActualidadRT) and Sputnik (@SputnikMundo), where I took a random sampling of 15 tweets between Sept. 1 and 30, 2017 about the Catalan referendum showed that a majority of Twitter stories were pro-referendum in their framing or content. Indeed, out of 15 tweets from @ActualidadRT, 11 of them were pro-referendum in their framing or content, 3/15 were neutral and framed the content in order to create an impression of total political chaos, and 1/15 was neutral insofar as it defended Russia's lack of involvement in the debate. Similarly, out of the 15 @SputnikMundo tweets that I analyzed, 14/15 were pro-referendum in their framing or content and 1/15 was neutral to defending Russia's lack of involvement.

What conclusions can be drawn from this? First of all, more research would have to be carried out in order to widen the data sample, but it does seem to indicate that RT and Sputnik acted as heavily biased media players. In this case, there was indeed a RSS white propaganda campaign in favor of the referendum. One may wonder why RSS media outlets would be so heavily one-sided in their coverage, as opposed to what seems to have been a relatively more balanced coverage in the UK.

From a political messaging perspective, this was an excellent opportunity for Russia to "level the playing field" of discourse surrounding the annexation of Crimea. The Russian reasoning is that European and Western state actors, and subsequently the media, openly condemned the annexation of Crimea, which the pro-Crimean annexation camp justified through a referendum. So Russian media would "play the same game" as Europe and the West did by supporting one side in the case of the Catalan referendum. However, Russia only adopted this position through the media: indeed, the Russian state did not openly support Catalan independence—as RT and Sputnik explicitly and emphatically affirmed through tweets and articles. RSS media outlets abroad disseminate precisely this type of "rationalizing" postmodern discourse that supposedly "reveals the West's hypocrisy"—a reasoning that partly explains why RT and Sputnik showcase Assange and Snowden as trailblazers.

However, this seemingly postmodern challenging discourse in RSS propaganda in fact distorts more than it reveals. One example of this is the sophism that RSS media outlets espoused when they equated the Catalan and Crimean referenda:¹⁹⁷ the fundamental

¹⁹⁷ Milosevich-Juaristi, Mira. Nov. 7, 2017. "La "combinación", instrumento de la guerra de la información de Rusia en Cataluña" in Real Instituto Elcano.

difference was in fact that the Catalan referendum was to secede from Spain *to create a new state*; the Crimean referendum was to secede from Ukraine *to join Russia*. Another inconsistency behind the sheen of postmodernist discourse is that although RT and Sputnik supported the Catalan cause, the Russian state quells separatist movements inside of Russia¹⁹⁸ for fear that “[i]f [the Northern Caucasus declares independence], in that very second—not even hour, but second—people in other territorial entities will want to do the same,” which would be a “tragedy,”¹⁹⁹ according to Vladimir Putin.

http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari86-2017-milosevichjuaristi-combinacion-instrumento-guerra-informacion-rusia-cataluna.

¹⁹⁸ Alandete 2019.

¹⁹⁹ Vladimir Putin in Svetlana Emelianova, “Vladimir Putin: Secession of the Caucasus from Russia will lead to the dissolution of the country,” *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, December 20, 2011, <https://rg.ru/2011/12/20/reg-skfo/gudermes-anons.html>.

5. The 2017 French elections

5.1 Historical context

The historical themes of the 2017 French presidential elections were multifarious political ruptures and continuities within a general context of society-wide systemic strains. In this section, I have chosen to bring to the fore the dynamics that fed the rise of the Front National (FN).²⁰⁰ France's geographic and economic organization in the context of globalization has often been pointed to as a major source of discontent in the run-up to the elections. I will also discuss the erosion of traditional political parties and party politics through corruption scandals and new rules for conducting party primaries. In order to focus on the run-up to the French 2017 elections, the historical analysis and case study timeframe will stop at May 6, 2017, one day before the final round of elections on May 7, 2017.

Systemic strains are key in understanding the decay of the traditionally strong parties in France, which reached its full realization in the 2017 elections, when the candidates of the older parties were unable to pass the benchmark for the second round vote. As one political commentator put it, "the system-antisystem [...] rift [was] decisive in [these] presidential elections in the context of a society particularly divided between [...] the France that is doing well and the other France that is doing badly."²⁰¹ As another one said, the 2017 elections confronted "two Frances."²⁰² The geographer Christophe Guilluy argues that even during the period known as "The Glorious Thirty,"²⁰³ which was synonymous with economic growth for the middle class from the end of World War II to 1975, the working class never really gained access to a middle class, but rather lived in an illusion of social mobility²⁰⁴—as he argues, the French labor force has always been made up of 60% working class people, which has remained so since 1954.²⁰⁵ He argues that as French cities increasingly became spaces for the upper-

²⁰⁰ The party is now called the *Rassemblement national* (RN) since June 2018.

²⁰¹ Eddy Fougier, "25 raisons inédites qui font de la présidentielle 2017 une élection historique," *Huffpost*, May 7, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/eddy-fougier/emmanuel-macron-25-raisons-inedites-qui-font-de-la-presidentielle-2017-une-election-historique_a_22073964/.

²⁰² Vivien Vergnaud, "Quelques leçons à tirer de l'élection présidentielle," *Le Journal du Dimanche*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/quelques-lecons-a-tirer-de-lelection-presidentielle-3326027>.

²⁰³ *Les Trente Glorieuses* in French—this is a popular expression to designate the approximate thirty years of national prosperity from 1946 to 1975. The term was coined by Jean Fourastié in his book *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*.

²⁰⁴ Christophe Guilluy and Christophe Noyé, *Atlas des Nouvelles fractures sociales en France* (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2006).

²⁰⁵ Jean-Philippe Huelin, "Atlas des nouvelles fractures sociales," *Mediapart*, June 9, 2009. <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/yannick-henrio/blog/011010/atlas-des-nouvelles-fractures-sociales>.

middle class, the working class was pushed out of cities into semi-rural outskirts and thus lost its cultural and political identity. Moreover, the Socialist Party alienated the working class that it used to represent by catering to the middle-class and even *bobos*²⁰⁶ through representatives from France's elite.²⁰⁷ These factors, in addition to the deindustrialization of North-Eastern France and the general sentiment that globalization has only benefitted the few,²⁰⁸ provide a convincing basis to interpret of the strong political disenfranchisement that contributed to propel Marine Le Pen into the second round vote in 2017.

The unravelling of traditional party politics accelerated through a series of phenomena. Indeed, the *Parti socialiste* (PS), i.e. the Socialist Party that stands for social democracy, lost much of its credibility under François Hollande's term from 2012 to 2017—nicknamed *Président Flanby*, which roughly means Jelly President, for having neither a firm enough political project, personality nor appearance, Hollande was the most unpopular president of the Fifth Republic, with an average approval rating of only 25%.²⁰⁹ In 2017, for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic, the incumbent president chose not to run for reelection, and no presidential candidate represented his government.²¹⁰

As the PS and *Les Républicains* (LR), i.e. The Republicans, which represents a long lineage of conservative Gaullist political parties, were trying to renew ties with their bases, they both chose to hold open primaries in 2017, where any citizen registered to vote who adheres to the values of the party may vote in the primaries.²¹¹ This type of primaries facilitated the election of François Fillon for LR and Benoît Hamon for the PS, both of whom squarely represented the values of their party, as opposed to more moderate candidates who stood a chance to be elected by voters from the opposite side of the political spectrum.²¹² Fillon presumably lost at the first round vote because of a corruption scandal, after which his

²⁰⁶ In French sociology, *bobo* is the short form for *bourgeois-bohème*, i.e. the bohemian bourgeoisie—David Brooks' definition of bobos in his 2001 book *Bobos in Paradise* is "highly educated folk who have one foot in the bohemian world of creativity and another foot in the bourgeois realm of ambition and worldly success."

²⁰⁷ Gilles Morin, "Les socialistes et la société française. Réseaux et milieux (1905-1981)," *Vingtième Siècle*, 96: 4 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.3917/ving.096.0047>.

²⁰⁸ Huelin.

²⁰⁹ Thomas Liabot, "Baromètre Ifop-JDD : Hollande, retour sur une impopularité record," *Le Journal du Dimanche*, April 16, 2017 [edited on April 19, 2017], <https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/barometre-ifop-jdd-hollande-retour-sur-une-impopularite-record-3295022>.

²¹⁰ Fougier.

²¹¹ "Les élections présidentielles depuis 1958," *Vie Publique*, July 7, 2018, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/decouverte-institutions/institutions/approfondissements/elections-presidentielles-depuis-1958.html>.

²¹² Fougier.

ratings plummeted; Hamon received only 6.36% of the first round votes,²¹³ which disqualified him with the lowest score ever for a PS candidate. Therefore, for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic, neither the traditional left- nor right-wing parties manage to qualify their candidates for the second round.²¹⁴

In the meantime, throughout the mounting socio-economic unease and consequent political vacuum, the Front National (FN) steadily grew. The “impressive and linear evolution” went from a party that only had 300 members in 1981 to Jean-Marie Le Pen becoming the runner-up in the 2002 elections against Jacques Chirac, to his daughter Marine Le Pen at times polling as the front runner in 2017. This surge is partly due to the FN’s shift towards a more mainstream image, away from Jean-Marie Le Pen’s denial of the existence of gas chambers during World War II²¹⁵ towards a more socialist program.

5.2 Overview of the propaganda operation(s)

There were three major propaganda operations that targeted the 2017 French presidential elections and that presumably are linked to Russian-state actors, but also to American Alt-Right actors. This thesis will focus on the first and third operations because they have been attributed to the Russian state. However, I will still present #MacronGate, the second operation, because it is intertwined with the others and constitutes part of the propaganda environment.

The first operation, which started back in early 2017, was a general anti-Macron RSS white and gray propaganda campaign: RT, but mostly Sputnik skewed their coverage and provided a platform for sometimes vicious rumors about Macron—who was the only openly pro-Europe candidate critical of Russia. After a thorough investigation of digital forensic evidence, DFRLab’s researcher Ben Nimmo came to the conclusion that “[m]uch of RT France’s coverage [had] tended to report criticism of Macron, but at least mentioned the candidate’s own stance, albeit often briefly. Sputnik France, however, has continued to show a bias against

²¹³ “Election présidentielle 2017 : résultats globaux du premier tour,” [interieur.gouv.fr](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-elections/Election-presidentielle-2017/Election-presidentielle-2017-resultats-globaux-du-premier-tour), April 24, 2017, <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-elections/Election-presidentielle-2017/Election-presidentielle-2017-resultats-globaux-du-premier-tour>.

²¹⁴ “Les élections présidentielles depuis 1958.”

²¹⁵ Florian Delafoi, “Front National (1971-2017),” *Le Temps*, <https://www.letemps.ch/monde/front-national-19712017>.

Macron, compared with more favorable coverage of his main rivals.”²¹⁶ On the other hand, Marine Le Pen “benefited from broadly uncritical coverage, headlining her repeatedly.”²¹⁷ This was a stealth campaign with multiple seemingly small piques: one blatant example was the spread of the rumor that Macron had “[a] very wealthy gay lobby behind him” and that “the controversial details of his personal life and ties [will] soon become public”²¹⁸—which implied that Macron was gay. Sputnik also published the findings of an unverified opinion poll by a private Russian social media polling company that placed François Fillon as the number one candidate, although French opinion polls had Macron in the lead.²¹⁹ Such rumors and tendentious stories were amplified and fed on social media through botnets and fake accounts—Facebook removed some 70,000 fake accounts posting propaganda about the French elections.²²⁰ However, propaganda operations were also simultaneously being orchestrated by the American Alt-Right through online communities such as 4chan, where “trolls” rallied to fight what they called “The Battle of France” for Marine Le Pen. This American element becomes significant in the two following propaganda operations. However, it is important to note that the American alt-right and RSS media actors do feed off of each other’s propaganda campaigns.²²¹

The #MacronGate rumor spreads on May 3, 2017, just four days before the second round vote in what seems like a desperate attempt at swaying the vote towards Le Pen. Documents allegedly proving that Macron holds offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands suddenly appear on 4chan just two hours before the last televised debate between the two final candidates. The documents are posted by an anonymous user who, according to the IP address,²²² is located in Latvia—although the user subsequently denies that the declared

²¹⁶ Ben Nimmo, “The French election through Kremlin eyes,” @DFRLab on Medium, April 20, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/the-french-election-through-kremlin-eyes-5d85e0846c50>.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ “Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could Be ‘US Agent’ Lobbying Banks’ Interests,” *Sputnik*, February 4, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201702041050340451-macron-us-agent-dhuicq/>.

²¹⁹ Nimmo, “The French election through Kremlin eyes.”

²²⁰ Joseph Menn, “Exclusive: Russia used Facebook to try to spy on Macron campaign – sources,” *Reuters*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyber-france-facebook-spies-exclusive/exclusive-russia-used-facebook-to-try-to-spy-on-macron-campaign-sources-idUSKBN1AC0EI>.

²²¹ Emmi Bevensee and Alexander Reid Ross, “The Alt-Right and Global Information Warfare” (2018 IEEE International Conference on Big Data (Big Data), Seattle, Washington, USA, December 10-13, 2018), <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/1905/1905.02712.pdf>.

²²² An IP address is “a logical numeric address that is assigned to every single computer, printer, switch, router or any other device that is part of a TCP/IP-based network” with a part that “further pinpoints the exact location” of the device. (Source: <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/2435/internet-protocol-address-ip-address>)

location is real in a 4chan message. The supposed existence of offshore accounts spreads through social media, where they are shared by over 7000, mostly pro-Trump, Twitter accounts.²²³ Marine Le Pen herself during the final debate exclaimed, “I hope that we will not soon learn that you have an offshore account in the Bahamas.”²²⁴ As for attribution, the research company Qurium has found digital forensic evidence showing that the source of MacronGate can be traced back to American Andrew Auernheimer, the webmaster of *The Daily Stormer*²²⁵—“the world’s biggest neo-Nazi website,”²²⁶ which is now only accessible through the Dark Web since popular search engines have denied to host it.²²⁷

The third and final propaganda operation was the “Macron Leaks,” which was a 9-gigabyte data dump of stolen e-mails and documents from four leaders of the Macron campaign that were released online on May 5, 2017. The documents had been retrieved two weeks before through a “spear phishing operation”—i.e. “an email [...] scam targeted towards a specific individual, organization or business [...] often intended to steal data for malicious purposes”²²⁸—targeting Macron’s closest associates, but the data was only dumped 48 hours before the second round vote, indicating that the perpetrators aimed to take advantage of the 44-hour period of electoral silence, in which all campaigning and discussion of the elections in the media must come to a halt.²²⁹ Macron Leaks first spread on Twitter because of Jack Posobiec, an American “conservative activist,”²³⁰ whose tweet was retweeted “87 times in the first five minutes, suggesting, [according to Nimmo], that the message was being

²²³ Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer et al., « Les Manipulations de l’information : un défi pour nos démocraties, » report for the Center for Analysis, Forecast and Strategy (CAPS) of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and for the Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School (IRSEM) of the French Ministry of the Armed Forces, Paris, August 2018.

https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/les_manipulations_de_l_information_2_cle04b2b6.pdf.

²²⁴ My translation, Marine Le Pen in Mathilde Cousin, “VIDEO. «Je n’ai pas de compte aux Bahamas, c’est de la diffamation», lance Macron, qui porte plainte pour propagation de fausse nouvelle,” *20 minutes*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.20minutes.fr/elections/2061779-20170504-video-compte-bahamas-diffamation-lance-macron-porte-plainte-propagation-fausse-nouvelle>.

²²⁵ “Tracing the source of MacronGate, the Macron offshore papers,” Qurium, https://www.qurium.org/alerts/france/tracing_macrongate_source/.

²²⁶ Luke O’Brien, “The Making of an American Nazi,” *The Atlantic*, December 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/12/the-making-of-an-american-nazi/544119/>.

²²⁷ Rachel Gutman, “Who Is Weev, and Why Did He Derail a Journalist’s Career?” *The Atlantic*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/02/who-is-weev/553295/>.

²²⁸ “What is Spear Phishing?” Kaspersky, <https://www.kaspersky.com/resource-center/definitions/spear-phishing>.

²²⁹ Jeangène Vilmer et al.

²³⁰ “Jack Posobiec’s file,” Politifact, <https://www.politifact.com/personalities/jack-posobiec/>.

boosted with the help of bots.”²³¹ Then, WikiLeaks’ tweet boosted the topic on Twitter—“the hashtag #MacronLeaks was used in 47,000 tweets, in just three and a half hours after the initial tweet.”²³² Attribution is again a difficult game here—France has not officially attributed the leak to any entity²³³—, but the security software company TrendMicro pointed its finger at Fancy Bear,²³⁴ a hacking group believed to be linked to the GRU.²³⁵ Interestingly, there was no really compromising nor particularly eye-catching material in the Macron Leaks, Therefore, it was in many respects a failed data dump from a propaganda perspective: as one commentator aptly stated, “it is amateurish, chaotic, disorganized, and has little substance [...]”.²³⁶

5.3 Domestic patterns and factors and their interplay with the spread or halt of RSS propaganda

Different domestic factors interplayed with the two propaganda operations that I will analyze, namely white and gray propaganda through RT and Sputnik and black propaganda of Macron Leaks, which both appear to have failed.

In the first case regarding the white and gray propaganda that “systematically relayed anything that could be favorable for Marine Le Pen and François Fillon, whereas the smallest attack possibility against Macron was exploited,”²³⁷ such as spreading the rumor that Macron may belong to “a wealthy gay lobby,”²³⁸ it is important to keep in mind that, as one journalist stated, “France was arguably never at the centre of the Kremlin’s information interests in Europe,” so it was only when Fillon was out of the race that “there was this rush to try and

²³¹ Megha Mohan, “Macron Leaks: the anatomy of a hack,” *BBC Trending*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-39845105>.

²³² Ben Nimmo et al., “Hashtag Campaign: #MacronLeaks,” @DRFLab on Medium, May 6, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/hashtag-campaign-macronleaks-4a3fb870c4e8>.

²³³ Andrew Rettman, “Macron Leaks could be 'isolated individual', France says,” *euobserver*, June 2, 2017, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/138106>.

²³⁴ Feike Hacquebord, “Two Years of Pawn Storm: Examining an Increasingly Relevant Threat,” TrendLabs Research Paper, 2017, <https://www.trendmicro.com/vinfo/gb/security/news/cyber-attacks/espionage-cyber-propaganda-two-years-of-pawn-storm>.

²³⁵ Garrett M. Graff, “Indicting 12 Russian Hackers Could Be Mueller's Biggest Move Yet,” *Wired*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/mueller-indictment-dnc-hack-russia-fancy-bear/>.

²³⁶ Stefan Soesanto, “The Macron leak that wasn't,” European Council on Foreign Relations, May 9, 2017, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_macron_leak_that_wasnt_7285.

²³⁷ Vincent Coquaz, “RT et Sputnik ont-ils relayé des fake news pendant la campagne comme le dit En Marche ?” *Libération*, June 6, 2018, https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/2018/06/06/rt-et-sputnik-ont-ils-relaye-des-fake-news-pendant-la-campagne-comme-le-dit-en-marche_1656810.

²³⁸ Jeangène Vilmer 109.

discredit Macron,” which was carried out with a “sense of [...] scramble and panic.”²³⁹ In 2017, RT and Sputnik produced no clear message framing to harness ethno-nationalist tensions or socio-economic divides—indeed, Macron was an anti-establishment candidate with a brand-new centrist political “movement,” and elections are fundamentally a moment of choice rather than a moment to protest against the status quo. Therefore, I argue that this structural political factor made it difficult for fear-mongering propaganda to flourish, so it was also difficult for RT—which had just launched its French branch in December 2017—and Sputnik to do the same. As one researcher aptly wrote regarding the cooperation between Russia and the American alt-right:

The Kremlin is a beneficiary of a confluence of narratives and visions and it would not be able to do anything if they began to disappear. Russia acts not as a societal transformer but as an echo chamber of European and American societies’ own doubts and transformations.²⁴⁰

This observation is applicable not only to the American case, but also to all white/gray RSS propaganda in the French, British and Spanish cases: RSS propaganda is only as strong as local discontent in public discourse is high. During the 2017 French presidential race, there was no major bone of contention in public discourse like the topic of immigration in the 2016 US elections, British deep-seated discontent with the EU and EU-8 immigration or Catalan nationalism in the 2017 Catalan referendum.

The Twitter accounts of RT and Sputnik in French, @RTenfrancais and @sputnik_fr and messages that they vehiculate are closely linked to what commentators and researchers of French social media call the “*fachosphère*,”²⁴¹ which is a pejorative term from the words “fascist” and “sphere” that is used to designate the French extreme-right community online. Indeed, Jeangène Vilmer sees “a strong correlation between the online communities that spread these rumors that were mostly aimed at Macron and Russophile communities (75% for accounts that disseminated at least three rumors).”²⁴² When I visit the Twitter page of @sputnik_fr, Twitter recommends that I follow the Twitter accounts of “Valeurs actuelles” and “Boulevard Voltaire,” which are both deemed to be news outlets of the extreme right or

²³⁹ Sam Jones, “Flawed Macron hack provides lessons for both sides,” *Financial Times*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/a5df0dfa-3491-11e7-99bd-13beb0903fa3>.

²⁴⁰ Marlene Laruelle, “Russian and American Far Right Connections: Confluence, Not Influence,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 516*, March 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russian-and-american-far-right-connections-confluence-not-influence>.

²⁴¹ Jeangène Vilmer 111.

²⁴² Ibid.

fachosphère.²⁴³ Additionally, a cursory analysis of @RTenfrancais tweets published right before the second round of elections shows probable politically-motivated bot activity that creates online links between extreme-right actors. Indeed, the Twitter account @ggelta2013²⁴⁴ was one of only 11 that interacted with a particularly vicious tweet, considering that it was published just two days before the elections, stating that “French youth is amongst the most skeptical towards the benefits of democracy,”²⁴⁵ and this same @ggelta2013 account only provides a steady stream of retweets, be they for the Italian extreme-right Lega²⁴⁶ or Jordan Bardella²⁴⁷—a major figure of the French extreme-right RN; the account also shows up as a major tweeter on a graph by the Social Media Research Foundation mapping extreme-right discussions about immigration in French and other languages.²⁴⁸ This illustrative example, along with the Twitter recommendations when one clicks on @RTenfrancais and on @sputnik_fr, go to show to what extent these two RSS outlets have embedded themselves into what seems to be a relatively closed online media circuit of the *fachosphère* that nevertheless maintains links to other European extreme right movements. RT and Sputnik had more of an anecdotal approach to messaging with diverse tidbit stories that went from publishing tweets about Marine Le Pen’s pick for Sports minister to the predicted break-up of the LR party, so they did not have one unified divisive narrative to prime audiences. From my own limited research, RT tweets had relatively few interactions with its content, which seems to indicate that RSS white and gray propaganda did not get very far. Nevertheless, the two RSS outlets have successfully managed to embed themselves into the French and European *fachosphère*, and I believe that they are also being boosted by bot

²⁴³ Marie Vaton, ““Valeurs Actuelles” : enquête sur une extrême droitisation,” *Téléobs*, December 5, 2015, <https://teleobs.nouvelobs.com/actualites/20151201.OBS0468/valeurs-actuelles-enquete-sur-une-extreme-droitisation.html> and Didier Pleux, ““Boulevard Voltaire”, le site de l’intolérance,” *Le Monde*, October 22, 2012, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2012/10/22/boulevard-voltaire-le-site-de-l-intolerance_1779115_3232.html.

²⁴⁴ <https://twitter.com/ggelta2013>

²⁴⁵ My translation, @RTenfrancais, “#Europe : les jeunes Français sont les plus sceptiques quant aux bienfaits de la démocratie [https://francais.rt.com/international/37901-pour-48-jeunes-europeens-democratie-pas-meilleure-forme-gouvernement-etude ... #sondage](https://francais.rt.com/international/37901-pour-48-jeunes-europeens-democratie-pas-meilleure-forme-gouvernement-etude...#sondage),” May 5, 2017, 8:36 AM, <https://twitter.com/RTenfrancais/status/860518505745195009>. Tweet.

²⁴⁶ Lega – Salvini Premier (@LegaSalvini), « FERRARA, PIAZZA STUPENDA PER IL CAPITANO! #9giugnovotoLega #primagliitaliani,” June 4, 2019, 06:36am, <https://twitter.com/LegaSalvini/status/1135903045936697344>. Tweet.

²⁴⁷ Jordan Bardella (@J_Bardella), “À demain 8h15 sur @radioclassique ! #ClassiqueMatin,” June 4, 2019, 11:00, https://twitter.com/J_Bardella/status/1135969469656850432. Tweet.

²⁴⁸ NodeXLExcelAutomator, “#Immigration_2018-12-19_06-38-16.xlsx” (graph for the Node Graph Gallery of the Social Media Research Foundation), December 19, 2018, <http://nodexlgraphgallery.org/Pages/Graph.aspx?graphID=179103>.

accounts like @ggelta2013. To conclude, although RSS white and gray propaganda seems to have failed to widely disseminate an anti-Macron message because it could neither surf on widespread nationalist nor socio-economic tensions, RT and Sputnik may still become powerful actors because they are so deeply intertwined with the *fachosphère*, which shows an apt understanding of marginal (online) media divisions in France.

The second RSS propaganda campaign—namely the so-called “Macron Leaks” data dump—clearly demonstrates that in cases of blatant gray/black propaganda, local systemic factors (as well as luck) can play a key role in discrediting and stopping the dissemination of propaganda.²⁴⁹ Indeed, the strong cooperation between state entities, Macron’s party *En Marche!* and the mainstream media’s compliance with French electoral laws limited the damage of the Macron Leaks. As one commentator writes, “the high level of cooperation in France among the state, political parties, and the media may be a model for others to emulate.”²⁵⁰ Another key factor is the majority of the French population’s trust in the traditional media and distrust in social media stories, as well as the content of the Macron Leaks and the timing of the release.

First of all, strong inter-institutional cooperation was triggered by awareness of what happened in the United States during the 2016 elections,²⁵¹ so the National Commission for Control of Electoral Campaigning Regarding the Presidential Elections (CNCCEP is the French acronym) was established shortly before the campaign. This body, alongside the National Agency for the Security of Information Systems (French acronym: ANSSI), were instrumental in preparation for the possibility of foreign state-sponsored online propaganda campaigns: the ANSSI conducted a workshop on the theme for all political parties to attend—only Le Pen’s RN party declined the invitation.²⁵² When Macron’s campaign staff became aware of the Macron Leaks, they immediately contacted the CNCCEP, which rapidly created a press release in which it warned the press not to publish the Macron Leaks because spreading false information can be punishable by French law.²⁵³

²⁴⁹ Jeangène Vilmer, 113.

²⁵⁰ Erik Brattburg and Tim Maurer, “Russian Election Interference: Europe’s Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Paper*, May 23, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/23/russian-election-interference-europe-s-counter-to-fake-news-and-cyber-attacks-pub-76435>.

²⁵¹ Jeangène Vilmer, 118.

²⁵² *Ibid*, 115.

²⁵³ Jeangène Vilmer, 118.

This swift inter-institutional cooperation was complemented by compliance of an overwhelming majority of traditional French media, which prevented the Macron Leaks from effectively entering public discourse which, according to Mika Aaltola's "five stages of election meddling," means that the Macron Leaks stopped short of the "[f]ourth stage – whitewashing the leaked data through the professional media."²⁵⁴ This "strong tradition of serious journalism"²⁵⁵ means that "[the French press] covered the hacking and influence operation without giving any credibility to the leaked information."²⁵⁶ Because the majority of the French population trusts the traditional media—"a 2017 study found that 75 percent of the French people surveyed trust information from traditional media, while only 32 percent trust information from online media and only 25 percent trust information from social networks"²⁵⁷—after a few hours, "more tweets using the MacronLeaks hashtag were about fake news than they were about the leaks or Mr. Macron's credibility."²⁵⁸

Beyond these domestic factors that provided the Macron Leaks with little ground to take root in, the release of the leaks was poorly executed both in form—i.e. the way it spread—and content: "nearly 18 thousand bots deployed to push #MacronLeaks and related topics' failed to either mobilize or produce significant discussion of the leaked documents among French users more likely to vote for Macron,"²⁵⁹ in large part because the content was first spread through the American alt-right.²⁶⁰ Perhaps more importantly, the content of the leaks was uneventful and did not fit into any SYP's except for some messages that were so far-fetched that they instantly discredited the Macron Leaks promoters.²⁶¹ Indeed, a vast majority of the leaks were just regular administrative e-mails from the campaign, and just a few messages were blatantly planted because they were so vulgar and unidiomatic, seemingly translated from English—"baise le peuple" may fit into the SYP of prejudice against the globalized elite that Macron represented, but it was rapidly discredited as "fake news." Finally,

²⁵⁴ Mika Aaltola, "Democracy's Eleventh Hour," *FIJA BRIEFING PAPER* 226, November 2017, https://storage.googleapis.com/upi-live/2017/11/bp226_democracys_eleventh_hour.pdf.

²⁵⁵ Jeangène Vilmer, 114.

²⁵⁶ Hall Jamieson, 11.

²⁵⁷ Brattburg and Maurer.

²⁵⁸ Sam Jones, "Flawed Macron hack provides lessons for both sides," *The Financial Times*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/a5df0dfa-3491-11e7-99bd-13be0903fa3>.

²⁵⁹ Emilio Ferrara in Hall Jamieson, 12.

²⁶⁰ Jeangène Vilmer, 115.

²⁶¹ Josh Caplan (@joshdcaplan), « Grégoire Potton, directeur of gen. affairs @ #EnMarche tells staff "baise le peuple," which means "fuck the people." #MacronGate #MacronLeaks" », May 6, 2017, 07:46, <https://twitter.com/joshdcaplan/status/860868394534522880>. Tweet.

the timing of the release, which was just a few hours before the 44-hour period of mandatory media silence relating to the campaign, was poorly planned because it did not give the rumor sufficient time to grow and made the public instantly suspicious.²⁶²

To conclude on which domestic factors most influenced the failure of Macron Leaks, I argue that fluid inter-institutional coordination, as well as the responsible behavior of traditional media and general public trust in them proved to be essential in slowing the dissemination of this piece of RSS propaganda—which seemed to have benefitted from the mobilization of the American alt-right. Also, the content of the leaks was irrelevant to the political mood in France as it did not tap into any SYP's. According to some, the Macron Leaks sloppiness even makes it look like a false flag operation: “some analysts have remarked that the Cyrillic metadata and appearances of the name Roshka Georgiy Petrovich [...] are almost too numerous when contrasted with the sparsity of evidence found in other Russian attacks.”²⁶³ Although this is a plausible guess, perhaps only time will tell which actors were really behind this piece of gray/black propaganda.

²⁶² Jeangène Vilmer, 115.

²⁶³ Brattburg and Maurer

6. Conclusion

After explaining the choice of three case studies in type 2 countries and of the term “propaganda,” in Chapter One, I identified the interaction between RSS online propaganda operations and domestic conditions in Western countries as an embryonic research field. The wide theoretical frame of constructivism, with the sub-theories of symbolic politics, political communication and political psychology, along with propaganda studies informed my choice to analyze the interaction between domestic factors and the propaganda campaigns as well as my approach to the content analysis of RSS propaganda.

In Chapter Two, I argue that there is perhaps no greater goal for RSS propaganda abroad than to promote the idea that “nothing is true and everything is possible,” as Peter Pomerantsev’s constructivist theory and eponymous book about Russian strategy in the 21st century goes, or as RT’s slogan goes, “question more.” RSS propaganda’s framing keeps people in democratic societies on their toes and ensures that Russia stays in the limelight on the world stage in a cost-effective way. In the context of a dwindling economy and resources, yet also of an expansionist and revisionist mindset, Russia’s best bet is to project power through online propaganda. The Kremlin partially bases its choice to conduct propaganda on reflexive control theory, which aims to exert influence on foreign political actors by engaging with them in light of their social context. Russia’s strong and historical engagement with propaganda abroad stems from a domestic information culture informed by “soft authoritarianism” that seeks to uphold regime security through “information security,” whereby Russia must protect the “information security” of the minds of its citizens; thus, propaganda is an asymmetric tool that Russia uses against more open and democratic Western countries, where “[questioning] more” is permitted.

In the case study of Brexit, the historical roots of sentiments linked to the referendum, which include high socio-economic inequality, ethno-nationalist tensions and a divided media landscape, provided fertile breeding ground for pro-Brexit propaganda—the majority of which was created and disseminated by the Vote Leave and Leave.EU campaigns. RSS propaganda carried out through RT and Sputnik, as well as through IRA sock puppet and bot social media accounts, seems to have been on a relatively small scale and quite disorganized. Nevertheless, it framed its messages in ways similar to local Vote Leave and Leave.EU actors, especially to surf on the SYP wave of anti-immigration sentiment.

The deep-rooted history of Catalan nationalism and recent discourse radicalization from the pro-independentist parties created an environment of total division between pro-Madrid as opposed to pro-Barcelona media. In this context, RT, Sputnik and Assange's coverage of the crisis proved to very aggressively tout the pro-Catalan nationalism narrative. There also seems to have been a RSS bot campaign, of which one part of the bots were also used to support the regime in Venezuela. However, the case of the Catalan referendum also points towards possible shortcomings in research methodologies and towards the issue of bias or politicization in contemporary online propaganda studies more generally.

Finally, the failure of Macron Leaks in the 2017 French presidential elections are interesting insofar as they demonstrate the importance of smooth inter-institutional cooperation in halting a propaganda campaign, but also the key role that the traditional media can play, especially if they are well-respected amongst the general population. However, the content of the Macron Leaks did not fit into a previously primed narrative, which may also partly explain the general lack of interest. Whereas RT and Sputnik had little traction and strategic framing in their reporting, they still managed to integrate themselves into the *fachosphere*, which could mean a greater ability to put forward anti-system narratives about France—the most recent of which was their extensive bottom-up coverage of the yellow vests crisis, which significantly increased their following on social media.²⁶⁴ Therefore, although the Macron Leaks flop gave experts and pundits some hope regarding how to effectively handle RSS propaganda, I argue that we should be more cautious in our assessment of RT and Sputnik in France.

These three cases seems to indicate that the most pervasive, influential and subtle form of RSS propaganda were RT and Sputnik, which consistently sought to embed themselves in their host country's dominant anti-system narrative. Thus, any type of local tensions—be they socio-economic or ethno-nationalist—yield SYP's that can be exploited, and a fragmented media environment, especially one where there is little trust in the traditional press, means that RT, Sputnik and associated bots or sock puppets can more easily gain legitimacy and insert themselves into the anti-system local discourse. Although RT and Sputnik

²⁶⁴ Alexandre Piquard et Alexandre Berteau, "La chaîne RT surfe sur le mouvement des « gilets jaunes," *Le Monde*, January 5, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2019/01/05/la-chaîne-rt-surfe-sur-le-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes_5405334_3234.html.

do not seem to influence local political decisions, they do occupy and reinforce anti-system echo chambers.

In the field of contemporary online propaganda studies, there still remains a large swathe of uncharted territory. Future studies are desperately need to analyze domestic online propaganda campaigns, especially through private messaging applications like WhatsApp, in developing countries such as India, the Philippines or Brazil.²⁶⁵ I would also suggest that more qualitative and quantitative research into the influence of factors such as education and critical thinking on the belief and spread of propaganda be carried out, perhaps turning towards countries like Finland that will implement “fake news” awareness initiation classes for children as young as three years old. Research should also be conducted into technological evolutions of bots to understand whether they are flying under the radars of social media companies in a cat-and-mouse game. Reflexive control theory in the context of RSS propaganda abroad remains a research gap well worth exploring. Finally, I believe that the approach of analyzing the interplay and confluence between domestic factors and foreign propaganda operations can be further developed with new case studies.

However, this field of research faces two existential caveats: the first one regards paucity of data and opaqueness of social media companies, which is impeding the field. This is a comment that numerous online propaganda researchers have made, including Bastos and Mercea, Hall Jamieson, Howard and Kollyani and Alandete. Therefore, it is up to the scientific community and governments to find a solution to this issue in cooperation with social media companies in order to conduct more and better-quality research. Secondly, there is a desperate need for multidisciplinary meta-research: as the research into the Catalan case showed, there are scientific methodological questions to solve, for which more peer reviewed publishing and conferences would help. Then, there are philosophical, ethical and deontological questions that merit more attention in the field of contemporary propaganda studies to guide researchers towards objectivity or truthfulness in a “post-truth” political environment.

The policy implications of this thesis are both pessimistic and optimistic. A pessimist would say that as long as Russia is revisionist, propaganda aimed at Western democracies will

²⁶⁵ For more information on the topic, see “Beyond Europe: How Disinformation Campaigns Affect Democracies Globally” (panel, StratCom Conference, October 2, 2018, Washington, D.C.), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOpx8ZbQMnA>.

most likely continue. And for RSS propaganda to really lose footing and wither away, the underlying problems in Western democracies that RSS propaganda feeds need to be resolved. Therefore the best policy recommendation is to mend divisions within society that create SYP's. From a short- to medium-term policy perspective, this recommendation seems hardly actionable.

The optimistic policy conclusions to draw from this study are that in the short term, states can learn from France's institutional and legal framework to regulate and halt RSS or any other propaganda when necessary. However, this type of regulation may be difficult for some states to implement because of how they conceive of the concept of freedom of speech, and it may in fact in the long-run erode the right to freedom of speech. In the medium- to long-term, another solution is educating citizens about online political propaganda and how to seek accurate information on- and offline.

From a constructivist standpoint, there may be no greater policy recommendation than for Western democracies to be aware of the effects of alarmist rhetoric, precipitous claims and fear-mongering about democracy being in danger. If targeted democracies fall prey to paranoid policies, this would be an accurate illustration of reflexive control theory or of a fly causing an elephant to fall off a cliff. Western governments must find the right way to speak the truth about Russian state-sponsored interference whilst providing appropriate constructive measures to ensure the prospering of free speech and democracy in their own societies.

Annex—Telephone interview with David Alandete (June 5, 2019)

Former Managing Editor of *El País*, current Washington Correspondent for *ABC*

Author (A): From what I can gather concerning the case of Catalonia, it's that RT and Sputnik News were binary, well created, played off of nationalist tensions, and also the sharp divide between pro-Catalan secessionist outlets and anti-Catalan secessionist outlets. Do you agree with this assessment first of all, and do you believe that there were any other domestic Spanish factors that interacted with this propaganda?

David Alandete (DA): So, I think, like, we have to actually consider the Russian meddling in the Catalan independence crisis from the point of view of Russia taking advantage of a pre-existing crisis, ok? I actually do not think that Russia was in any way interested in promoting the pro-Independence sentiment in Catalonia. Maybe they saw that there was a crisis that was going on, and then especially RT and Sputnik increased their coverage of the crisis, bending the rules of journalism and mixing opinions with factual reporting and publishing headlines where extremely divisive [sic], like "Tanks in the streets of Barcelona," "Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain on the verge of war" You know, all these headlines that you can find them online if you read Spanish, which I guess you do, were actually very exaggerated, divisive, and really not a journalistic way of approaching this, you know. The thing is that, they did it mainly, you know, I don't consider RT TV—I mean, it is a TV, but most of their activity in disinformation is online, you know, so that's what I think was the main point, you know. [Creating] disunity online through mostly false claims.

A: And so following up on that, do you believe that Russian propaganda has the same approach everywhere it goes, or do you think that it caters specifically to the domestic national context?

DA: I mean, RT is very complex. RT started like a normal TV, you know. Its main goal was to actually portray Russia in a positive light to the outside world. There's nothing wrong with that, you know there are many channels that do that. The thing is that through the years, it turned into a propaganda weapon for the Kremlin. It mixes legitimate reporting, especially I think their TV channel, you know the one that you can see in hotels and cable, you know, it's not that different from other TVs that we have throughout the world, you know. The thing is that online, they actually went berserk and there is actually no filter or no journalistic guidelines or editing, and they take advantage of these to always, always, always amplify the Kremlin's message in several crises. So I would say that they are more active in some scenarios. So in Europe they are very active, in France they were very active when Macron was running. In Germany they were active against Merkel. Same with Italy in the last election. Brexit, too. The United States. Now, more recently, their main focus has been Syria, too, of course. They have been the strongest deniers of Assad's responsibility in the chemical attacks, and the most recently is in Venezuela. You know they are supporting the Maduro regime.

A: Right, so moving on to another one of my questions, do you think that RT and Sputnik are actually successful in what they do, especially in the Catalanian crisis?

DA: I think they are successful in creating division, you know? They are successful in casting concern, you know? In this age of social networks, news travels fast, you know through Facebook, Twitter. They have mastered the art of disinformation, and these headlines, the news travels faster than regular news, you know. And yes I think that they are successful in creating division and in portraying the West, the European Union, you know, NATO, the United States, places and institutions that are going through a very deep crisis, stronger than the one we can see in Russia, you know.

A: So do you think that they actually create the division, or do they just—

DA: No, they prey on pre-existing divisions. RT and Sputnik could not actually make up, you know, the independence sentiments in Catalonia or the drive to leave the European Union in Great Britain, you know. They cannot make that up, you know, but they prey on it, and they go there, and you know. I mean, the case of Catalonia I think is paradigmatic because if you consider that independence parties are banned in Russia, and if you actually try to advance pro-independence goals, you will be put in jail, you know. I think it's five years, I don't know right now off the top of my head, but I mean, you go to jail, like for sure. The thing is that, they come to Europe, and they're like, OK, this is the main point here, so let's focus on it. And you know, I think there's no doubt that it's not a matter for the national domestic interest of Russia, it's just a matter for their foreign perception, you know. How Russia is perceived outside, and I think with that they are succeeding, you know.

A: Do you think that they are also, as we say in French "*ils se tirent une balle dans le pied*," so they're almost "shooting their own foot" by creating—

DA: Can you repeat that?

A: So, sorry. Don't you believe that Russia Today and Sputnik News, which are vehiculating these divisive messages are actually just shooting, they're almost creating a negative worldwide sentiment about Russia? So isn't it backfiring in some ways?

DA: No. I mean, the thing is that they, you know like, they already play with the idea that Russia has a negative image for sowing disinformation, they don't care. What they do is that they attack journalists who do reporting on them, like Jessikka Aro in Finland. They—it's like Trump, you know—they cast everything as fake news, you know. And their reporters are very active in creating short videos and Twitter messages, trying to actually create these doubts, and like "oh, Russia," "everything is a lie," you know, everything is a conspiracy, or everything is NATO, the United States, or the "deep state." And the proof that they don't care and that they keep doing it is that they are fully operative in Venezuela right now, you know, fully, supporting Maduro.

A: Which they weren't just a few months ago?

DA: They've always been, but now it's very intense.

A: Interesting. So, do you believe... So, from what I read in your articles about the Catalan crisis and Russian interference, you have an article that said that there was bot activity linked to pro-Chavez accounts.

DA: Yeah yeah.

A: So what's your insight into this?

DA: Sorry?

A: I was just wondering what your insight is into this aspect of propaganda which is more I'd say gray or black propaganda? So not as open as Russia Today or Sputnik News.

DA: Well, really like if you see how Russia operates in the disinformation field, they are actually highly coordinated with several regimes. Iran is one of them. If you go to Iran, they have not only their Pars TV channels, but also others like HispanTV, and also English channels. They also collaborate with Syria and operate in many languages, with Cuba, with Prensa Latina. I think Venezuela, too, you know Telesur, [unclear]. They share the same sources, they share the same quotes, interviews, the

same experts. So you just have to go to the map of the world and see who Russia considers an ally, and Venezuela's there, Iran is there. Most assured, you will see disinformation collaboration between their propaganda. This they have mastered very well. And I have to say, even though like this has been going on in Russia since 2009-2010, maybe 2011 when Putin won reelection as president, but he was in trouble because there were protests, but Venezuela with Chavez, not with Maduro now, but with Chavez, they actually started doing this, you know, before. You know. They know that it was important for them to control the West.

A: And what do you think is the influence of bots in Russia's propaganda strategy?

DA: Can you repeat that please?

A: What do you think is the importance of bots in Russia's strategy, in propaganda?

DA: I have to say there are many studies that analyze this. It is my belief, my opinion, that bots are not very important. I mean, my main conclusion after studying this phenomenon is that disinformation actually prey [sic] on how psychologically human beings tend to share more rapidly and more often bombastic headlines that are basically lies, you know. So, I think there are bots, especially at the Internet Research Agency, this has been researched, but I think it's actually more important how they actually prey on—how would I say—mainstream media, you know in order to... spread disinformation, very efficiently I have to say. You know, I mean my main point here is, I work for a mainstream newspaper in Spain, OK? I am bound by some regulations, you know. Like I need to write which sources, I need to identify my sources, I need to identify headlines that actually reflect what is in the story, you know. These things don't apply to them. They can actually have a headline, like they did during the Catalanian crisis, that says "Tanks in the streets of Barcelona," and that's it, you know! And that's just an opinion that someone says, someone who's never been to Barcelona but by bending the rules of journalism, they are able to spread disinformation very fast.

A: Yeah, so the white propaganda or overt propaganda is almost more dangerous as opposed to bot activity and all the rest.

DA: Bot activity, I think, it's not a thing anymore because the big platforms, they have detected it and they can take measures against it.

A: But do you think that during the 2017 Catalanian crisis, bots were still a major factor or even in that crisis they weren't—

DA: According to the analysis that we did with a company that is called Alto Data Analytics, there were. But I didn't do that research myself, I just used others' research.

A: Do you think... As a research now, I'm finding it very difficult to understand how much information is out there, how much information is known about these propaganda operations from within perhaps the government, but isn't revealed of course because it's still confidential. So I saw that Rajoy and Dastis both cited what seemed to be the same source as you did, so I guess the Alto Data Analytics saying that approximately 30% of the automated accounts were Venezuelan. Do you have any insight into whether more research has been carried out or whether more is actually known about this?

DA: Yeah, I don't think Rajoy used the same sources as we did. I think all the research that the government did—and I actually was... I didn't report on this, but I was of course in touch with the Spanish intelligence services to corroborate the story and research, you know. So, there's something in Spain called Centro Criptológico Nacional, which is something that sounds like, I don't know,

something very weird, but it is where these analyses are done. They reached the same conclusions separately, you know, the same numbers. I know for a fact that they didn't use Alto [Data Analytics].

A: Right, that makes sense, of course. Ok. And so, on another topic, in a comparative analysis, would you compare the Catalan case more with that of France, Brexit or to another in terms of Russian propaganda outreach? So what cases pop into mind when you think of how Russia used the Catalan crisis?

DA: I think it's very similar to all the other campaigns really. Like it's very very similar to the point that they actually took some of their tactics from the Brexit playbook, you know, like there like supporting somehow the referendum. Same with the German elections. This type of tactic, you know, this type of headlines, this type of sources—you know they usually use the same sources, so you see this guy who is you know someone that doesn't have any experience in European affairs or in Catalan affairs or whatever, Spanish affairs actually being used as a source for pieces in Spanish, English, French, on any given topic that you can imagine, you know, Brexit, Catalonia, Trump. These experts, they are always the same, they will share [unclear], but they always express pro-Putin, pro-Russian views, you know. And this is one of the main tenets of what they do, you know. You know they...journalism also depends on sourcing, you know, you need good sources, and when you do analytical pieces and you ask for opinions, I mean, if you're going to write about the United States or about Catalonia or about Italy you better get someone that has experience and knows what he or she is talking about. The fact with RT or Sputnik that they have this limited number of experts that are willing to talk to them, and they will always, always say things that benefit Putin and the Kremlin. The case that I mentioned earlier about the tanks in the streets of Barcelona, I recommend you to read it, it is in Spanish. The guy who they use as a source is someone that can give opinions about anything, and his opinion is there are tanks in the streets of Barcelona. That is not an opinion, you know. But they claim that that is an opinion and that they have the legitimacy to turn this into a headline. That was one of the most shared pieces of news in the crisis, you know.

A: Yeah, that's of course a very important point to think about, the way that they spin the same people around to talk about everything, for sure. And so also during my research I found unfortunately that there is very little about the Russian interference in the Catalan case. Why do you think that that is? Because I found a lot more about Brexit, and also some more on France.

DA: You mean there was more intents in the cases of Brexit or France?

A: I mean that there was more scholarly information about the Russian interference in the French case and in the British case, whereas in the Catalan case there was relatively little information about disinformation.

DA: Yeah, well because like in Catalonia, you know like it's not an institutional crisis as big as like you know like the United Kingdom actually breaking up with the rest. And also you have to consider that when this happened in the United Kingdom, it was a complete shock and people started looking for reasons or like what influenced there the process. With Catalonia the thing is that we were actually to detect, research and report before the referendum happened, you know, so we caught them. And that explains their extremely violent reaction online, you know, their harassing like which lasts until today by the way.

A: So the Russian disinformation organs are still harassing Catalan journalists, or Spanish—

DA: Yeah journalists. They've come after me, they'll insult me, they'll like, ... and all the people who actually took part in this you know. So they don't respect the fact that we do journalism and report them then they will attack personally the journalists.

A: Yeah I remember that it's the same issue with Ben Nimmo from the DFRLab who's at the Atlantic Council.

DA: Yes.

A: There are a lot of people who unfortunately have that kind of reaction. And finally, do you have any updates on the investigation into Russian interference during the Catalanian crisis? I know that very little or almost nothing is being written about it now since it's already two years ago, but is there any new information that is perhaps relevant?

DA: Well, the only thing that I think is relevant is the link between Assange and some people—Julian Assange and some people from Catalonia, you know some independent leaders. And that may be a point of contact you know. You know Assange works, he worked for RT, he had a show in RT, and I think that may be a point of research, but I don't have much information about it now.

A: Ok, thank you. Yeah, I think that you also wrote articles about Assange's links, if I'm not mistaken. And so now I have some slightly perhaps more controversial questions, so please excuse me in advance. So I wanted to know more about what it was like to write within *El País* during the crisis. I know that some detractors think that *El País* is or was very biased during the 2017 Catalan crisis. What was it like for you personally to work within *El País*? Was it a normal deontological setting or were there some infringements or difficulties?

DA: No it was normal. It was normal. If you want to know about how the situation is, I recommend you to *Reporters sans frontières*, and they actually put out—Reporters without Borders, yeah—they put out a report on how the situation of freedom of the press in Catalonia was very, very, very difficult for some journalists so there were a couple of journalists from *El País* quoted there, and they actually with their name and last name told their stories, and that's probably a better depiction of what was going on.

A: I'll make sure to take a look at that, thank you. And also with the benefit of hindsight, would you have carried out your research in the same way, and would you have written your articles in the same way as you did in 2017, or do you think that there were any methodological shortcuts that were taken or, I mean, was the information well-verified before coming out?

DA: So, I would do the same because you know the research of disinformation also like, when you take the approach of like "hey, I work with a highly-effective company, Alto [Data Analytics], and our researcher, his name is Javier Lesaca, they are extremely prestigious for these things, right? The second thing is like, methodologically, this is interesting, right? There was a backlash or a push, this is typical of, from the Russian meddling machine and their very complex systems. So with me they didn't get upset, or really upset, they didn't get a degree of harassing until I went to the UK Parliament in December 2017 and along with another two people, I actually was able to explain our research and our conclusions to like a committee on fake news. Then there was a letter sent to the committee some months after that claiming that there were methodological flaws, right? And they were actually like going after the percentage of bots that were analyzed, you know, using tools that were available. You know, the thing is that we never said that bots were the main thing, you know, that's like going into details and trying to cut out of the whole story by discrediting a little detail, you know? The author of that letter that was casting doubts on the methodology is a guy named—he claims he's a hacker, so I guess we can say he's a hacker—his name is M.C. McGrath, and just recently—I knew that he was working with Julian Assange—but just recently, I got the registry of visits to Julian Assange while he was in the Ecuador embassy—he was one of the people that visited Assange the most those days, you know. So this is an attack coming from Assange that is working

with the Russian machine, or coordinated with the Russian machine, trying to discredit the fact that he doesn't like the percentage of false followers that we claimed that he had and how we discounted the number of bots. Now, I read their claims. I think the percentage of bots that he found was incorrect, but even if it were different, this doesn't harm the main conclusion, you know, which is the fact that Assange said for instance that Assange quoted in the Russian media, so this is not one of these sources that I was telling you about, claimed that there was going to be a civil war between Spain and Catalonia! Ok? Or that Spain was engaging in the First World War in Internet! You know? So I think I would do the research in the same way, to answer your question. Nothing that I've seen invalidates the main conclusion, that is that Russia was engaged in a campaign and using sources like Julian Assange in order to prove a point.

A: But you do believe that some of the conclusions or that some of the findings related to bots were somewhat incorrect or somewhat... Yes, is that also what you're saying?

DA: No no, that's what they claim. I think it was correct. But what I mean is that even if it wasn't, if there was like a percentage that was not accurate, which I don't think, but even if it was the case, which is what they claim, it wouldn't invalidate that there was a disinformation campaign, not at all. But I think we were correct, 100%.

A: And my final question for you is, do you believe that—so this is a more general philosophical question that I'm also asking myself during my own studies, and I was wondering what your point of view is on this—do you believe that the study of propaganda, such as Russian state-sponsored propaganda can be objective, and if so, how? Because you know, as you know, everyone comes at the question from different angles, and it seems to me sometimes difficult to know how to objectively approach the question. Or should it be approached objectively at all?

DA: I don't understand the question, sorry.

A: The question is, do you think that the study of propaganda can be objective, and if so, how? How does one reach the greatest amount of objectivity in studies of propaganda?

DA: No, so we can objectively analyze propaganda, or study propaganda?

A: Yes, that's the question.

DA: It's always subjective? No, I think it's objective. You know, journalism is not a, you know, it's measurable, and I actually defend the idea that you can measure disinformation, you know? With algorithms, you can actually count sources, headlines, you know? The availability of sources. I think that can all be measured. I think it is not like an opinion. It's completely objective. I actually think that with good resources, we can come up with a methodology to analyze disinformation and fight it.

A: And do you believe that the social media companies provide us with the correct tools to do that?

DA: No, not at all. I think they need to start changing that. You know, they are very opaque.

A: Yes, that's been one of the major points of contention that I've seen in the literature so far about how social media companies, apart from Twitter, don't reveal a lot of the activities that are going on on their websites.

DA: Yeah.

A: Alright, well thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it. And I was wondering, are there any points that you would like to elaborate on as a conclusion or extra points that you see as important?

DA: No, I think that we went through the main things, and you have like my... You know that I wrote a book on this, right?

A: Yes, I saw that you wrote a book recently on this.

DA: Yeah, you have more information in there, like the methodology and everything. I think that if you have any other methodological questions, there you can find a lot of stuff.

A: Alright, great, well, thank you so much again, and have a nice day!

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