



CHAPTER 2

Polarize and Conquer: Russian Influence Operations in the United States

Abstract This chapter recounts, analyzes and theoretically frames the impact of influence operations carried by Russian trolls coordinated by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) to covertly influence the 2016 presidential elections in the United States. The chapter locates the IRA development in the context of domestic Russian politics and its later evolution as an agent of information warfare in the conflict in Ukraine. The chapter also discusses the theme of political polarization within American society, which was exploited and exacerbated by a coordinated strategy of political interference directed by the Kremlin aimed at sowing distrust and confusions among voters.

Keywords Trolling · Internet Research Agency (IRA) · Russia · Hybrid warfare · Facebook

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter discusses the influence operations¹ carried by the Kremlin-affiliated on-line propaganda outfit known as the Internet Research

¹ “Information operations and warfare, also known as influence operations, include the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent”. See <https://www.rand.org/topics/information-operations.html>.

Agency (IRA), which covertly interfered with the 2016 US presidential elections. The influence strategy is discussed with reference to Russian politics by looking at the IRA as a hub of information warfare in support of the Russian government, both for national issues and in the context of the military intervention in Ukraine. Special emphasis in the analysis is given to the concept of ‘managed democracy,’ a form of government hiding an autocratic core behind a façade of democratic procedures and institutions. The term is discussed in the chapter as an ideological precursor to the media manipulation efforts carried by Russia in the United States.

The case study presented in support of the analysis discusses a series of political events in the United States organized via social media by the IRA with the unwitting cooperation of real American activists. The IRA operations are observed as a revealing example of contemporary Russian propaganda strategies, based on the ‘weaponization of information’ (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). Such influence strategy is discussed through the theoretical prism of post-truth politics, particularly with reference to the trust crisis in political and cultural institutions and to postmodern ideological relativism.

The chapter also explores the growing cultural and political divisions within American society. The epistemic crisis, the decline in authority of democratic institutions and ideological polarization at the heart of the post-truth condition were exploited by the influence operations by a hostile foreign actor. The chapter also demonstrates how Russia is exploiting the post-truth condition within Western democracies to challenge their global supremacy and advance its geopolitical agenda.

2.2 THIS IS WHAT MANAGED DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE

On Saturday May 21, 2016, two small crowds of demonstrators squared off at noon in front of the Da’Wah Islamic Center in Houston, Texas. One protest had been assembled by the *Heart of Texas* Facebook group, which boasted the headline ‘Texas: homeland of guns, BBQ and ur heart’ and presented itself as an organization in favor of the secession of Texas from the United States. The Facebook group, which at the time counted over 250,000 followers, had created the event ‘Stop the Islamization of

Texas,' and the roughly fifty people that attended waved confederate flags, chanted anti-Muslim slogans and wore 'White Lives Matter' t-shirts. On the other side of the street, a completely different crowd of counter-protesters, slightly outnumbering their opponents, attended the event 'Save Islamic Knowledge' that had been organized on the same day and location by another Facebook group, *United Muslims of America*, which counted more than 300,000 followers. These demonstrators carried signs against Islamophobia, waved 'Antifa' symbols and unrolled a large black banner with an illustration of Hitler pointing a gun to his head. *Follow your leader, kill yourself*, read the slogan on the banner.

Six months later, on November 12, 10,000 people gathered in New York City's Union Square to protest the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. They were attending the 'Trump is NOT my president. March against Trump' event, organized by the Facebook group *BlackMattersUS*, which presented itself as a community of activists with a mission "to tell the bold truth about racism, inequality and injustice the mainstream media keep out-of-sight." The description of the event, which was shared on Facebook with 61,000 people, read: "Divided is the reason we just fell. We must unite despite our differences to stop HATE from ruling the land." It was the most widely attended of the many demonstrations that took place across America in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election. The vast crowd marched for over forty blocks, until it reached the Trump Tower, carrying signs against racism, sexism, homophobia and chanting "This is what democracy looks like!".

At first sight, the street confrontation in Houston on an issue as sensitive as Muslim immigration in the post-9/11 America and the wave of popular discontent in New York against Trump's election might have appeared as genuine displays of American grassroots activism, signaling a robust tradition of political participation which flares up in periods of contentious politics. But upon closer scrutiny, there was a catch, which was revealed one year later by the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence investigating Russian interference in the 2016 US elections. None of the organizers actually showed up to the rallies, since the events, as well as the Facebook groups behind them, had been created by a shadowy agency based in St. Petersburg, Russia, known as the Internet Research Agency, or IRA.

In its on-line propaganda campaigns, carried between 2013 and 2018, the IRA—which US officials defined as a 'troll farm'—operated like a sophisticated digital marketing agency, employing over a thousand people

to perform round the clock influence operations in various world regions. In the United States, the operations started around 2014 and continued through 2018.² The IRA was founded and financed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch in the food catering business with close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin and to Russian intelligence.³ In February 2018, Prigozhin was among the several Russian citizens and entities indicted by the US Justice Department Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who was investigating Russian information warfare against the United States and possible collusions between the Trump campaign⁴ and the Russian government.⁵ The IRA was also among the entities indicted with charges of conspiracy to defraud the United States by unlawfully interfering in its political and electoral process through a series of influence operations that were described as ‘information warfare’.⁶

²The data provided by the major technology companies to the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence “illustrate that for approximately five years, Russia has waged a propaganda war against American citizens, manipulating social media narratives to influence American culture and politics”. DiResta, D., et al. (2018). *The tactics & tropes of the internet research agency* (p. 6). New Knowledge.

³ Eltagouri, M. (2018). “The rise of ‘Putin’s chef,’ the Russian oligarch accused of manipulating the U.S. election”. *Washington Post*. <https://beta.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/16/the-rise-of-putins-chef-yevgeniy-prigozhin-the-russian-accused-of-manipulating-the-u-s-election/?noredirect=on>.

⁴ “The IRA had a very clear bias for then-candidate Trump’s that spanned from early in the campaign and throughout the data set. A substantial portion of political content articulated pro-Donald Trump sentiments, beginning with the early primaries” (DiResta et al. 2018, 9).

⁵ While the Mueller report fell short of accusing President Trump of collusion with Russian agents, it nonetheless concluded that “the Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion”. See Editorial Board. (2019). “The Mueller report and the danger facing American democracy”. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/19/opinion/mueller-report-trump-russia.html>.

⁶ “Information warfare can cover a vast range of different activities and processes seeking to steal, plant, interdict, manipulate, distort or destroy information. The channels and methods available for doing this cover an equally broad range, including computers, smartphones, real or invented news media, statements by leaders or celebrities, online troll campaigns, text messages, vox pops by concerned citizens, YouTube videos, or direct approaches to individual human targets. Recent Russian campaigning provides examples of all of the above and more”. Giles, K. (2016). *Handbook of Russian information warfare* (p. 4). Nato Defense College.

The Special Counsel indictments confirmed what had already been reported first by Buzzfeed in 2014,⁷ by *The New York Times* in 2015⁸ and by several other later reports on the operations and the structure of on-line propaganda outfits affiliated with the Kremlin. The indictments laid bare the multiple disinformation tactics employed by the IRA to influence American politics, including disseminating false information on the presidential candidates, particularly Hillary Clinton,⁹ and impersonating the role of activists in order to mobilize American citizens around a plurality of divisive issues.

What had been initially discussed and analyzed by journalists and scholars (Seddon 2014; Chen 2015; Confessore & Wakabayashi 2017; Vaidhyanathan 2018) was thus officially condemned by the American judiciary: Russia leveraged popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube to wage an information warfare against the United States. A campaign of disinformation that had started with an hoax about a fake terrorist attack on US ground (Chen 2015) later evolved into a machinery, at times amateurish at others very effective, geared toward pitting American political communities against each other by means of incendiary memes and fabricated events disseminated via social media. The operations of the IRA are part of a broader Russian state-run soft power and propaganda apparatus that includes the multilingual all-news network RT, the on-line news agency Sputnik, think tanks, foundations and social and religious groups, which often cooperate in order to amplify pro-Kremlin political narratives.

According to a report compiled by cybersecurity company New Knowledge in collaboration with Columbia University, the disinformation campaign leading up to the 2016 US elections was part of a three-pronged strategy which also included the attempted hacking of the voting system, the cyberattack of the Democratic National Committee email server, with the subsequent release of a trove of confidential emails to the alternative

⁷ Seddon, M. (2014). “Documents show how Russia’s troll army hit America”. *Buzzfeed*. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/maxseddon/documents-show-how-russias-troll-army-hit-america>.

⁸ Chen, A. (2015). “The agency. An investigation into the Russian troll farm called the Internet Research Agency”. *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>.

⁹ “A substantial portion of political content articulated anti-Hillary Clinton sentiments among both Right and Left-leaning IRA-created communities” (DiResta et al. 2018, 9).

information site WikiLeaks—which provided inspiration for the so-called *Pizzagate* conspiracy theory discussed in Chapter 3—and also a vast and sustained operation “designed to exert political influence and exacerbate social divisions in US culture.”¹⁰

Facing mounting political pressure and public scrutiny, technology companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google have provided the Senate Committee with data sets indicating, albeit incompletely,¹¹ the breadth of the various activities conducted by the IRA to spread manipulative content. The broader goal of these media manipulation tactics through fictitious personas via social media was to influence the outcome of the 2016 elections in support of Trump, while simultaneously polarizing a society increasingly fractured along ideological fault-lines.

Public opinion polarization¹² has been discussed extensively as one of the defining features of the current age of political communications via social media, a condition that scholars link to the spread of disinformation and to negative effects on the democratic process (Tucker et al. 2018). Closeted social groupings of like-minded citizens increasingly exist and operate in the form ‘filter bubbles’ algorithmically engendered by social media and search engines (Pariser 2011). In the United States, the Internet has allowed for a further splintering of a public opinion which since at least three decades has been divided in opposing ideological fronts by broadcast media such as talk radio and all-news television networks (Cosentino 2017). Identity politics challenging established political traditions and institutions, as well as so-called culture wars across cultural, religious, ethnic and geographic cleavages were also important preconditions of the growing ideological and affective political polarization among American citizens. Studies also have indicated a link between political polarization over social media and the circulation of both propaganda, malicious disinformation and unintentional misinformation. Tucker et al. (2018) suggest that political polarization and disinformation might be

¹⁰Ibid., 4.

¹¹The New Knowledge reports lament that “none of the platforms (Twitter, Facebook, and Alphabet) appears to have turned over complete sets. (...) Each lacked core components that would have provided a fuller and more actionable picture” (DiResta et al. 2018, 5).

¹²The concept indicates the extent to which supporters of a political party dislike the competing political party and its supporters.

fueling each other, while also stressing the importance of preexisting political engagement in this process. A well-known 2016 Buzzfeed report¹³ suggested a connection between the circulation of disinformation and engagement levels among social media users, particularly those active in hyper-partisan group both from the alt-right and from the far-left ecosystems.

Russian trolls at the IRA didn't simply fabricate incendiary material or events via social media, but rather exploited and further amplified already existing grievances within American society. As argued by Confessore and Wakabayashi (2017), they manipulated the "the anger, passion and misinformation" that Americans were already expressing and sharing via social media. As part of their broader influence strategy, IRA trolls created a plurality of Facebook groups, such as the already mentioned *Heart of Texas* or *BlackMattersUS*, which would mimic the rhetoric and content of real hyper-partisan groups, with the goal of disseminating sensational and polarizing content, in some cases patently false, often taken or rehashed from real American sources on mainstream or social media.

As previously discussed, the spread of disinformation is linked to legitimacy problems of the main institutions of contemporary liberal democracies, one of the primary features of the post-truth condition, which lends itself to the exploitation by hostile foreign State actors. As argued by Bennett and Livingston (2018), propaganda efforts by foreign agents leverage on the "ennui and anger that accompanies the hollowing out of mainstream institutions of the state and society." This statement suggests a precise strategy on the part of foreign countries, in this case Russia, based on preying upon the inherent fragilities of Western democracies, especially of their traditional rival, the United States. Scholars and researchers (DiResta et al. 2018) agree that the IRA goal was to further stoke and spread confusion and distrust among American citizens on structural issues within their societies, in their democratic system and in their political establishment.

By artificially amplifying divisions in the American electorate, Russian agents applied a media manipulation strategy similar to the one that had been employed domestically since the early days of the Putin's presidency. Such strategy was part of a political philosophy that went by the name

¹³ Silverman, C., et al. (2016). "Hyperpartisan Facebook pages are publishing false and misleading information at an alarming rate". *Buzzfeed*. https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigisilverman/partisan-fb-pages-analysis?utm_term=.jnB0mGP48x#.toaL7DxX3l.

of ‘managed democracy,’ defining a government constituted formally as democratic, which, however, functions as a *de facto* autocracy (Snyder 2018).

To understand the roots of this strategy, one needs to appreciate the influence exerted on Russian politics during the early 2000s by former Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov, the ‘political technologist’ credited with popularizing the notion of managed democracy (Pomerantsev 2014a; Snyder 2018). In the Adam Curtis 2016 documentary *Hypernormalization*, Surkov is mentioned as one of the people who better understood how uncertainty about the future and lack of belief in politics and institutions, which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dramatic transition to democracy under Boris Eltsin, could be exploited to bolster a new type of power, an hybrid between democracy and dictatorship, which would then become embodied by the three presidencies of Vladimir Putin.

Among the political technologists of twenty-first-century Russia, Surkov stood out as the one with the most radical vision, drawn from his education in the theater arts, his passion for literature and pop culture and his career in the advertising and PR business for one of Russia’s largest banks. Under Surkov supervision as Putin’s chief ideologist, politics was turned into a “theatre where nobody knew what was true and what was fake any longer” (Curtis 2016). Surkov’s aim was not simply to manipulate people, but to undermine their very grasp and perception of reality. Surkov, further observes Curtis, turned Russian politics into “a constantly changing piece of theatre,” simultaneously sponsoring imitation political parties and fake social movements, consisting of both nationalist skinheads and pro-Kremlin youth groups on the one hand, and human rights groups on the other, and encouraging their confrontation to simulate a thriving democracy and to spread unrest and confusion among the public opinion. In Surkov’s own words: “If you criticize democracy in Russia, then that means it exists. If there are demonstrations, it means there is democracy. They don’t have demonstrations in totalitarian states.”¹⁴ It was a strategy that according to Pomerantsev (2011) was meant to keep

¹⁴ Sawka, R. (2011). “Surkov: Dark prince of the Kremlin”. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/richard-sawka/surkov-dark-prince-of-kremlin>.

opposition confused¹⁵ and “to own all forms of political discourse, to not let any independent movements develop outside of its walls.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, the real power in Putin’s Russia—the corporate takeover of national resources, the consolidation of the media into government-friendly ownership, the raiding of private companies by powerful and corrupt oligarchs, the murdering of dissenting voices in politics and in the press¹⁷—was hidden from the political stage and exercised without significant public scrutiny and accountability. Democracy thus was apparently functioning, with elections being held regularly and street demonstrations happening among the different political currents, but its core of representation of people’s interests had been stripped out of any meaningful substance. Surkov helped to create “a world of masks and poses, colorful but empty, with little at its core but power for power’s sake and the accumulation of vast wealth.”¹⁸ This is the managed democracy that, according to observers such as Pomerantsev, Russia has been experiencing under Putin since then early 2000s.

Confusion was thus used as a system of political control that Surkov built on Western cultural references, such as the postmodern ideas popularized by French scholars like Lyotard on the breakdown of grand cultural narratives and on the fragmentation of truth, discussed in the previous chapter as the historical and philosophical precondition to the current post-truth era. According to Dixon (2016), a correspondence has been noted between Surkov’s approach to politics and the theories of Lyotard on the postmodern condition, characterized by multiple perspectives and micro-narratives in lieu of grand totalizing truths. According to Pomerantsev (2011), a postmodern sensibility was at the heart of Surkov idea of

¹⁵ Pomerantsev, P. (2011). “Putin’s Rasputin”. *London Review of Books*. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n20/peter-pomerantsev/putins-rasputin>.

¹⁶ Pomerantsev, P. (2014a). “The hidden author of Putinism. How Vladislav Surkov invented the new Russia”. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/hidden-author-putinism-russia-vladislav-surkov/382489/>.

¹⁷ With respect to this, Roudakova (2017) observes that “With the arrival of President Putin in 2000, press freedom was further and unequivocally curtailed as private media began to be harassed, censorship was reintroduced, and independent journalists began to be threatened and even murdered” (p. 3).

¹⁸ Pomerantsev (2011).

managed democracy: “Russia has adopted a fashionable, supposedly liberational Western intellectual movement and transformed it into an instrument of oppression.” One could thus argue that Russia has pioneered the style of political management that characterizes contemporary populist leaders such as Trump, who seems to thrive in a post-truth scenario where objective truth, empirical evidence and truth-arbitrating institutions have lost their preeminence in public discourses.

The point of the Surkovian approach to politics, which predates the global onset of post-truth, is not to push for a certain well-rounded propagandistic narrative, as it was standard practice during the Soviet era, but rather to disseminate a plurality of conflicting narratives, partly real and partly fictional, and to question people’s ability to tell the real from the fictional, and the true from the false. Roudakova, in her thorough study of the decline of journalism in contemporary Russia, also emphasizes the difference between Soviet propaganda and the brand of propaganda under Putin, stigmatizing the ‘defactualization’ of reality it produces: “To contemporary propagandists the notion of factual accuracy has become superfluous. (...) The goal of the new propaganda is not to persuade anyone but to confuse and distract, spawning ever more grotesque interpretations of reality and spreading distrust in any and all truth claims” (Roudakova 2017, 218).

In contemporary Russia, political reality has thus been reinvented in a form of a ‘mass hallucination’ that can be altered to take any shape, while simultaneously maintaining its fundamental core of power balances unchallenged and unaltered. According to Dixon, Surkov “through his frank dissemination of ambiguous and contradictory statements, fiction, humor, honesty, heresy (...) swamps any existing narrative, defamiliarising the entire landscape and in the process undermining trust in any existing information structure.”¹⁹ This last point echoes the observations raised by D’Ancona (2017) and Harsin (2018), mentioned in the introduction, who consider a crisis of trust in journalism and the media as foundational of the post-truth condition. Quoting again Roudakova (2017, 220): “As facts are reduced to opinions and opinions masquerade as facts, boundaries between fact, opinion, and fabrication disappear, and with them disappears the stability of a shared reality.”

¹⁹ Dixon, J. (2016). “Is Vladislav Surkov an artist?” *New Minds Eye*. <https://newmindseye.wordpress.com/is-vladislav-surkov-an-artist/>.

The IRA dissemination of false information and the creation of fake groups of activists during the 2016 US elections appear to follow the same dystopian vision of democracy concocted by Surkov: a vision that exacerbates the inherent flaws, divisions and issues within American politics and society to further tear the population apart, bewilder and confuse the public opinion, disable genuine opposition and bolster the rise of leaders and power brokers with demagogic and autocratic tendencies such as Donald Trump. In order to better understand how the IRA fits within the broader Russian political context and contemporary history, it is worth recounting its development and its later employment as a key component of Russia's new aggressive foreign policy.

2.3 THE IRA'S 'NON-LINEAR' INFORMATION WARFARE

The IRA was created to mimic the model of the Chinese on-line propaganda outfits such as the 50 Cent Army, who closely monitor and manage public opinion on the Internet (Woolley & Howard 2018). Its establishment, which is believed to be dated to 2013, was part of a two-pronged strategy employed by Russia after 2011 to rein in the politically disruptive effects on domestic politics of new communication technologies, particularly social media. On the one hand, draconian laws on blogs were enacted and major national social media such as VKontakte were forcibly placed under the ownership of government-friendly companies, in order to stifle the growth of a free and independent public sphere on-line. On the other hand, propaganda and manipulation strategies via social media were devised and implemented to influence both the national and the international public opinion, particularly in the United States, with the goal of creating polarization on key political issues. "Control at home and dissent and unrest abroad" was the grand strategy, as summed up by the original Buzzfeed report on Kremlin-affiliated trolls (Seddon 2014).

The application to the Internet of the strategy for public opinion control and manipulation that eventually paved the way for the IRA was developed under the supervision of Vyacheslav Volodin, 10th Chairman of the State Duma. Volodin has been credited for engineering Putin conservative turn after 2012, for his third term as Russian President, during which a resurgence of traditional and religious values was promoted and a Eurasian geopolitical view with Russia at its helm was crafted by a number of ideologues and conservative thinkers, including notorious far-right philosopher Alexandre Dugin (Engström 2014). At the time,

many middle-class Russians who had come of age during the more liberal decades of the early 2000s protested against alleged frauds during Putin's elections for a third term and against corruption among the ruling elites, with many of the rallies being organized through social media and blogs.

Some commentators speculate (Milam 2018) that Surkov's strategy to engineer and manipulate dissent had backfired around 2011–2012, as social media and blogs gave an unexpected and genuine boost to Russian opposition parties and civil society groups. While most of the Kremlin attention during the early 2000s was on controlling broadcast media, especially television, up until 2012 the Internet had been left relatively free from political interference, allowing for a thriving blogosphere to develop (Sanovich in Woolley and Howard 2018). Volodin was chosen as a replacement to Vladislav Surkov after the greatest wave of protests that had been seen in Russia since the 1990s. Volodin adopted Surkov playbook for polarizing and manipulating the public opinion, while, however, making sure that political divisions wouldn't escalate into actual activity on the ground.

The ultimate goal of the new strategy was to turn the Internet into an unreliable source of information, by polluting the on-line conversations with false information, presenting contradicting versions of events and pitting different sections of the public opinion against each other. This manipulative approach to social media, which served as the rationale for the creation of troll farms such as IRA, was first tested on domestic issues to disable the 2011–2021 wave of protests—attacking popular opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny and Boris Nemtsov²⁰—and then eventually applied to other contexts, like Ukraine, the Baltic states, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and eventually the United States.

Under Putin's third term, an important political evolution was what Pomerantsev calls 'perpetual war mobilization', which resurrected old imperial ambitions as well as Soviet-era fears of a Western threat. In practice, it translated into stoking anxieties about Western encroachment into countries neighboring Russia, which could be used to justify retaliatory

²⁰When Nemtsov was killed in 2015, the IRA trolls received several assignments in order to instill doubts and confusion around his death, pushing forward several narratives meant at shifting the blame from the Kremlin to Nemtsov's friends or on Ukrainian oligarchs. See Parfitt, T. (2015). "My life as a pro-Putin propagandist in Russia's secret 'troll factory'". *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11656043/My-life-as-a-pro-Putin-propagandist-in-Russias-secret-troll-factory.html>.

or even preemptive military actions. Such nationalist warmongering was applied expediently to quell the unrest and internal divisions surfacing in 2011, and to consolidate Putin's power after his controversial 2012 third election as president. Russian domestic and foreign policy strategies—which combined propaganda against foreign countries via broadcast media and the Internet, lavish soft power initiatives such as the 2012 Sochi Winter Games and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, and reinvigorated nationalism with a religious and messianic streak—were at times underestimated or even misunderstood as being backwards, particularly by the Obama administration. In reality, the Kremlin “acted as a geopolitical *avant-garde*, informed by a dark, subversive reading of globalization” (Pomerantsev 2014a) whereby old geopolitical paradigms were upended by flows of capitals, people and cultural or political symbols that challenged both State borders and postwar Atlanticist alliances like the EU or NATO.²¹ This is the foreign policy vision that Russia increasingly put forth in the lead-up to and following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, formerly part of Ukraine.

Disinformation and propaganda were key components of Russian military campaign in Ukraine. Some of the examples of Russian disinformation in the conflict have become well-known examples in the tradition of information warfare: one Russian current-affairs program featured an actor posing in the same segment first as an anti-Russian and later as a pro-Russian activist,²² and during a news program a woman falsely accused Ukrainian nationalists of crucifying a child in the eastern Ukrainian city of Sloviansk.²³ Another sadly famous example is the downing of the MH17 passenger airplane flying over the Donbass region of Eastern Ukraine in

²¹ Interestingly, when on March 17, 2014, President Obama banned Surkov from entering the United States in retaliation to the Russia annexation of Crimea, he responded by saying: “The only things that interest me in the US are Tupac Shakur, Allen Ginsberg, and Jackson Pollock. I don’t need a visa to access their work”.

²² BBC News. (2014). “Russia TV stations air ‘impostor’ protester in two guises”. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-26986657>.

²³ Nemtsova, A. (2014). “There’s no evidence the Ukrainian army crucified a child in Sloviansk”. *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/theres-no-evidence-the-ukrainian-army-crucified-a-child-in-sloviansk>.

July 2014, which killed 298 people between passengers and crew members. Official investigations have concluded that the plane was hit by anti-aircraft missiles in possession of pro-Russia separatist militias,²⁴ but in the aftermath of the crash the Russian media swiftly started to spread a variety of possible explanations aimed at absolving the rebels.²⁵

The aim of the Russian media blitz on the MH17 was to distract people from the evidence that was being gathered in the aftermath of the crash, which was pointing to the separatists as culprits. However, rather than trying to convince people of one particular version of events, Russian media rushed to produce as many competing narratives as possible so as to leave the public opinion flabbergasted and unable to neither conduct a rational search for the truth nor form an evidence-based opinion. Challenged on the veracity of the reports, the Russian Deputy Minister of Information at the time cynically claimed that the fabricated reports were actually a boost to television ratings, as if the point of such blatant propaganda was not so much to persuade anyone, but to keep the viewer hooked and distracted, and to disrupt Ukrainian or Western narratives rather than providing a coherent counternarrative.

After its successful propaganda effort in support of the military campaign in Ukraine, the IRA was later appointed to become an essential part of the new Russian foreign policy. The use of social media to wage information warfare in foreign countries, including the United States, was in fact perfected by Russia during the war in Ukraine. It should be noted that IRA's attempts to influence the American public opinion date back to 2014, particularly within the context of the conflict in the Donbass. The goal was to challenge the condemning position of the Obama administration on Russia's annexation of Crimea and other Russian military operations in Ukraine, by posting in the comment sections of the major US on-line news outlets such as Fox News, Politico and the Huffington Post (Seddon 2014). It should be pointed out that, after his demotion as Deputy Chief of Staff, Surkov was appointed as Putin's aide on foreign

²⁴Walker, S. (2018). "MH17 downed by Russian military missile system, say investigators". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/24/mh17-downed-by-russian-military-missile-system-say-investigators>.

²⁵Among the increasingly ludicrous hypotheses, the most notorious claimed that data from radars showed Ukrainian jets flying near the MH17 plane, suggesting that the plane was shot down by the Ukrainian army aiming at Mr. Putin's presidential jet, and that corpses unrelated to the event had been moved by the CIA to the plane crashing site to increase the death toll.

policy, with Ukraine in his portfolio.²⁶ In this new position, he was able to further pursue his model of theatrical political consultancy on a much more ambitious scale. In Ukraine, Surkov managed the image and communications of the separatist groups and helped stage a highly contested referendum that was used as a justification for the annexation of Crimea.

Surkov rightly understood that the ‘weaponized relativism’,²⁷ or the obfuscation of truth by a plurality of conflicting media narratives that he had perfected in Russian domestic politics, would resonate well in a Western world still recovering from the post-Iraq debacle and by the 2008 financial crisis, and increasingly suspicious of its own political and cultural institutions, where “reality-based discourse has already fractured into political partisanship.”²⁸ In other words, a Western world that was gradually slipping into the post-truth condition. The managed democracy doctrine for domestic politics evolved into what Surkov, through his literary alter-ego Nathan Dubovitsky,²⁹ called the ‘non-linear war,’ a futuristic view of warfare whereby conflicts happen between multiple fronts with shifting alliances, and whose ultimate goal is not necessarily military success but rather a process of constant disorientation and destabilization that could be exploited for geopolitical ends.

The Kremlin’s ‘non-linear’ approach to foreign policy thus relies on an array of seemingly contradictory messages aimed at building alliances with ideologically different groups within Western democracies: European right-wing nationalists and populists such as Hungary’s Jobbik, Italy’s Lega Nord and Five Star Movement, or France’s Front National rally around Russia’s anti-EU message; American and European far-right and far-left sympathizers are attracted by the idea of Russia fighting American

²⁶While the Kremlin has always denied his involvement in the military conflict in the Donbass region, a hacking of Surkov’s email outed him as the de facto commander of pro-Russia separatists. See Embury-Dennis, T. (2016). “Russia’s involvement in Ukraine conflict ‘revealed after hackers’ leak emails linked to Vladimir Putin’s top aide’. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-ukraine-involvement-emails-hack-vladimir-putin-top-aide-crimea-war-a7397446.html>.

²⁷Storey, P. (2015). “Vladislav Surkov: The (gray) cardinal of the Kremlin”. *Cicero Magazine*. <http://ciceromagazine.com/features/the-gray-cardinal-of-the-kremlin/>.

²⁸Pomerantsev, P. (2014b). “Russia’s ideology: There is no truth”. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/12/opinion/russias-ideology-there-is-no-truth.html>.

²⁹See http://www.bewilderingstories.com/issue582/without_sky.html.

imperialism in Ukraine or in the Middle East; American religious conservatives appreciate Kremlin's religious revivalism and its position against homosexuality. Such contradictory messages appeal to Western audiences from multiple ideological perspectives and end up producing widespread political support for Russia.³⁰

2.4 FABRICATED FACEBOOK EVENTS IN AMERICA

According to Surkov "all democracies are managed democracies,"³¹ and political success is to be achieved by influencing people and by giving them the illusion of freedom. This cynical statement of political philosophy could be seen as the guiding logic behind the IRA strategy in the US elections: staging events that would give people a fake sense of freedom and participation, titillating their political inclinations with 'bait' content, polluting the media with multiple conflicting narratives, often fictitious, so as to make consensus impossible, and then operate to assist the victory of the most politically convenient candidate. According to Kakutani, the same 'Surkovian manipulation' that had shaped contemporary Russian politics also "informed Russian efforts to disrupt the 2016 U.S. election by impersonating Americans and grassroots political groups on social media" (Kakutani 2018, 241).

This section focuses on a number of events, organized via Facebook by the IRA, which happened on the US territory. According to the already mentioned indictments by the US Justice Department,³² people working at IRA "took extraordinary steps to appear as ordinary American activists" on social media in order to reach out to real activists and citizens. Since 2014, by closely monitoring American politics³³ and focusing on the media ecosystems at the far-right and far-left fringes of the public opinion, Russian agents knew which topics to push. According to a Senator of

³⁰Pomerantsev, P. (2014c). "How Putin is reinventing warfare". *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/05/how-putin-is-reinventing-warfare/>.

³¹Sawka (2011).

³²USA vs IRA et al. (2018). See <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>.

³³According to a former IRA employee, IRA trolls were required to watch the well-known tv series *House of Cards* to learn about American politics. See Yahoo! News. (2017). "Russian trolls were schooled on 'House of Cards'". *Yahoo!* <https://www.yahoo.com/news/russian-trolls-schooled-house-cards-185648522.html>.

the Intelligence Committee, Russian operatives “spent months developing networks of real people to follow and like their content” which were later “utilized to push an array of disinformation.”³⁴ Starting in 2014, the IRA began to monitor social media sites devoted to American politics and social issues by tracking “certain metrics like the group’s size, the frequency of content placed by the group, and the level of audience engagement with that content, such as the average number of comments or responses to a post.”³⁵ IRA operatives also travelled to the United States and contacted American political and social activists in order to gather intelligence on how to effectively interfere with the course of the elections. They also invested considerable resources in creating fictitious personas through social media and in turning them into influencers or public opinion leaders in the United States. The stated goal, as claimed by the indictments, was to elevate the intensity of US politics “through supporting radical groups, users dissatisfied with [the] social and economic situation and oppositional social movements.”³⁶

The IRA organized nearly 120 events across the United States via Facebook between 2015 and 2017, which were seen by over 300,000 people,³⁷ in some cases with a high attendance, and in other cases resulting in low turnout or in being uncovered by real activists.³⁸ The strategy was to identify hot-button issues and then mobilize citizens from both sides of the political spectrum. On the issue of race and police brutality, for example, the IRA-managed *Blue Lives Matter* counter-protest was held in Dallas in July 2016 across the street from where a legitimate Black Lives Matter protest rally was taking place. Also, *BlackMattersUS*, an IRA-run Facebook group, recruited unwitting local activists to organize a rally that was held in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2016, protesting the shooting

³⁴ Abeshouse, B. (2018). “Facebook, Russian trolls and the new era of information warfare”. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/americas/2018/01/facebook-russian-trolls-era-information-warfare-180131135425603.html>.

³⁵ USA vs IRA et al. (2018, 12).

³⁶ Ibid., 14.

³⁷ O’Sullivan, D. (2018). “Russian trolls created Facebook events seen by more than 300,000 users”. *CNN Money*. <https://money.cnn.com/2018/01/26/media/russia-trolls-facebook-events/index.html>.

³⁸ The IRA operations were not always successful, and real activists could not always be unwillingly coopted. What made some American citizens suspicious were the frequent grammatical mistakes in the communications by Russians and some imprecisions in organizing the events.

of an African-American by the police. On the issue of the 2016 presidential race, one event in support of Hillary Clinton and one against her were organized, respectively, in Washington and New York. In Florida, which was a key battleground for the 2016 election, several rallies dubbed 'Florida Goes Trump' were organized by the IRA in coordination with members of the official Trump campaign, which were allegedly unaware of cooperating with Russian agents.³⁹

Over a hundred Facebook groups with partisan-sounding names like *Blacktivist*, *Being Patriotic*, *LGBT United* were all set up by the IRA to spread ideologically oriented content. Some examples were playing with a kind of millennials' cool irony, like a post promoting a Bernie Sanders coloring book. Others were aiming for a more tangible effect on people's life, like the organization of a self-defense group with a political slant for African-Americans called *Black Fist*, which was set up in New York City by the IRA via social media by recruiting experienced martial arts trainers and by promoting the classes with Facebook ads targeting black communities.⁴⁰ Within the broader strategy of leveraging ethnic or sociocultural cleavages within American society, the already mentioned New Knowledge report suggests that the IRA conducted long and extensive influence operations targeting African-American communities, with the goal of developing audiences and recruiting assets.⁴¹

Overall, by Facebook own admission in front of the Intelligence Committee, nearly 130 million Americans were exposed to the manipulative content circulated on the social network by agents of Russian disinformation. The content, spread by fake accounts, consisted of memes, events or other types of post with high virality potential for so-called organic

³⁹ In one of these events, an American citizen was paid to impersonate Hillary Clinton dressed in a prison uniform standing in a cage built on a flatbed truck.

⁴⁰ Adams, R., & Brown, H. (2017). "These Americans were tricked into working for Russia. They say they had no idea". *Buzzfeed News*. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rosalindadams/these-americans-were-tricked-into-working-for-russia-they#.rgyD61X0Q>.

⁴¹ "The most prolific IRA efforts on Facebook and Instagram specifically targeted Black American communities and appear to have been focused on developing Black audiences and recruiting Black Americans as assets. The IRA created an expansive cross-platform media mirage targeting the Black community, which shared and cross-promoted authentic Black media to create an immersive influence ecosystem" (DiResta et al. 2018, 8).

reach,⁴² as well as ads and promoted content on a plurality of political themes.⁴³ Overall, Russia invested nearly \$100,000 in 2016 on 3000 Facebook ads on controversial issues with the goal of influencing both on-line and off-line political conversations across the ideological spectrum, while the broader IRA budget is estimated at an average \$15 million per year.⁴⁴

The public opinion manipulation efforts by the IRA exposed by the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence revealed the level of sophistication reached by the information warfare strategies employed by Russia, from the hacking of the DNC mail servers to the spreading of disinformation via automated bot accounts on social media, from the polarization of the public opinion to the creation of divisive events. Such strategy seems to replicate Russia's postmodern approach to authoritarian politics, already tested on domestic issues, which "doesn't crush opposition, but rather climbs into different interest groups and manipulates them from the inside" (Pomerantsev 2014b).⁴⁵

Russian propaganda and disinformation strategies have a long history that dates back to the Soviet era, but the advent of social media has provided its agents with a whole new array of tools to elevate the scope,

⁴² Organic reach is the audience reached via social media without paying or promoting content. For full definition, see https://www.facebook.com/help/285625061456389?helpref=uf_permalink.

⁴³ According to the New Knowledge report: "The IRA had a roster of themes, primarily social issues, that they repeatedly emphasized and reinforced across their Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube content." Such themes included: "Black culture, community, Black Lives Matter; Blue Lives Matter, pro-police; Anti-refugee, pro-immigration reform; Texas culture, community, and pride; Southern culture (Confederate history); Separatist movements and secession; Muslim culture, community, and pride; Christian culture, community, and pride; LGBT culture, community, and pride; Native American culture, community, and pride; Meme and 'red pill' culture; Patriotism and Tea Party culture; Liberal and feminist culture; Veteran's Issues; Gun rights, pro-2nd Amendment; Political Pro-Trump, anti-Clinton content; Pro-Bernie Sanders and Jill Stein content; Syria and ISIS, pro-Assad, anti-U.S.; Trust in media".

⁴⁴ Weiss, B. (2018). "A Russian troll factory had a \$1.25 million monthly budget to interfere in the 2016 US election". *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/russian-troll-farm-spent-millions-on-election-interference-2018-2>.

⁴⁵ Pomerantsev (2014b).

reach and complexity of their efforts. With social media, Russian influence agents have mastered the art of propaganda by manipulating online conversations, spreading false narratives and turning unaware American citizens into puppets of a kind of political theater. The IRA should thus be regarded as an update for the twenty-first century of the Soviet-era ‘active measures,’ a series of action of information warfare which included, among other things, media manipulations, disinformation and propaganda campaigns. The most well known of the Russian active measures operation of the past was probably *Operation Infektion*, a disinformation campaign run in the 1980s by KGB agents by planting in small publications worldwide the rumor that the AIDS virus had been developed by US scientists as a part of a biological warfare program.⁴⁶

The Russian strategy was not limited to Facebook, and it involved all the major social media such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr as well as news aggregator Reddit. Instagram was also leveraged, particularly after Facebook started to become more scrutinized by US officials and law enforcement.⁴⁷ In 2017, executives from these technology companies testified in front of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in order to clarify their responsibility in facilitating foreign meddling with American politics. Twitter, for example, disclosed 37,000 Russian accounts whose tweets were seen about 300 million times.⁴⁸ YouTube also admitted a heavy presence of Russian trolls, with over a thousand videos distributed on many of its channels. In a belated response to the mounting

⁴⁶ For an overview of Soviet-era active measures, see Times Video. “Operation Infektion”. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/what-is-disinformation-fake-news-playlist>. It is worth pointing out that to this day, 40% of African-Americans believe that AIDS was created by the US government.

⁴⁷ As suggested by the already mentioned New Knowledge report, it is also possible that Instagram was chosen also because it lends itself better to the circulation of viral political content in the form of visual memes.

⁴⁸ “The indictments revealed one successful example of a Twitter account managed by the IRA under the handle @TEN_GOP, pretending to speak on behalf of the Tennessee Republican Party, which attracted more than 100,000 followers and which was retweeted several times by Donald Trump Jr. The account also actively pushed claims of voter fraud, which would become a mantra for Donald Trump”. See Graham, D. (2018). “What Mueller’s indictment reveals”. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/mueller-roadmap/553604/>.

public pressure and official scrutiny on their role as vessels of Russian propaganda, the major American technology companies have acted to remove all the accounts that were associated with the IRA.

2.5 CONCLUSIONS

The disinformation and manipulation tactics and strategies against the United States are a clear indication that Russia is deploying an aggressive and ambition foreign policy doctrine vis-à-vis its historical rival. American officials, politicians, journalists and academics are beginning to appreciate the scope and the complexity of the propaganda apparatus that Russian has been developing since 2011–2012, first for domestic purposes and then to exert greater influence in the international arena. Russian propaganda works by combining traditional tight control of the media, censorship and Soviet-era *dezinformacija*, with a more advanced approach to propaganda based on exploiting the free circulation of information via digital technologies.

As seen in the case of the Facebook events staged by the IRA, social media have been weaponized by Russian agents in order to instill doubts and spread controversy. In an ironic twist, the very tools created by American high-tech companies to facilitate business and social exchanges have been used to target American society and politics. Facebook, probably the most sophisticated targeting platform for digital marketers, operates on a business model and algorithmic style of management that incentivizes users' engagement on viral posts. The networking platform has, however, been criticized for amplifying sensational and misleading content that fueled misinformation and partisanship (Benkler et al. 2018; Vaidhyanathan 2018). Russian operatives were quick to discover the potential of Facebook for waging influence operations.

Since Russia is currently not able to compete with America from a military or economic standpoint, it has invested in cultural and technological resources to boost its standing as world power. Russia has indeed rightly understood that the twenty-first century is an information-driven century, and that soft power and hard power are equally important. Under Putin, the Kremlin has put a unique spin on the concept of soft power, stretching it to include propaganda and disinformation campaign as essential elements of its foreign policy strategy (Van Herpen 2016). Just as in the Baltic region and in Ukraine, Russia amplified ethno-political grievances and divisions, in the United States, it exploited race and various cultural

or political cleavages. In an age of ‘non-linear warfare,’ as per Surkov’s vision, military attack or occupation of another country is not a requisite for waging warfare, and equally important damage can be achieved with a cyberattack or a vast scale media influence operation.

As seen, Russian strategy was aimed at attacking American societies’ fault-lines in order to pit different groups against each other. Socioeconomic divisions linked to structural and cyclic issues with capitalist economy, deeply rooted racial tensions, culture wars on values and lifestyle choices: all of these issues have been plaguing American society for several decades now. Russians decided to expose, amplify and exploit such issues in order to weaken American social and political stability and undermine its democratic process. In carrying their influence campaigns in the United States, Russians have demonstrated cunning cynicism, and no divisive issue has been spared from the repertoire of manipulation, including the highly controversial and potentially dangerous issue of children vaccination. Researchers have in fact detected attempts from Russian trolls and bots to manipulate the on-line conversation on vaccines. As for many other issues, Russian trolls supported both sides, sending pro and anti-vaccine communications to stoke polarization on such a sensitive issue. By playing both sides, again the ultimate goal was to create confusion and erode public consensus and trust in public and government institution responsible for vaccines administration.⁴⁹ The organizing of Facebook events by the IRA thus parallels the political practices originally tested for Russian domestic politics, or, as Kakutani (2018, 243) eloquently puts it, “some of the Russian operatives’ moves seemed like cynical pieces of Surkovian stagecraft.”

The backdrop to these tactics of public opinion division and manipulation is the rampant political polarization that is plaguing American society. As traditional ideological divisions are being supplanted by identity politics, belonging to a political group or movement has become an identity issue even more than an expression of support for a specific policy or program. Political identities have become channels through which one can express personal or affective dimension such as sexual, ethnic, cultural

⁴⁹ Glenza, J. (2018). “Russian trolls ‘spreading discord’ over vaccine safety online”. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/aug/23/russian-trolls-spread-vaccine-misinformation-on-twitter>.

or geographic.⁵⁰ Political identity differences are thus charged with values drawn from both the public and the private spheres, and this could explain why political cleavages have become so entrenched.

Such emotional and cultural predisposition toward ideological division and infighting makes the American citizens vulnerable to external manipulation efforts, as demonstrated by the case study discussed in this chapter. With respect to this, Foreign Policy magazine comments that “Whether for ideological, tribal, partisan, financial, or other reasons, Americans may simply not be interested in truly understanding and critiquing the information that they receive. Because of that, they will be increasingly the targets of “like wars” by aggressors foreign and domestic.”⁵¹

This fits well with the role of Russia as a raider of globalization that cunningly manipulated technological platforms and information flows to undermine the American democratic process, with the goal of challenging established geopolitical orders. As we shall see in Chapters 3 and 4, such approach does not simply appeal to Russia, but also to other countries that bear resentment against Western powers and against American political supremacy. According to Pomerantsev, the geopolitical conflicts of the twenty-first century are likely to be played out not so much around traditional political categories, such as right vs left, or communism vs capitalism, but between competing visions of globalization, between the somehow naïve Western idea of a ‘global village’ ruled by liberal democracy and free-market capitalism, which has become increasingly unpopular and untenable, and the emerging Russian notion of ‘non-linear war’.⁵²

⁵⁰ Taub, A. (2017). “Why Americans vote ‘against their interest’: Partisanship”. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/12/upshot/why-americans-vote-against-their-interest-partisanship.html>.

⁵¹ Zenko, M. (2018). “The problem isn’t fake news from Russia. It’s us”. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/03/the-problem-isnt-fake-news-from-russia-its-us/>.

⁵² Pomerantsev (2014c).

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