

## RT in Europe and beyond

The Wannabe Elite of the Anti-Elites

Edited by Anton Shekhovtsov



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#### Centre for Democratic Integrity

## Überwachung und Analyse von Einflüssen autoritärer Regime auf die demokratische Ordnung Europas

The Centre for Democratic Integrity monitors and analyses attempts of authoritarian regimes to influence politics, societies and public governance in Europe

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#### **Anton Shekhovtsov**

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Already during the first presidential term of Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin elites became concerned about Russia's image abroad, especially in the West. Those concerns were underpinned not only by the need to improve Russia's international image after the most active phase of the Second Chechen War, which was marked by massive human rights violations on the part of the Russian government forces, but also by the annoying domination of Western stereotypes depicting Russia as a cold country full of drunken bears with balalaikas.

As international television was (and often still is) considered to be one of the most important tools to modify a nation's image abroad, Mikhail Lesin, Russia's Minister of Press, Broadcasting and Mass Communications in 1999-2004, reportedly promoted an idea of creating an international Russian TV channel as early as 2001. After returning from a trip to the US, Lesin - presumably disgruntled by the American criticism of freedom of speech in Russia - said: "I've long ago stopped being ashamed of the word 'propaganda' [...] We need to propagandise Russia in the international market, its positive side, or we'll look like bears in their eyes, wandering the streets growling".1 Lesin's plan involved "a large-scale campaign in the US featuring a series of social ads about Russia", and Lesin promised to spare no expense saying that financial backing of the project would come both from the state budget and private businesses who were not indifferent to Russia's image in the West.<sup>2</sup>

At that time, the Kremlin elites made no steps in the direction of creating an international Russian TV channel. The Kremlin elites were busy putting the remaining major domestic TV channels under state control. Moreover, Lesin's idea was technically difficult to implement, as Russia lacked necessary resources for developing big TV projects from scratch.

For example, the state-owned All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company started working on creating the first Russian language 24/7 news TV channel (unofficially nicknamed "Russian CNN") in 2003,<sup>3</sup> but the channel, Vesti, started broadcasting only in 2007.



Mikhail Lesin (left) and Vladimir Putin (right) in 2002. Source: Wikimedia Commons

In 2004, however, Moscow took a more active stance in promoting Russian foreign policy positions abroad. That year, the Kremlin established the Valdai International Discussion Club (or simply Valdai), meetings which were aimed at establishing direct communication between Kremlin officials, including Putin himself, and foreign influencers – journalists, academics, experts, think-tankers, etc. Quite naturally, Russian operatives often used Valdai as a recruitment venue aiming to bring as many foreign (especially Western) influencers, over to the Kremlin side as possible.

Especially after the Ukrainian "Orange revolution", which Moscow perceived as a Western-instigated threat to Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space, Moscow felt that it needed to step up its outreach to international audiences, and that seemed to be a perfect time to return to Lesin's idea of a Russian international TV channel. Lesin, who was then an advisor to Putin, teamed up with the Kremlin Press Secretary Alexey Gromov, and developed the idea of the Russia Today TV channel.

The launch of Russia Today was announced in the beginning of June 2005. According to a press release, the aim of the new TV channel was to "reflect a Russian position on the major issues of international politics" and "inform the audience of events and phenomena of Russian life". In 2013, Putin would retrospectively admit:

When we designed this project back in 2005, we proceeded from the premise that one more strong player had to emerge on the world information scene, a player that would not just provide an unbiased coverage of what was happening in Russia but would also try – I want to stress this: try – to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams.<sup>5</sup>

A 25-year-old uber-loyal Russian journalist, Margarita Simonyan, was appointed the editor-in-chief of Russia Today, possibly on Gromov's personal recommendation – they closely worked together when she was a reporter in the Kremlin pool.<sup>6</sup>



Alexey Gromov (left) and Vladimir Putin (right) in 2000. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Russia Today was founded by the Autonomous Non-Profit Organisation "TV Novosti", a subsidiary of the Russian state-owned domestic news agency "RIA Novosti". It was reported that \$30 million (approximately €24.45 million in June 2005) would be invested in the new TV channel by the end of 2005.<sup>7</sup> But, at that

time, reports on the sources of funding were contradictory: some said Russia Today would be directly funded by the state,<sup>8</sup> while others mentioned borrowing from commercial banks.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, it was confirmed that Russia Today was primarily funded by the state. As Putin stated in 2013, "certainly the channel is funded by the government, so it cannot help but reflect the Russian authorities' official position on the events in our country and in the rest of the world one way or another".<sup>10</sup>

The English-language Russia Today TV channel was initially scheduled to go on the air in autumn 2005, but for technical reasons the launch of broadcasting was postponed to December of that year. The original production team of Russia Today consisted of 344 people of whom 72 were foreigners, and many hosts were foreigners - they knew Western realities better and spoke better English.<sup>11</sup> According to the Kommersant newspaper, which in 2005 was still owned by London-based Russian businessman Boris Berezovsky, salaries of Russia Today employees were two times higher than salaries of Russian journalists working for Russian federal TV channels; novice correspondents of Russia Today would receive a monthly salary of \$2,500-3,000 (approximately €2,100-2,500 in December 2005).12

Speaking to *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, an official newspaper of the Russian government, in December 2005, Simonyan said that Russia Today already had news bureaus in Washington DC, Paris, London and Jerusalem, and was going to open news bureaus in Cairo and New York.<sup>13</sup> As the number of its own bureaus was clearly not enough for an operation of the envisaged scale, Russia Today would at that time also cooperate with international news agencies.<sup>14</sup>

While it is easy to discuss the launch of Russia Today in 2005 purely in terms of Moscow's relations with the West, a more elaborate approach would also include an

international media context. Writing in December 2005, Julian Evans insightfully argued that the Russian initiative to launch an international TV channel mirrored "what many rich countries do to improve cultural and diplomatic relations with the rest of the world. The aberration is not that Russia is trying its hand at public diplomacy, but that it had avoided it for so long". 15 Indeed, by the time Russia started broadcasting Russia Today, several major countries - apart from the US and UK had already established their strong statefunded presence in the international TV environment. Germany's Deutsche Welle launched its TV channel in 1992, and German, English and Spanish became its three broadcasting languages in the course of the 1990s. China Central Television began broadcasting its English language TV channel CCTV-9 (renamed later into CGTN) in 2000. France, however, was lagging behind: its France 24 international TV channel in French and English languages was launched even later than Russia Today, in 2006.

from perspective, Seen this Russia Today was meant to become an instrument of Russian soft power, much like CNN was an instrument of American soft power, or CCTV-9 - of the Chinese. Soft power, understood as the ability to influence through affinity and attraction with resources such as a nation's political values, culture, and foreign policies, 16 is a typical tool of influencing other societies. Therefore, the earlier domestic criticism of Russia Today which insisted, for example, that there was no "demand" for Russia Today in the world seemed to be misplaced: Russia Today's earnings would be measured in impact rather than in rubles.

But the start of Russia Today was not only part of the general trend of major world powers willing to influence other nations through TV channels by presenting their specific perspectives on international affairs, but also part of the rise of what James Painter calls "counter-hegemonic news" - TV channels "set up with the explicit intention of challenging the 'BBC/ CNN approach' to world events". This counter-hegemonic trend was started by Venezuela, which launched Telesur, a Latin American TV channel, in July 2005; at first, Telesur's broadcasts were only in Spanish, but the channel added English in 2015. Russia continued the trend with Russia Today in December 2005, and was followed by Qatar's Al Jazeera English (November 2006) and Iran's Press TV (July 2007). It was hardly a coincidence that the emergence of counter-hegemonic TV channels like Telesur, Russia Today, Al Jazeera English and Press TV took place during the unprecedented hike in oil prices bringing windfall revenues to the four oilrich countries - these revenues clearly contributed to the building of their pricey international TV projects.

In the period between 2005 and 2008, the only major criticism of Russia Today was that it was "a breathless cheerleader for the Kremlin", 18 implying that the TV channel would offer no objective assessment of the politics and policies of the Russian leadership, focusing only on positive (real or imagined) developments and showcasing Russia Russia's contemporary and historical achievements in arts, sports, space explorations, etc. But everything started to change in 2008, the year that gave birth to the Russia Today, or RT, that we have known since then.

The trigger for that change was the Russian war on Georgia, which Moscow called "a peace enforcement operation", in August 2008. Russia won the war in five days, concurrently occupying South Ossetia and another Georgian region, Abkhazia. The overwhelming majority of Russian citizens supported Moscow's *blitzkrieg*, however, in the months that followed, many Russian politicians, experts and officials discussed one particular paradox:

Russia easily won the Russian-Georgian war, but lost the information war, implying that it failed to convince the international community of the righteousness of Moscow's invasion of Georgia. One pro-Kremlin Russian journalist provided an insight into the establishment's thinking: "The Russian military campaign in the Northern Caucasus can be considered a victorious one, but Russia has definitely lost the information war that the US waged on us. In the eyes of almost all the countries of the world, Russia is seen as an aggressor that has attacked a weak Georgian state". 19



Russian occupation army in Georgia in 2008. Source: Wikimedia Commons

One of the Kremlin's major political strategists, Gleb Pavlovsky, argued that "Russia's loss of the information war with the Western media" was determined by the lack of Russian global media.<sup>20</sup> Another reason for losing the information war and Vladimir Putin himself was of this opinion - was the sheer "power of the West's propaganda machine".21 Among a few other analysts, Anatoliy Tsyganok, the director of the Moscow-based Centre of Military Forecasting, was more specific and practice-oriented. According to him, Russia lost the information war because it had not been prepared for it at all. To win at information warfare in the future, he claimed, Russia needed to employ "information forces" that would engage disinformation propaganda. cooperation with the international media. These "information forces" would supply

the international media with ready-touse imagery for which scriptwriters were needed.<sup>22</sup>

One important result of Russia's perceived defeat in the assumed information war with the West was the realisation that not only had the existing Russian international media, including Russia Today, failed to convince Western audiences of the alleged legitimacy of Russia's actions in Georgia: rather, the entire approach based on the traditional soft power concept of presenting an "attractive image" of Russia had failed. Following Tsyganok's logic, Russia was, indeed, in need of "information forces" for future wars.

This realisation led to the rebranding and re-conceptualisation of Russia Today. In 2009, it was renamed RT – not to conceal the Russian origin of the TV channel, but to appeal to international audiences who might not be so easily wooed by a channel that would presumably be talking, literally, just about Russia today. More importantly, the messaging of the TV channel dramatically changed. It ceased to be an instrument of Russian soft power and became an instrument of Russian political warfare against the West.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, RT's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, while insisting on RT being a legitimate media resource, would not hesitate to speak of it in weaponised terms. In 2012, she compared RT to a Defence Ministry saying that the TV channel should be prepared for an information war well in advance because it was impossible "to only start making a weapon when the war has already started". The following year, she further elaborated her idea about RT as a weapon of political warfare:

The information weapon, of course, is used in critical moments, and war is always a critical moment. [...] [The information weapon is] a weapon like any other. [...] Of course, the Defence

Ministry cannot start training soldiers, preparing weaponry and generally making itself from scratch when the war has already started. If we do not have an audience today, tomorrow and the day after, it will be the same as in 2008.<sup>25</sup>

To build up its audience and sharpen its skills in information warfare, RT started positioning itself as "a channel deliberately presenting an alternative point of view to the mainstream on all matters". 26 This contrarian turn of RT involved engaging with themes and commentators that represented the fringes of social, political and cultural life in Western societies, thus RT would start giving a platform to farright and far-left politicians, conspiracy theorists, isolationists, anti-establishment bloggers - a platform blown out of proportion to their significance at home. In this sense, RT became engaged in what Andrew Wilson called "nudge propaganda" - "it works by finding parties, politicians, and points-of-view that are already sure of their world-view rather than confused, and giving them a nudge - so long as these views are usefully anti-systemic".27



RT's editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan in 2019. Source: Wikimedia Commons

With time, RT grew to present itself, in a radically populist way, as a global underdog fighting against the ascendant Western power, as an elite of the antielites. To match its aspirations, RT started to expand. RT launched its Arabic version "Rusiya Al-Yaum" in 2007, the Spanish-

language channel "RT en Español" in 2009, "RT America" – in 2010, "RT UK" and the German-language "RT Deutsch" – in 2014, and the French-language "RT France" – in 2017.

In 2021, the Centre for Democratic Integrity reached out to academics, media experts and investigative journalists, asking them to provide their analyses of different editions of RT and particular topics exploited by this Russian TV channel. All chapters were finished before the beginning of the renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, and therefore do not reflect RT's coverage of Russia's horrendous, unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine.

response to the Russian aggression, the EU and its allies banned RT and its various editions. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter suspended RT's accounts and blocked external links to RT's websites. YouTube blocked Russian statefunded media,28 including RT and Sputnik, around the world, while Google removed RT and Sputnik from search results in the EU. Apple and Microsoft pulled RT from their global app stores. Due to these measures, RT was hit hard and lost much of the audience it had been building up since 2005. Nevertheless, this collection of chapters is not an obituary to RT; rather, it is detailed research into an exercise of malign influence that will likely stay the course under one name or other in the years to come.

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#### **Executive summary**

#### "RT en Español: How Russian Disinformation Targets 500 Million Spanish Speakers" Daniel Iriarte

The Spanish language edition of RT has different characteristics than the versions in other languages. Unlike RT channels in English, French or German, RT en Español does not target spectators in any European country: its audiences are mostly in Latin America and, to a lesser degree, in the US. As Russia's interests in Latin America grow, so do the efforts and investment of Russian disinformation in the region, of which RT en Español is a central part. This chapter analyses the features of this TV channel and the role it played in Russia's attempts to interfere in the domestic politics of several Latin American countries.

#### "Copying, Distorting and Questioning: The Mediatic Populism of RT France" Hugo Littow

Hindered by the opposition of French media and politics, the orientation imposed by its Russian parent company and the constraint of the CNN model, RT France has developed a hybrid and evolving strategy to become a highly local and openly disruptive media. An analysis of its television and online production and interviews with journalists from both departments reveal how RT France uses mass media techniques like curation and repackaging to subvert the codes of traditional journalism. By selectively rejecting formal definitions and contextual judgment while adding markers questioning, doubt and irony, RT France undermines professional expertise and journalistic authority to better insinuate criticism and conspiracy logic. Through

the use of slanted interviews, vox pops and social media curation, the media pushes forward populist and sovereigntist discourses without openly adhering to them, in order to appear as an alternative mainstream media.

#### "Manufacturing Dissent: RT France's Challenge in a Brand-New Media Landscape" Élie Guckert

Even before being shut down in March 2022 by the EU in retaliation to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Kremlin-backed French media outlets RT France and Sputnik were already struggling to keep their place in a rapidly evolving French media landscape. The exclusivity of the alternative anti-mainstream stance they enjoyed in 2017 was challenged by other domestic actors, while RT and Sputnik had to comply with a restrictive French law, trapped by their desire to look as respectable as France24, BBC or CNN while cultivating an anti-mainstream narrative. This is how they failed at being the "baddest" guys in town.

#### "RT DE and Other Russian State Media in Germany" Silvia Stöber

The Russian state media RT and Sputnik have been present in Germany since 2014. They tried to establish themselves in the classic media of television and radio as well as online. The attempt to broadcast RT DE as a nationwide television programme from December 2021 onwards, however, eventually failed due to German media legislation. Since then, RT and Sputnik try to maintain their widespread distribution via websites and online platforms by circumventing transparency requirements and blocking, as well as by switching to less well-known service providers.

### "The Information War of RT DE"

Jonas Andreae

As one of the nations most targeted by Russian disinformation, it is important to carefully analyse the strategies the Kremlin uses in Germany to destabilise both media discourse and society. This chapter outlines three main strategies: (1) giving fake news a credible platform and a professional appeal, (2) sowing mistrust in the democratic system, and (3) dividing the society by supporting diametrically opposed contents in its media outlets. Raising awareness about these crude strategies and asking the question "who profits from this reporting" are viable responses to minimising the effects of the information warfare of RT DE.

#### "Ambitious Goals and Modest Results: RT UK and Its Coverage of the 2019 British General Elections" Vitaly Kazakov

This chapter summarises the history of the Russian state-backed information network RT UK from its inception to 2021. It provides an overview of key programming, employees involved, and approaches adopted by this Russian informational actor, as well as discussing the positioning of the network within the British political and media landscapes. The chapter also analyses the case study of RT UK's mediation of a major political event in Britain, the 2019 general election. Relying on the live media ethnography method, this chapter investigates a set of outputs produced by RT UK across its traditional and new media platforms in the period immediately preceding the Finally, the chapter assesses RT's impacts and reach of audiences in the UK during this democratic event.

# "RT and Conspiracy Theories: "The Kremlin's Underdog" against the West" Ilya Yablokov and Precious Chatterie-Doody

This chapter provides an explanation into the usage of disinformation and conspiracy theories by the Englishlanguage versions of RT. In RT's broadcasts, conspiracy theories play the integral role of a populist instrument of societal division, which serves to criticise Russia's geopolitical opponents while whitewashing the actions of the Russian government. This chapter explains the media strategy of the English-language versions of RT and the ways the media outlet takes advantage of the global media environment. It shows that RT's unique position on the global media market is a result of the crisis of trust to the elites and the global media broadcasters.

#### "The COVID-19 Crisis in Europe: A Story Told by RT" Alexandra Yatsyk

This chapter examines how the Russian state-supported media outlet RT covered the COVID-19 pandemic in France, Germany, the UK and the Spanish-speaking world from March 2020 to September 2021. This investigation demonstrates common techniques for producing and spreading RT's messages in these regions, including those promoted by the respective national far-right movements and parties there. Among other things, RT's key information strategies included telling half-truths and broadcasting representatives of local marginal groups so they could criticise their national governments. Finally, we unveil the regional dimension of RT's pandemic picture, to which its Spanish-language edition contributed in a way much different from the other three editions explored in the chapter.





#### **Daniel Iriarte**

Daniel Iriarte is a journalist specialising in international security. He has been closely tracking and studying Russian disinformation in Spanish language since 2016.

#### Introduction

If readers are interested in current Russian affairs, they may be familiar with the dramatic transformation of Russia Today in the last years of the previous decade. Launched in 2005 as a mostly benign channel to present Russia in a positive light for English-speaking viewers, it became nonetheless a tool of Moscow's propaganda during the Georgia war in 2008. The transformation of Russia's information war doctrine in those years, fuelled by this conflict, led Russia Today not only to be renamed as RT, but also to become the spearhead of Russian state disinformation. But the Kremlin decided not only to put the media it controlled at the service of its goals; it would also go global.

For this reason, RT transmissions in the Spanish language started 24/7 in December 2009 after a short trial period. The fact that RT en Español (its official name in Spanish) was the third languageoriented channel of the network after English and Arabic – and many years before its versions in German and French - gives an idea of the importance that Russia gives to Spanish-speaking audiences, a result of its growing involvement in Latin America. And certainly, Spanish is the fourth most spoken language in the world: it is the mother tongue of 493 million people, including 42 million only in the US. If we include those who have some knowledge

of the language, the figure grows to 591 million all over the world.<sup>1</sup>

As a general rule on Russian propaganda, the closer a topic to the Kremlin's core interests is, the stronger the disinformation. In this regard, for a casual observer, RT en Español may resemble a relatively serious TV channel reporting on international affairs – as long as it does not address subjects like Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the status of the Crimean Peninsula or the war in Syria. By focusing mostly on Latin America, its news programs may seem merely informative, although with a marked ideological bias. This last feature does not stand out in the hyper-partisan Hispanic media ecosystem, however, as it is often assumed that every outlet has an ideology, and audiences know what to expect from it. And in contrast to editions of RT in other languages - such as English, French or German - that have a more ambiguous political stance and can appeal both to the left-wing and the right-wing fringes, Spanish RT has a very clear target audience: left-wing viewers, especially those of the so-called "Bolivarian Left", which had a strong weight in progressive Western circles in the two previous decades and remains significant in Latin America and, to a lesser extent, in Spain.

Nonetheless, as Russia's geopolitical outreach has expanded in Latin America – mostly in relation to its alliance with the Venezuelan government – so has Russian



Source: https://www.facebook.com/ActualidadRT/

disinformation done on local issues. This is very visible in the Spanish version of RT.

In January 2020, the U.S. Department of State established that Russia was very active in spreading disinformation in South America against the members of the socalled Lima Group, the alliance of countries opposed to Nicolás Maduro's regime.<sup>2</sup> According to our own observations, this estimation is correct, as conservative governments in the region are constantly targeted by negative reporting in Spanisheditions of Russian language sponsored outlets (Sputnik, NewsFront), if not by outright fabrications. In this scheme, RT en Español serves to generate mass content that is then replicated via social media, often with misleading headlines or biased commentaries.

#### Maximising the impact of RT en Español

The audiences of Spanish RT's traditional broadcasting are negligible, and do not reach even the 0.1 percent of the share needed to be reported by Spain's statistical institutions. However, it has other ways to spread its content, through small cable and satellite TV providers in Spain and Latin America, and partnerships or associations with other channels. Some 70 local or national TV stations fill spaces with RT content, and the company claims to be present in 315 hotels. Several Cuban and Venezuelan channels also transmit Spanish RT for a few hours a day.

In April 2018, RT en Español claimed its audience to have grown 36 percent all over the world since 2015, reaching 18 million people and tripling its audience in Latin America, especially in Mexico, thanks to an agreement to include the channel on one of the main satellite platforms.<sup>3</sup> Since then, these figures kept growing. On 28 December 2019, RT broadcast a

special programme to celebrate its 10th anniversary.<sup>4</sup> The programme claimed that the channel reached an audience of 20 million people in Latin America alone. This growth was fuelled by its own investment in cooperation and expansion. For example, the number of satellite and cable TV networks transmitting RT in Latin America, Spain and the US rose from 660 to over 1,000.<sup>5</sup>



RT en Español celebrates 10 years on air.
Source: https://www.facebook.com/ActualidadRT/

It is hard to verify these figures independently. However, social media and Internet monitoring can provide a more objective indicator of its impact. In October 2021, the number of followers of RT en Español was over 3.2 million on Twitter and over 18.1 million on Facebook. Its YouTube channel had 5.35 million subscribers and had reached almost 4 billion plays. A SimilarWeb analysis shows that the RT en Español website reached 19.32 million views in September 2021, with almost half of its traffic coming from Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina and Colombia, plus another 11.1% coming from Spain.<sup>6</sup>

And it is on social media where RT has a real impact. RT en Español has the capacity to produce a huge amount of content that is then spread and amplified by a network of accounts, especially on Facebook, the most popular social network in Latin America. This has been evident in times of crisis, such as the massive protests and riots in Ecuador (2019), Chile (2019-2020) or Colombia (2021), where the content produced by RT about police violence against demonstrators – in

some cases filling an informative vacuum – were widely shared on social media and contributed to further inflaming the situation.

Yet another remarkable element about RT's influence is the fact that many medium to low sized Latin American and Spanish media use them as a legitimate source - in the same way as, for example, BBC or Al Jazeera - for their coverage of international affairs. As many of those media do not have a proper budget for international reporters, correspondents on the ground or special envoys, their international news desks rely on bigger outlets to gather the facts on global events. And as they include RT among these outlets, this situation heavily influences the reporting on critical issues, such as Russia's relations with other countries like the US, or the wars in Ukraine and Syria.

# Who makes RT en Español?

While in January 2017 most of the work was done in Moscow, Montevideo and Madrid, the channel has since opened its own studios in Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Miami. Besides, it can count on the network of RT English studios in places like Washington or London, which are used to report from those cities whenever necessary. It also has correspondents in Caracas and Hayana, among other places.

At the moment of writing, according to its own website, the crew of visible faces on RT en Español is composed of five Russians, five Spaniards, five Argentinians, five Mexicans, four Chileans, three Ecuadorians, two Venezuelans, two Cubans and one US citizen; they are anchormen and anchorwomen, presenters of different TV shows or correspondents and journalists who appear on camera. In addition to them, there is a multinational team of several dozen people in charge of production, writing and technical work.

The director is another Russian, Victoria Vorontsova. According to her LinkedIn profile,8 she studied Spanish language and culture in Madrid in 1997 and Science, International Relations and Law in Northern Iowa the following year. complemented with a Master degree in International Relations in Moscow. She has been part of the RT team since 2005, first as a news editor and then as an adviser to the editor-in-chief. When RT en Español was created in 2009, she was immediately appointed to head it. However, she does not have a strong public profile. She has only 3,680 Twitter followers at the moment of this research, and her Twitter and Facebook accounts are mostly devoted to retweeting RT content.



Victoria Vorontsova, director of RT en Español. Source: https://theaibs.tv/the-2010-aibs-judges/ victoria-vorontsova/

But the most interesting figure in the leadership of RT Spanish is the deputy director of the website, Inna Afinogenova. Over the past five years, she has become a highly influential YouTube star thanks to her ironic/humoristic political clips that were first broadcast during the news shows of RT en Español but then became an independent programme, called "Ahí les va" (an expression that can be translated as "Here you have it"). It first appeared on YouTube and is now be found on the RT website. Through humour, irony and "whataboutism" (an old

technique mastered by Soviet diplomats, consisting in pointing to the flaws of others as a way to defend oneself from criticism), "Ahí Les Va" promotes subtle yet highly manipulative narratives about international politics, mostly – but not only – covering Latin American affairs. The underlying philosophy of the programme, repeated almost verbatim on most shows, is "Mainstream media are hiding/not showing/manipulating information on current affairs, but thankfully we are here to explain it to you".

Afinogenova's command of the Spanish language is impressive, and the jokes are usually pretty funny, so it is not strange that the programme is a wild success among Latin American audiences. Its outreach should not be underestimated: at the time of this writing, Afinogenova's YouTube channel has almost 1 million subscribers, a massive increase from the 184,000 it had in February 2020. Her Telegram channel is followed by more than 54,500 people. Most videos reached over 200,000 views, with those addressing the protest and instability wave in Latin America reaching around 300,000 views. An explainer of the crack in Chile's social, capitalist model, which has been viewed by more than 600,000 people, remains the most viewed clip so far. Several videos about alleged campaigns against the Sputnik V vaccine reached more than half a million views, while most videos about Colombia reached more than 400,000 views.

# What viewers see on RT en Español

RT programming is not as diverse as it may seem at first sight. It includes many documentaries, usually related to Russian weapons or some aspects about life in Russia's regions, as well as social issues in different parts of the world. RT en Español also has sports, travel and interview programmes. News shows are constant, broadcast on almost an hourly basis from 1 pm to 5 am.

But the most important feature of the channel is its political shows, such as "RT Reporta" ("RT Reports"), in which RT journalists address current affairs all over the world and interview experts and figures relevant to the subject. While the characteristics of the show resemble objective journalism, the choice of topics is never accidental, often highlighting the uglier aspects of Western societies or Latin American countries ruled by right-wing governments. Another programme, "En la mira" ("In the crosshairs"), is a monthly partnership between RT en Español and Venezuelan state TV channel Telesur. aiming to present Venezuela and other allied nations such as Cuba or Bolivia as the permanent target of the capitalist West, which attacks their sovereignty.

A few years ago, English RT broadcast a much-discussed show hosted



Source: https://www.facebook.com/ActualidadRT/

by Julian Assange, in which the founder of Wikileaks interviewed figures ranging from Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah to former Guantanamo prisoners to Malaysian politician Anwar Ibrahim. Similarly, from March 2018 to June 2020, RT en Español had a show titled "Conversando con Correa" ("Talking with Correa"), in which the former Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa interviewed leading progressive international figures. They were mostly from Spain and Latin America, such as Pablo Iglesias Turrión, the co-founder and and former Secretary General of the Spanish far-left party Podemos, and Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú, but there were also renowned intellectuals, activists and politicians from other countries, such as UN human rights adviser Jean Ziegler, lawyer and journalist Glenn Greenwald, filmmaker Oliver Stone, musician Roger Waters and former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Some of them even appeared in both Assange and Correa's shows, such as U.S. intellectual Noam Chomsky.

Although some of the guests are certainly controversial, such as former Catalan president Carles Puigdemont (now a fugitive from Spanish justice), "Conversando con Correa" is mostly a talk show where two strong personalities - the interviewee and Correa himself exchange views on current or cultural affairs. For this reason, and given the unequivocal ideological stance of its highprofile participants, it is rather harmless and definitely inside the limits of the freedom of expression. But the programme is significant for another reason: it shows the commitment of RT en Español to the political movement of Correa, currently exiled in Brussels after being sentenced in absentia to eight years of prison on corruption charges. Correa's supporters claim that these charges are fabricated, and Interpol has repeatedly refused to enforce a Red Notice against him on the grounds that it was politically motivated. Ecuador's former president hopes that a more sympathetic government may pave the way for his return to the country as a free man. For this reason, RT and other Spanishlanguage Russian state-sponsored outlets devoted enormous efforts to promote the candidacy of Correa's heir, Andrés Arauz, in the 2021 general election. Although Arauz was ultimately defeated in the run-off by conservative candidate Guillermo Lasso, RT is currently working to undermine the latter's presidency, accusing him of not having fulfilled his electoral promises despite having been in power for only four months, and suggesting that Lasso's government may be promoting the recent wave of prison riots to set grounds for a security referendum that would allow the return of U.S. military bases to the country.



Eva Golinger. Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/ dgcomsoc/7688081968/

Another interesting show, still being broadcast, is "Detrás de la noticia" ("Behind the news"), hosted by Eva Golinger. This Venezuelan-U.S. lawyer and activist became a celebrity within progressive circles after the publication of her 2006 book *The Chávez* Code,9 which, on the basis of U.S. official documents obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, claimed to prove Washington's involvement in the 2002 failed coup d'etat against Venezuelan thenpresident Hugo Chávez. For some years, Golinger became an informal advisor and advocate for Chávez's government.10 She reflected on her experiences in her 2019 book Confidante of 'Tyrants': The Story of the US Woman Trusted by the U.S.'s Biggest Enemies.11

In every episode of "Detrás de la noticia", Golinger addresses topics that concern U.S. and Latin American progressives, immigration, such as environmental issues, gun proliferation, inequality or U.S. interventionism abroad, with a striking tolerance towards left-wing governments no matter how authoritarian they are (as, for example, the Cuban or Venezuelan regimes), always portrayed as victims of imperialism. The longevity of the programme, which started in January 2011, is remarkable, as it promotes many of the core topics of RT, such as an image of the U.S. as an unfair, dysfunctional and basically evil state. Compared to such a human rights violator, the narrative seems to go, Russia does not look so bad. However, it would be wrong to consider Golinger a Kremlin employee or outright propagandist: as a prominent activist on her own, she rather fits the category of those who for ideological affinity, anti-imperialist conviction or mere disorientation can be labelled "RT's fellow travellers".

But the true star of the channel is the TV show "El Zoom" ("The Zoom"), a supposedly analytical yet highly



Javier Rodríguez Carrasco.
Source: https://www.facebook.com/ActualidadRT/

manipulative programme in which the presenter addresses current affairs twice a week with the help of some guests. And make no mistake: the topic is always in a top position in the Kremlin's interests list, be it gas supplies to Europe, naval incidents with NATO warships in the Black Sea or political crises in the Latin American countries, the governments of which Moscow aims to weaken. The show

serves for its presenter, Spanish journalist Javier Rodríguez Carrasco - who has been working for RT en Español practically since its foundation in 2009 - to introduce a series of strategic narratives, permanently in the service of Russia's propagandistic framework. He launches these ideas amid long commentaries, sometimes before asking the interviewees about a totally different issue. This way, these strategic messages (for example, "we all know that the U.S. backs Al Qaeda and the Islamic State", "the EU is weak and on the verge of collapse", "the U.S. always betrays its partners because it wants vassals, not allies", "Navalny and the Russian opposition are stooges of Western intelligence services") remain uncontested. In general, guests are already sympathetic to these points of view, but in the rare occasions that they are not, or if they dare to challenge an argument expressed by the presenter, Rodríguez Carrasco simply changes the subject and asks a different guest about another topic. Thus, many participants never realise how they are played by this experienced host.

# Disinformation campaigns: the case of @spainbuca

RT en Español has played a prominent role in different centralised disinformation campaigns. Probably the most important was the operation unleashed after the downing of the MH17 Malaysia Airlines flight over Ukraine in July 2014. In the hours immediately after the incident, a team from RT en Español, which was on a reporting trip to Donbass, travelled to the place and filmed the wrecked fuselage, while expressing a notorious ambiguity about who was responsible for the downing. More importantly, an alleged Spanish air controller with a Twitter handle @spainbuca, who claimed to be in the control tower of the Boryspil Airport



José Carlos Barrios Sánchez (@spainbuca) during an interview with RT en Español. Source: https://theins.ru/news/94973

in Kyiv, started tweeting about the alleged presence of two Ukrainian warplanes in the area, among other elements that suggested that Ukraine was behind the incident and was attempting to cover it up. Soon after, "he" disappeared from the public view and "his" account was cancelled by Twitter, leading some internauts with pro-Kremlin views to wonder if he had been "silenced for knowing too much".

@spainbuca had already made an appearance on RT en Español months before under the same identity, an alleged Spanish air controller named "Carlos" who "had been living in Ukraine for five years". In an interview with RT news show in May 2014, he claimed to have been forced to leave Kyiv after receiving death threats for his posts on social media criticising the Maidan "coup". Neither of these two interventions was genuine: in 2018, a joint investigation by Radio Free Europe/Radio



Oliver Stone at a meeting with Vladimir Putin.
Source: http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/
news/56260/photos

Liberty and Romanian site RISE Project revealed that his real identity was José Carlos Barrios Sánchez, and that he was a conman arrested for fraud in Romania in 2013.<sup>13</sup> He had never been an air controller in Ukraine, where, in fact, it had already been established that there were no Spaniards in such a role. In a recorded phone interview with the investigative journalists who exposed him – which the author of this chapter was able to obtain independently – Barrios Sánchez claimed that for his interventions he had received significant amounts of money from the RT team, who told him what he had to say.<sup>14</sup>

This flagrant falsity was nonetheless widely exploited by Russian disinformation and diplomacy, until it became impossible to continue with the farce. Even Vladimir Putin, in his interviews with U.S. filmmaker Oliver Stone, made a reference to the "specialist of Spanish origin" who exposed "Ukraine's military aircraft in the corridor assigned for civilian aircraft". 15 And in the years that have passed since this episode, RT en Español has continued spreading different Russian versions of the downing of the MH17 flight, trying to convince its audience that Russia bore no responsibility for the incident and that the international investigation had no interest in uncovering the truth, only in falsely blaming Moscow for the downing.

Other disinformation operations in which RT en Español played a key role are the amplification of Catalonia's pro-independence movement in the last months of 2017. Although the coverage of the irregular independence referendum organised by pro-independence Catalan authorities was presented as factual and as an attempt to "give voice to both sides", it usually ignored that the consultation was illegitimate in the eyes of the Spanish authorities and was not recognised by any transnational body or legitimised by international observers. Exaggerations and decontextualised data were a common feature on RT in that period, and when counter-riot policemen sent to prevent

the celebration of the referendum beat up voters in front of the cameras, the images – and the reactions to them – were exploited by RT for a whole week. Significantly, the consultation and police repression in Catalonia were not covered on the ground by the usual local correspondents (all of them Spaniards), but by an Argentinian reporter who was sent from Moscow to Barcelona.

And this is, very often, the way that RT en Español serves a wider disinformation framework: in many cases, it does not invent falsities or conspiracy theories, which could be easily disproven and would quickly discredit the TV channel. Instead, it identifies highly controversial topics and amplifies them under the mask of "critical journalism", usually focusing on their most divisive aspects. This is what RT France did with the Yellow Vest movements16 and what RT Deutsch did with the socalled "Querdenken" movement protesting against COVID-19 policies.<sup>17</sup> **Besides** Catalonia, RT en Español used this same strategy, for example, with the incarceration of rapper Pablo Hasél in February 2021 for the crimes of "praising terrorism" and "insulting the Crown" in his lyrics. 18

The Hasél case is complicated and many human controversial, defenders, including rights Amnestv International, have called to abolish the legislation that led to his imprisonment. However, he had also been previously sentenced for a crime of aggression against a policeman, so as a convicted felon he had to go to prison after being found guilty of this second series of charges. RT, as one could expect, not only failed to explain the nuances of the case, but also compared it unfavourably to the alleged tolerance showed by Spanish authorities towards a neo-Nazi march that took place in Madrid in these same days.19

# Targeting Latin America

The same modus operandi has been successfully applied in Latin America. Social upheavals in the region have multiple causes, so attempting to blame protests on "Russian interference", as some officials tried to do,<sup>20</sup> sounds ridiculous (and indeed helps to reinforce the narrative that "Russia is always falsely accused", as Russian propaganda dutifully reiterates at any opportunity). However, there is a large body of evidence showing that when these sorts of upheavals take place, Russia's propaganda machine is well placed to exploit and amplify them, and it does.<sup>21</sup> By siding with the protesters, whose demands are seen as legitimate by wide sections of the population, RT manages to establish itself as a credible source, unlike progovernment media that are perceived as biased.

As a result, the audiences of RT en Español have grown exponentially in these years, peaking during periods of instability in these countries. During the two most intense weeks of the protests in Chile in 2019, RT en Español entered the ninth position in the ranking both of the most influential media and most shared content in the country, according to a social media analysis of the private Spanish firm Alto Analytics commissioned by the Chilean government.22 When riots exploded in Colombia in April 2021, RT en Español ran dozens of stories and videos about police violence and repression against demonstrators. As the protests were not initially covered by international media, these materials filled an information vacuum and became viral immediately, also helping to fuel discontent against Colombian authorities. Previously. face of a similar context in November 2019, the government of Ecuador cut off the broadcasting of RT en Español and Venezuela's Telesur on the basis that they were contributing to inflame the situation.<sup>23</sup>



A vaccination site offering Sputnik V in Mexico. (AP). Source: https://www.as-coa.org/articles/vaccine-manufacturing-race-russia-trips

Interestingly, in contrast to other editions of this channel, RT en Español did not contribute much to spread coronavirus disinformation anti-vaccination or narratives, according to a July 2020 analysis by the Stanford Internet Observatory.<sup>24</sup> "A study of Russian disinformation across the six languages covered by RT suggests that RT en Español is, unlike other RT outlets, not a primary vector for influence operations; instead, Russia-aligned disinformation is funnelled into Spanishspeaking communities through other 'grey' propaganda channels", the report states.<sup>25</sup> The reasons are unclear, but we can speculate that progressive audiences in Latin America and Spain, the target audience of RT en Español, tend to be much more pro-science and pro-vaccine than their counterparts on the Right. Instead, RT en Español focused strongly on promoting the virtues of the Sputnik V vaccine and "international campaigns" denouncing against it.26 When Sputnik V was launched, several Latin American governments like Argentina and Mexico immediately showed interest in purchasing it. Since Moscow was trying to use the vaccine as a vehicle for influence in the region, spreading antivaccination narratives would have been a shot in the foot. Whatever the motives, independent observers including author of this article soon noticed that any information related to the Sputnik V was shared many thousands of times on social media, when other articles were usually shared only in the dozens or in the hundreds at most. Whether this was partially the

result of a coordinated campaign has never been properly determined, but we can be sure that the interest of Spanish-speaking audiences in the Sputnik V was genuine.

But RT en Español does not hesitate to resort to conspiracy theories or outright lies when necessary to promote a "higher cause". In recent months, for example, it has spread the idea – of course, without proper evidence – that the U.S. and Colombian authorities are somehow behind the murder of Haiti's President Jovenel Moïse, 27 or that the government of Guillermo Lasso is deliberately promoting the wave of prison riots in Ecuador 28 in order to boost a referendum on national security that would allow the return of U.S. bases to the country. 29

These techniques could backfire, though: as disinformation gains more prominence in the contents of RT en Español, an increasing number of citizens realises its true nature. It is interesting that, unlike in the early years of the channel, not many reputed Spanish academics agree to be interviewed in RT programmes today, as many of them are wary of past distortions. Unfortunately, this is not the case yet in Latin America, where many real experts still contribute happily to the channel's shows. However, judging by reactions on social media to RT articles and shows, awareness about these manipulations is growing too. As the channel adopts an increasingly biased approach and its falsifications become apparent to more people, also grows the number of those who can experience first-hand how unreliable RT en Español is, and how its real goals are not to make information public but to lead its viewers to see the world the way the Kremlin wants. Luckily for all, this can only work for so long before one is confronted with reality.

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#### Introduction

The RT France website was founded in 2015 and a French-speaking 24/7 news TV channel was launched in 2017. Two vears later, in the midst of the massive Gilets Jaunes protests that swept France for several months, RT France was heralded as the movement's reference media by both the government and protesters. How did RT manage to establish its French branch so quickly and profoundly? How does RT France reconcile its journalistic image and its editorial message, in between the expectations of its Russian founders and the reception of its French audience? To answer these questions, we have analysed RT France's online news production between 31 December 2018 and 13 January 2019, in the midst of the Gilets Jaunes movement. We have also looked at the channel's news bulletins from 15 July to 21 July 2019. We also conducted interviews with RT France chief editor Jérôme Bonnet, communication director Lorenzo Ricci, and two journalists whose names were changed at their demand.

#### American model, French reception and Russian preeminence: the triple constraint at RT France's inception

When Russia Today was founded in 2005, its chief editor Margarita Simonyan defined its ambition as such: "it will be a view of the world from Russia. We do not want to change the professional format established by such TV channels as BBC, CNN and Euronews. We want to reflect Russia's view of the world and make Russia itself more understandable". From its



"RT France arrives on the airwaves".
Source: https://www.facebook.com/RTFrance/

inception, the news group, like most major transnational news actors, was based on the model created by CNN International in the 1980s: a global, 24/7, fast-paced and predominantly visual coverage of hard news.<sup>2</sup> In this informational competition for global news coverage, Russian media were significantly behind, because of the privatisations of the 1990s and the Doctrine of Information Security instated in 2000.3 In response, the Kremlin invested vast amounts of money to catch up: in 2009, Russia Today was renamed "RT", giving a more global identity to the channel; in 2013, Putin restructured the State media to create an international news agency called "Rossiya Segodnya" (Russian for "Russia Today", although RT claims there is no link between the two); and in 2014, it launched a multimedia news agency called Sputnik, to compete with majors actors like AFP or Reuters. Meanwhile, in 2013. RT launched an international video news agency called Ruptly. Based in Berlin, with 22 offices around the world, this network is "as effective as APTN or Reuters" says Philippe, a TV journalist for RT France.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, since 2007 RT International has created seven regional branches (RT Arabic, RT en Español, RT America, RT UK, RT France, RT Deutsch and RT на русском [in Russian]), plus 25 correspondent offices in 18 countries.5 "Thanks to this international aspect, we can have access to gems", says Jérôme Bonnet, chief editor for RT France. Producers from each branch can thus broadcast reports made by other branches and offices.

Although RT France benefits from

this global network, its centralisation is problematic for news production. "I have a serious problem with some packages that come to us, that are already made by Moscow", says Philippe.6 At RT France, these pre-packaged news contents cause a double problem. On a technical level, they come in a language and format not adapted to the French public. Most journalists at RT France do not have the experience to translate and adapt these packages, as can be seen on air. For instance, the French dubbing of the 2019 Direct Line with Vladimir Putin is barely understandable, and the interview of Russian journalist Ivan Golunov made by RT International was aired on RT France without any introduction nor presentation of the context or interviewee.<sup>7</sup> In June 2018, the Superior Audiovisual Council (Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel, CSA), the regulator for French television, issued a formal notice to RT France for a poor translation of a report in Syria. It also highlighted "a visible imbalance in the analysis" of the Ghouta chemical attack.8 On a journalistic level, Philippe points out interferences from RT's headquarters in Moscow: "if they are interested in a subject, they'll put it first. Russia comes first because you're above all a news channel that belongs to Russia. And you'll do impossible acrobatic feats to link it to the news, to find a transition that makes it work, that's the difficulty. I wouldn't have had this difficulty at another news channel". Among such subjects, Philippe highlights reports on Russian army and weapons: "what do we care about Russia's new tank or new missile? Here, it feels like a glory to Russia. And sadly, you can do nothing about it. You can't zap it".9 Carole, who works at RT France's website, highlights mainly Russian soft news suggested by RT International. "It's the website's 'cheap buzz' aspect, that is not handled by us, that is handled by Moscow. They find funny videos, they send them to us. We choose what interests us". 10

At RT France's headquarters in Boulogne-Billancourt's media district, in the suburbs of Paris, almost all of the

70 journalists and 50 other employees are French, according to Lorenzo Ricci, PR manager.<sup>11</sup> "The management is still Russian, the president [Xenia Fedorova] is still Russian obviously, but in the editorial department, there is no Russian any more", adds Philippe. 12 "So there is indeed a will to develop a French media, settled in the French landscape", Jérôme Bonnet says.<sup>13</sup> This localising logic not only allows RT France to adapt to French news and mediatic codes, but also favours a better reception from the French audience. In line with other regional branches, RT France has recruited well-known local media figures. such as economist Jacques Sapir, journalist Stéphanie de Muru and, above all, TV host Frédéric Taddeï, who is dominant on the RT France website.

However, RT France suffers from many restraints imposed by the national mediascape. The channel is only broadcast by two TV service providers and on high channels: free on channel 359, and recently Canal+ on channel 176. "Mechanically, our



Jérôme Bonnet reacts to Emmanuel Macron's criticism of RT. Screenshot

reach is a bit limited", Jérôme Bonnet owns up.14 This limited broadcasting can be linked to the high degree of scrutiny imposed by the CSA, which, when it gave RT France its broadcasting licence in September 2017. sent along a list of "particular stipulations informational truthfulness". 15 This surveillance has an impact on the journalistic work, according to Philippe: "every time, you work fearing the CSA, because you are under scrutiny".16 This scrutiny can also be found in the portrayal of RT France by other French media, which

often criticise its sovereigntist and anti-Atlanticist editorial line, its sensationalist and dramatic coverage of French news, its glorification of Russia and Putin or the poor mastery of the French language and journalistic codes by Russian journalists and translators. In 2019, RT France itself estimated there had been "550 critical news articles" from French media since the launch of its TV channel. 17 However, the first opposition to RT's arrival in France was political, and came from then presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron. In February 2017, after Sputnik published an interview in which Macron was presented as "an agent of the US bank system" and of "a rich gay lobby", his campaign team denounced "two websites, Russia Today and Sputnik, 100% controlled by the Russian State" which "broadcast and propagate fake news everyday".18 The two websites were banned from the campaign trail and, once Macron was elected president, from the presidential palace.<sup>19</sup> RT France capitalises on this outsider image. "Being marginalised, that helps them", Philippe notes. "And they use it, they overuse it, with a section, sometimes inside the news bulletin, saying: 'Here we go, Emmanuel Macron banned us from the Elysée once again".20 The website even has a whole column devoted to answering outside critics, called "RT is talking to you".21

RT France's bad reputation in the French mediascape had a direct influence on the channel's internal organisation, starting with its generous recruitment policy which mostly attracted journalists in a precarious situation. "They recruited two profiles: people who got out of schools, so quite inexperienced because it's not easy getting out of school and getting a job; and the other profile was people who struggled a bit, who had been doing piecework for a while or didn't even have any activity", Carole remembers.<sup>22</sup> In the TV department, Philippe specifically highlights a lack of management: "it's a good channel with lots of means. But the human means, the professional experience is lacking a bit".

He specifically points out the chief editor's lack of TV experience – Jérôme Bonnet was previously chief editor to a satirical magazine – and the absence of a journalist during the TV's editorial conferences: "only the manager, those handling the guests and the chief editor choose more or less what will be covered during the day". The separation from management is even wider in the web department: "let's say we don't really have a web chief editor, so we kind of manage among ourselves. We are in a kind of autonomy". 24

These management problems and the general lack of experience have a direct impact on the quality of news production. Carole deplores "a big dose of system D" in the web department, where, as we'll see further down, journalists mostly do media curation, a form of online journalism often experienced as a depreciation of the profession.<sup>25</sup> "I've heard more critics about the frustrated aspect - 'Why don't we do more things? Why don't we do better?' - more a lack of ambition, means and competence, than about a "we are hindered" ideological aspect".26 In the TV department too, journalistic work is often limited to editing outside productions. A repetitive task, all the more trying as it is done in the urgency of the 24/7 news system, particularly in RT France where there is a 30-minute live news bulletin



Source: https://www.puredesigninternational.com/ project/rt-france-mipcom-2017/

every hour. "In other newsrooms, normally you take much, much, much more time preparing a 30-minute big news bulletin like this", says Philippe.<sup>27</sup>

As we have seen, RT France's mediatic ambition is hindered by several paradoxes: it is greatly influenced economically and mediatically by the occidental model of CNN but firmly oriented editorially and journalistically by its Russian parent company. It follows a highly regionalising logic that highlights all the more its rejection by the French media sphere: it benefits from ambitious topdown investment but greatly depends on bottom-up resourcefulness. So how does RT France find its own voice in between Eastern and Western models, in the midst of a hostile French mediasphere and in a disarticulated work organisation?

#### The editorial frame: a magnifying glass of French controversies

Despite its transnational status, the RT France website is mostly oriented towards French news: in our survey, from 31 December 2018 to 13 January 2019, the France column made for two thirds of the news production, with 188 articles, whereas the International column only had 81 articles. As in most large transnational news channels, the global coverage ideal does not resist the law of proximity.<sup>28</sup> Even in its international news coverage. RT France tended to follow the traditional news hierarchy: the most covered regions were the West (46 articles) and the Middle-East (17), while the most mentioned international actor was the United States (18 appearances). Neither does RT France draw upon international news to offer a more detailed analysis of foreign affairs: articles in the International column were on average shorter (2,525 characters) than those in the France column (2,602 characters).29 The choice of news sources confirms this national scope. The AFP, cited in 78 articles, was the main source whereas

Russian agencies Sputnik, Tass, RIA Novosti and VGTRK provided only five articles. In second place were French newspapers, with the main focus on national news (64 articles) and then local news (35 articles). This shows an important curation of the French media sphere. A total of 55 articles featured content made by RT France or Ruptly, again mostly focused on national news (42 articles); and 77 articles used social media as sources for information and footage, particularly for French news (62 articles).



French far-right leader meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in March 2017. Source: Wikimedia Commons

By following mainly occidental news agencies and French newspapers, RT France's website focalises on subjects that have already attracted national or international interest. Blog and social media curation, although it seems to pose a challenge to traditional news hierarchy, only reinforces this focalisation on viral subjects and events. 30 According to White, hard news focuses on "events or situations which are construed as threatening to damage. disrupt or rearrange the social order in either its material, political or normative guise".31 RT France, like most 24/7 news channels, thus over-represents conflicts, crimes, disasters and controversies, while its visual and highly-edited journalism dramatises news coverage.32 In the first two weeks of January 2019, RT France's website devoted 114 of its 298 articles to security subjects: 70 articles were about the Gilets Jaunes protests, 13 about terrorist

attacks, 10 about violence and aggressions and seven about disasters. This security angle tends to highlight minor news items. For instance, RT France devoted an article to a police car bumping into a protester, an accident covered by only two regional newspapers, one of which doubting it.33 Likewise, on 2 January 2019, RT France published an article on an aggression in Belgium, covered three days earlier in Belgian tabloids, but picked up in France only by the far-right blog FdeSouche earlier that day.<sup>34</sup> Along with its attention to social media and its interest in controversial themes like security and immigration, RT France tends to magnify news that highlight or are highlighted by radical rightwing populist movements and parties. RT France is thus the only generalist medium to publish the reaction of the far-right National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN) party to a rap music video showing children hitting a piñata of party-leader Marine Le Pen.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, RT France was one of the rare websites to cover the cancellation of a feminist march in the United States "because of a 'massively white' participation deemed unrepresentative". The article even describes a local event as "international scale", even though it only represented a local branch of a national movement.36

RT France's curation frames its news production in a western, mostly national, scope with a short-term eventbased timeline that favours virality and leaves little space for in-depth analysis. This framework favours sensationalist and controversial subjects, in which extremist discourses and actors are over-represented. Yet, because of this curation of national newspapers and western news agencies. most of RT France's editorial line is made up of the dominant informational flow that RT says it is opposed to - its French motto being "Osez questionner" ("Dare to question"). On the one hand, news agency journalism is marked by strict writing, rigid formats and concise articles, and is thus opposed to alternative journalism. The role of news agencies toward other media imposes a form of procedural objectivity, while their production rhythms often limit their work to simple recording and recounting, all of which put them at the heart of the "mainstream" journalism that RT criticises.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, curation favours picking up news and discourses already pushed forward by generalist media, which seems to go against the questioning that RT pretends to embody. So how can RT offer an alternative to or a critique of a mediatic system presented as monolithic, when it is essentially based on it?



Osez questionner – Dare to question.
Source: https://www.puredesigninternational.com/
project/rt-france-mipcom-2017/

# Repackaging newswires: the suspension of judgment and the insinuation of criticism

"When we pick up an AFP, besides typographic or chart-related matters, there are keywords – 'annexation', 'dictator', 'regime' - we don't put", Carole says.<sup>38</sup> This news repackaging by subtraction is raised as a policy for both the channel and the website: "simply, we try to avoid

moral postures", Jérôme Bonnet explains. "There, it's a principle we are very firm about. When we talk about Kim Jong-un, we don't need to put 'dictator' before. People know who Kim Jong-un is and what North Korea is". This stance represents a profound questioning not only of consensual mediatic denominations, but also of the principle of linguistic deference from the public to the journalists.<sup>40</sup> According to RT's policy, journalists have the right to express subjective comments on events and actors, but they are not to impose formal definitions that would imply social representations and cognitive frameworks. In Carole's words: "when we say something, we don't really suggest it, we say it". But these terms, we argue, have a scientific meaning, based on academic knowledge and journalistic observation. By rejecting them because of the moral judgement or the ideological orientation they may carry, RT denies the reality they describe. This politicisation of expertise creates the risk of a general relativism, in which an uninitiated reader's opinion would equal that of an expert, because of everybody's subjectivity.41 Moreover, according to Temmerman and colleagues. "journalism is in itself a continuous act of including or excluding judgments" on subjects, angles and words. 42 The exclusion of moral judgment is therefore in itself a moral judgement, in which the North Korean regime is put on the same level as any other political system. "Not taking a moral posture and being pragmatic is also a moral posture. In geopolitics, that's what Russia does", Carole notes. "But that's what many countries in fact do".43

Moreover, RT France does not respect this suspension of judgment with the same thoroughness for all the actors it describes. In its coverage of Jair Bolsonaro's inauguration, RT France never indicates the Brazilian president's far-right political orientation, whereas it places the Workers' Party on the "left-wing". The article sums up the focus of Bolsonaro's campaign as "fighting corruption and criminality"

without commenting on his ultraliberal line nor his racist and homophobic rhetoric.44 Between 31 December 2018 and 13 January 2019, the word "farright" was only used once, to describe the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands), and was never applied to bigger personalities or parties like the French RN or "France Arise" (Debout La France), the Italian Lega, the Polish Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) or the Hungarian Fidesz. Yet, François Fillon was presented as "the former candidate for the Right" and Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador as a "left-wing president". And while RT France pretends to reject formal words that would reveal a normative judgment, it still picks up phrases showing an ideological vision of some actors. For instance, Salvini, the Lega's leader and then Italian Interior minister, was presented several times as "the government's strong-minded man" or "Il Capitano", a nickname invented by his supporters and picked up by RT without context or quotation marks.46 Likewise. Putin was presented as "the master of the Kremlin" while Macron was described as "the tenant of the Elvsée".47

This subtracting process also takes place in the contextualisation of articles. According to Lochard, the minimalistic writing of hard news generally challenges the "contextual dependency" of the event's interpretation.48 In the case of RT, this decontextualisation again varies depending on the actors involved. Thus, when Emmanuel Macron publishes a letter to the French, it is "in the midst of a political crisis", says RT's headline. 49 On the contrary, on the day of Nicolas Maduro's inauguration, RT's headline was a sober "Venezuela: Nicolas Maduro inaugurated for another six-vear mandate" while almost all the other French media's headlines noted the isolation and contestations the president suffers.<sup>50</sup> Another example can be found in the three articles RT France dedicates to a building collapsing in Magnitogorsk. One article is taken from Reuters and the other two

from the AFP.<sup>51</sup> None of them include the paragraph written by the AFP on the lack of safety and poor state of Russian buildings built in the Soviet era.<sup>52</sup> "You won't find that on RT, that's for sure", Carole says.

Although they are done in the name of judgement suspension, we can see that RT France's subtractions from curated articles are neither systematic nor neutral. We even identified some oriented or subjective elements added by RT France. This repackaging by addition mostly concerns specific sections of the articles, like their title. On 11 January 2019, when a survey announced an erosion of public support for the Gilets Jaunes movement, RT France was the only French medium to run a headline about the ongoing support of "67% of the lowest-income French".<sup>53</sup>



RT interviews one of the participants of the Gilets Jaunes movement.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

On 5 January 2019, when the Lima Group refused to recognise Nicolas Maduro's reelection, RT France's headline was the only one to mention Mexico's disagreement before the Group's announcement.<sup>54</sup> Another zone where RT France's stance is made clear despite the hard news model is the subheading, added to newswires by

the journalist to orient their reading. For instance, in an article on then US State secretary Mike Pompeo's visit to Cairo, a subhead that reads "Yet another American charge against Iran" adds an idea of harassment to the following paragraphs.<sup>55</sup> Introductions and conclusions are also key zones for subjective elements. On 11 January 2019, RT France's transcription of an interview of then French Interior minister Christophe Castaner about act 8 of the Gilets Jaunes protests is concluded by this rhetorical question: "Something to fan the flames with before act 9?"56 Four hours later, the website introduced an article about the French president's declarations with a similar question: "Did Emmanuel Macron voluntarily fan the flames before the upcoming Gilets Jaunes protests of 12 January?"57

Another way of orienting the reader lies beyond the text. The hypertext system offers journalists space for both complex and concise writing adapted to hard news, so they can focus on the subject while indicating contextual elements through hyperlinks. Most importantly, it creates an extended and coherent network for the reader to browse freely and chose information from.<sup>58</sup> Praising itself to be at the forefront of the digitalisation of news channels and wanting to offer readers the same autonomy for news contextualisation that it gives for news evaluation, RT France makes much use of hyperlinks on its website. But this hypertextual offer has to be pertinent for the reader to consciously choose their news. In RT France articles, boxes promote undated articles that sometimes turn out to be obsolete in the rapid flow of hard news. For instance, an article about the trial of suspected jihadists with a box about a concert being cancelled because of a "terrorist threat" gives the impression that the two events were concurrent, even though they were 16 months apart.<sup>59</sup> Hyperlinks can also ideologically orient the reader from a theme to another: halfway through an article about a French petroleum group investing in Venezuela, an embedded tweet promotes another article about Russia and Venezuela's joint military manoeuvres. Links can even be deceptive: in one analysis of the Gilets Jaunes, a sentence about raising fuel taxes leads to an article about a majority deputy's proposal to reinstate consent to taxation; and a sentence about the Gilet Jaunes' fragmentation leads to an article showing pictures of their Christmas celebrations; and finally a sentence about a survey showing Emmanuel Macron's dwindling popularity leads to an article about another survey that shows Marine Le Pen's rising popularity. Leads to an article about another survey that shows Marine Le Pen's rising popularity.

# Creating ambiguity in and towards journalistic discourses

As we have seen, RT France localises its editorial policy by favouring national news and sources, while bringing a bigger focus on social media sources and themes like security or immigration. This editorialisation is furthered the repackaging of curated content. By invoking a suspension of judgement, RT France journalists tend to selectively delete scientific or consensual denominations and concrete contextual elements that contradict the channel's dominantly sovereigntist worldview. In addition. they repeatedly add subjective elements of judgement in conspicuous but nonessential sections of their news articles. thus suggesting critical reading without affecting the hard news core.

The journalist's discourse is thus doubly impeded by the media's hybrid nature: on the one hand, the curation method and the traditional hard news model limit the expression of their subjectivity to peripheral sections of the article; on the other hand, the media's alternative approach minimises their

formal authority through the principle of suspended judgment. This questioning of journalistic authority is exemplified by the frequent use of rhetorical questions. In the first half of January 2019, 30 articles (10% of RT France's production) had question marks in their headlines, like "Gilets Jaunes: how far from reality are the Interior's figures?" or "Germany: Russian hackers behind a massive data leak?" According to Charaudeau, the journalist uses this to "establish a knowing bond with the reader by forcing him to accept the questioning" without being responsible for the lack of explanation.<sup>62</sup> RT France journalists also make heavy use of quotes, whether entire sentences or "textual isles" in an indirect discourse.63 Here are some of the 86 headlines - based on quoted textual isles which form almost a third of the 298 articles published between 31 December 2018 and 13 January 2019: "What new 'reforms' can we expect in 2019?"; "The US and Colombia want to re-establish 'democracy' in Venezuela"; "Gilets Jaunes: Edouard Philippe wants a special 'troublemaker' file". These isles are a form of autonymic modalisation that creates an ambiguous distance between the journalist and the reported speech: are the quotation marks proof of the journalist's transparency in relaying unmediated speech or a sign of disapproving irony towards third parties' discourses?<sup>64</sup> Whichever meaning the reader gets, the journalist appears to side with him or her, sometimes against the general mediatic discourse.

Tellingly, we find a heavy lexical field of doubt on the RT France website, for instance in an article about the Institute for Statecraft NGO's anti-Russian lobbying: "the veil is lifted", "presumed", "supposed to", "which is not without reminding us of", "supposedly", "presented as", "so-called", "if this document is to be believed". Beside this recurrent rhetoric in RT's production, there are articles that challenge more openly mediatic discourses. An analysis of the relationship between the Gilets Jaunes movement and the media starts with a

list of the protestors' aggressions against journalists, followed by a similar list of mediatic comments and fake news hostile toward protestors, creating a levelling parallel between protestors' physical violence and columnists' critics.66 Another occasion for RT France to express rejection of the French mainstream media comes every year when they send a journalist to the Bobards d'Or ("The Golden Fibs").67 This satirical ceremony created by leading far-right figure Jean-Yves Le Gallou rewards "the worst lies spread by the media".68 In general, RT France offers much more lenient coverage to conspiracy discourse than to mediatic discourses, as can be seen in an article published on 3 January 2019 titled: "Hackers threaten to reveal the 'truth' about 9/11 if they don't get a ransom". RT France is the only French generalist media, along with Sputnik, to cover this news. Contrary to cybersecurity outlets, they do not mention the doubts surrounding these revelations nor the targeted companies' denials.69

### RT France and the "public opinion"

RT France promotes a critical reading of mediatic discourses that sometimes flirts with conspiracy theories and shows ambiguity towards its own journalistic authority. Thus, journalists retreat from their own production - here it is to be noted that almost all articles are unsigned - to leave a greater space to third party voices, notably for news evaluation.70 To that end, the frequent use of quotes is used to show both the sources' authenticity and the transparency of the journalist's work, in a logic of hyperrealism.71 Yet, this idea of quoting being the ultimate expression of direct and transparent journalism is highly contradicted by the simplification, decontextualisation and errors inevitably caused by speech transposition.72 This distortion is made worse by the re-





#### Lire l'article:

francais.rt.com/international/...



RT France's tweet reads: "#Anonymous accuses UK of being behind program to 'counter Russian #propaganda'". Screenshot

composition resulting from the curation method, which only picks up chosen bits of external voices.<sup>73</sup> RT France's tendency to favour sources and sentences that go along its view of society and public opinion is best exemplified by its wide use of vox pops and Twitter curation. In the first two weeks of January 2019, the RT France website made nine compilations of anonymous tweets on various subjects, from the Miss Algeria beauty pageant to Emmanuel Macron's New Year address. When we surveyed RT France's TV channel, from July 15 to July 21 2019, the news bulletins aired two street interviews. As the recent research has demonstrated, most vox pops are destined not to show a balanced spectrum of opinions, but to highlight a single point of view.<sup>74</sup> On RT France, all tweet compilations indeed showed a single point of view, and the vox pop about Benjamin Grievaux's candidacy as mayor of Paris did not show any of his supporters, although the presidential party's candidate was at the time leading in the polls.<sup>75</sup>

This slant in the representation of public opinion can also be found in news sourcing and analysis. According to Carole, web journalists make sure not to pick up online comments from far-right accounts, but they do not have an ethical problem

using them as news sources. Thus, in RT France's articles you can find a communiqué by TV Libertés, a far-right web TV channel, or a tweet by Pierre Sautarel, founder of far-right blog FdeSouche, without any presentation of these sources.76 On 15 July 2019, in an analysis of the Hong Kong protests for independence, RT France's TV channel invited the CEO of a Chinese consulting firm, who evoked foreign implication and American orchestration behind the movement on air. On 19 July 2019, the channel invited the president of a Catholic sovereigntist movement to discuss an investigation into the selling of French rolling stock manufacturer Alstom. RT France has often been criticised for inviting such little-known commentators and for hiding their often nationalist ideological affiliations.77 "The other day for instance, they had [far-right politician] Florian Philippot talking about Julian Assange. Where's the link?" Philippe asks.



French far-right politician Florian Philippot, a former ally of Marine Le Pen. Screenshot

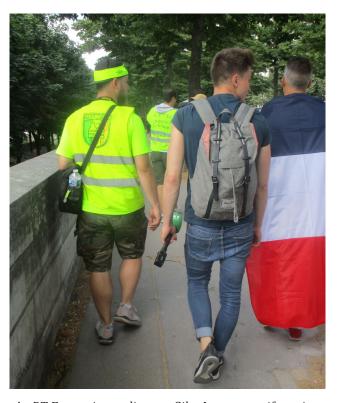
"Sometimes, I find the guests too extreme, be it far-left or far-right". According to Carole, the overrepresentation of extremist movements in the website's opinion section is caused both by the unwillingness of "representatives of the mainstream thought" to speak to RT and by "a conscious choice to give the floor to opinions that are less heard elsewhere". "We choose to offset, so it doesn't bother us to have 90% of the speaking taken by people who are Eurosceptic, sovereigntist and anti-interventionist". "

As we have seen, RT France pushes

forward the image of a dominant public opinion and slants this representation to oppose it to a dominant mediatic discourse and to bring it closer it to sovereigntist discourses. This answers to Krämer's definition of populism as the expression of a "climate of opinion" presented as the "people's natural common will".80 When asked about the large space given to sovereigntists on RT France, Jérôme Bonnet invokes their rising popularity: "Be it leftwing or right-wing, sovereignty is a rising value in politics these days. We can see it's everywhere. We mean to give everyone a chance to speak, so we'll happily give it to them, even more so as they are much less seen elsewhere, or only as bogeymen. We encourage that, because we encourage difference, but we are not the ones saying it".81 By pushing forward the image of a natural and indisputable public opinion, by distancing itself from any partisan approach and by opening itself to populist and conspiracy discourses, RT France itself becomes a populist media.82 If we see populism as an ideologically empty communication logic, carrying multiple contesting voices without being limited to them, a populist media can welcome different political discourses from the without identifying opposition with them. "It's true we are often qualified as alternative media", Jérôme Bonnet notes. "I'm OK with that and it is true we are a bit different. But I don't feel like we are a flag bearer either".83 RT France thus plays the role of an informational mainstream. large in structure and lenient in identity. into which smaller streams born in the blogosphere can flow. A mainstream media for alternative journalism.

This "policy of the apolitical" welcomes all opposition movements without adhering to any, only to profoundly criticise institutional powers. To this end, it is reminiscent of the Russian social movements of the early 2010s. 4 Therefore, it has an important strategic value in protesting, which can explain RT France's popularity among the heterogeneous

and non-partisan Gilet Jaunes protests. According to Carole, RT France's online audience consists mostly of active social media users, only a minimal fraction of which participated in protests. Among them, she identifies many different French political viewpoints (far-left, far-right, Eurosceptic right-wing, sovereigntist leftwing) as well as people mostly interested in diplomacy, who are anti-American. This vision fits with the analysis by the Reframing Russia project of RT's global audience, which found that the majority of readers were interested in transnational news media and informal soft news, and that only a small number of readers had alternative anti-elite profiles.85 Here, RT France's informal style and varied production allow a personalised reception for each reader.



An RT France journalist at a Giles Jaunes manifestation. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Frequent publishing on varied subjects and in different formats and media lets the audience choose their news. The articles' concision, the news decontextualisation and the integration of hyperlinks and tweets allow them to further their reading in the direction they prefer. The removal of signs of normative evaluation frees the reader from scientifically constructed or

commonly defined classifications. The dissemination of subjective markers suggests an oriented reading, but their concentration in structurally conspicuous but informationally superfluous key zones makes their subjectivity obvious and their consideration anecdotal. The strong use of rhetorical questions and quotes creates an ambiguous reading of news that leaves much to the reader's personal interpretation. Even vox pops and tweet compilations can be received in varied ways because of their informal character. According to Bosch, the degree to which an interviewee is representative varies depending on the congruence between their ideology and that of the audience, which is more likely to take into account opinions that go along their worldview rather than those that go against it.86

In general, RT France's informal and amateur aspect, distinguishable from the strict professional frame of traditional media, invites the audience not to receive its discourse with the normative and prescriptive filter of classic journalistic authority. On the contrary, its journalistic writing seems made to yield to the subjectivities of its different audiences. be it the diligent hard news reader, the soft news consumer, or the patchwork of citizens with anti-establishment political views whose only common feature is a sensibility towards sovereigntist themes. If Russian propaganda evolved into public diplomacy through the multiplication and evolution of its discourses, RT France's populism also multiplies and adapts its discourses depending on its audience.

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# Manufacturing Dissent: RT France's Challenge in a Brand-New Media Landscape



# Élie Guckert

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### Introduction

"What are we waiting for, to ban them?", asked French senator Claude Malhuret, in July 2019. He was referring to RT and Sputnik France during a hearing held by the Senate Commission of Culture. Education and Communication. "Their programmes are not made by journalists; they are made directly by the Department D<sup>1</sup> of the FSB in Moscow, as in the heyday of the cold war." 2 Xenia Fedorova, the present director of RT France, immediately fought back and fulminated against "cold war fantasies thrown out without evidence, and accusations and calls for censorship, only because RT France stands apart from the mainstream media".3 This kind of skirmish between a state-elected official and the French arm of the Russian state-controlled TV channel was not the first of its kind, nor will it probably be the last.

During the 2017 French presidential elections, RT France and Sputnik succeeded in becoming a talking point of the French political debate, as well as a subject of diplomatic tension between Paris and Moscow. In recent years, both publications had managed to make national headlines in France on several occasions, for instance, through the exploitation of social and democratic crises such as the "Yellow Vests" movement. Their names therefore regularly wound up in a number of political controversies.

Today, France is not the same country it was at the beginning of the 21st century. This year – a few months ahead of a new presidential election – the political landscape seems more fragmented and polarised than ever, with a national discussion focusing on Far-Right themes that are being pushed by a changing media environment amid local social tensions and an international health crisis. It is apparent that Russia still attempts to exert influence over the political process in certain Western democracies, and there is no reason to believe that France is now out of the Kremlin"s crosshairs. But Russian

propaganda outlets are not the sole players anymore and find themselves challenged by other media players in France. Will RT France be able to locate its own position within this new equation, and still maintain its ability to help shape the future of French politics?

### The fog of "disinformation war"

In 1988, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky theorised the concept of the "manufacturing of consent" by the "mass media", accusing the latter of spreading certain narratives to legitimise elite ideology. This concept, and its weaponisation by other political actors in France, has been highly disputed.4 However, the last decade witnessed the rise of another phenomenon—new actors entered the democratic media arena and did the exact opposite: alternative and foreign state media attempted to destroy any remaining democratic consensus by fuelling controversies and mainstreaming radical voices once confined to the darkest corners of the Internet. This was a "manufacturing of dissent".

A 2020 study by the Pew Research Centre in Washington DC found that "partisan polarisation in the use and trust of media sources [had] widened in the past five years" in the United States. "Deep partisan divisions exist in the news sources Americans trust, distrust and rely on", the study found. During the 2016 US presidential election, the Centre also noted that "the 2016 campaign [was] unfolding against a backdrop of intense partisan division and animosity. Partisans' views of the opposing party [were] more negative than at any point in nearly a quarter of a century".

Polarisation, and disinformation fuelled by social media, are often considered by some as good explanations for understanding the political outcomes in the United States in 2016; others think the role of disinformation may have been overstated. For example, a 2018 study by Ohio State University suggests that about 4 percent of then-President Barack Obama's 2012 supporters were dissuaded from voting for Hilary Clinton in 2016 due to fake news.<sup>7</sup> Contradicting this view, a 2020 study published in the academic journal *Nature Human Behaviour* suggests that exposure to fake news during the 2016 US presidential election has been overstated.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, it is no longer a question whether Russia tried/did not try to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election. The United States' 2019 Mueller Report declared that the Kremlin did in fact try to garner more public favour for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton.9 It is also well documented that the Democratic National Committee's 2016 email leak was indeed the work of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (still commonly known as GRU). Many reports suggest that there were new attempts made to interfere four years later, during the 2020 US presidential election, with the aim to undermine Joe Biden's campaign. Social media companies flagged attempts by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) - the troll factory of "Putin's cook" Yevgeny Prigozhin - to create disinformation networks and a fake domestic left-leaning outlet called "Peace Data". 10 Again, these disinformation operations aimed at capitalising on a preexisting polarised political environment,



Putin tours the new factory Concord directed by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Source: Wikimedia Commons

this time by recruiting local journalists to write on highly divisive issues.<sup>11</sup>

disinformation Such exercises, as monitored in the United States, are also visible in other Western countries, especially in Europe. In March 2021, **EUvsDisinfo** (the European Union's disinformation watchdog, run by the bloc's External Action Service) said that Germany was the main target of Russian disinformation. The watchdog tracked 700 cases, since 2015, of deliberately fake or misleading reporting that aimed at spreading disinformation about Germany. In comparison, over the same time period, the institution documented 300 such cases for France, 170 for Italy, and 40 for Spain.<sup>12</sup> Weeks before the German federal election in September 2021, RT Deutsch had become the most prominent media outlet on social media. For months prior, the German arm of Russian propaganda focused on promoting fears about the Covid pandemic, and advocating for the far-right party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland); this generated more than 22 million interactions on Facebook, thereby outdoing the online reach of German mainstream media such as Bild or Deutsche Welle.13

"Russian interference attempts are real. But today we do not have the required methodological tools to measure their real effect on electoral behaviour", says Colin Gérard, PhD. candidate at the French institute of Geopolitics, where he focuses on Russian informational influence strategy.<sup>14</sup> "It widens the scope of possibilities for interpretations, but the reality is that we do not know much and that we have a tendency to forget endogenous factors existing in the countries that are targeted by Russian actors."15 Those endogenous factors are key to understanding the possible reach of RT France, and other Russian disinformation operations in France. In June 2019, the Institut Montaigne tried to understand if there was a polarisation in French media similar to that in the US, and concluded that:

- the polarisation of the American media space unfolds on a horizontal political axis opposing the left to the right;
- it takes place within the traditional media space (Fox News is opposed to CNN);
- it is aligned with the opposition between political actors and the institutions they represent [...]; and
- this phenomenon of polarisation has been emphasised by the emergence of new media to the right of the political spectrum.<sup>16</sup>

According to this study, a very different kind of polarisation is at play in France. "The polarisation of the French media space is unfolding on a vertical axis, opposing institutionalists to those who could be considered "anti-elites" [...] the polarisation of the French media space is less aligned with that of political actors than in the United States, due to the multiplicity of political actors in France". This study concludes that social media, and the creation of more and more new alternative media on both sides of the political spectrum, will only strengthen this trend to further polarisation.

But like in the United States, France is seeing a stark radicalisation of its right-wing media outlets. France even has its own Fox News, called CNews. 18 In May 2021, the audience numbers for CNews surpassed that of BFMTV news and weather channel for the first time.<sup>19</sup> Since then, CNews (owned by French billionaire Vincent Bolloré) has allowed the most radical voices of the far right to pour into mainstream political discourse. Its front columnist, Eric Zemmour, is now a likely candidate for the 2022 French presidential election. Such successes force other mainstream media to rethink their editorial strategies as well, with some shifting towards the right of the political spectrum too;<sup>20</sup> this is a few months before a presidential election where the current president is due to face Marine Le Pen, the candidate of the main far-right party. National Rally (Rassemblement National).

"The more polarised European societies are, the more it serves the



Vincent Bolloré at the Global Conference in June 2013. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Kremlin's general purpose to delegitimise the liberal democratic norm", confirms Maxime Audinet,<sup>21</sup> a research fellow at the French Strategic Research Institute of the Military School (IRSEM) and author of a book on the same subject.<sup>22</sup> This would however require RT France to find the optimal position to do that in French politics, and this is more complicated than it was in 2017.

# The "wannabe elite" of the anti-elites

Did RT France exert some influence on the evolution of the French media environment over the past five years? "There is, beside RT and disinformation campaigns from abroad, a French media and political space that is becoming more and more savage", says Roman Bornstein,<sup>23</sup> a journalist and researcher at the Fondation Jean-Jaurès. He authored "Digital interference, a manual: Russia and the 2016 US presidential election",24 and undertook an extensive investigation into RT France, which was published in 2019.<sup>25</sup> "The standards that traditionally frame the public debate - whether it is about the codes of political communication, the rules of journalistic work or the border between facts and opinions – are collapsing one after the other. RT France is taking advantage of it, but is not at the origin of it".26

However, Christophe Deloire (the

secretary general of Reporters Sans Frontières [RSF]) suggested otherwise in June 2021. During a "France Culture" broadcast about fake news and information warfare, he said: "I can testify, having seen it, that French news networks made editorial decisions that were linked to the competition represented by RT. Executives, in private, said "yes, I made this editorial decision because otherwise RT will gain ground and I cannot let them do it".<sup>27</sup> But Deloire did not specify which French news network in particular he was referring to, and the RSF did not reply to our request for comment.

"That is exactly the wrong thing to say", reacts Maxime Audinet. "It gives RT the opportunity to present themselves as what they claim to be: an alternative media capable of reaching a specific audience in the French media landscape. In their communication, it allows them to say that they are an alternative media rather than a media at the service of Russian foreign policy."28 Sure enough, RT France immediately jumped on the occasion to portray themselves as standing against the established system. Xenia Fedorova, RT France's director, ironically rejoiced on Twitter: "If we get other channels to raise the bar, it's a tribute to our efforts... and good news for all audiences (3° ".29"

Worryingly, the best publicity for RT France has often been offered by French



Xenia Fedorova, chief executive of RT France. Source: Wikimedia Commons

politicians themselves. During the last French presidential elections, in May 2017, Nicolas Dhuicq – a member of the centreright party Les Républicains (Republicans) and a staunch defender of Vladimir Putin – gave an interview to the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*, which was then re-published by Sputnik in English.<sup>30</sup> Dhuicq accused Emmanuel Macron of being a "US agent" backed by "a very wealthy gay lobby". The interview was not even translated in French, or published by the French outlets of Sputnik or RT, but it raised controversy in public political debate anyway.

Two weeks after Dhuicg's interview. the-then Secretary General of Macron's party "En Marche!" ("On the Move!") Richard Ferrand publicly accused Russia of targeting Macron's campaign with disinformation. "For several weeks now, Russia Today and SputnikNews have been striving to spread the most defamatory rumours about Emmanuel Macron. [...] These two sites are the prime relay of all the attacks against Emmanuel Macron, and in particular the threats of Julian Assange", he wrote in the French newspaper Le Monde.31 According to him, the website of "En Marche!' and its infrastructures were then the "targets of attacks of various forms every month".

He also noted that Macron's then principal political rivals, François Fillon and Marine Le Pen - who both received the support of Vladimir Putin at the time<sup>32</sup> - were apparently not the target of such attacks. Macron's staff started to picture their champion as the French version of Hillary Clinton, with his rivals being depicted as Russian puppets. And because there is no such thing as bad publicity, Sputnik jumped on the bandwagon again, portraying itself and RT as legitimate "free press" outlets under attack by the French government and mainstream French media.33

The suspicions expressed by Macron's staff were not unfounded. In February 2017, Julian Assange – the founder of Wikileaks, who was considered for many years as one of the arms of the

Russian propaganda ecosystem and who also published the leaked DNC emails a year before – said: "We have interesting information concerning one of the candidates for the French presidency – Emmanuel Macron. This data comes from the personal correspondence of former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton". This claim was relayed to the public by both RT France and Sputnik, but that so-called information never saw the light of day.

Instead, a few days before the last election run in May 2017, WikiLeaks published 20,000 e-mails stolen from the "En Marche!" party. According to an American cybersecurity company, the hacking operation could have been the work of APT28, a hacking group better known as "Fancy Bear" with suspected ties to Russian military intelligence.<sup>36</sup> Unlike the hack-and-leak operation aimed at the DNC in 2016, this trove of emails did not contain anything relevant or compromising about Macron. But it was still extensively reported on, not only by RT France and Sputnik, but also by several French media outlets such as Mediapart and Libération.

After his victory, the new French president started to target RT France and Sputnik as foreign agents interfering in France's political processes. The subject became a matter of tension between Paris and Moscow. In May 2017, during a press conference at Versailles with Vladimir Putin, Emmanuel Macron said: "The truth is that Russia Today and Sputnik did



Emmanuel Macron said at a press conference with Putin: "The truth is that Russia Today and Sputnik did not behave as media organisations and journalists, but as agencies of influence and propaganda, lying propaganda – no more, no less". Source: Wikimedia Commons

not behave as media organisations and journalists, but as agencies of influence and propaganda, lying propaganda – no more, no less".

"RT's existence depends on what others will say about them", analyses Colin Gérard. "The declaration of Emmanuel Macron in Versailles was the biggest publicity stunt for them. After that, Macron's opponents were wondering 'why not RT?". "It stages the binary opposition that RT seeks with power, and there, all of a sudden, it was obvious", confirms Maxime Audinet. "This anti-government posture helped RT to finally find its audience, one year later.

### The "Match"

November 2018 saw the birth of the "Yellow Vests" movement. Each week. during violent protests, the "Yellow Vests" demanded institutional political reforms and more social justice, reflecting an increased (and open) hostility towards the figure of President Macron. But the movement was also accused of providing a new forum for extremist views, anti-Semitic discourse, and conspiracy theories, coming from ideological discourse on both the far-right and the far-left. The French government's main response was the creation of a new "crowd control" doctrine that led to more violence between police and protesters. This was a perfect scenario for RT France, according to Maxime Audinet: "There was a form of convergence between the Yellow Vests and the alternative, anti-elite, or even populist posture of RT France."40 The better explanation for this ideological match comes from Xenia Fedorova herself, who said to Le Monde: "The Yellow Vests know that we are not esteemed by Macron".41

"By nature, RT France has a real playing card on social media", says Roman Bornstein. "The algorithms of YouTube and Facebook push the publications that are the most likely to trigger reactions and emotions. Structurally divisive, shocking, sensationalist content therefore finds

audiences more easily. RT France knew how to play it very well at the time of the "Yellow Vests", by live streaming clashes between demonstrators and the police; the very prototype of what works on social media: a spectacular, violent, divisive and political sequence."<sup>42</sup>

Thanks to this "riot porn" strategy, RT France - alongside other alternative media outlets like Brut - became one of the favourite news sources for those in the "Yellow Vests" movement; they had, so far, rejected virtually every mainstream media source as sympathisers and supporters of the French government. According to Maxime Audinet, the Russian propaganda outlet more than doubled its audience. going from 2 to 3 million visitors on its website every month (during regular times) up to between 8 and 12 million during the "Yellow Vests" movement.43 RT France became the biggest French media source on YouTube, with 23 million views - way ahead of mainstream media like Le Monde that were providing coverage on the same topic.

At the same time, RT France tried to put on a respectable face by recruiting famous personalities to its staff. In 2017, it recruited former Radio France director Jean-Luc Hees to its Ethical Committee, alongside National Rally's Member of the European Parliament and Putin apologist Thierry Mariani. Hees finally announced his departure from the committee in 2020. Mariani, who officially declared that he had been contacted by RT as early as 2015,44 resigned in 2018, but was still able to get on the air regularly.<sup>45</sup> In July 2018, RT France also recruited Frédéric Taddeï, once a popular figure of French public television. More recently, RT announced the arrival of Régis Le Sommier, ex-deputy director of the iconic French magazine Paris Match.46 "Contrary to what is often said, RT is not a daily broadcast of 'fake news". On the contrary, there is an effort to build trust in the channel, to install it in the landscape, to build an audience and to establish a connection with it", says Roman Bornstein.47

apparent Contrasting with its desire for respectability - and continuing its live stream coverage of the "Yellow Vest" protests between 2018 and 2019 -RT France also gave airtime to the most radical voices such as Étienne Chouard; he was a major ideological reference for the proponents of the "Yellow Vests" movement and a defender of far-right figures such as Alain Soral, as well as a propagator of conspiracy theories about major events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks.<sup>48</sup> The objective was not only to depict France as a country drowning in chaos and disorder, but, of course, to simultaneously make Russia look good in comparison. To do so, RT France had no difficulty in finding



"Yellow Vests". Source: Wikimedia Commons

protesters advocating for Vladimir Putin in a movement where far-right militants were numerous. For instance, RT France interviewed a "Yellow Vest" protester in December 2018 who claimed that French policemen were dressing as civilians and staging the urban destruction occurring during the protests. The protester was, in fact, a militant from the anti-same-sex marriage movement "La Manif Pour Tous", and RT France was publicly accused of facts manipulation.49 A few months later, in February 2019, RT France interviewed another Yellow Vest' who demanded that "Putin speak out and reason with our moron president! [...] He shows how to lead a country. [...] Whether it's with an iron fist or not, we don't care, we just want to stop being in trouble".50 This is a clear

example of Russian propaganda talking about democratic illusions on the streets of Paris.

The exploitation of the "Yellow Vests" movement by Russia led some political leaders and press outlets in France to conclude that the movement was in fact nothing more than a Russian fabrication. An argument was put forward (which disturbingly mirrored a Russian media theory) that this movement was in fact a "colour revolution" staged by the United States' intelligence agencies. because Macron was advocating for the creation of a European army.<sup>51</sup> In December 2019, The Times and Bloomberg published a study suggesting that a network of hundreds of trolls, allegedly connected to Russia, were publishing 1,600 tweets a day about the "Yellow Vests". The Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security, acting on the authority of the French Prime Minister, even opened an investigation to verify whether there were any such attempts of foreign interference.

However, further analysis showed that this so-called Russian network was, in fact, a group of militants of different ideological persuasions, comprising both locals and foreigners, and ranging from conspiracy theorists to Trump supporters to Polish nationalists. No obvious link with Russia was found among the top ten influencers.<sup>52</sup> "Of course, Russian-state media capitalized on the "Yellow Vests" movement, but there is no evidence that Russia was behind the movement itself", sums up Colin Gérard.53 "Yellow vests" were not CIA or GRU agents - they were an organic French social movement that was exploited by every actor who had a vested interest in doing so, with Russia naturally being one of these actors. No more, no less. RT France's moment of glory did not last, as public interest in the protests started to fade, and Covid-19 putting a temporary halt to all public gatherings. Its new audience elsewhere. and the moved Russian propaganda outlet eventually reverted back to its original audience. While it has considerable social media success, RT France does not prove a viable competitor on television, and cannot be considered a mass media outlet. It is available only on satellite and cable, and thus cannot compete with any major French news channel.

But even though the social conflict in France never really stopped - with the "Yellow vests' movement merging with anti-Covid restrictions and anti-vaccine movements in the summer of 2021 - RT France was unable to exploit the situation in the same way it did in 2018/2019. "They are, of course, doing intense reporting on protests against the vaccine pass, because they understand that there is an audience to find there and that this topic could play a role during the election", admits Colin Gérard.<sup>54</sup> "But it is interesting to observe their Russian-speaking versions a massive vaccination advocate for campaign in Russia, and that they would never cover such protests. In France, they don't care about the pandemic; they just try to capitalise on the protests."

In France, RT and Sputnik certainly tried to sow doubt about the credibility of Western vaccines such as Pfizer-BioNTech or AstraZeneca, but only to the benefit of the Russian vaccine, Sputnik V—a narrative unable to acquire an audience and which only deepened ongoing tensions in France the same way the "Yellow Vests" movement did. Moreover, they are now being challenged by other powerful domestic media that are occupying the very ground that RT and Sputnik were not able to secure, and face the threat of being marginalised within the French "manufacturing of dissent" ecosystem.

### Hands tied

RT France now finds itself blocked by its paradoxical desire to look as respectable and reliable as CNN, the BBC, or France 24, and its tendency to spread rumours and outrage to serve the Kremlin's international viewpoint. Their efforts to take a stand against the French government have made them a target within a regulated media ecosystem. Indeed, to keep its TV licence, RT France has to comply with this regulation and cannot cross the line.

The Higher Audio-Visual Council de (Conseil supérieur l'audiovisuel [CSA]), which is responsible for regulating broadcasting in France, flagged RT France in 2018 for its coverage of the Syrian conflict. During a news report aired in April 2018, the channel stated that the chemical attack on Douma was not the responsibility of Bashar al-Assad's regime but was in fact "staged" by a rebel group called Jaysh al-Islam. "The CSA observed that the oral translation of the remarks made by a Syrian witness did not correspond at all to what he expressed on the air", said the Council.55 RT France defend itself by saying it was nothing more than a "technical error" that was later corrected. But, "the CSA finally noted that all the elements disseminated dealing with the situation in Syria showed a marked imbalance in the analysis, without, on such a sensitive subject, the different points of view having been exposed."56 In



Bashar al-Assad meets Putin in Russia in September 2021. Source: Wikimedia Commons

2020, RT France was once again reported to the CSA for a report that quoted the chief of the Russian Reconciliation Centre in Syria (considered one of the main spreaders of propaganda and conspiracy theories about the conflict) saying that Belgian and French intelligence services were attempting to stage a chemical attack to set a trap for Moscow and Damascus.

The CSA investigation is not good news for RT France; in order to show itself as a victim, RT France said, "financial sanction, suspension of broadcasting or termination of our license: we are risking a lot in this procedure."<sup>57</sup>

"They will be closely monitored during the election campaign. And they know that at the slightest error they will get caught and that they cannot do like RT America or RT en Español, which are a lot tougher", says Colin Gérard.<sup>58</sup>

RT is facing such threats in other European countries as well, which are starting to take action. In the United Kingdom, the Office of Communications (Ofcom) – the British equivalent of the CSA - found that "the RT news channel [had broken] broadcasting rules by failing to preserve due impartiality in seven news and current affairs programs over a sixweek period". In July 2019, Ofcom fined the news channel £200,000 (€235,000).<sup>59</sup> In August 2021, Luxembourg banned RT from broadcasting its German-language channel, halting its attempt to sidestep German media regulations, as RT Deutsch struggles to earn its license there. 60 Under pressure, internet platforms are also starting to take harder measures. The RT Deutsch YouTube channel was closed just after the German election; the platform accused it of disseminating fake news about the pandemic.<sup>61</sup> It is, of course, always a good occasion for the Kremlin to claim that liberal democracies are censoring free press, but there are also major setbacks for RT's reputation.

And RT is very careful when it comes to its reputation. In France, the news channel tried to sue public figures for defamation several times.<sup>62</sup> So far, most of those attempts ended in public embarrassment. In June 2020, RT France lost its cases against former government spokesperson Benjamin Griveaux, and the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. Griveaux accused RT France of "being a propaganda tool funded by a foreign state, Russia", while *Charlie Hebdo* pushed as far



Caricature on RT by Charlie Hebdo. Source: https://charliehebdo.fr/2018/02/international/russia-today-france/

as comparing RT to the Nazi propaganda newspaper *Signal*.<sup>63</sup>

In the meantime, RT France's main anti-elite challenger in the French media ecosystem, CNews, is so outrageous that the Russian TV channel looks soft in comparison. *CNews* is also frequently reported to the CSA, but unlike the Russian news channel, Vincent Bolloré's TV outlet can afford it. RT is not the "baddest guy in town" anymore, argues Maxime Audinet.64 "CNews filled the position RT France dreamed of and which they were never able to conquer fully because of their weak audience numbers on TV, in particular. Now CNews is the alternative media, and RT not so much". However, malign influence by Russian elements on French democracy should not be dismissed so quickly. "If there are any foreign interference operations during the election campaign, it will be very interesting to see if there is a penetration into this new national ecosystem."65

"It should be reminded that RT is only a part of a wider propaganda ecosystem set by Russia", notes Roman Bornstein.<sup>66</sup> "There is RT and Sputnik, but there are also hackers with ties to the Russian intelligence services, troll farms, bots, blogs and fake media." And France is not very prepared to defend itself, Bornstein thinks. "Given the political tensions surrounding the management of the health crisis, one can indeed easily anticipate the damage that the disclosure of emails exchanged between senior political and medical officials during the COVID-19 crisis would do to an already particularly defiant French public opinion."67

"If you add to this the extremist candidates, and their entourage who do not hesitate to relay proven false information, and to participate in the spreading of conspiracy theories to flatter the most radicalised fringes of their electorates, you obtain a French ecosystem very conducive to an interference operation for 2022".<sup>68</sup>

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### Silvia Stöber

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# A classic TV channel for Germany?

Founded as early as 2005 as a state-funded foreign media source, Russia Today still had a rather late start in Germany. It was not until 2014 that Russia Today launched a German-language website; this consisted of videos such as "Der fehlende part" ("The missing part"), online articles, and accounts on social media platforms. It called itself RT Deutsch, and renamed itself RT DE in 2020. Both designations are in use.

Contrary to how it started in the UK, RT did not initially obtain a licence as a classic TV station in Germany. It could therefore not distribute TV programmes via the usual channels, such as cable and antenna. So although RT had had the objective of establishing a TV station in Germany since 2014, this did not become a



An RT DE greeting card for the the occasion of the launch of the TV programme in mid-December 2021

reality right away. In April 2021, however, RT DE Programme Director Alexander Korostelev told the Franco-German broadcaster Arte in an interview that "[w] e have always been working towards this point".1

There are a few factors in play that caused this delay. In order to obtain a television licence in Germany, the Medienstaatsvertrag (State Media Treaty), imposes certain conditions. These include - perhaps as a lesson from the times of National Socialism - the concept of "Staatsferne", which translates into maintaining a relative distance from the State. In this context, it means limited State influence on public broadcasting. This concept applies equally to media broadcasting in Germany by foreign states.<sup>2</sup> According to the RT DE website, its parent organisation, TV Novosti, is "financed from the public budget of the Russian Federation"; RT DE therefore does not meet the required broadcasting conditions in Germany. In the draft budget law submitted to the Russian State Duma for 2022, 2.7 billion roubles (€33.5 million) were earmarked for the development and distribution of this German-language TV channel. And a total of 28.7 billion roubles (€347 million) was budgeted for TV Novosti.4

Furthermore. the German government assessed RT DE and other similar Russian media outlets or subsidiaries as "key players in a complex network that disseminates their narratives on behalf of Russian state agencies with the aim, among other things, of influencing the political opinion-forming process in Germany".5 This was in answer to a question posed in the Bundestag by members of the liberal Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei, or FDP) in September 2020. It is also stated that the Bundesverfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution). which is the German federal domestic

intelligence service, evaluates these media services on an *ad hoc* basis to gauge Russian influence.

In its 2020 Annual Report, the opined Bundesverfassungsschutz Russian state media were tools for efforts to steer public opinion in Germany in its favour by spreading propaganda, disinformation, and other attempts to exert influence.6 In the 2019 Annual Report, it specifically "the internet broadcaster mentioned RT Deutsch as well as the news agency Sputnik". These media sources, based in Germany but operated by the Russian state, were therefore important for the German state to keep an eye on, according to this report.

Statements by leading RT employees indicate that they do not regard RT as a classic information medium. For example, in an interview with the Franco-German television channel Artein April 2021, RTDE's Managing Director, Dinara Toktosunova, said: "I actually think that the whole world is at war for information. If you ask where the Third World War is, it's in the information sphere. In this context, of course, we are all in this war".8 This comment reflects statements made by RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan. She already spoke of an information war in a 2012 interview with the Russian newspaper Kommersant. In this, and in another interview in 2013



RT DE Managing Director Dinara Toktosunova. Source: https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/ OTS\_20211216\_OTS0021/rt-erweitert-globalesangebot-um-deutschsprachige-nachrichten-mit-neuemfernsehsender-rt-de

with the Russian news website *Lenta.ru*, she said that just as the Ministry of Defence kept weapons ready for war in peacetime, information "weapons" had to be ready for times of crisis too.<sup>9</sup>

By looking at the totality of these factors - its funding by the Russian State, assessments by the German authorities, and statements by senior RT employees themselves - one would argue that RT DE does not meet the requirements of the State Media Treaty for a nationwide television licence in Germany, Nonetheless. RT pursued the goal of establishing a TV station in the country. At the end of January 2021, RT DE announced that, pending outcomes from the Covid pandemic, it would go on air in Berlin in December the same year.<sup>10</sup> The announcement was linked to a webpage advertising more than 200 job openings in all areas, ranging from management, technology, and graphics to editorial and presenter positions in Berlin. Such jobs were still being advertised as of 31 December 2021.11

This led people to conclude that apparently RT DE were preparing to apply for a television licence in Germany. There were at least plans in 2019 to establish an "advisory board for RT Deutsch", as the-then Editor-in-Chief Ivan Rodionov said.12 This advisory board was to consist of "renowned German personalities from the most important social groups", he explained. They were to accompany and oversee RT Deutsch.<sup>13</sup> However, according to the Medienanstalt Berlin-Brandenburg (MABB) - an independent joint media agency of the federal states of Berlin and Brandenburg - RT did not apply for a television licence in Germany until the end of 2021.

Instead, those responsible for RT DE tried to use European regulations to gain the right to broadcast a full programme for television nationwide. The autonomous non-profit organisation (or ANO) TV Novosti, which is listed as responsible for RT



Oliver Brendel, head of programme development at RT DE. Source: https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\_20211216\_OTS0021/rt-erweitert-globales-angebot-um-deutschsprachige-nachrichten-mit-neuemfernsehsender-rt-de

DE in its imprint, 14 applied for a television licence in Luxembourg in June 2021. But in mid-August 2021, the government of this EU state rejected the application. "Luxembourg is not competent for the television programme 'RT in German'", the Office of Prime Minister Xavier Bettel said. 15 Bettel's Ministry of State is, among other things, responsible for media and communications. According to the article, his ministry confirmed that on 15 June 2021 it received a request from the RT parent company, TV Novosti, to broadcast, via satellite, a German-language television programme "RT in German". One of the most important, and most widely-used satellite operators in Europe, is Astra, which is based in a small town in Luxembourg.

According to a report by the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, however – even before TV Novosti submitted this application – officials, diplomats, and intelligence officers from Luxembourg and Germany met in late May 2021 to discuss how to handle such a possible application for a television licence.<sup>16</sup> It was agreed by the majority that Germany was responsible for granting this licence, not Luxembourg. In August 2021 therefore, a spokesman for the Ministry of State in Luxembourg confirmed that,<sup>17</sup> in accordance with the procedure foreseen for the exchange of information between national authorities, the relevant

bodies in Germany had been approached to ensure consistent application of the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive.<sup>18</sup>

When it became clear that nation wide broadcasting in Germany could not be achieved in a legally compliant manner within the framework of EU regulations, those responsible at RT tried to get this done via Council of Europe regulations. According to its own information, TV Novosti acquired a licence in Serbia for cable and satellite transmission of the channel RT, in the German language, for European countries.<sup>19</sup> The legal basis, as cited by RT, was the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (ECTT).<sup>20</sup> This was announced on 16 December 2021, when RT finally launched its German television programme, comprising news, talk shows and German translations of its English-language programmes. According to the statement, the TV programme is produced in Moscow and broadcast from Serbia to Eutelsat's 9B and 16A satellites; these in turn can be received on televisions in Central and Eastern Europe, but are not nearly as widely used in Germany as the TV and radio programmes broadcast via Astra.

Those responsible within the German authorities reacted immediately to the launch of this nationwide TV programme. A day later, the MAAB initiated proceedings against RT and gave the latter until the end of the year to respond. The point of contention given was that the broadcasting licence required for the TV programme had neither been applied for nor granted in Germany. In coordination with German and European regulatory authorities, the European Affairs Commissioner of the German media authorities for the German federal states, Tobias Schmid, informed satellite operator Eutelsat, which stopped broadcasting RT DE on satellite 9B on 22 December 2021.<sup>21</sup>

RT protested, as expected, referring once more to the ECTT, and announced that it would exhaust all legal means in

its defence. A major point of this legal contention was the location of the TV station. In the view of the German media institutions, the headquarters were still in Berlin and thus subject to German jurisdiction. Accordingly, the licence must be applied for and granted in Germany, according to Tobias Schmid.<sup>22</sup>

This was countered by RT programme director Alexander Korostelev in October 2021, as he stressed that editorial decisions would continue to be made in Berlin.<sup>23</sup> Throughout 2021, more than 200 job



RT DE programme director Alexander Korostelev. Source: https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/ OTS\_20211216\_OTS0021/rt-erweitert-globalesangebot-um-deutschsprachige-nachrichten-mit-neuemfernsehsender-rt-de

positions were advertised, with the explicit reference to Berlin as the location of work.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Managing Director Dinara Toktosunova said that editorial decisions were being made in Moscow. She also stated that most of the people who worked for the station were located in the Russian capital. Consequently, she concluded, there could be no jurisdiction Germany.<sup>25</sup> Correspondingly, in announcement by RT in September 2021 ("RT goes on the air: tune in!") stated that the company would broadcast its German programming directly from Moscow with the assistance of approximately 400 employees. Seventy additional employees would deliver programming portions from Berlin.<sup>26</sup> Here, RT's ambition to offer the full programme of a TV station from Berlin was blatantly opposed to its claim that the

channel was being broadcast in accordance with German legal requirements.

Following the decision of (which held regional media MABB responsibilities), the media commission responsible at a national level, ZAK, also banned RT DE's television programmes in Germany. Furthermore, ZAK held itself responsible because RT DE Productions GmbH was based in Germany. The broadcaster filed a complaint against the decision, and also filed an urgent application with the Administrative Court in Berlin to be able to legally continue airing its TV programmes. As the live stream of the television programme continued. MABB first imposed a penalty payment of €25,000 on 5 March 2022, and threatened a new penalty payment of €40,000 if RT DE did not respond.<sup>27</sup>

# Banned from YouTube

A few hours after launching its new TV programme on 16 December 2021, the "RT on air" livestream channel was blocked by YouTube. The platform justified the move by pointing to the fact that the RT DE channel had already been stopped in September for bypassing its terms of service. This related to the time when YouTube had accused RT of spreading disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, an illegal activity as per YouTube's community guidelines. As a result, YouTube withdrew RT right to upload new posts to one of its channels. But when RT tried to circumvent this by using another YouTube channel for its uploads, the video platform blocked both channels.<sup>28</sup> Using the same reasoning, YouTube stopped the new channel from airing in December.29

This was a bitter blow for RT DE, whose main channel had 600,000 subscribers in September. From the very beginning, its programmes, such as "The missing part" or "451°" were uploaded

to YouTube, incorporated into RT's own website, and linked within posts on social media platforms such as Facebook. Therefore, all YouTube videos on the RT websites and social media posts were now also lost. This was changed by RT with their new TV programme, as that was now streamed continuously on its own website. Furthermore, in its legal case YouTube, RT announced its intention to use all legal options available to regain its presence on the video platform.

In addition to the livestream on its own website, RT DE used apps and TV services for Apple and Android, thereby providing the programmes in other languages. There were also Smart- and Pay- TV offerings, and an RT DE TV channel on Odysee – a video platform that sees itself as an alternative to YouTube, without moderators and safety filters for younger viewers.<sup>30</sup> The content of Odysee remains permanently on a blockchain called the LBRY Network. The CEO of Odysee, Jeremy Kauffman, said he created the website so that "anyone could speak, and anyone could have a voice".<sup>31</sup>

Simultaneously, both former and current RT employees continued to remain active on YouTube. Ivan Rodionov, RT DE's Editor in Chief from 2014 to 2020, runs a YouTube channel ("InfraRot") with other colleagues, and promotes it on his Twitter account. According to a report in the German tabloid *Bild* in November 2021, YouTube was also reviewing the content of this channel on its platform.<sup>32</sup> On Facebook, "InfraRot" posted livestreams of demonstrations against COVID-19

safety measures, without giving concrete information about who was behind this media outlet. Interestingly, "InfraRot" also hosted a channel on Odysee, but this had remarkably fewer subscribers – only 143 followers as of December 2021.<sup>33</sup>

In this cat-and-mouse game between media regulators and platform operators on the one hand, and RT and affiliated channels (such as "InfraRot") on the other, it becomes apparent that the latter keeps losing followers and having to win them over again, over a longer period of time. However, new opportunities are constantly being found to set up accounts and channels without provision of the operator's details. and to switch to internet platforms that evade media regulation. This was already evident in accounts such as "In the Now", "Redfish", "Waste-Ed", "Soapbox", and "Back Then": founded by Maffick Media GmbH and Redfish GmbH in 2018, these are subsidiaries of the Berlin-based company Ruptly. These accounts, with very different content and ideology, provided information about their operators and the Russian state as the financier only after requests, some of which were later withdrawn when there was less attention to these channels. Some Facebook users who were critical of Russia shared content from "In the Now" without knowing who operated that account. This is a prime example of what might be meant by preparing weapons for information warfare in peacetime - accounts tailored to different users are to be disseminated to, and trusted by, an audience so that they can be bombarded with targeted messages when required.



RT DE on Odyssee. Screenshot



The Maffick Media team.

Source: https://web.archive.org/web/20200807142342/

https://wearemaffick.com/

# Global competition with other news agencies

To be able to flood websites, accounts and channels with its own content, TV Novosti ensures that it has its own recordings of important world events. It also makes these available to other media sources. To this end, TV Novosti founded a video news agency in Berlin, the alreadymentioned company Ruptly. It began operations back in 2013, just a year before its sister organisation, RT DE, was launched. To date, Dinara Toktosunova is listed as Chief Executive Director for Ruptly,<sup>34</sup> and she is also the managing director of RT DE. Ruptly presents itself as highly professional and competitive. It claims its mission is to offer "a bolder, deeper point-of-view than the established figures of the news marketplace", by using "the best resources and technologies to bring you the latest breaking stories and most professional coverage". To this end, Ruptly continues "to expand a rapidly growing global network of permanent bureaus and stringers", and says it has content ranging from stories "from the world's most dangerous conflict zones" to the "best light news stories".35

In 2019, Ruptly scored a coup. Julian Assange left the protection of the

Ecuadorian Embassy in London after seven years, and he was immediately arrested by police. The Russian news agency was the first on the scene, and provided exclusive footage that was broadcast worldwide. From Germany, Ruptly provided extensive live streams of protest actions in the country, such as the Pegida demonstrations (directed against official migration policy) and the Querdenker movement (protesting COVID-19 safety measures and COVID-19 vaccinations). Video clips, often edited to highlight footage of police violence against protesters, are frequently shared on social media to evidence a lack of democracy in Germany and other EU countries. Ruptly thus presents itself as giving a voice to those who oppose the government.

Compared to RT, the activities of the state-owned international media group Rossiya Segodnya (or "Federal State



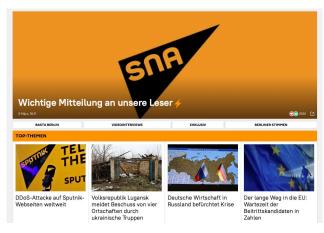
A Querdenken meeting. Source: Wikimedia Commons

### Sputnik News/SNA News

Unitary Enterprise"), are less known to the German public. Its General Director, Dmitry Kiselyov, is known as the presenter of the Sunday TV programme "News of the Week" on Rossiya 1, the Russian domestic TV network. In Germany, the media company has been offering news and a radio programme under the name "Sputnik News" since 2014. Its headquarters are

given as an address in a residential area outside the centre of Berlin. Little more than a few quotes about its Director, Sergey Feoktistov, can be found in Russian media.

In December 2020, the Russian Embassy in Germany announced that "Sputnik News" would be rebranded - it was renamed "SNA News" and had a new website and new accounts on Facebook and other social media.<sup>36</sup> Since the summer of 2020, SNA News hosted a podcast "Basta Berlin" on YouTube, run by two Berlin journalists,<sup>37</sup> with the account reaching a maximum of 90,000 viewers.<sup>38</sup> SNA News says it wants to "use state-of-the-art information technology to inform Germanlanguage readers about the most important events in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the world". The editorial offices are located in Berlin and Moscow, according to the imprint. It describes its work through the keywords of "accuracy", "efficiency", "responsibility", "diversity of opinion", and "innovation".39



SNA News. Screenshot

This reflects a strategy similar to that shown to visitors to the Rossiya Segodnya headquarters in Moscow; in turn, the latter is similar to the self-description of Ruptly, the TV Novosti news agency. The aim is to be technically in a position to produce news – through videos, pictures, and text – in competition with other news agencies such as AP, Reuters, and dpa.com, thereby influencing and determining public opinion about current affairs. While speed of news publication was highlighted to visitors

during a tour of its editorial offices in Moscow, SNA News cites accuracy as its first priority on its website. Rossiya Segodnya also stated that in order to be a leader in the future, it was now experimenting with advanced digital techniques.

### Mega Radio SNA

In addition, SNA News produces a radio programme in German that can be heard livestream on the Internet. SNA Radio news programmes that are available (for example, on the audio-streaming platform Soundcloud) are advertised with the phrase "Sachlich – Nah – Ausgewogen" ("Factual – Close – Balanced") as an explanation for the abbreviation SNA. This is followed by the words "Eine Produktion von Rossiya Segodnya".

In cooperation with the private German station Megaradio (located in Augsburg in Bavaria), SNA contributions and programmes are also broadcast on that platform. According to the imprint on its website, megaradio-sna.de is a project of Mega Radio GmbH in Augsburg. The imprint does not contain any indication that some programme parts are produced by SNA.41 The Megaradio station runs on the DAB+ Network (a digital transmission standard for terrestrial reception of digital radio), with a licence from the programme regulatory authority in Kassel – the Hessian State Authority for Private Broadcasting and New Media. Mega Radio GmbH had applied for a nationwide licence there.

In February 2019, the media authority responsible for Berlin and the state of Brandenburg decided that the broadcasting of the Megaradio station on the Berlin DAB+ network must be discontinued. The authority referred to several court decisions,<sup>42</sup> one of which noted that the radio station was highly financially dependent on the Russian state media company *Rossiya Segodnya*. The

fundamental question – can broadcasters that receive extensive programming supplies from companies financed by other states obtain a broadcasting licence in Germany? – was to be settled before the Kassel Administrative Court in Hesse. As in the case of RT DE's TV station, the issue is one of "Staatsferne". However, the case was withdrawn and the proceedings were discontinued in 2019.

# Aspects of media law

If RT DE broadcasts as a television station in Germany, it must (like Megaradio SNA) broadcast as a classic radio station. This is so that it will comply with the regulations of the State Media Treaty, as well as with general journalistic principles. This includes the journalistic obligation to exercise due diligence. Towards the end of 2021, the regulatory authority Hamburg/Schleswig-Medienanstalt Holstein identified a violation of this State Media Treaty at Megaradio. In a press release, the State authority said that during continuous programme monitoring, a news report supplied by SNA Radio about "side effects and deaths in connection with the Covid-19 vaccinations" had attracted attention.43 This news story seemed to lack critical information that would assist full understanding of the topic. It therefore violated the journalistic principles laid down in the State Media Treaty. This announcement is critical and worth highlighting: the State Media Treaty has been reformed in such a way that, since November 2020, "telemedia with journalistic-editorial offerings" must also comply with journalistic principles. In concrete terms, this means that the supervisory authorities can now also take action against disinformation on the Internet.

The regulatory authority also



Ken Ebsen, Screenshot

responsible for RT DE, MABB, has already sent letters to providers of YouTube channels and websites, pointing out violations of their journalistic obligation to exercise due diligence. Those notified include journalist Ken Jebsen, who has been very successful in spreading conspiracy myths and disinformation about COVID-19 on the Internet. He has since abandoned his very well-known label, KenFM, and has launched new social media channels and platforms under the name "Apolut". Like many others on the scene (including RT DE and "InfraRot"), he uses the Instant Messenger service Telegram and similar platforms; these see themselves as an alternative to Twitter and YouTube by moderating content very little or not at all.

The challenge for regulators is that Telegram and other such providers, which portray themselves as alternatives to "mainstream media", are based outside Germany and the EU. Added to this is the sheer volume of disinformation on the Internet, which is almost impossible to keep track of. The advantage with RT and SNA products so far has been that their origins have been traceable, or could be uncovered. so that they can be held accountable - at least in theory. But the described cases of RT DE, "InfraRot" and Ken Jebsen show that a cat-and-mouse game is developing here as well. When they change their names and channels, they naturally lose followers. But now, a widely-developed network between alternative information sources assists them in distributing their news and video products. Some authors publish on RT DE and also on other platforms.

RT DE, SNA, and the alternative media are the same in that they consistently make accusations of politically motivated decisions and censorship. As an answer, the regulatory authorities in Germany's federally organised media svstem emphasise their independence from the State. For example, an employee of MAAB emphasised that it does not matter whether information is correct or incorrect – they are not the "truth police", he said. Rather, "it is a matter of ensuring that content is not taken out of context, that sources are named, and that quotations are not abbreviated or in other ways misrepresented; in short, that the journalistic obligation to exercise due diligence is observed".44

#### "Media war"

Suspensions and bans against Russian state media regularly result in the Russian government responding with the threat of retaliatory countermeasures against German media in Russia. This primarily concerns the German foreign broadcaster Deutsche Welle with its service in the Russian language. One day after the German media commission ZAK banned RT DE's television programme for lack of a German licence (2 February 2022), the Russian leadership reacted with a complete ban on Deutsche Welle in Russia. Furthermore, the journalists of the foreign broadcaster were no longer allowed to continue working in Russia, nor was the news content to be receivable and retrievable on any distribution channel in Germany. However, Deutsche Welle had all the necessary accreditations and licences. 45

Even when private providers made such decisions, rather than official supervisory authorities, there were threats of retaliation from the Russian government. RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan repeatedly spoke of a "media war" or "information war" in this context. On the RT DE website, in fact, there is a section called



Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded Margarita Simonyan with the Alexander Nevsky Order in 2019. Source: Wikimedia Commons

"Campaign against RT DE". As in the case of the blocking of RT's YouTube channels, it is then assumed that the German government has exerted its influence on YouTube. This was equally the case when the private German, Commerzbank, terminated the accounts of Ruptly and RT DE Productions GmbH in Germany (on 31 May 2021). Christofer Burger, the German Foreign Office's spokesman in Berlin, clarified that "the German government has in no way acted on Commerzbank in the sense of terminating the business relationship". 46

What is noteworthy in the Russian side's argument is that, on the one hand, they present themselves as being on the same level as the "mainstream media" in Germany. On the other hand, they position themselves in clear opposition to them, and present themselves as "alternative media". As for the first point, it is always emphasised that the German foreign broadcaster Deutsche Welle is also financed by the state. However, there is no evidence presented in such statements that the German government has any influence on the content of Deutsche Welle. As far as its own reporting is concerned, it is emphasised that journalistic standards are adhered to. For example, in response to a question from the public broadcaster SWR about whether it engages in "campaign journalism", RT DE declared that it did not, nor is it aware of a single public rebuke from the Press Council, the body responsible for the voluntary selfregulation of print media and their online

presence in Germany. However, what RT DE did not mention was that the Press Council cannot reprimand the state medium at all, because RT has never applied for control by the Press Council.<sup>47</sup>

also apparently RT targeted employees of traditional media when recruiting new staff for their TV station. In any case, offers were made to individual journalists. Many journalists repeatedly received news about jobs advertised at RT via job platforms. When beginning their new jobs, journalists would receive packages with greeting cards and USB sticks. On social media, however, these job advertisements were often met with ironic comments. So far, no prominent journalists' departures to RT DE have been announced either. In recent years, many newcomers and career changers to journalism gained awareness about RT DE. On the other hand. those writing on behalf of RT DE often attack the "mainstream media", as well as individual journalists, on social media. One RT employee appears as a troublemaker at events held by the Federal Press Conference, which is an association of journalists in Berlin that organises press conferences with government representatives on a regular basis; journalists from the foreign press are also admitted to these events, and this then gives RT DE the opportunity to raise some controversy.<sup>48</sup>

RT has also taken legal action against the established media's coverage of its own company. For example, RT attempted to obtain a restraining order against the tabloid *Bild*, because an article about the application for the television licence in Luxembourg incorrectly stated "RT DE Productions GmbH" instead of TV Novosti. According to *Bild*, the error was corrected on 21 September 2021, after a lawyer for RT DE informed the *Bild* editorial team about this mistake. However, a Frankfurt regional court rejected RT's legal application, and ordered it to pay the costs of the proceedings.<sup>49</sup> In this case, the

question is whether this was a strategic lawsuit against public participation or "SLAPP" – legally abusive lawsuits against journalists, authors and NGOs, in order to intimidate them and prevent them from further reporting or public discussion. In France, for example, RT unsuccessfully sued political expert Nicolas Tenzer for his tweets about RT.<sup>50</sup> In the meantime, the EU Commission has presented a proposal for a directive against SLAPPs to be adopted in the second quarter of 2022.<sup>51</sup>

The question remains as to what goals are being pursued by RT DE and similar news services. The budget, the equipment in a studio in Berlin Adlershof. and the breadth and number of jobs advertised, suggested that RT DE wanted to take on German public and private TV stations in terms of technical quality and seriousness, at least in the news reporting section. But so far, these media channels have not attracted attention with reporting that can be described as "exclusive" or "investigative" enough in order to compete with the established media in Germany. There is also a lack of media personalities with strong reputations that could make their programmes attractive to a broad audience. Instead, their coverage resonates with an audience that sees itself on the fringes of the political spectrum, or within an alternative scene, in Germany.

These news outlets seem to want to be present on as many playout channels as possible, both within classic media outlets and online, and want to tempt audiences there – partly covertly – with different content and ideological orientations. It is questionable how seriously these attempts are being made to establish themselves on classic TV and radio channels. There is, after all, the described barrier of "Staatsferne" as a condition for obtaining broadcasting licences. And it can be assumed that programmes in traditional broadcasting will be monitored more closely for compliance with the regulations

of the State Media Treaty – and violations will be punished accordingly. However, this always gives rise to the possibility of RT DE and others accusing German authorities of political influence and censorship. This may happen even if the German authorities are not evaluating the reporting in terms of content *per se*, but in terms of compliance with the journalistic obligation to exercise due diligence.

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# Jonas Andreae

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### Information as "warfare"

On 18 February 1987, the German daily newspaper Die *Tageszeitung* (informally known as taz), published an interview titled: "Aids: Man-made in USA". The article had the renowned East German author Stefan Heym conducting an interview with the GDR biologist Josef Segal. In the interview, Segal claimed that HIV (that can result in AIDS), was created in a US Army medical research centre at Fort Detrick, Maryland. This theory picked up on the KGB's concept of "Operation Infektion", which attempted to spread the rumour that the AIDS epidemic was a targeted but failed American bioweapons operation. In East Germany, the Ministry for State Security (or "Stasi") was instructed by Soviet officials to further promote this idea in order to destabilise the West.2

Whether Segal was personally involved with the Stasi is disputed particularly because many of the relevant documents were either destroyed or have not yet been examined.3 However, the Stasi and other GDR political entities evidently did everything in their power to spread falsehoods in West Germany about how AIDS originated. By calling for a "bombshell story" within the taz editorial office, the interview with Segal that was finally printed by the popular West German newspaper<sup>4</sup> resulted in massive outrage. It also led to some continuing to believe this theory, even today.

Of course, the media industry that existed in Germany in the 1980s is incomparable with that of today. In the current globalised and interconnected world within which we live, where virtually everyone has access to a variety of media products, can receive countless messages on social media, and can regularly interact with more publications than existed on the planet 50 years ago, information has truly has become an indispensable factor in our



RT DE programme director Alexander Korostelev and RT DE managing director Dinara Toktosunova.

Source: https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/deutschland-verbietet-ausstrahlung-vonrussischem-sender-rt-de-li.209665

lives. But one thing has not changed since the Stasi spread its fake story about the origin of HIV/AIDS: there are still those who seek to misuse media to persuade the public. The phenomenon of "fake news" has characterised the politics of this decade.<sup>5</sup> People and movements such as Donald Trump, the right-wing Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) or the German Querdenken movement (which denies the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic), are profiteers of a constantly changing media landscape in which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between lies and truth.

However, even in the post-Soviet era, Russia continues to take advantage of the complex media landscape, and use information as a weapon. And this is being done in a more sophisticated manner than ever before – Russia has established a global disinformation campaign by using multiple media outlets. Of the latter, the most important are RT (formerly Russia Today), and Sputnik News Agency, now functioning in Germany under the name "SNA".

In Germany, RT DE is the biggest Russian media outlet and, according to the Verfassungsschutz (Germany's domestic intelligence agency – the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution), one of the pawns utilised by Russia to "control the political and public opinion in Germany through the proliferation of propaganda, disinformation and other resources".<sup>6</sup> A

taskforce of the European External Action Service, the EUvsDisInfo Project publishes weekly summaries of Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns that affect the EU; it reported that Germany was one of the EU countries most targeted by these campaigns.<sup>7</sup> In March 2021, over five years after the launch of the EUvsDisinfo database, more than 700 collected cases targeted Germany. When compared with similar cases in France (300+ cases), Italy (170+ cases), and Spain (40+ cases), it seems the Kremlin has given the Federal Republic of Germany special priority.

There is thus all the more reason to carefully analyse Russian interference within the German media landscape, and to examine the motives and strategies used by different Russia-affiliated media outlets; awareness needs to be raised for this relatively new form of foreign interference. I will demonstrate, in the remainder of this paper, what the three main strategies the Kremlin is using in its "information war" in Germany: 1) Spreading a Russia-positive narrative; 2) planting public mistrust in the German government and other political stakeholders of liberal democracy; and 3) dividing German society through targeted content.

The collection of research for this contribution was challenging, as most of the video clips produced by RT DE, since its inception in 2014, are not available online anymore. This is, of course, a consequence of RT DE's ban from the video platform YouTube<sup>8</sup> due to its false reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic (which will be discussed later). However, the RT DE website also offers a variety of text contributions, articles, and commentaries. For the examples used here, the author has therefore largely relied upon these written sources, as well as on existing work done by Dr. Susanne Spahn, who has conducted impressive research regarding Russian disinformation in Germany.9

## Russia's (false) version of the story: between propaganda and news

In an earlier version of the "About us" section on RT's own website,10 it said: "Our goal is to show the other point of view, as well as to expose media manipulation". It went on to say, "[w]ith the German programme, RT aims to take a counter position to the one-sided and often interest-driven mainstream-media." Interestingly, the section has since been altered<sup>11</sup> and now makes no mention of the often populist-coined terms "mainstream media" and "counter public".12 However, the style of reporting, the perspective on world affairs, and the political affiliations and positions have not changed. It is exactly this agenda, which subtly resonates in some of the reporting, that makes RT DE so dangerous. By investing heavily in its foreign media outlets, the Kremlin has established a massive media machine that is ready to sell Moscow's version of "the story" to those who want to hear it - and to those who do not.

A 2019 report by the blog Proekt states that the Russian presidential administration's First Deputy Chief of Staff, Alexey Gromov, has been holding weekly meetings that include senior representatives of certain Russian TV stations, representatives from the Kremlin's press teams, and with other government representatives (such as from the State Duma).<sup>13</sup> During these meetings, Gromov is said to "give recommendations about what kind of light participants might or might not shed on recent events."<sup>14</sup> Such attempts at interference within national media broadcasts extend also to media outlets outside Russia. According to Susanne Spahn, 15 up to 90% of website content of



Alexey Gromov.
Source: https://apral.ru/2021/06/08/gromovmozhet-otvetit-za-proval-pmev-kotoryj-po-mneniyuzhurnalistov-stal-yarmarkoj-tshheslaviya-vo-vremyapandemii.html

the Russia-affiliated SNA-Radio<sup>16</sup> (available in some parts of Germany and online), stems from Russia. The German newspaper *Spiegel* reported that RT DE journalists received sharp instructions about their framing, content and coverage of news by both their Moscow headquarters and the local editorship.<sup>17</sup>

A prime example that shows how Russia uses its media outlets to distort facts and tell its own "truth" is the poisoning of Alexey Navalny. While multiple (Western) media outlets have published evidence of the involvement of both Russia and its Federal Security Service (FSB) in Navalny's poisoning,<sup>18</sup> Russian media have sought to slander such research. The investigative website "Bellingcat" was especially targeted in multiple articles on RT DE, where the latter attempted to discredit the former's work. Among other things, the group was labelled "a symbol of the decline of classic investigative journalism", and their story on Russian involvement in the Navalny poisoning was "made up".19

Germany's Verfassungsschutz mentioned this same distortion strategy in their annual report on state security (2020).<sup>20</sup> According to the report, the RT DE campaign was based on three pillars to make it successful: 1) Russian state agencies denied any involvement with the poisoning; 2) this message was reinforced by state-affiliated media in Russia, who also engaged in personal attacks on the victim's

family and entourage; and 3) Russianfunded media actors in Germany adopted corresponding narratives and tried to carry them into German media discourse. Critics of such reporting practices were quickly labelled "Russophobic", to discredit their arguments. By false reporting in such matters, Russia aimed at gaining authority over the messages put out to the public. Through surreptitious distraction from the real scandal, they attempted to shift public opinion and thereby affect politics within the country.

In the case of Alexey Navalny, politicians from both ends of the political spectrum picked up on the doubting narrative. and questioned Russian involvement in the poisoning. For example, Klaus Ernst, an MP from the German Die Linke ("The Left") party, tweeted soon after the first allegations, asking "Who is interested in disturbing the relations, especially the economic ones, between Germany, the EU and Russia [...]?".21 His Linke colleague and then-foreign policy spokesman for the parliamentary group, Gregor Gysi, insinuated in an interview that the assassination attempt could



Die Linke's Gregor Gysi. Source: Wikimedia Commons

have been initiated by an opponent of the contested "Nord Stream 2 pipeline" project.<sup>22</sup> The scepticism of these leftwing politicians echoes that of those on the right: the parliamentary group of the right-wing AfD submitted an enquiry to the federal government casting doubt on Russian involvement and discovery of the poison on Navalny's body.<sup>23</sup> Many of the questions seem to follow the narrative that the poison, which was discovered during Navalny's hospitalisation in Germany, could have been planted by anti-Russian stakeholders during the rescue flight.

Such conspiracy theories, spread by political agents on both the Left and Right, were naturally picked up by RT DE and other Russia-affiliated media. RT DE reported on the parliamentary inquiry, taking it as proof that the federal government knew little to nothing about the context of the alleged poisoning.<sup>24</sup> It appeared that AfD and RT DE followed a joint mission in the Navalny case, as they stirred confusion and provided an alternative story for the public to believe in: that the poisoning was a hoax, and was designed to deteriorate Germany-Russian relations.

Another example of RT DE's attempts to influence German foreign policy towards Russia is exemplified in the misinformation it spread about the crash of the MH17 flight and the annexation of Crimea in Ukraine. After the crash of the Malaysian Boeing plane over eastern Ukraine, Russian public sources and state media agencies distributed a variety of different - and often contradictory - theories on possible causes for the plane crash in which 298 people lost their lives. RT Deutsch (as it was called back then) was heavily involved in spreading false information what really happened in order to deflect attention from the real cause: the shooting down of the MH17 flight by the Russian Buk surface-toair missile system. During a parliamentary enquiry, a faction of Die Linke repeated similar theories, and also made accusations challenging the credibility of the MH17 Joint Investigation Team (comprising officials from the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Malaysia and Ukraine).

The same enquiry also took aim at efforts that insinuated Russia was involved in the missile launch. Russian-led theories were supported and promoted; for instance, it was questioned whether other (non-Russian) agents had access to a Buk rocket (the missile that shot the plane

down),<sup>25</sup> or if the wreckage bore marks that actually contradicted the use of an antiaircraft missile?26 It was insinuated that a Ukrainian fighter aircraft might have shot down the plane.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Russian news agencies RIA Novosti and "Sputnik News" were cited as reliable sources in these questions.<sup>28</sup> As a result of defending Russia and its role in the MH17 crash, Die Linke has been heavily criticised within the German political spectrum. Their mingling with RT DE and other Russia-affiliated media was especially visible during the Russian annexation of Crimea. Gregor Gysi, who also vouched for Putin during the poisoning of Navalny, compared the takeover of Crimea with the declaration of independence by Kosovo.<sup>29</sup> This misleading comparison was a well-known propaganda tool used, aiming to justify the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula by Russia - it was widely disseminated by RT DE and other Russian state media at the time.

Of course, this apparent cooperation between German politicians and RT DE can rarely be proven, and foreign media outlets are only one of many communication tools used by the Kremlin to spread its propaganda. Nonetheless, RT DE is the most influential outlet of Russia's state media in Germany, and it tailors its figures to be received by its German audience. It is remarkable how Russia utilises RT DE to gain public support, and how it skilfully uses societal doubts and discord to further its case – all under the mantle of "reporting the truth".

## Mistrust in the system

Published by the Atlantic Council, the article "Russia is the world's leading exporter of instability" gives us further insight into Russian media warfare.<sup>30</sup> Whether it is about cyber-attacks, the weaponization of energy supplies, or the backing of mercenaries in international

conflicts, disinformation is one of the most important destabilisation tactics Russia has against the West. This is particularly the case in Germany, where Russian media has continuously eroded trust in the German federal government, its public institutions, the existence of multinational/ or multilateral organisations. Russia's foreign media outlets are always looking for ways to sway public opinion, using a persuasive narrative about "the rotten West" and its portraval as an unstable and unjust system.31

An example of this can be seen in the biased reporting on the 2019 EU elections in 2019, which Spahn has analysed extensively.<sup>32</sup> She identified three prominent narratives in RT DE's reporting on the EU parliamentary elections: 1) the EU has no future and will soon fall apart; 2) its elections do not make any positive difference for Europeans; and 3) the European community and its shared values are a hoax propagated by EU elites. But while these statements are malicious and anti-European, RT DE has taken care to make them sound like legitimate news. By giving voice to EU critics such as the "economist" Markus Krall,33 RT DE can subtly push its Europhobic agenda. With his controversial ideas for the German economy and society. Krall has often been quoted by RT DE. In his bestseller, Die Bürgerliche Revolution ("The Civil Revolution"), Krall pitches for restrictions and even abolition of universal suffrage to enable a "counter-revolution" and change Germany's political system.34



Markus Krall. Source: Wikimedia Commons

The Russian campaign of disinformation with regards to the European elections was summarised by EUvsDisinfo in the following: "Russia is playing a long game in Europe: its objective is not merely to influence the outcome of any particular election, but rather to broadly subvert the efficacy of our democratic institutions, fuel widespread social fragmentation and mistrust, and ultimately paralyse our ability to act in our own self-interest and to defend our values".35 By featuring interviews with anti-EU candidates, and concentrating attention on Europhobic narratives, Russia's aim seems to be to erode trust in European democracy. However, the undermining of Western institutions can be self-inflicted. In Germany, this was quite visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in very overt public outrage: anti-restriction movements even led protesters to try and storm the German parliament building (which only added to the movement's popularity). Such situations give Russia prime opportunity to exploit internal divisions and challenges within Western government.36

The Ouerdenken movement protested against the safety measures laid down by the German government in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was supported by a variety of different groups, from both the right and left of the political spectrum as well as spiritualists and Reichsbürger-hardliners (who deny the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany). This caught the attention of the (inter)national media, and especially RT DE. In their reporting, the Russian network often gave this movement a credible voice within the German media landscape. For instance, in the RT DE article "Vaccinate until the doctor comes",37 the author insinuates that COVID-19 vaccinations are extremely dangerous. One of the sources the author cites is a biochemist named Christian Steidl, who wrote on this topic on the conspiracy blog 1bis19.38 The latter is an online magazine for crude "theories" or

"opinions" on developments in Germany, and is anything but a reliable source of information. However, RT DE quoted the blog as if it were indeed legitimate. Without a thorough fact-check, the average reader is unlikely to discover the source's lack of validity. Another RT DE article entitled "Expert group questions alleged "overcrowding of intensive care beds" all fake news?"39 claimed that intensive care capacities in German hospitals had never been fully utilised; it further suggested that such medical facilities were admitting patients who did not require such assistance but were doing so in order to make some financial profit. The German TV station ZDF fact-checked this allegation, and found that the claims were false. The facts had been twisted to paint a picture of a morally corrupt government against the background of the global COVID-19 response.40

These are but two examples of RT DE's reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent response. The publication gives conspiracy theorists a major platform backed by a prominent name and a professionally organised structure. Because of the professionally designed website (and with the large editorial office and important-looking faces behind it), it is very easy to trust such resources. This is the case even when the content of conspiracy blogs such as *1bis19* and the website of RT DE often appear congruent.

RT DE annotates many of its articles with a disclaimer: "RT DE strives to present a broad spectrum of opinions. Guest contributions and opinion articles do not have to reflect the views of the editorial team". This is not only done with opinion pieces, but also with articles that are not flagged and that appear to be "normal" journalistic However, contributions. RT DE seems to have a quite narrow understanding about the wide spectrum of opinions that exist. One struggles to find any news that follow (in RT DE's words) the "mainstream" agenda, despite the promise of a broad spectrum of opinions.

# A crude division of labour: societal division

In 2015, RT DE asked its readers who they voted for in the last federal election. The results provided information about their audience: it is primarily made up of three groups: non-voters (23.01%). supporters of Die Linke (26.77%), and those supporting the AfD (20.09%).41 Viewers/ readers of RT DE did not reflect any factions from the centre of the German political spectrum. It is accepted, of course, that this survey is not a concrete representation, nor is it suggested that these numbers still represent the viewership today. But it is still quite interesting that RT DE has the ability to polarise within the political spectrum. When looking at interview partners that are featured on RT DE programmes, the same trends appear: these appear mostly from the political margins, such as the populists of the AfD (right-wing) and Die Linke (left-wing). Other prominent guests are "experts", commentators, and contributors to the New Right and Third Position movements, as well as anti-Western and anti-capitalist leftists. The Querdenken protests were given extensive live coverage (as outlined earlier). Also, the outlet reports in detail about more Leftist social movements such as demonstrations for affordable rent, problems regarding the current housing shortage, and the pitfalls of real estate speculation.

Within the Russia-affiliated media structure in Germany, there are important players besides RT DE, as Silvia Stöber's contribution to this volume has shown. When looking at societal polarisation, one of the interesting actors promoted by Russia is Maffick media. Maffick is a social media agency founded in Berlin, where it still has its main headquarters.



Anissa Naouai, founder of Maffick. Screenshot

While the company only mentions a Los Angeles address headquarters on its website and social media profiles, it does maintain an office in Berlin and has multiple employees in the city, as the author of this piece has independently verified.

In its own words, Maffick media connects "ethical brands with ethical people"42 and controls multiple successful online channels. One of them is "Wasted-Eď", the company's English-language "eco-sustainability channel".43 which focuses on the international climate crisis, environmental issues, and the importance of an eco-friendly lifestyle. On Instagram and Facebook, the channel reaches audiences of 450,000 and 760,000 respectively, across the globe. On Tik-Tok, the "Wasted-Ed" account has upwards of 1.4 million followers.44 The Maffick account therefore reaches a vast number of people, many of them young, and informs them about adapting a "greener" lifestyle, as well as providing DIY tips and vegan recipes. The channel could be described as "Fridays-for-future-ish", with an occasional anti-capitalist twist.

At the other ideological end exists the Russia-backed media outlet RT, and the German subsidiary RT DE. Their reporting on the current global climate crisis stands almost diametrically opposite to that of "Wasted-Ed". Climate change, and legislation combating global warming are topics that are often criticised or questioned on RT. One example is the 2021 article "Climate change is booming, again", written by Rüdiger Rauls and published in

the summer on RT DE's website.<sup>45</sup> In this article, Rauls refers to climate change as "propaganda", calls greenhouse emissions a "theory", and rejects measures to reduce the same. Rauls, who also frequently contributes to the website run by the German conspiracy theorist Ken Jebsen ("Apolut"),<sup>46</sup> strenuously denied climate change in this article. His contribution has joined the ranks of other similar articles that reflect an "interesting" relationship to truth, science, or universally accepted facts, as they effectively deny climate change and the crises related to it.



Rüdiger Rauls.

Source: https://www.rubikon.news/autoren/
rudiger-rauls

Based on these examples, one can Russian-backed conclude that media outlets clearly follow multiple agendas. On the topic of climate change, there are publications pushing both a left-wing and progressive agenda (advocating for stricter environmental rules and sustainable lifestyles) and those that sow doubts about climate change (questioning it and dismissing the current global crisis as "propaganda" and "unimportant"). The question must be asked: what possible motives could lead to such extremely contrary reporting? It seems unlikely that Russia's objective lies in influencing public opinion on, and raising awareness about, the climate crisis; this would contradict the

very politics of the fossil fuel-driven Russian regime. Furthermore, the information promoted via Kremlin-run media differs greatly, depending on the channel.

A more likely explanation is a Kremlin-backed strategic push for societal division. In times of extreme polarisation within societies, using the power of media to widen the gap between political positions and opinions is both perfidious and clever. Through their aggressive strategy of division on the content level, Russia can cause unrest (as exemplified in the ideological clash between the pro and contra groups in the climate crisis). Russia also makes full use of the other two aforementioned strategies: mistrust in the government, and aversion to majority opinion. Both Maffick and Redfish (a similar agency) state their objectives lie in crossing the boundaries between journalism and activism.47 By doing so, the Kremlin reaches a new audience, one that is radical and angry. The rage felt by many at increasing environmental limitations and rules is stoked on one channel while another channel simultaneously downplays the necessity for those same measures - this is a tactic endangering social cohesion in Western democracies.

Through of this strategy polarisation, the Kremlin is aiming at pitting two camps against each other. On the one hand, it reaches out to a younger audience longing for political change (via TikTok, Instagram and other social media outlets). On the other hand, via RT DE, it appeals to a dissatisfied and sometimes apolitical audience. The consequences of this division cannot be clearly measured. However, there is some scientific research available that warns of the divisive ability of media; this is particularly the case for social media, especially for an uneducated/ uninformed audience. It therefore reflects just how critical education in this field is and how this will continue to be the case.<sup>48</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

As in any war, a nation needs soldiers to go into battle. In the case of Russian disinformation, these soldiers call themselves "journalists". And this hyperbole does not stem from the author of this piece, but rather from those personally involved. The Chief Editor of RT, Margarita Simonjan, has described RT as a "weapon" on multiple occasions, calling it the "ministry of defence" for the Kremlin.<sup>49</sup> It seems that the "army" has gone on the offensive, and the information war on the West is ramping up.

Within the German media landscape, RTDEhasestablisheditselfasaviableplayer. The COVID-19 pandemic, which stirred up conspiracy theorists from both the Left and Right, greatly expedited the reach of the Russian media outlet. By giving voice to those who marched on the street declaring resistance to the "Corona-dictatorship" in Germany, RT DE once again spread fake news and destabilised German public discourse on the pandemic. With reporting that displays nonsense as fact-based - as shown above in the examples regarding climate change - RT DE's audience is led to believe the fake stories. And Russia's often malign actions are legitimised when some politicians, either for their personal gain or to further a radical agenda, pick up on such false narratives. Whether Russia breaks international law, denies climate change, argues against the efficacy of vaccinations, or promotes societal division, RT DE is there to report on these developments. This dangerous strategy has found a receptive base in a disgruntled nation, and is difficult to combat. So far, social media enterprises (such as Facebook and Instagram) have started to label Russia-affiliated media as such. But a more profound and far-reaching change - like banning RT DE from YouTube - has great potential disadvantages for social media platforms. For instance, RT DE can present itself as a "victim" of "Western dominance", as they did after the decision

on their YouTube channel. Widespread bans can also exacerbate government mistrust, which RT DE propagates in their programmes. Both Estonia and the Czech Republic have programmes dedicated to finding and highlighting Russian disinformation.<sup>50</sup> Estonia, for example, with its large ethnically Russian population, outs individuals and social media posts that promote disinformation - it essentially uses a "naming and shaming" strategy. Due to ongoing efforts to increase media literacy in such countries, the governments can rely on citizen mobilisation efforts to counter Russian disinformation.<sup>51</sup> Experts have long criticised the lack of media education in German schools. German students count to the "media illiterates" in comparison to other countries.<sup>52</sup> Countering the effects of disinformation and fake news would disable populist groups of their ability to manipulate, and with that, the Russian foreign media in Germany would have less power.

As Germany is the country most targeted by Russian disinformation, the development of a viable strategy to counter its effects is long overdue. Strategies like those introduced in this paper must be considered when discussing Russian toward Germany, aggression Europe. and the West. Manipulating the public through information has always worked. But the potential to misuse media has only grown over time. Awareness for these hybrid strategies can and must be raised, particularly in strong and sound democracies like Germany.

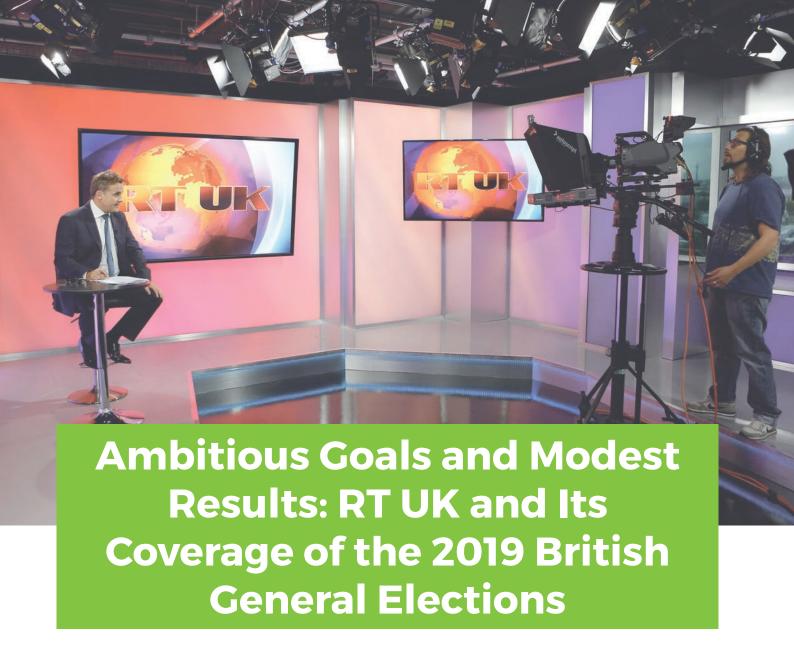
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#### Introduction

Like other arms of Russia Today (RT)'s network, RT UK has had a short yet volatile history. The British branch of the Russian state-sponsored broadcaster was created in 2014 with a view to "challenge dominant power structures in Britain by broadcasting live and original programming with a progressive UK focus".2 The launch for the new UK channel was indeed ambitious in terms of the resources committed and objectives posed. Recording and broadcasting daily news bulletins and special programming from its lavish central London studio, RT UK became accessible to most UK households through several terrestrial and satellite TV channels, as well as via new media platforms. Its newly assembled journalistic and production cast was aiming to "do what statutory regulators are supposed to do - hold power to account".3



RT ad campaign in the London Underground. Source: https://twitter.com/prestofurioso/ status/918567402140569605

Over the years of its activity, RT UK (and its parent network, RT International) became an object of scrutiny by both the British political establishment and the media regulators. The activities and outputs of the wider RT network, and of RT UK specifically, have been at the centre of several high-profile political scandals and investigations conducted by the UK Office of Communications (Ofcom), which is responsible for monitoring media

networks' compliance with national broadcasting regulations. A range of high-profile British politicians have also accused the network of being a "weapon of (Russiasponsored) disinformation". In July 2021, RT ceased the production and broadcasting of daily UK-specific news bulletins; RT UK continued to work only on its special programmes and online content.

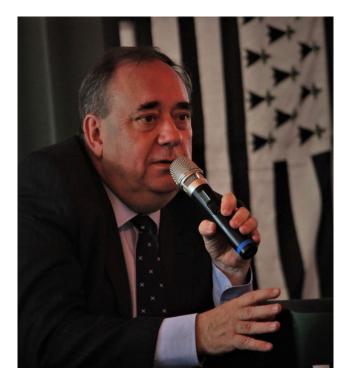
The end of RT's UK-focused news production was undoubtedly a blow to the broadcaster's initial vision for entering the British news media field and being a competitor therein. The history of RT UK presents a unique case for the efficacy of international efforts in influencing information. As a branch of the RT information network. RT UK shares some characteristics with its partner RT channels, such as language (i.e., creating content in English alongside RT International and RT America) and a comparatively narrow national focus (similar to RT America and, to some extent, RT France and RT DE). This chapter aims to provide an overview of some of the factors that shaped features of RT UK operations, its programming, reach, and audience reaction. I will also present some highlights from my case study on the channel's coverage of the 2019 UK General Election across its programmes and media platforms - this will assist in forming a clearer picture of RT UK and will contribute to some of the current debates concerning this channel.

### Programming overview

To match the new network's ambition of shaking up the established news media environment in the UK, RT UK produced a broad range of programmes via TV broadcasts and through its online channels. One of its key elements were the daily news bulletins (approximately 25-30 minutes long) that aired hourly on weekday evenings. Alongside a full range of RT-produced programming, the bulletins

were made available to up to 90 percent of all UK households via Freeview and several satellite channels.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the cancellation of its TV news production, RT UK's daily bulletins covered a variety of local and international topics "that mattered most to Britons".6 The bulletins were also livestreamed and available to the British and international audiences via RT UK's dedicated YouTube and Facebook channels. as well as the network's website. As of the summer of 2021, the RT UK YouTube channel had over 210,000 subscribers; it was still lagging severely behind its sister channels, RT Arabic and RT en Español, which had over 5 million subscribers each. In terms of subscriber numbers, RT UK's Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts (which also share select news clips in addition to other content) also significantly trail behind their counterpart RT channels as well as other major international media outlets' accounts. Despite that, these online platforms allowed RT UK's news content to find some audiences; for example, several of RT UK's YouTube clips have been viewed more than two million times.<sup>7</sup>

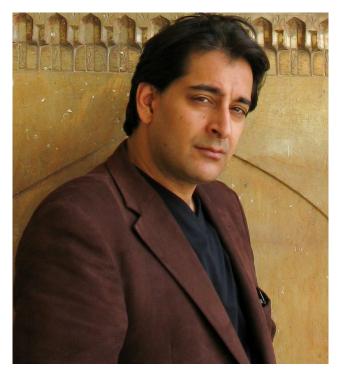
In addition to its news programmes, RT produced several TV shows featuring a mixture of high-profile and controversial presenters and political personalities. These included the former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond, who hosted his own political discussion show.8 From the outset, Salmond's employment with RT caused some disquiet in mainstream British media;9 the notorious legal proceedings he was involved in, and the controversy in the wake of the "Russia report" will be discussed in more detail below. Another politician-turned-RT controversial show host is George Galloway, a former left-wing MP, who was attempting to make a return to parliament.11 He hosted a TV talk-show Sputnik,12 and regularly contributed opinion pieces to the RT's news website. Securing the services of Salmond and Galloway for its UK programming furthered RT International's wider strategy of employing "prominent figures at the



Alex Salmond in 2017. Source: Wikimedia Commons

political margins", in order to help the network to cover "inconvenient' stories that the 'mainstream media' overlook". It de-emphasizes [RT's] affiliation to the Russian perspective, and presents itself as the voice of a "transnational antiimperialist movement". 13 Neither Salmond nor Galloway had obvious links with, or interest in, Russian affairs prior to their RT employment. RT UK's selection of these two prominent - and controversial - Scottish politicians, who often endorse polarising views as its flagship programmes' hosts, demonstrates the channel's interest in exploiting social and political cleavages within British society (such as debates surrounding Scottish independence, and Brexit).14

In addition to such politicians, RT UK became home to several British journalists, including Afshin Rattansi, who previously worked for *The Guardian*, BBC, Channel 4, and Bloomberg TV.<sup>15</sup> His show *Going Underground* was another longrunning RT UK programme, and featured analyses of recent news and developments, and interviews with a range of guests – the aim was to "discover the stories that aren't being covered by the mainstream UK media".<sup>16</sup> This is an example of what



Afshin Rattansi. Source: Wikimedia Commons

has been referred to as "media-centricity" within the wider RT approach to news coverage, or a strategy designed to present a story through the lens of how other outlets often inadequately report on the issue in question.<sup>17</sup> This approach was clearly adopted by RT UK across all its programming. Where some of RT International's flagship TV shows are often provocative and one-sided in terms of their discussion of controversial international developments, RT UK's Going Underground has been observed to draw on a pool of more "widely-recognised expertise and more varied opinion" whilst still adhering to the overarching positions and themes prevalent in RT's reporting.<sup>18</sup>

Until 2018, RT UK hosted a satirical news discussion programme, Sam Delaney's News Thing, 19 which was similar in its tone and approach to more mainstream latenight shows on Western TV networks. RT UK's staff also included Polly Boiko, a presenter who hosted a show ICYMI (In Case You Missed It), which was specifically aimed at younger audiences on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. The show often ridiculed political correctness, and covered pop culture matters, soft news, and "vox-pops with members of the public

[...] seemingly attempting to stoke a sense of apathy with claims about how awful everyone is, and a sense of foreboding, if hilarious, doom surrounding the ills of modern (Western) society".20 Additionally, RT UK became home for one of the longestserving journalists for the network, Martyn Andrews. Prior to moving to the network's UK branch, Andrews reported for RT from Moscow. As an openly gay journalist, and throughout his RT career (including his reporting from the Sochi 2014 Olympics), he has embodied "a more than symbolic rebuttal of the mainstream western media account" of Russia's growing espousal of conservative values and homophobic political discourse.<sup>21</sup> As a popular culturefocused reporter, Andrews continued to enact and provide - throughout his RT UK news reports and online op-eds - an alternative take on the views held by mainstream British media outlets on a variety of cultural, sport, political, and general interest stories; this alternative view was often aligned with official Russian political discourse.<sup>22</sup> Finally, RT UK also benefited from RT International's ability to capture the services of high-profile football personalities such as José Mourinho, Peter Schmeichel, and Stan Collymore for the network's coverage of the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. RT's contribution to this Russian public diplomacy campaign has been received uncharacteristically positively by British audiences.<sup>23</sup> Given such football stars' notoriety in the UK, such programming undoubtedly helped RT attract new followers in that country.

In summation. through staffing selections and programming trajectories, RT UK attempted to reach British audiences across both traditional and new media formats. It employed a variety of approaches to news discussions and interpretations across platforms. These ranged from the serious and often polemical tone of Going Underground, Alex Salmond Show, and Sputnik, to the more humorous entertainment- and culturefocused News Thing as well as Andrews and

Boiko's reporting. RT UK's reporting style was characterised, among other things, by a focus on media-centricity and counterhegemonic rhetoric.

# Tensions between RT UK and the British political and media regulation establishment

RT UK's strategy did not form and evolve within a vacuum. On one hand, it is linked to the overarching editorial practices and policies used by the wider RT network. On the other hand, RT UK's content and approach to its programming has inevitably been shaped in response to the specific political environment in the UK, and the need to adhere to the local broadcasting code. The latter has been particularly significant in informing the fate of RT UK over the past few years. The Ofcom investigations, and the broadcaster's legal battle with the regulator, are an important part of RT UK's story.

In its nascent years, RT UK was the subject of minor Ofcom sanctions,24 but this scrutiny intensified following the 2018 Skripal affair.<sup>25</sup> The regulator launched a detailed investigation of RT's programmes that were broadcast in the UK during the months of March and April 2018, and subsequently found that in seven of these "RT failed to preserve due impartiality".26 This key standard of British news reporting prompts news outlets to "include a sufficiently diverse range of opinions on matters of significant controversy".27 One of the programmes found to be in breach of these standards was produced specifically by RT UK - George Galloway's Sputnik while the rest was programming by other RT branches that were shown in the UK. RT launched a formal judicial review of Ofcom's investigation and rulings, but in 2020, the judiciary sided with the British



George Galloway at the Stop The War protests in London.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

regulator. Ofcom fined RT UK £200,000 for the breaches, and ordered the channel to convey to its audience a summary of Ofcom's findings.<sup>28</sup>

The Ofcom sanctions stopped short of a formal "cease operations" order. The final ruling on Ofcom's RT UK penalties in early 2020 shortly preceded a further political exposé of Russian activities in the UK, known as the "Russia Report". This document summarised the examination. by the British Parliament's intelligence and security committee, of interference in UK politics by Russian state-sponsored actors. The report argued that the British authorities had failed to seriously consider evidence suggesting that programming by RT and the radio network "Sputnik" featured a "preponderance of pro-Brexit or anti-EU stories".29 The report further proposed that, coupled together with the social media activity of Russia-linked bots and trolls, RT UK had been part of a wider Russian campaign that aimed at influencing the Brexit vote and other democratic processes in the UK - the report stated that the British authorities did not adequately assess the influence of these actors.<sup>30</sup>

Like its parent international network, RT UK internalised and appropriated such assessments, serving as a "Kremlin propaganda bullhorn" in its self-positioning within the landscape of British broadcasting, and in its branding efforts to reach wider audiences. Nowhere else has this been clearer than during its infamous ad campaigns on the London

tube and bus network. The campaign, aiming to drive the British audiences to RT UK's content in a provocative fashion, featured messages that spanned London underground stops such as "[w]atch RT and find out who we are planning to hack next".31 This was a clever attempt to use the network's controversial status to attract viewers and online audiences disillusioned with British mainstream broadcasters and news sources.<sup>32</sup> The criticism and outrage resulting from the campaign<sup>33</sup> played right into the hands of RT's messaging strategy; the latter aligns with what has been described as a "strategic humour" approach in Russia's engagement with international audiences.<sup>34</sup> By appropriating the crude labelling given by its adversaries, and relying on satire, humour, and "trolling" across its outputs and self-positioning,<sup>35</sup> various branches of RT (including RT UK) attempt to present a self-confident image in "a vicious battle with the Western media establishment".36

Any success of such audacious challenges to the order of and efforts to enter the British mediascape must be judged according to the level of resonance the content produced amongst British audiences. Herein lies one of the key arguments in the prominent debates around the need to resist and counteract RT UK, and other prominent Russian informational media actors, to protect British democracy and social cohesion. While the activities of such actors should, of course, not be dismissed, RT UK's audience reach (and their possible effects) may be grossly overvalued. Previous research on this indicates that even at the height of its notoriety, RT UK only reached levels of around 0.01 percent of British TV viewers, despite being easily available.<sup>37</sup> Social media platforms helped RT UK reach more people, but the number of followers remained far behind that of other RT network-owned branches, not to mention the followers of other high-profile international broadcasters in the UK and abroad.

For those members of the public whom RT does reach, recent audience survevs found that such content consumption takes place in the context of the viewers' "awareness of RT's national affiliation [and] desire to balance out perceived biases of mainstream sources".38 The high viewing figures of a few of the viral clips shared by RT UK do not necessarily translate into dedicated following of RT's outputs. In sum, while the presence of RT within the British media environment may have generated significant publicity, and the network did entice a small segment of the media audience in the country, its actual impact seems to have come up short of the initial objective. The following case study, of the mediation of a major political event, may help to illustrate this.

# RT UK's coverage of the 2019 General Election

RT UK's reporting of a high-profile British political media event - which coincided with some scandals around the network - sheds light on how this broadcaster operates and to what degree its work is resonant with its audience. The British General Election took place on 12 December 2019 and saw the Conservative Party (the Tories) – led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson - heavily defeat the Labour Party and its leader Jeremy Corbyn, thereby gaining a commanding majority in Parliament. Relying on the live media ethnography method,39 I collected a set of outputs produced by RT UK on 6 December 2019.40 The date was chosen as the final Friday of the campaign period, a point at which all the key narratives of the election period reached a crescendo. 41 The broadcast materials were recorded or accessed via the RT website, then transcribed, and analysed using content and qualitative methods.42 Additionally, data from RT UK's website and

a variety of relevant social media channels – introduced in more detail below – was collected and coded by the author.

The goal was to identify and understand RT's key messages, and the modes of informing and connecting to the audience that were exhibited in RT's coverage of these elections. I also attempted to assess whether RT UK uniformly and noticeably spurred its viewers to favour some candidates whilst discrediting others across its media channels and different outputs. Finally, I tried to trace what kind of technologies, formats, and themes were used in the election coverage, and how effective and impactful were RT's approaches to mediation of the election.

On the whole, all the key topics prevalent in the coverage of this election in other British outlets – including Brexit, business, economy and trade, healthcare, media standards and scandals, and taxation<sup>43</sup> – were also evident in RT UK's coverage. Apart from the network's closer attention to the business of media scandals, the Russian broadcaster's agenda-setting mediation contribution to the British election campaign was not markedly distinct from that of the other news outlets. However, upon closer examination, there are traces of overarching messages and political preferences that are exhibited

right across RT UK's reporting of this general election. These are summarised below.

#### **RT UK News Bulletin**

I first examined the RT UK News Bulletin that was broadcast at 7pm on 6 December 2019.44 On the surface, the bulletin tried to balance its coverage of the election by reporting the daily news as well as on activities related to all major parties in the election. However, the framing and salience of reporting was notably skewed. The Conservative Party and its leader were the focus of a single report in the elections section of the newscast. In this report, the reporter poked fun at the "Get Britain out of Neutral" slogan adopted by the Tory campaign. Instead of providing an expert guest view on the Tories' activities that day, RT UK featured humorous tweets about the slogan and the visual mistake made in the unveiling of this campaign. This instance exemplified the noted counterhegemonic practices regularly employed by RT personnel, who often use humour, satire, and mockery to undermine Western institutions and their representatives whom they wish to discredit.45

Content analysis summary of the RT UK News Bulletin broadcast, 6 December 2019

| Central Report Topic                     | # of    | Total length of | % of the total   |  |  |
|--|---------|-----------------|------------------|--|--|
|  | stories | coverage        | broadcast length |  |  |
| Directly election-related                |         |                 |                  |  |  |
| Labour Party                             | 2       | 3:52            | 14.9 %           |  |  |
| Negative view of UK government           | 2       | 6:04            | 22.8 %           |  |  |
| and Brexit                               |         |                 |                  |  |  |
| <b>Conservative Party</b>                | 1       | 0:33            | 2 %              |  |  |
| Scottish National Party                  | 1       | 0:15            | 0.9 %            |  |  |
| Brexit Party                             | 1       | 0:09            | 0.5 %            |  |  |
| Green Party                              | 1       | 0:05            | 0.3 %            |  |  |
| Plaid Cymru                              | 1       | 0:09            | 0.5 %            |  |  |
| No Link or Link to the Election Implicit |         |                 |                  |  |  |
| UK in foreign affairs                    | 4       | 5:25            | 20.4 %           |  |  |
| UK domestic matter, non-election         | 2       | 5:58            | 22.5 %           |  |  |
|  |         |                 |                  |  |  |

Total length: 26m 30s



Jeremy Corbyn. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Johnson and the Conservatives' campaign did appear and were given voice in the other bulletin segments that focused on the Labour campaign. Such appearances tended to be given a negative slant. Reporting on other key election topics was similarly presented, through a lens antagonistic to the current Conservative government; for example, a lengthy report and in-studio interview with a "Brexit expert" explained how the government-proposed plan to leave the EU was misleading.

In a sharp juxtaposition, the Labour activities for that day - for example, Corbyn's press conference – were presented in a more serious and considerate tone. The press conference, held on the morning of 6 December, was widely covered across various RT UK platforms, including the RT UK News Bulletin. Corbyn's public statement evaluated the nature of a US-UK trade deal document, which subsequently was alleged to have been leaked to Labour from a Russian source.<sup>46</sup> The controversy around this document, in general, "fuelled a debate about the future of the NHS and made the headlines for days, particularly after evidence emerged blaming Russians for the leak".47 The reporting by RT UK about that day's conference did not touch upon the source of the document Corbyn was discussing. Instead, during an in-studio interview with an RT UK reporter, the host unpicked the points made in Corbyn's accusations of the government's Brexit plans. This obviously contrasted with the whimsical tone of the broadcaster's

report on Johnson and the Conservatives' campaign that was shown prior to this instudio discussion.

The exchange between the reporter and the news bulletin host legitimised the accusations made by Corbyn, and implied the Prime Minister was lying about his Brexit plan; at the same time, the potential hardships to the British people as a result of this issue was also highlighted. The in-studio exchange suggested that, as a result of the leaked information, Corbyn would have the upper hand during the televised debate between the party leaders that was scheduled later that evening. The notably anti-Brexit, pro-Labour stance of the bulletin supports the findings of previous research: that RT's editorial policy is mercurial in terms of its political orientation as long as the views expressed challenge Western democratic institutions. 48 For example, some reporting across RT's networks was sympathetic towards Brexit in previous years, 49 but RT UK's election coverage took the opposite stand. Likewise, other branches of RT obviously supported right-leaning rather than left-leaning parties and candidates in previous major election campaigns, such as in the case of RT's coverage of the 2020 US presidential elections.<sup>50</sup>

The bulletin covered activities of other political parties participating in the election, but the coverage consisted of mere seconds-long highlights of the respective campaigns. The Scottish National Party, the Brexit Party, the Green Party, and the nationalist Welsh party Plaid Cymru were in primary focus for a total 2.2 percent of the newscast's length. The rest of the news bulletin's coverage reflected negatively on the current UK government. Any links to the election were implicit yet evident: stories critiqued Johnson's and previous Conservative governments but passed no judgement on whether a Labour cabinet would have done a better job. The additional storylines in the bulletin explained that: the threat of Russian disinformation was inflated by

the British government and its military command; the current government's own diplomat was quitting her job because of the Brexit "mess"; the government and local authorities' handling of the Grenfell Tower incident was "shameful". Altogether, despite a clear preference for one party over another in the election campaign, the newscast's messaging was more interested in challenging the current UK government, rather than narrowly serving as a Labour campaign communications tool.

### Special programming

Interestingly, RT UK's two high-profile political discussion programmes introduced above – the *Alex Salmond Show* and George Galloway's *Sputnik* – did not dedicate any attention to the upcoming elections in the episodes aired on collection dates.<sup>51</sup> Instead, the former provided a discussion of the issue of Catalan independence, while the latter debated standards of good journalism. Despite the proximity of the election, RT UK's programming was not completely overtaken by this important political event, and the network continued to engage its viewers by using a variety of subject matter.

The third major political discussion show of RT UK, Afshin Rattansi's *Going Underground* (broadcast on 7 December 2019), provided a detailed discussion of the upcoming election – during the host's interview with the newly-

appointed Russian ambassador to the UK. This programme served as a more traditional exercise of public diplomacy by a Russian informational actor. Its goal was to introduce RT UK viewers to the new Russian ambassador, Andrei Kelin, and discuss Russia's official position on a range of issues concerning the British public. The programme broadly signified RT UK's own internalised stance on the election and the network's role within the British media sphere: (a) that its influence was grossly exaggerated (articulated in the ambassador's dismissive responses to Rattansi's questions about Russian interference in British domestic affairs): (b) that RT UK presented a balanced and unbiased take on the election and on other British political affairs (through the host's frank questioning on key controversial issues); and (c) that it provided an alternative voice, on behalf of Russia and its government, compared to other mainstream outlets in the UK (in this case, through the direct public diplomacy appeal of the interview and its subject's dismissal anti-Kremlin popular narratives circulating in mainstream British media). The latter point was highlighted by the fact that Rattansi did not push for answers on sensitive questions (brought up similarly by other mainstream outlets) when the Russian ambassador asked him not to. A different interviewer may have prompted the more combative and "truthseeking" approach sometimes utilised in RT programming, whereas here, the controversial subjects were brought up but not fully explored.

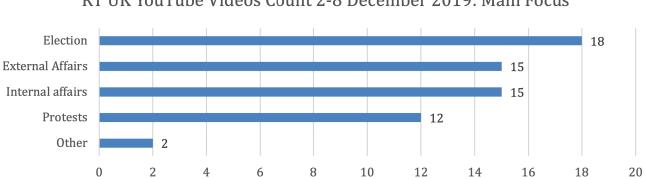


#### Election coverage on the RT UK website and on social media platforms

Election coverage on the RT website - on and around 6 December 2019 - was more multi-directional when compared with the RT UK News Bulletin and the special programming. There were stories that presented the leader of the Tories in a negative light. One of the headings, for example, was "Pedalling porkies? BoJo claims CYCLING on the pavement is the 'NAUGHTIEST" thing he's ever done", which highlighted RT's tactic of "tabloidisation" and a "click-bait" style of presenting online content.<sup>52</sup> There were other stories as well, which were framed in a manner sympathetic with Johnson's rhetoric and that questioned the Labour campaign. This was not noticeable in the broadcast content.53 Significantly, the news reporting on the website demonstrated a keen interest in the media coverage and in social media reactions to the election campaign: "'Where's the grilling you gave Jeremy Corbyn?' TV breakfast show hosts slammed online for giving BoJo easy ride with 'cosy chat'"54 and "'Fairly hefty clanger': Channel 4 misquotes BoJo as saying he wanted control over migration of 'people of colour'".55 The theme of accusing various media outlets of their biased or inaccurate coverage of the election exemplifies RT UK's media-centric approach to news coverage.

RT UK covered the issue (perceived) unfair and biased mediation of the campaign across its news outputs and platforms, featuring examples from both anti-Tory and anti-Labour mainstream British media coverage. Such stories might have had more resonance with RT UK's Labour-leaning audience; as another study argued, Labour supporters were the ones for whom the issue of biased and inadequate mediation of the election was particularly appealing.<sup>56</sup> Overall, however, the Conservatives and news related to their 2019 campaign received more attention on RT's news website when compared with the broadcast news bulletins investigated here. This suggests that the approach to the selection and coverage of subject matter is not in seamless sync across RT UK's broadcast and web production teams at all times.

The social media output of RT UK programmes and its employees deserves a more detailed look than may be feasible to fully discuss within this short chapter, but some of the highlights presented below point to important trends: on YouTube, for the week 2-8 December 2019, RT UK's service shared 62 videos on its channel. The election was the most prominent subject in these videos, with 18 videos in total addressing election-related news and issues. When compared with other RT UK platforms, election-related content on YouTube was not as salient: less than a third (29 percent) of content on this channel directly addressed the election. Compare this with the RT UK broadcast news bulletins studied here, and the RT UK Twitter account, where 41.9 percent of total coverage and 45 percent of the



RT UK YouTube Videos Count 2-8 December 2019: Main Focus

daily coverage on 6 December were (respectively) dedicated directly to the election.

The approach used by RT UK to share election-related and other content on its YouTube channel seemed to have a multiprong strategy of targeting and engaging a variety of viewers. The live stream of Jeremy Corbyn's press conference, for example, was one of the most prominent videos posted by RT UK during the investigated week. The same press conference was live-streamed on YouTube by two leading British newspapers, The Guardian and The Telegraph. The Guardian's stream<sup>57</sup> was viewed nearly ten times more than that shared by RT UK (12,100 compared with 1,486 views at the time of analysis), and The Telegraph's coverage<sup>58</sup> attracted about 20 times more views than that of RT UK (30,200 compared with 1,486 views). Despite reaching far fewer online users, RT UK's version of the live-stream was in fact comparatively very successful in generating online discussions amongst its YouTube viewers. RT UK's version resulted in 177 public comments, more than *The* Guardian's version (167)comments) but fewer than The Telegraph's (272). This may serve as evidence of RT UK's content followers being more proactive YouTube users, who are ready to engage in discussions on election-related media content.

No-commentary footage clips were another popular and frequently used type of YouTube videos shared by RT UK. One such clip shared excerpts from Nicola Sturgeon's campaign appearance, in which she urged Scottish voters to prevent a Conservative majority and the inevitability of Brexit it would bring about. Although much shorter than the live stream of Corbyn's press conference, the footage of Sturgeon's appearance and her anti-Brexit claims showcased the general anti-Tory stance of RT UK's outputs in connection to the election. The video resulted in the highest number of user comments, and showcased a broad division amongst participants on

the issues of Brexit, Scottish independence, and party preferences. This example serves as further evidence of RT's interest and success in causing emotional responses from its online and offline audiences; these audiences were reached by a variety of output formats and platforms through which such content was shared.



A pro-Brexit demonstrator outside the House of Commons, Westminster. Source: Wikimedia Commons

The official RT UK news service account on Twitter (@RTUKnews), which had 95,000 followers at the time of writing. shared 22 tweets on 6 December 2019. Only ten of these were directly related to the election (45 percent of the daily coverage). Seven tweets (32 percent of the daily coverage) expressed sentiments, or circulated news stories, that were antagonistic to the Tory campaign or to the current government. Two messages shared positive or supportive updates on the Labour campaign, the same number as positive or favourable tweets about the Tory campaign. Two tweets (nine percent) provided updates on the campaigns of other political parties: the SNP and the Brexit Party. Brexit featured comparatively prominently: four tweets (18 percent) both in the context of the election and from the standpoint of broader economic impact. Mediation of the election by various British media outlets also formed a distinct avenue of RT UK's Twitter activity: three tweets (14) percent of all daily posts). Overall, while negative undertones in the coverage of the Conservative campaign and the current UK government's activities were prominent in @RTUKnews' messages, the election, scheduled to take place in just a few days, made up less than half of all Twitter activity on this channel on 6 December 2019. Stories about crime and justice, sports, international business, and viral Internet content (such as cat videos, and other unrelated topics) jointly made up a larger portion of the daily Twitter coverage than general elections-related news.

The personal account of Afshin Rattansi (@afshinrattansi, followers at the time of writing), the host of *Going Underground*, provided a different case study of the election's online coverage by RT and its journalists on Twitter. Rattansi was, on average, more active than the RT UK news service account. Between 9 and 11 December, when the data was available, he shared at least 124 tweets: approximately 41 tweets per day. Notably, almost two thirds of all his messages directly addressed election-related issues (77 tweets, 62 percent of the sample). Unlike the @RTUKnews feed, the issues of Brexit, other parties' participation in the election, as well as any positive sentiment towards the Tory campaign, were virtually absent from the sample. Rattansi's personal political preferences became clear from the analysis of the collected messages: a third of his tweets (40, or 32 percent of the sample) were sympathetic towards, or directly endorsed, the Labour campaign and/or Jeremy Corbyn. A negative light on the Tory campaign or Boris Johnson's leadership was shed in 37 messages (nearly 30 percent of the sample). More significantly, however, was Rattansi's clear intention to expose and showcase the political bias demonstrated by a range of British media outlets during their coverage of the election. More than half of his tweets (63 messages, 51 percent of the sample) directly addressed the issue of unfair mediation of the election. He specifically attacked the BBC, on a range of its programmes and journalists, for their alleged bias and preferential reporting of

the Tories, and their unfair reporting of the Labour campaign.

In comparison, the account of the show Rattansi hosted (@Underground RT. 26,211 followers at the time of writing). dedicated much less attention to the issues related to the election. Between 2 and 11 December 2019, @Underground\_ RT shared 83 tweets. Among them, just over ten percent (nine tweets out of 83) directly addressed the issue of the upcoming election. Similar to the account of the show's host, these tweets criticised the Tory campaign, supported the Labour campaign, and questioned the balance of other media outlets' coverage of the election. RT UK journalists' accounts, therefore, do not appear to be regulated as strictly when compared with the protocols guiding BBC journalists' online presence. The RT UK's staff personal social media activity may be on par with, or even more resonant than, the social media pages of the programmes they host. This emphasises just how important it is for channels such as RT UK to make the right staffing choices.

While there were some differences in the overall approach to delivery, and in the editorial selection of the stories disseminated, through various RT UK platforms, the overarching (and selfevident) message projected in its election coverage aimed at undermining the current government and the Tory campaign; the election itself, though, was far from being the exclusive focus for RT's content managers. The reach of the channels was modest at best, and even then, as suggested in other research, members of RT's audiences in the UK consumed the network's broadcast news and new media content as part of "a varied media diet, which includes mainstream international sources".59

#### RT UK's audience reach during the 2019 General Election

To be comprehensive, any discussion about the outputs of an information network needs a twin consideration of their reach and possible impact amongst its audiences. The Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB), an audience research agency, suggested that the RT UK TV broadcast audience reached 0.51 percent of all audiences, or 310,000 viewers. in the week commencing 2 to 8 December 2019. An average daily TV viewer audience in the UK was 68,000, while the time spent watching RT's TV content was negligible, amounting to 0.01 percent of average weekly share of viewing (less than a second, per average viewer).60 The viewing figures for the Facebook live-stream of the Labour press conference on 6 December (discussed above) nearly equalled RT's average daily TV audience, highlighting the significance of new media platforms in RT UK's ability to reach viewers in the UK. The BARB report on live-streaming of RT's content in the UK, via RT's own app or Sky GO service, reflects how marginal the share of dissemination was of the Russian state-backed channel via online broadcast delivery, when compared with other major broadcasters. The report suggested RT's content was streamed for a total of 7.363 minutes during that same week, whereas Fox News' content was streamed for 3.6 million minutes, and BBC for 132.9 million minutes.61

Another report provided a specific reflection on the Russia-backed outlets' share of online news consumption during the entire election campaign: "[F]oreign sites like *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* played a relatively small part with just 1 percent share of the time spent with news, about 0.02 percent of the time people spent online



during the election".<sup>62</sup> Such figures provide a sense of the modest audience reach of RT UK's outputs. The new media channels also have reached a significantly smaller number of online users when compared with the accounts of other major UK media outlets. None of the online content reached viral status – something that happens on occasion with RT's online satirical posts, licensed video shorts, or videos of disasters<sup>63</sup> – but this was not observed for the period of investigation.

To assess the role of RT UK in influencing UK domestic affairs, it would help to have: (1) a better understanding of the makeup of RT's audiences, and (2) wider patterns of voter preferences and attitudes towards political news consumption during election periods in the UK. Some of the audience reactions and engagement patterns observed in my analysis suggests that voters across the political spectrum followed and engaged with RT UK's content, and with one another, on the network's online platforms. Fletcher and colleagues argue that the major problem around mediation of the 2019 election was not that media organisations drove polarisation of public opinion on key issues such as Brexit but "that many people do not engage much with news at all, spending just 3 percent of their time online".64 RT UK's coverage presented an alternative option for UK voters to obtain and discuss election-related news, even if its reach was comparatively small.

More credit needs to be given to the audiences of political news content in being able to engage with and make judgements based on reported news. As suggested in a

study on the patterns of news consumption during the British 2019 elections, "most news users accessed a variety of sources, including both sources aligned with their own political views and sources that challenge them",65 thus breaking through the mooted echo chambers of electionrelated information. The same should be true of RT UK's audiences. The network's influence on British voter preferences should not be overestimated, yet its role should not be disregarded entirely. It has reached a segment of UK voters and provided them with a particular framing of election-related news. RT UK also supplied multiple platforms for its viewers and audiences to interact with one another ahead of the December 2019 election.

#### **Conclusions**

While RT UK has not officially endorsed any of the participating parties in this election, the cross-platform outputs on and around 6 December 2019 suggest the overarching leaning of the network and its employees in supporting the Labour campaign, though the salience of this leaning did vary across platforms. In contrast, the Conservatives' campaign was lacking the same rigour of coverage, and Boris Johnson was often mocked. Brexit, one of the key issues surrounding the election, was persistently portrayed in negative tones. It would be inaccurate to state that RT UK's coverage was entirely entrenched in its pro-Labour, anti-Tory configuration. There are stories that "side with" the Conservative campaign, but these were noted when RT UK attacked the biased coverage of the mainstream media, helping the channel to challenge the status quo of the British news media landscape. There were cases of simple, factual reporting on the Tories' activities, and those that provided a seemingly balanced overview of the two parties' positions on key election issues, thereby prompting audiences to decide for themselves. RT UK's news coverage of the

election did feature overviews of activities of other participating political parties, most notably, SNP and the Brexit Party, across various platforms, but these were comparatively marginal. The total coverage of the Green Party's activity across all investigated RT UK platforms consisted of a five seconds-long mention in the evening news bulletin.

Such a slant in RT UK's reporting contrasted sharply with RT's approach to coverage of the 2020 US presidential elections, in which the network's reporting towards leaned strongly endorsing the right-wing Republicans. Moreover. whereas the standards of RT America's coverage of the election across the Atlantic was found to be seriously flawed on multiple occasions,66 my analysis of RT UK's coverage of the UK elections did not uncover obvious signs of unacceptably low standards of journalistic practice. This supports the experts' previous conclusions that, "content produced for RT UK (under Ofcom's remit) is markedly more balanced than content produced for RT America".67 The ability of the British media regulatory system to keep the activity of such foreign informational actors as RT UK in check, is therefore key in endorsing adequate standards of news reporting during such important periods of democratic processes such as election campaigns.

A major distinctive feature of RT UK's reporting of the UK 2019 election was the salience of stories that questioned and undermined the coverage of the campaign by other mainstream media outlets. Such a strategy fit well with RT's overarching counter-hegemonic ethos. both respect to its own self-position in the global media sphere<sup>68</sup> and in its appeal to audiences interested in assaults on established media institutions.<sup>69</sup> This may explain RT's apparent interest in exposing the biased and questionable expertise of rival outlets, even when it advances the position of the Conservative party and its leader (such as in the case of the Channel 4 misquotation of a Boris Johnson speech). In



Nikolay Bogachikhin, head of RT UK. Source: https://www.linkedin.com/in/nikolaybogachikhin-40659536/

this case, the apparent need to emphasise the supposed misstep by a rival media organisation trumped an opportunity to engage with the subject matter of Johnson's speech in question, thereby highlighting RT's interest in reporting controversial and potentially viral content.

A report exploring the mediation of the election in the same period by major British outlets found that the "final week of the campaign saw the highest levels of newspaper negativity towards the Labour party. Negativity also increased towards other opposition parties, whereas the Conservatives' position improved on that of the penultimate week".70 This could be explained by the fact that Labourendorsing mainstream media outlets were significantly fewer in number compared with the outlets openly endorsing the Conservative Party during this election.<sup>71</sup> This election-reporting landscape could facilitated RT UK's situational have alignment, and the network's staff's personal biases, in this instance. This may be a consequence of Moscow's delegation of journalistic and editorial agency to subordinate actors. especially foreign staff are not fully acculturated to Kremlin positions. RT UK's overarching

sympathetic view of Labour activities in the studied period may be explained not only by the personal political preferences of reporters captured in this study, but also the network's counter-hegemonic positioning vis-à-vis mainstream British news sources, and a desire to present the British government in a negative light.

Overall, there are signs of RT UK's obvious continuity with the mode of operations of its parent network; this is apparent in its activities across its news production and dissemination, the style and content of reports, staff hiring practices, and other features. Yet, given the close oversight of its activities by British media regulators, RT UK does constitute a unique case within RT's international network, and prompted the need for a more careful approach to news dissemination and discussion. In this context, RT UK's coverage of the 2019 elections presents an excellent case study of the network's efforts to at once integrate in, and shake up, the existing media environment within which it operated. This instance showcases the channel's initial ambition in its multipronged and cross-media approach to informing British audiences of significant political developments both in the UK and internationally. The "media-centricity" of RT UK's coverage of the election, or the persisting interest in pinpointing how mainstream outlets misreport on issues of significance,<sup>72</sup> illustrates how the network challenges the alignment of the British media sphere.

The prominence of the debates around RT UK's activities as a threat to British democracy<sup>73</sup> is a sign that this element of RT UK's ambition is successful, at least to a degree. At the same time, its 2019 election reporting presents clear evidence that the perceived damage the channel could cause to the British democratic practices may have been overblown. Being burned by Ofcom's close monitoring and sanctioned for previous missteps, RT UK's coverage of the election was often factual, situationally supporting

the Labour campaign and being biased against the current British government. Tiny TV audiences reached modest success in terms of the deployment of new media platforms, and showcased that RT UK, as of the end of the 2010s, was far from reaching the initial goals that were self-proclaimed by the network upon its launch. It suffered a further setback in the form of the recent discontinuation of the broadcast news production.

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#### Why RT?

If you open a web page of the English-language version of RT, perhaps one of the first things you are going to see is a barrage of anti-US/UK/EU posts and news. Some look balanced, but others read like a political activist's blog that takes sides and vigorously attacks an opponent. If you go further, into the op-ed section, you will find plenty of stories that can fairly be called conspiracy theories. These are RT's specialty: whatever happens in the world, RT's staff writers and columnists find the angle that will directly or indirectly connect societal and political problems with corporate crimes, the CIA's plots around the world and the super-rich who work hand-in hand with the US government. Yet, RT was not always as critical of the West as it is now.

The channel was initially launched under the name "Russia Today" in 2005 as a traditional soft power tool to promote Russian culture, but its evolution began from a regional conflict in Georgia in 2008.



A Russia Today newscast on Russia's war against Georgia in August 2008. Screenshot

In August 2008, the channel failed to defend Russia's geopolitical interests during a conflict where pro-Russian forces annexed two regions of the republic of Georgia. Most of the global media covered this conflict from the Georgian perspective, calling the Russian military forces "the occupants" and blaming Moscow for starting the New Cold War.<sup>2</sup> That summer, the Kremlin lost

the global battle of words and completely changed their approach. The channel was rebranded as RT, received a massive financial boost from the Russian government and started an aggressive campaign of transnational criticising corporations. governments, global media holdings and US military expansionism.3 More importantly, the channel's management put the idea of the conspiring "Other" into the channel's broadcasting strategy. Among daily news and talk shows, a viewer was able to find regular publication of conspiracy fears that became a part of the channel's brand identity.

### Why Conspiracy Theories?

RTrepresentsanexcellentcaseforthe investigation of how global communication technologies influence the development and dissemination of conspiracy theories; and what this means for conflict resolution when information cannot be sealed behind state borders or linguistic limitations. When the idea to write a book on RT and conspiracy theories came to one of the authors of this article in 2013, the channel was already growing as an international broadcaster interested in fringe opinions and alternative facts.<sup>4</sup> This was before the catchphrase "fake news" was added to the daily vocabulary of both average news consumers and academics.<sup>5</sup> A decade ago, RT pioneered the use of controversial opinions (packaged as freedom of speech), alternative facts, conspiracy theories and unverified claims as part of the news agenda to damage political opponents of the Kremlin on both sides of the Atlantic. The choice of questionable stories like conspiracy theories is not surprising: they help undermine the legitimacy of political and social actors and spread rapidly thanks to global communications, thus affecting and shaping opinions and biases of millions of people around the world.6



A conspiracy theory demonstration in Berlin. Source: Wikimedia Commons

What does a regular conspiracy theory do? It questions the conventional order of people's actions by looking "behind the curtains" to find a plot and nefarious masterminds who aim to destroy the status quo and render the lives of ordinary people miserable. Conspiracy theories help to explain the complicated reality around us: a world that lacks transparency and is full of inequality and injustice. At times, as Peter Knight notes,<sup>7</sup> conspiracy theories can be onto something, but mostly they will be very far from reality. For RT presenters and guests, conspiracy theorising is the chance to show themselves as champions of the freedom of speech. Hence, the motto: "You can call me a conspiracy theorist, but I do my own research and just ask questions!" is an opening for an unrestrained speech and gives the floor to further, much more bizarre speculations that travel via a variety of media platforms.

Although conspiracy theories have been with us for centuries, it is the 20th and the 21st centuries that turned them into an integral part of the world's perception.<sup>8</sup> One of the outcomes of the Cold War is the idea of the dangerous Other that is threatening the stability of society. This is the idea that was equally popular in the US, the USSR and European countries involved in ideological battles.<sup>9</sup> In the aftermath of the Cold War, the habit of finding the dangerous Other resumed, yet the image of dangerous masterminds became much more developed and richer.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the post-Cold War period the images of

conspiring enemies became part of the popular culture spread through songs, art and cinema.<sup>11</sup> It is almost impossible to avoid a conspiratorial interpretation of any major news story or political development. Conspiracy theories are haunting us daily, and they will not go anywhere in the foreseeable future. However, the biggest impact that conspiracy theories have is on global political divisions where these ideas become part of populist platforms.

#### Why populism?

When reading RT, an attentive viewer will notice a recurrence of populist utterances. This is no coincidence. Populism has been referred to as a "thin-centred ideology" that political actors can map onto any specific ideological concerns they have, from either end of the political spectrum. 12 practical terms, though, populism often involves exploiting particular issues at times of real or perceived crisis and societal dissatisfaction.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, several scholars look at populism in terms of what it actually does, i.e. as "a political logic", a "style" of performing and thus enacting social relations or, most recently, as a "communication logic" which incorporates an actor's claims, motives and methods of engagement.14 Broadly speaking, populist appeals tend to mobilise "the people" against power-holding "elites" who are depicted as corrupt, self-serving and out of touch with "ordinary" citizens' problems.<sup>15</sup> Conspiracy theories are built precisely around this opposition between "the people" and a scheming "elite". They represent a populist interpretation of how power works: powerful elites serve their own interests at the expense of the public.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, studies have shown that openness to the populist values of peoplecentrism and anti-elitism is associated with a more positive perception.<sup>17</sup> What is more, belief in any conspiracy theory increases openness to other such ideas, regardless of whether they fit coherently together.<sup>18</sup>

After the defeat in 2008, RT has superbly weaponised a populist agenda (with ideas taken from both the Right and the Left) and turned it into one of its brand elements. The shapeshifting of RT aimed to turn it into the "underdog" whose mission was to speak on behalf of the "people" (everyone threatened by the first world states' governments and companies) about the crimes committed by elites in the West. Ideally, that meant finding stories in the US, UK and other European countries.

In 2010, Margarita Simonyan, RT's chief editor, said: "Everybody wants to know what is happening in their backyards [...] We decided [...] to look for stories that are on the one hand extremely interesting, that can be breath-taking, fascinating for our audience, and on the other hand that have not been reported or [are] hugely underreported in the mainstream media".<sup>19</sup>



Russian President Vladimir Putin and RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan. Source: Wikimedia Commons

That combination was supposed to bring a greater audience to the stories allegedly unreported by the so-called "mainstream media", which would often be very critical of the US and Western European governments. Moreover, that approach is based on two premises: first, that "people [...] understand that the whole truth cannot be told by Anglo-Saxon television channels". And secondly, that "there is no objectivity: there are as many approximations of the truth as there are potential voices". The populist division of the world between the "power elite" (the US and others) and the "underdog" (Russia) would help to spread

misinformation and mistrust in the states that are the Kremlin's future opponents. However, the populist agenda is one of the few fundamentals of RT's strategy that employs conspiracy theories.

# What is unique about RT's media strategy?

RT's entrance to the global media market coincided with a decrease in trust of various institutions, including the media. People became more trusting of alternative figureheads that allowed media outlets like RT to spread all sorts of stories that, as they claim, "mainstream media" would ignore.<sup>22</sup> Conspiracy theories, due to their attractiveness and divisive character. would be the first on RT's list. At the same time, many people would consume and trust alternative interpretations of current news more than other available sources. So, the truth is separated from analysis of public records, debate and consensusbuilding. Instead, credibility attaches itself to the "new type of heroic truth teller" who is "brave enough to call bullshit on the rest of the establishment".23 RT has occupied precisely that niche: an underdog truthseeker that is able to speak truth to the world, exposing the corruption, lies and deception of the ruling class.

RT's brand identity is therefore built on its capacity to raise questions, rather than providing any detail or credible answers. This practice, which RT has developed over time, makes conspiratorial insinuations rather than outright allegations. The purpose of RT is to curate favourable opinions in the news agenda whilst keeping itself distant from what the guests say. These guests can be affiliated journalists, no-name bloggers or retired intelligence officers. RT says that its mission is to provide the floor to all viewpoints, some of which are often ignored by "mainstream media". By posing

as an alternative to the "mainstream media", RT not only brands itself to attract potential viewers and followers of such content, it also seeks to show that traditional media is dead and the road is open for all sorts of non-conventional approaches to news and current affairs.

On the technical side, airing conspiracy theories can be problematic: some governments can strip the licence from those media outlets that are engaged in the spread of misinformation. RT has fallen into that trap several times in the UK, causing an investigation by the media watchdog Ofcom.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, RT's staff became tech-savvy when it comes to airing unverified claims.



Russian operatives behind the Scribal poisoning talking to RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan. Screenshot

During the Skripal affair in 2018, when a former Russian double agent and his daughter were poisoned by a bioweapon, RT was desperate to find the holes in the narrative developed by the British government and intelligence. while simultaneously avoiding breaking the Ofcom regulations and losing their broadcasting licence. RT's staff, via talk shows, op-ed pieces and news reports, covered multiple conspiracy theories produced by other authors and media entities, accusing the UK government, investigative journalists, the military and scientists of staging the coup to accuse Russia of the murder attempt. Most of the Skripal-related stories were mutually conflicting, but the goal was to chip away at the credibility of the official accounts that had been released to the public about

the poisonings and stay within the legal limits. When it was difficult to find the one convincing voice to spread favourable views on the Skripal poisoning, RT used social media posts to create content for their news stories and attracted a disproportionate amount of air time to such stories. Relying on social media posts and outsourcing some of the most blatant accusations into the op-ed section helped RT protect itself from possible legal consequences. RT also used access to public information about the police investigation to cast doubt on the UK government's actions, and shared conspiratorial tweets by Russian officials to provide weight to the questionable allegations against the UK officials' line.

Usually, an uninformed viewer will not notice that RT is a Russian-funded television channel. RT as a brand is slick enough to have plenty of attention on all continents. Rather than give the Kremlin's perspective on events, it invites audiences to "Question more" about the news. The point here is not to tell audiences what the Kremlin thinks, but to reinforce its status as an outsider that shows that no one can be fully trusted. RT only engages in aggressive pro-Russian news-making when the Kremlin's policy line is at stake. In fact, RT is a product of, and a savvy player in. a broader global media environment. The context for RT's evolution is vital because today's communication is not a one-way process: news coverage is a product of the



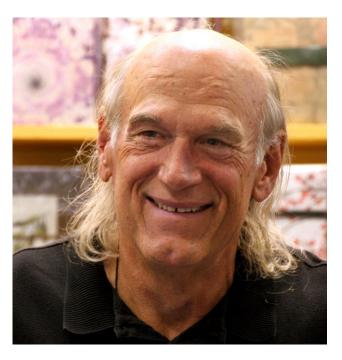
RT's advertisement campaign in London Underground. Source: https://trendjackers.com/russia-todayprovocative-adverts-london-underground/

interactions of journalists, host platforms and audiences. All of these elements contribute to the ways in which populist messages are constructed and developed. Together, they work to give conspiratorial online content a comparative circulatory advantage. Positioning itself as an outside voice, RT chose conspiracy theories as its key content. They have become, in a way, part of RT's identity.

# How can conspiracy theories be instrumentalised?

As an example, let us look at the most recent international stories that RT's staff picked up for airing: the global COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 US Presidential elections.

At the start of the global pandemic in March 2020, while many US media outlets were broadcasting cautious messages about self-isolation and social distancing, RT's hosts were actively spreading false narratives. They laughed at the "mainstream" media" and called the pandemic the type of stories that the media love.25 Within a couple of weeks, as countries were closing borders around the world, including Russia, RT changed its approach and called for social distancing in their programmes. At the same time, the hosts used every opportunity to attack corporations and governments for not providing help to the most vulnerable social groups. Even in stories with no conspiratorial content, RT's hosts were able to find or create these. In one of the shows, Jesse Ventura, presenter of "The World according to Jesse", spoke about the media criticism of Tesla's founder Elon Musk for delivering a different kind of ventilator to California hospitals.<sup>26</sup> Ventura's response to the story boiled down to the traditional RT mantra of the big oil lobby in control of the media that used every opportunity to challenge Musk's



Jesse Ventura. Source: Wikimedia Commons

electric cars. "The oil business hates him" concluded Ventura.<sup>27</sup> RT only once openly engaged with a COVID-related conspiracy theory entitled "The Great Reset". This is the notion that the global elite will turn the post-pandemic world into a "digital concentration camp" where ordinary people would be divided into classes based on their vaccination status and surveyed 24/7.<sup>28</sup>

On the contrary, the op-ed section can be called a repository for all sorts of COVID-related conspiracy theories, from government-critical anti-vaxxers and extreme libertarians, precisely because RT can hide behind the principle: "The statements, views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of RT". Up to today, RT's website has accumulated hundreds of pieces written by covid-dissidents that see the disease and the vaccination programme as the "health pass tyranny" of the globalist government.<sup>29</sup> The lockdown policies are portrayed as the way for governments to suppress freedom of speech. Some argue that legitimate worries about the efficiency of anti-COVID measures were being portrayed as wacky conspiracy theories by scientists and the media, in ways reminiscent of communistera psychological treatment of ideological opponents.<sup>30</sup>

The US presidential elections provided a brilliant opportunity for RT to air many allegations about the US political system, which was portrayed in disarray and vulnerable to flaws.31 RT implicated both of the main political parties in this hijacking of the democratic process, and the sentiment recurs in no uncertain terms throughout RT's op-eds, even those not about the elections. There is the idea that those in "the elite" or "the Establishment" "believe democracy has gone too far", and have "little genuine love for democracy" when it brings to power those with populist views with which they do not sympathise.<sup>32</sup>

### The elite say too much democracy is undemocratic, but they just want to stop the 'wrong sort of people' winning elections





Screenshot

For the most part, both candidates were represented as interchangeable defenders of a militaristic and persistent status quo, past their prime and driven by similar corporatist and fascistic tendencies; and their parties represent neither the interests of voters, nor the US as a whole.33 Articles sympathetic to Trump painted him as the victim of an all-encompassing establishment conspiracy. The Democratic Party was portrayed as being corrupt and dangerous.34 Leading Democrats were subject to character assassination, and many of RT's op-eds covered conspiracy theories related to Hunter Biden and his business dealings, even repeating Trump's words in referring unironically (and

without inverted commas) to "the Biden crime family". 35 As late as 9 November 2020 op-eds were referring in delegitimising tones to the "apparent victory" of Biden, as merely a return to the establishment's warmongering business as usual, the "Great Reset" of global capitalism and the "new pathologized totalitarianism". 36

#### What can be done?

Perhaps the biggest question for policy makers and experts is: what can be done with the conspiratorial narratives pushed by RT that decrease public safety and trust in expert knowledge?

First, RT might be a pioneer of some broadcasting tactics but it is not unique in its efforts to spread misinformation, and legislative measures on reporting falsehoods seem to be effective. These measures should be applied consistently and treat every media outlet equally. The marketincentivesforclickablecontentmean that policy responses must be addressed whole (multiplatform) towards the environment, rather than focussed on one actor within it (therefore, statements like "RT is a propaganda bullhorn" are not efficient and in turn legitimise many of RT's "underdog" claims). Such regulation must encompass statutory duties of broadcast media and social media platforms, a clarification of the responsibilities of content producers versus hosts, and crosssector collaboration, plus transnational intergovernmental coordination penalties for non-compliance.

Secondly, most conspiracy theories spread online and offline because people tend to overestimate their critical thinking abilities. A variety of media literacy programmes should target different social and age groups to foster understanding of the complexity of the digital and global communication environment.

Thirdly, media platforms like RT benefit from the conflicts within society – corruption, infringements committed by

political elites, lack of political transparency and socio-economic polarisation – and here lies the hardest part. Conspiracy theories will inevitably arise as part of the socio-economic context in every society, and there will always be the outlet who tries to promote such views for their own benefit. It is vital to spare too much criticism of such outlets and instead focus on the long-term goal to safeguard political and media institutions and protect citizens' capacity to productively engage with them.

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## Alexandra Yatsyk

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#### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing global challenges, including those that threaten to undermine democracy. At the initial phase of the pandemic many European governments acted incoherently, which made them vulnerable to criticism by their political opponents. The Russian state funded media outlet RT, formerly known as Russia Today, enthusiastically joined them. Its editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan readily admitted that she saw RT as an "information weapon" against the West that played a role similar to the Ministry of Defence.<sup>1</sup>

There is a consensus among major Western press and media, including American,<sup>2</sup> British,<sup>3</sup> German<sup>4</sup> and French,<sup>5</sup> that tend to view RT as the Kremlin's propagandistic tool specialising in spreading disinformation. COVID-19 provided RT with an excellent opportunity to exaggerate this public health contingency and portray Europe as being mired in a deepening crisis.

This chapter examines how RT covered the COVID-19 pandemic in France, Germany, the UK and Spain. For this purpose, I analysed English, French, German and Spanish versions of the RT website as well as the content of their

respective YouTube channels. I reviewed articles and video reports published from March 2020 to September 2021 containing the basic tag words – #Covid for the French and German RT websites and #CovidUK and #CovidSpain for English and Spanish ones respectively.<sup>6</sup>

## The "brave" RT World

RT, founded in 2005, broadcasts the Russian government's propaganda worldwide in the English, Arabic, Spanish, French and German languages. According to the Similarweb web analytics platform that compiles and analyses online traffic and website performance, the total number of visitors to rt.com reached 136.25 million in the month of August 2021. The views from Russia accounted for 46 percent (about 62.7 million visits) of the traffic. The number of views from France and Germany was quite modest - 4 and 8 percent or 5.6 and 10.9 million respectively. Similarweb does not provide detailed information on the countries with low traffic, which are aggregated, indicating that for the UK and Spain it was less than 2.2 percent each (or less than 3.1 million views) (see Chart 1).

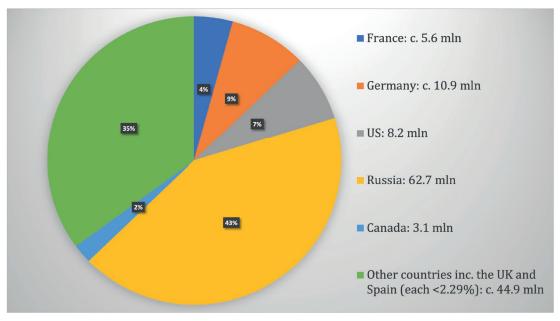


Chart 1: Internet traffic of rt.com in August 2021 (136.25 mln views). Source: Similarweb

According to Similarweb data, in August 2021, RT France's website attracted 3.8 million views from France, RT DE – 4.6 million, RT en Español – 2.6 million, and RT UK – less than 3.1 million (see the Table 1).

in this regard. Orttung and Nelson analyse a dataset of more than 70 thousand RT YouTube videos produced in 2015-2017 to confirm that RT's strategic interests focus on Arab, Spanish and Russian speakers.<sup>15</sup>

|                 | Total numbers of | Traffic by     | Average visit  | Pages     |
|-----------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------|
|                 | visits           | country (%)    | duration (min) | per visit |
| RT France       | 3,840,000        | France: 94.93  | 02:09          | 2.08      |
| RT DE           | 4,360,000        | Germany: 84.94 | 04:40          | 2.65      |
| RT UK*          | <3,120,000       | UK: <2.29      | n/a            | n/a       |
| RT en Español** | 2,678,672        | Spain: 13.34   | n/a            | n/a       |

Table 1: Visits to francais.rt.com, de.rt.com, rt.com\*, actualidad.rt.com\*\*.

Source: Similarweb.

The duration of an average visit to the French or German editions of the RT website does not exceed 5 minutes, which typically indicates a quick glance at online content. To compare, the average visit to the French mainstream daily newspaper *Le Monde* website lasts 11 minutes, according to Similarweb. The noticeable brevity of visits to the French and German editions raises a question about the possibility that the visits are generated by bots rather than people.

Margarita Simonyan regularly boasted of the growing popularity of RT across the globe,<sup>7</sup> including France,<sup>8</sup> Germany,<sup>9</sup> and the non-Western world.<sup>10</sup> In her tweet from 3 August 2021, she praised RT's YouTube account for reaching 73 million views, which, according to her, made it more popular than BBC, ABC and CNN.<sup>11</sup>

A number of investigations, including those by *The Daily Beast* in 2017<sup>12</sup> and Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny's team in 2020, as well as revelations by formerworkers of the Russian "troll farms", shed light on how RT inflates web traffic through Indian bots, Russian troll farms and even pornographic websites while enjoying significant financial support from the Russian state. European audiences do not seem to be RT's main target group

As Chart 1 shows, RT's website audience in France, UK, Germany and Spain consists of no more than 16 percent in total.

Comparison of RT's English and Spanish content in social media shows certain disparity as the former is more heavily skewed towards disinformation than the latter. Bush's analysis of RT Facebook pages in English and Spanish in 2020 demonstrates that RT in English is geared towards undermining lockdown measures in the US and Western Europe, spreading conspiracy theories criticising the Western vaccines while praising COVID-19 policies conducted by the Russian and Chinese governments. In contrast, Spanish RT's role as a purveyor of disinformation is quite limited (see Chart 2): to spread COVID-19-related disinformation, Moscow prefers to use Sputnik Mundo and News Front Spanish media platforms, rather than RT en Español.<sup>16</sup> Taking into account that the audience of Spanish RT's website is also numerically insignificant in Spain, it is very likely that the COVID-19 coverage by RT in Spain via YouTube or its website would follow this general trend.

<sup>\*</sup> Data is taken as the approximate number of visitors of rt.com from UK

<sup>\*\*</sup> Data is taken as the number of visitors of actualidad.rt.com from Spain

| Language | Disinfo on RT | Disinfo on Sputnik | Disinfo through other | Total |
|----------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------|
|          | (% of total)  | (% of total)       | channels (% of total) |       |
| Spanish  | 9 (9.5%)      | 28 (29.5%)         | 58 (61%)              | 95    |
| English  | 35 (21.6%)    | 35 (21.6%)         | 92 (56.8%)            | 162   |
| French   | 18 (28.6%)    | 27 (42.9%)         | 18 (28.6%)            | 63    |
| German   | 19 (30.6%)    | 33 (53.2%)         | 10 (16.1%)            | 62    |
| Russian  | 14 (2.1%)     | n/a                | 647 (97.9%)           | 661   |

Chart 2: Media channels used by the Russian government to spread disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Source: Daniel Bush, "Two Faces of Russian Information Operations", see Endnotes.

My analysis of the 20 most popular videos on the YouTube accounts of RT France, RT DE, RT UK and RT en Español shows that far more importance is assigned to the French and German audiences, as

measured by the view counts, number of comments and video production quality, which significantly outpace RT in UK and Spain (See Chart 3).

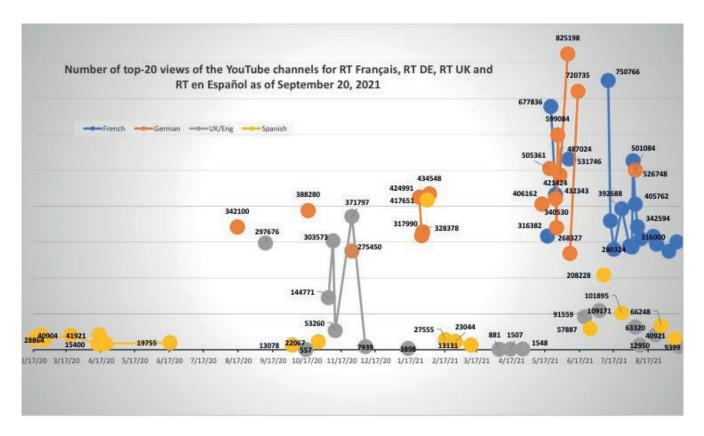


Chart 3: Number of views of the 20 most popular COVID-19-related videos on the YouTube channels of RT France, RT DE, RT UK and RT en Español as of 20 September 2021

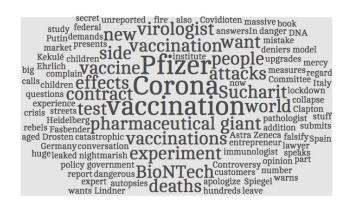
It should be noted that top 20 videos mostly correspond with specific events, which implies a strong interest in developing certain topics. For instance, a wave of anti-government demonstrations swept across France throughout the summer of 2021, as thousands protested against the compulsory vaccination for certain occupations and the introduction of a vaccine certificate (health pass).<sup>17</sup> This theme was repeatedly exploited in RT's French coverage, as reflected in the keyword cloud derived from the top 20 COVID-19-related videos<sup>18</sup> (Picture 1).



Picture 1: The keyword cloud based on the top 20 COVID-19-related videos of RT France on YouTube on 20 September 2021

The top 20 COVID-19-related videos on RT DE's YouTube channel refer to the first part of 2021 and focus on such issues as opposition to mass vaccination and conspiracy theories (Picture 2). The number of views and comments accompanying videos by RT DE and RT France are comparable as they are in the range between 500 and 900 thousand visits. RT DE, however, is a leader in this category with an interview by the conspiracy theorist Sucharit Bhakdi, which was viewed more than 2 million times.

The top 20 COVID-19-themed videos on RT UK's YouTube channel cover the end of 2020 and focus on epidemiological restrictions and anti-lockdown protests (see Picture 3). The most watched video tells the story of a woman who refused to close her business during lockdown and was fined £27,000 (approximately €30,280) by the authorities for this (the video has had more than 370 thousand views).



Picture 2: The keyword cloud based on the top 20 COVID-19-related videos of RT DE on YouTube on 20 September 2021

The top 20 videos from Spanish RT differ from those produced for British, German and especially French audiences. They are less watched and elicit fewer comments. Each accrues less than 65 thousand views and 800 comments, with the average number of comments reaching 380. For comparison, the average number of comments for top 20 videos for UK is around 908; France – 3,000, and Germany – 4,000.



Picture 3: The keyword cloud based on the top 20 COVID-19-related videos of RT UK on YouTube on 20 September 2021

The most popular COVID-19-related video report produced by RT en Español is about the residents of a nursing home, who died from COVID-19 despite receiving their first vaccination dose. It stands out because it accrued 418 thousand views and generated 3,100 comments, which could have been artificially inflated by bots. As for the rest of the top 20 videos, the COVID-19 coverage of RT en Español on YouTube focuses on the same topics as the other "fellow" RT editions, but does so in a less aggressive manner (Picture 4).



Picture 4: The keyword cloud based on the top 20 COVID-19-related videos of RT en Español on YouTube on 20 September 2021

COVID-19 coverage on the website of RT en Español tends to be more neutral and less critical. While both French and German RT websites fiercely criticise their respective national governments, blaming them for purportedly hiding the medical "truth" from the general public, accusing the Western vaccine manufacturers of price fixing expressing solidarity with far-right antivaxxers, reports of RT en Español tend to sympathise with left-wing forces rather than right-wing nationalists.

# **Anti-Health Pass Protests in France**

UK, Germany, and especially France and Spain - all experienced considerable human and financial losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic and were engulfed by social unrest. France witnessed a series of large-scale protests throughout the summer of 2021, with the turnout at rallies against the mandatory vaccination and introduction of the "health pass" 19 consistently reaching 200 thousand across the country.<sup>20</sup> Similar protests took place in Germany, Spain and the UK, yet none of them were so sustained as in France. Even though relative to France's population of 67 million, the turnout at those protests was insignificant, it did show that they were driven by a committed and vocal minority.<sup>21</sup>

French public opinion surveys

indicate that the vocal minority that persistently opposes the government's anti-COVID-19 measures is very heterogenous, as it incorporates representatives from both ends of the political spectrum.<sup>22</sup> For instance, it includes supporters of French left-wing politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon and members of his party, France Unbowed (La France Insoumise), as well as Florian Philippot, a Member of the European Parliament and former key figure in Marine Le Pen's far-right party National Rally (Rassemblement national, RN), who now presides over his own party, The Patriots (Les Patriotes). Some members of the Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes) movement also form a part of this grand anti-vaxxer coalition.



Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Source: Wikimedia Commons

RT France extensively covered those protests. The overall tonality of the coverage tended to present the protesters as victims of discrimination by the French authorities. In this context, the main target of RT France criticism became the introduction of the health pass, which was intended to coerce the public to vaccinate. Furthermore, RT France endeavoured to portray opposition to the health pass as being truly national and representing a wide range of social groups in France.

This effect is created through (a) in-depth coverage of all anti-vaxxer protests,<sup>23</sup> (b) personal accounts provided by seemingly "ordinary people", including "experts" and "professionals", such as

doctors,<sup>24</sup> scientists, lawyers,<sup>25</sup> journalists, politicians,26 and civil activists,27 most of whom, in fact, come from the political fringes of French society, and human interest stories about individual entrepreneurs,<sup>28</sup> municipal workers,<sup>29</sup> artists, NGO representatives, trade union activists, 30 and simply parents, who are not members of the anti-vaxxer movement, but who criticise the government's anti-COVID-19 measures. To present France as a country in crisis caused by corrupt and incompetent government, RT France has employed intentionally vitriolic rhetoric replete with highly emotionally charged and negative word combinations such as "Macron – dictatorship", "Macron – health coup",32 "Abuse of power - health pass",33 "Macron - country - fire and blood",34 "health pass – alert – defender of rights", 35 "Castex – killing France", 36 etc.

The sombre picture of social instability in France painted by RT France was further aggravated by its reporting on incidents of vandalism targeting vaccination centres,<sup>37</sup> examples of hate speech in banners carried during antivaxxer protests (such as racist and anti-Semitic symbols,<sup>38</sup> including the use of a yellow star<sup>39</sup> and a billboard depicting Macron as Hitler<sup>40</sup>).

The talking heads often invited by RT France to comment on anti-vaxxer protests usually come from the far right of French politics. Apart from the above-mentioned Florian Philippot, the most prominent far-right representatives included, in particular, Jean-Marc Chipot, a spokesperson for another far-right party Debout la France; Gilbert Collard, a MEP then representing the RN; and Maxime Thiébaut, a co-founder of the far-right Patriots party, who wrote a book about the Gilets Jaunes movement in 2019.

In addition, RT France quotes scientists and doctors, who criticise the government's COVID-19 measures. Chief among them in RT France coverage is the controversial French physician and microbiologist specialising in infectious



Didier Raoult. Source: Wikimedia Commons

diseases, Dr. Didier Raoult, who proposed an alternative COVID-19 treatment. RT France depicts Raoult as a French national hero who fought valiantly against the French state, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and transnational pharmaceutical corporations, who was defeated in the end but has not compromised. Disproportionate attention paid to Raoult is evident in the fact that the RT France website published 160 articles about him in 2020-21, lionising him as a prominent professional and a scientist, as well as a rebel and an "ordinary" man, who fought the corrupt global elite by allegedly proposing a cheaper and more effective treatment to save people's lives.<sup>41</sup> To demonstrate Raoult's popularity among "ordinary people", RT France collected testimonies from medical professionals,42 politicians,43 and random demonstrators.44 This was augmented by the collection of testimonials from other countries,<sup>45</sup> where his treatment method was used, and from individuals, who have purportedly recovered from COVID-19 by applying it.46 It is not surprising then that the French mainstream newspaper Le Monde called Raoult a central figure for French conspiracy theorists.<sup>47</sup> Although Raoult never gave an interview to RT France, the exploitation of controversy surrounding his name represents a good template of how RT produces populist anti-government narratives, with certain similarities found in its COVID-19 coverage in Germany and UK.

# Vaccine sceptics and conspiracy theorists in Germany

Similar to France, Germany experienced large-scale protests against COVID-19-related lockdowns. mass vaccination and introduction of the health pass. Starting from June 2020, the majority of these rallies were organised by the German grassroots anti-lockdown movement Querdenken. Originally formed in Stuttgart, Querdenken, just like the Gilets Jaunes in France, represents a heterogeneous movement,48 which reflected in the diversity of demonstrators at their rallies, including the members of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), the representatives of the loose alliance of ultra-right groups Reichsbürger (Citizens of the Reich), who reject the legitimacy of the modern German state, the conspiracy theorist and vegan chef Attila Hildmann and his followers, as well as environmental and left-wing activists, 49 families with children and retired persons. As the movement grew, Querdenken rallies attracted extremist groups<sup>50</sup> and German followers of the American far-right conspiracy theory and movement QAnon.51

From April 2021, Germany's domestic intelligence agency Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) began to monitor some of the Querdenken groups as they are being suspected of delegitimising the state and inciting extremist activities that "go beyond mere mobilisation to protest against the state's coronavirus protection measures".<sup>52</sup> In summer 2021, the authorities did not allow several Querdenken rallies because

the demonstrators refused to wear face masks. The AfD called the government's decision hypocritical and politically motivated.<sup>53</sup>

Social media platforms appear to be the main information and mobilisation tool of the movement, especially the cloud-based instant messaging system Telegram. Many Querdenken supporters switched to using Telegram after both Facebook<sup>54</sup> and Twitter<sup>55</sup> started banning them regularly.



A demonstration of the Reichsbuerger by the Reichstag in Berlin. Source: Wikimedia Commons

The use of Telegram by Querdenken members is noteworthy because it is also heavily utilised by both RT DE and Sputnik to spread fake news, as regularly identified by disinformation watchdogs. Telegram stands out from the other social media platforms because it is characterised by the lax approach towards content moderation, while its setup entails no restrictions for the number of followers. These features exploited by Kremlin outlets to cooperate with "alternative" (mostly farright) German media for cross-referencing, gaining mutual recognition and "extending their reach" to those groups, who are sceptical towards the government's anti-COVID-19 measures but who do not belong to radical forces.<sup>56</sup>

RT DE's editorial policy was summed in a remarkable post on Twitter on 20 May 2017, according to which RT DE admitted to reporting on those who "come up with" conspiracy theories, in order to "give people the chance to make up their own mind".<sup>57</sup>

It is not surprising then that German and British disinformation experts consider Germany as one of top targets of Russian disinformation.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast to RT France, which has tended to mostly concentrate its critical coverage on the introduction of the health pass, RT DE presented the issue of mass vaccination as impinging on basic human rights. This was done by the promotion of the Querdenken agenda, including antivaccine sentiments, and undergirding them conspiracy theories. With this purpose, RT DE employed more self-proclaimed "experts" in medicine, law and politics from the fringes than RT France.

Their collective criticism of the government's COVID-19 restrictions centred on the respect for democracy and human rights. To strengthen this appeal, RT DE gave the floor to politicians from both left and right who refused to vaccinate and justified doing so by their "personal right to freedom". In the words of the Deputy Minister-President of Bavaria Hubert Aiwanger, who is the Chairman of the centre-right Free Voters (Freie Wähler) party and who remains unvaccinated while his opinions are often quoted by RT DE, the right to decide to get vaccinated or not "has nothing to do with shamanism or



Hubert Aiwanger. Source: Wikimedia Commons

lateral thinking".<sup>59</sup> In Aiwanger's view, it is more about "a personal right to freedom" rather than the discussion between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated, which could quickly descend into a debate about apartheid.<sup>60</sup> Such targeted use of certain keywords – "human rights", "lateral thinking", "unvaccinated", and "apartheid" – is done on purpose to create a favourable online impression of Querdenken.

There are other examples of "self-explanatory" combinations of keywords in the titles that RT DE used in its COVID-19 coverage, including "lockdown abolishes fundamental rights to the inviolability of home and body",<sup>61</sup> "pseudo-pandemic",<sup>62</sup> "an incredibly great crime",<sup>63</sup> "brainwashing",<sup>64</sup> "covidiots", "abuse of power",<sup>65</sup> etc. Again, in contrast to RT France, RT DE published critics of German authorities, who come politically from both Left and Right.<sup>66</sup>

RT DE's COVID-19 coverage also includes news from the so-called "Corona Committee", an independent entity launched in 2020 by German lawyers, to assess the legal merits of various governments' anti-COVID-19 measures. Since 2020, the Corona Committee held more than 70 meetings to discuss COVID-19 restrictions, vaccine safety, reliability of PCR tests, vaccination of children, home care for the elderly and other issues. Various supporters of far-right agendas also participated in these meetings.

The Committee believes that COVID-19 is a mild respiratory disease. similar to influenza in terms of basic symptoms and the percentage of lethal cases. According to the Committee, the authorities overreacted bv imposing lockdowns that caused collateral economic damage, increased unemployment, undermined collective mental health and abrogated fundamental human rights. Moreover, the Committee declared that COVID-19 vaccines were the "first mass genetic engineering experiment on humans" with unforeseen and understudied side-effects.<sup>67</sup> The views expressed on the Committee's official website closely resonate with the opinions of Wolfgang Wodarg,<sup>68</sup> a German internist, pulmonologist, and a former member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands), who became widely known for his controversial statements on possible harmful effects of COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>69</sup>

Along with other anti-vaxxers, 70 who regularly question COVID-19 vaccines<sup>71</sup> and express doubts about the origins of COVID-19,72 RT DE used statements made by Dr. Matthias Schrappe, who became well-known for his insinuations,73 such as accusing the German authorities of manipulating medical data.74 In addition, RT DE solicited opinions from Sucharit Bhakdi, a retired Thai-German microbiologist and a prominent QAnon conspiracy theorist, who is also known for espousing anti-Semitic views.<sup>75</sup> Bhakdi claimed that the mass vaccination represented a "huge experiment", and he argued that the entire pandemic was fake.<sup>76</sup> RT DE's interview with Bhakdi was the most watched COVID-19-related video on their YouTube channel. accruing more than two million views. before YouTube deleted RT DE's channel on 28 September 2021, for spreading misinformation about COVID-19.77

# "Fight for Freedom of expression" in the UK

Whereas RT DE mostly focused on pseudoscientific and conspiracy theories of COVID-19, RT UK posited that epidemiological restrictions, mandatory vaccination and the "vaccine passport" (or "health pass") were parts of a global plot by politicians, IT-, health- and media organisations to normalise the public health emergency in order to establish closer control over the population.

In support of this warped vision, RT UK pointed out that the World Economic Forum announced a global partnership to develop vaccines when the number of

confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide "was still in the hundreds".<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, RT UK falsely claimed that the introduction of the "health passport" app benefitted the financial interests of IT giants. According to RT UK, Microsoft, Palantir, Facebook, Netflix and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance were all members of this plot.<sup>79</sup>

Regularly featured on RT columnist Neil Clark in one of his op-eds vilified ex-British PM Tony Blair by ascribing to him a central role in orchestrating the government's campaign to purportedly restrict civil liberties under the pretext of public health, which he compared to the war on terror.80 In another missive, the same Clark asserted that COVID-19 denialists were persecuted by the British authorities and compared this practice to the witch hunts in seventeenth century England. According to Clark, the cohort of "witches" today include the anti-war Left, supporters of right-wing politician and Brexit champion Nigel Farage, Trumpists, Corbynistas, Russian media, renowned English conspiracy theorist David Icke, "5G cranks", and "Covid denialists".81

In Clark's view, the latter represent scapegoats for the current regime, which persecute them for their refusal to wear masks and to obtain a vaccine passport.



David Icke. Source: Wikimedia Commons

According to Clark, this reflects the British government's hypocrisy, since it pursues the same public health policies to contain COVID-19 that violate the fundamental right to freedom<sup>82</sup> as does authoritarian China, whose human rights policy UK harshly criticises.<sup>83</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed in the op-ed written by another British author, Jani Allan, who warned of "Covid apartheid" against those who refused to get vaccinated.<sup>84</sup> Apart from criticism of the COVID-19 measures imposed by the British government, RT UK accused the main social media platforms of discriminating against COVID dissidents.<sup>85</sup>

One batch of such stories was about health professionals who were banned by social media platforms for spreading questionable data on the coronavirus. For instance, Malcolm Hendrick, a doctor working for UK's National Health Service, complained that Facebook censored his posts after he expressed doubts in the officially reported COVID-19 mortality rate. RT UK's columnists contended that to hide divergent views in the context of COVID-19 debates and to repeat the talking points of the big pharmaceutical companies constituted a "shoddy journalism" and even a crime against billions of people. Relations

To further develop this argument, the outlet pointed out that it was social media that facilitated the proliferation of conspiracy theories when targeting public figures speaking against lockdowns and other "Covid-orthodoxies". Moreover, in view of RT UK, "being right" and being against masks and vaccine passports did not automatically imply being a marginal person. Sweden's COVID-19 policy was then brought up as an example, since it also did not support compulsory mask-wearing and vaccination. 90

Russian state-controlled media extensively applied this rhetoric of "empty signifiers" in its narrative, when the concepts of one semantic system (for instance, the meanings of "human rights", "freedom", "conspiracy theories" as it they are understood from the perspective of

the democracy paradigm) are filled with reversed or "hybrid" meanings. A good example of this is RT UK's depiction of two key figures on the British conspiracy theory scene: Piers Corbyn, the notorious brother of former UK Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn, and David Icke, a former TV sports commentator.

Piers Corbyn is one of the faces of the anti-lockdown and anti-vax protests<sup>91</sup> that took place across Britain in 2020-2021.92 An intelligent, peaceful-looking man and former candidate in the 2021 London mayoral election, Corbyn is known for his support of 5G conspiracy theories and arguments against Bill Gates, who in Corbyn's view, spearheaded compulsory vaccination to control women's fertility.93 In its articles, RT UK mentioned Corbyn a "conspiracy theorist", "sceptic", "controversial campaigner",94 and "antiwar supporter".95 RT UK consistently emphasised the peaceful nature of his protests, as well as the peacefulness of the protests against COVID-19 measures in the UK in general, while accusing the government of a "crime against humanity" and threatening doctors critical of the measures with new "Nuremberg trials".96

David Icke, a former football player and TV presenter, is another widely known British conspiracy theorist, who appeared for the first time on RT UK in 2013. Icke denies the Holocaust, makes anti-Semitic statements and believes that the world is ruled by a race of alien lizards called "reptilians".97 According to him, COVID-19 simply does not exist, but was rather invented by a global "Jewish cult" and transmitted through the 5G network and vaccines. As the British Centre for Countering Digital Hate reported, Icke's video in which he laid out his views on conspiracy COVID-19 theories viewed over 30 million times on social media.98 Because Icke was egregiously spreading disinformation on COVID-19, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube suspended his accounts.99

RT UK predictably reacted to Icke's

ban from Facebook and YouTube in May 2020 and November 2020 respectively, calling it "an assault on free speech and free expression which needs to be forcefully resisted", as otherwise it would result in "sleepwalking towards dictatorship". 100

Ininterview with RTUK, Icke declared that flagship American IT companies were "out to silence" him.101 The outlet then further developed this theme by calling media censorship of alternative opinions regarding COVID-19 unacceptable. soften Icke's image, in May 2020, RT UK portrayed him as a "charming, maddening and sad" person and a loving father, whom social media unjustly labelled as a monster.<sup>102</sup> This example sheds light on RT UK's propaganda tactics, which is based on mixing half-truths with truths: on the one hand, the outlet did not deny the dubious nature of Icke's conspiracy theories, but on the other hand, it downplayed their negative social influence.

### RT en Español: criticism of the far right

RT en Español provided coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in a manner different from other RT channels in Europe. Its coverage did not feature representatives of far-right political forces or conspiracy theorists. The only thematic commonality that can be found between RT en Español and its European brethren is related to the coverage of the Russian government's vaccine policy and promotion of the Sputnik V vaccine. Even on this count, whereas the other three RT channels broadcast this narrative similarly to each other, RT en Español steered clear of producing obvious disinformation.

On RT en Español, commentators mostly criticised the COVID-19 measures from a left-wing perspective, pointing out, for instance, that the introduction of the health pass would not increase the mass

vaccination rate nationwide, 103 and that neither Pfizer-BioNTech nor AstraZeneca vaccines would address the vaccine deficit in Spain.<sup>104</sup> One of the personalities frequently featured on RT en Español to comment on COVID-19-related matters was José Antonio Edigo, a left-wing sociologist and a president of the communist organisation "Volver a Marx", widely known for espousing "anti-imperialist" and anti-Western views. Unlike his French and German counterparts, who blamed their national governments for "tyranny" and even "dictatorship", Edigo took an intermediary position between Russia and the West. He recognised the importance of WHO's policy recommendations but also reproached the West for prioritising its ideological interests over cooperation with the Russian authorities to produce a vaccine.105

In its coverage of Spanish politics, RT en Español, staving true to its leftwing credentials, concentrated much of its criticism on the conservative political forces that experienced a comeback in the Madrid regional elections in 2021. Daniel Bernabé, one of the leading columnists of RT en Español, argued that representatives of far-right political forces tended to radicalise Spanish politics, including anti-COVID-19 policies. For Bernabé, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, one of the key figures of the conservative People's Partv (Partido Popular) who had been the President of the Community of Madrid since 2019 and during the pandemic, was "playing at a very shameless 'Trumpism'". 106

The slogan "Communism or Freedom", used by Díaz Ayuso in her election campaign, Bernabé wrote, "turned a regional election into a plebiscite on the management of Pedro Sánchez as head of the Government of Spain. For their part, the forces of the Left used the slogan 'Fascism or Democracy' to warn of the danger of letting the extreme right into the institutions". <sup>107</sup>

Before the pandemic, RT en Español consistently criticised the far-right Vox party, 108 but when the pandemic struck this



Isabel Díaz Ayuso. Source: Wikimedia Commons

criticism intensified, given the anti-vax and anti-lockdown attitudes promoted by Vox's supporters.<sup>109</sup> Yet another line of criticism of RT en Español focused on how COVID-19 was handled by the local governments in the regions of Spain known for harbouring separatist sentiments. In several articles, the outlet expressed concerns about the potential "mismanagement" of the pandemic by the Catalan and Valencian governments,110 but without falling into their typically severe bashing. RT en Español discussed the Western vaccine policy in a similarly "soft" manner, as it focused on how to address the side effects accompanying the Western vaccines rather than openly promoting Sputnik V.111

# Sputnik V vs. the Western vaccine mismanagement

Numerous watchdogs regularly documented COVID-19-related disinformation that was circulated by RT.<sup>112</sup> During 2021, French, German and British editions of RT systematically "informed" their audiences about dangerous "sideeffects" of Western vaccines, including cases of kidney problems, lethal allergic reactions, <sup>113</sup> menstrual disorders, <sup>114</sup> heart muscle inflammation among young men, <sup>115</sup>

myocarditis,<sup>116</sup> blood clots,<sup>117</sup> cerebral vein thrombosis,<sup>118</sup> as well as many deaths caused by vaccination with Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Moderna.<sup>119</sup> In addition to harshly criticising the Western vaccines, RT also blamed the European Union's vaccine policy for its purported drawbacks.<sup>120</sup>

Meanwhile, RT dedicated a significant amount of broadcast time to promoting the Sputnik V vaccine. It should be recalled that Russia was the first country to register a COVID-19 vaccine in August 2020. However, due to multiple discrepancies repeatedly discovered in the scientific documentation and laboratory results accompanying Sputnik V, the Russian vaccine was not registered by key international regulatory bodies, including the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the WHO.<sup>121</sup>

Naturally, RT strove to explain Sputnik V's failed registration as stemming from political reasons, 122 Russophobia, 123 "imperial hegemonism", 124 and "vaxx imperialism".125 The "vaccine war" against Russian Sputnik V,126 RT argued, was due to Western political corruption<sup>127</sup> and a plot by the "Big Pharma" group 128 in collusion with EU governments to impose restrictions targeting the Russian vaccine across all EU member states, including Greece,<sup>129</sup> Hungary, Slovakia, 130 Italy.<sup>131</sup> To demonstrate the international credibility of Sputnik V, RT referred to Brazil<sup>132</sup> and Argentina, <sup>133</sup> where there was positive feedback from its use in respective national vaccination campaigns. RT actively solicited endorsements for Sputnik V from high-level international officials, including UN Secretary General António Guterres and EU Commissioner Thierry Breton,134 as well as the professional medical community represented by the highly reputable scientific journals *Nature*<sup>135</sup> and The Lancet. 136

The publication of an article praising Sputnik V in *The Lancet* in February 2021<sup>137</sup> marked a watershed moment, as it gave the Russian vaccine international legitimacy. However, several months later, another

article was published in *The Lancet*, in which a group of European researchers found data discrepancies in the third phase of Sputnik V's trial. As for Argentina, even though it used Russia's Sputnik V in its national vaccination campaign and commenced its use despite the above discoveries, RT omitted reporting on tensions between the two countries due to Russia's failure to honour its Sputnik V supply commitments to Argentina, which threatened to break the contract. 49

RT's campaign aimed at promoting Sputnik V and tarnishing Western vaccine policies demonstrate how Russian statesponsored media mixed factually accurate data points with disinformation to spread its messages.<sup>140</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of RT's COVID-19 coverage in France, Germany, the UK and Spain reveals common techniques for producing and spreading disinformation. At the same time, French, German and English coverage has yet another common characteristic, as it largely repeats the main themes promoted by respective national far-right movements and parties. In this regard Spanish RT stands out, as its criticism of government tends to be more moderate and it leans towards a more leftist agenda.

RT's key strategies in its COVID-19 coverage have included the following: mixing factually accurate information with fake news to complicate any potential rebuttals, featuring representatives of local marginal communities to criticize national governments for their public health policies, and bestowing on these representatives an "expert" status to increase their credibility in front of an uninformed public.

All four RT channels endeavour to discredit the Western vaccines and promote the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. However, there are important differences between them as well. For instance, French

coverage was mostly focused on COVID-19 protests, including public backlash against the introduction of lockdowns, mandatory vaccinations and health passes. German RT specialised in spreading fake news and conspiracy theories to such an extent that this led to the banning of its YouTube channel.

RT UK also prioritised spreading conspiracy theories, albeit not to the same degree as its German counterpart. This discrepancy probably has to do with the German audience being more exposed to such indoctrination, since a sizeable segment of it consists of supporters of the ultra-right AfD party. This also helps explain the fact that Germany hosts one of the largest communities of right-wing QAnon conspiracy theory believers in Europe.

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The **Centre for Democratic Integrity** (CDI) is a non-profit association founded in 2020 by Anton Shekhovtsov and Andreas Umland in Vienna, Austria. The aim of the CDI is to monitor and analyse attempts of authoritarian regimes based on illiberal value systems to wield malign influence in Europe. More information on the CDI can be found here: https://democratic-integrity.eu.

The CDI sees malign influence in the European context as directly or indirectly subverting and undermining European values and democratic institutions. The CDI follows the Treaty on European Union in understanding European values that are the following: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Democratic institutions are guardians of European values, and among them the CDI highlights:

- representative political parties that aggregate, organise and articulate citizens'
  political demands, translate these demands into policy proposals, engage citizens
  in the democratic process, provide the basis for coordinated legislative activity, and
  advance government accountability;
- free and fair elections in which voters should be able to form opinions independently and free of violence or threats of violence, compulsion, or manipulative interference of any kind;
- an impartial justice system free of discrimination or favouritism;
- free, independent and pluralistic media that provide objective and accurate reporting, guarantee access to diverse views and meaningful opinions, monitor public officials, foster democratic debate, and encourage active involvement of citizens in political and social life;
- a robust civil society that holds public institutions accountable on issues of democracy and human rights, helps preserve democratic vibrancy, presents opportunities for collective action, builds community cohesion, and helps citizens articulate their interests and demands.





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