The Weaponization of Postmodernism: Russia's New War with Europe

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Abstract

The term 'information war' (IW) first came to public consciousness following the bizarre set of events surrounding Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. Since then, despite significant popular and academic interest in the topic, the nature of its deployment and the set of motivations behind it remain poorly understood. This paper seeks to address this. In it I argue that the Russian IW programme is best understood as an attempt to weaponize postmodernism. By this I intend not the aggressive advocacy of a set of intellectual postulates, but the promotion of a psychological weariness or scepticism that resembles what we might call the postmodern condition. Its aim, I argue, is to aid in the establishment of a multipolar international order, one that insulates the Putin regime against the spread of ideas disruptive to its rule at home.

Keywords: Russia, Putin, European Union, information warfare, RT

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'Previously, there was artillery preparation before an attack. Now, it's informational preparation.' [1]

— *Dmitry Kiselev, Russian journalist and head of Rossiya Segodnya*

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2014 shook the world, but not right away. For the first few days the event was shrouded in mystery, confusion and intrigue. 'Little green men', as they were being called, were appearing all over the Crimean peninsula, dressed in what appeared to be Russian military uniforms but bearing no insignia. The Western media seemed pretty sure these were Russian soldiers but Vladimir Putin, Russia's President, denied it: 'the post-soviet space is full of such uniforms' he told reporters, 'and anyone could have bought them' (Dougherty 2014: p. 3). In the interests of fair and balanced reporting the claims of the President and his officials were picked up in the Western press, often presented equally alongside claims to the contrary. Two days after the invasion began, for instance, a report from the Associated Press stated that 'Ukraine's mission to the United Nations is claiming…16,000 Russian troops have been deployed in the strategic Crimea region, while Russia's UN ambassador told the council, Monday that Ukraine's fugitive president requested troops' (3 March 2014). Meanwhile, Russian media stations,

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[1] Cited in Dougherty, J. (2014), 'Everyone Lies: the Ukraine conflict and Russia's media transformation', p. 2

including its international broadcasting network RT (Russia Today until 2009) were busy at work suggesting their own theories about this mysterious force in the region and attacking the credibility of the Western press. A report from 4 March 2014, three days after the invasion began, complains 'the media many trust described in hysterical tones how the Autonomous Republic of Crimea was under a full-scale Russian Invasion' before insisting no such invasion has in fact taken place (*RT*). The effect of all this informational dissonance in Europe was paralysis, and this, I want to suggest, is precisely what was intended.

Part I: Multipolarity and the Anxieties of the Putin Regime

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought into focus a conflict between Russia and the EU that had been boiling beneath the surface of European public consciousness for some time in what Richard Sakwa calls a 'cold peace' (Sakwa 2013). The term 'cold peace' refers to a situation in which the underlying tensions and conflicts characteristic of a cold war are present, but where these conditions, and the strategies that go along with them, are concealed under the rhetoric of peace (Sakwa 2013, p. 206). Sakwa argues that the present tensions between Russia and the EU have their roots in a fundamental conflict in the way the two parties view the post-Cold-War international environment. The European assumption is that the end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a liberal consensus. Within the context of these assumptions, the EU's security model,[2] based on the spread of its values and norms of good government, and of course military support from NATO, is or should be uncontentious. Respect for human rights, revulsion at oppression and corruption—these are assumed to be

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[2] As stated in the European Council's 'European Security Strategy': 'The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states. Spreading good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights are the best means of strengthening the international order.'

universal, and at a basic level this assumption divides the world in the eyes of European policy makers into 'good' liberals, and 'bad' authoritarians.

From the Russian perspective, however, 'The existing system… is considered to embody a fundamental asymmetry: the extension of a system devised for one purpose—to contain the USSR and to advance the norms of the Western alliance system—into a new era and new territories, a temporal and spatial extension that that generates tension rather than extending security' (Sakwa 2013: p. 221). Against the liberal universalism assumed by Europe and the US 'Russia follows a policy aimed at creating a stable and sustainable system of international relations based on… principles of equality, mutual respect and non-interference in [the] internal affairs of states' (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2013). The new vision Russia has for the international environment is referred to as 'multipolarity' in the literature, and it is at the heart of Russia's Russian foreign policy thinking (Ziegler 2018: p. 133). At its centre is a call for the respect for difference. It advocates a new system of international relations centred on the strengthening of national sovereignties by means of a global adoption of cultural relativism, in place of the current unipolar and universalist liberal model.

One way of understanding its claims is by drawing a comparison with the politics of identity at the domestic level. In contrast to the stress laid by traditional liberal politics on the essential sameness of its citizens in moral and political terms, the politics of identity puts its emphasis on their differences and often involves 'the self-conscious assertion of… marginalized identity against the dominant discourse' (Butler 2002: p. 57). While laws and policies designed to fit everyone might suit the majority culture by whom they have been crafted, and on whom they have been modeled, this way of going about things is often less appealing to minorities. The aim of the politics of identity is to counter these homogenizing tendencies by asserting the political significance of difference, advocating social inclusion and acceptance over integration.

At the international level Russia casts itself in the role of the minority, marginalized and misunderstood by the spread of European and American values at the heart of globalization. According to its rhetoric it wants true equality, not the type currently on offer; it wants to decide for itself what it values, how it organizes its political life, and how it treats its citizens. Above all it wants respect and it wants it on its own terms, to be recognized and accepted in its difference (Forsberg at al 2014: p. 266). In these respects the analogy with identity politics is rather striking.

Motivations for Multipolarity

If this gives us a rough idea of what the doctrine of multipolarity entails, it certainly does not provide the complete picture. A more complete understanding requires a fuller picture of the motivations that stand behind it. Here I want to address two perspectives on this question. The first, which I will call the 'relativist' interpretation, sees calls for multipolarity as the response to the threat of Western cultural and economic imperialism. Representatives of this perspective, like Hiski Haukkala (2015), argue that 'the EU has sought to lock Russia into… highly institutionalized, indeed post-sovereign, arrangements with a view of creating an essentially unipolar Europe based on the EU's norms and values' (p. 25). Against this invasiveness Russia's claim to independence and calls for 'equality' and 'non-intervention' are perfectly reasonable. The second interpretation grounds multipolarity in the self-interest of the Putin regime. I will call this the 'realist' interpretation. Representatives of this view, like Peter Pomerantsev and James Sherr, argue that only within a global system tolerant of different and often-conflicting value-systems can a regime like Putin's, based on corruption and intimidation, protect itself from the destabilizing influences of Western information and values. In the following section I will examine each of these perspectives in turn.

Motivations for Multipolarity: The Relativist Interpretation

One particularly important advocate of the relativist position is the Russian philosopher and political thinker Alexander Dugin. In an interview he gave with TVO

in early 2015, he argues for a world in which cultural differences are respected and democracy is allowed to flourish in a variety of different ways. His claims for difference and plurality are based, he says, on his rejection of the widely held European notion of a universal human nature. The Russian 'understanding of human nature is [simply] incompatible with liberalism', he says, and because of this, Western attempts to impose its values on other cultures is 'messianic', 'imperialist' and 'racist', and a function of its 'incapacity…to understand the "positive other"' (*The Agenda with Steve Pakin* 2015). Dugin also importantly associates his views with those of the Russian Federation as a whole: 'Russia now is the vanguard of the rest that contests, that challenges, this universalism this messianism of the West' (*The Agenda with Steve Pakin* 2015).

Dugin is important for the impact his thinking has had on Russian officials and decision-makers, especially concerning foreign affairs (Shlapentohk 2007: p. 215). His influence stems from the resonance of his ideas with a new Russian elite obsessed with the re-emergence of Russia as a great power, and from his proximity to the regime. In 1999 he gave lectures at the school responsible for training future members of the security services, the FSB, and by 2005 his doctrines had found their way into the mouth of the President himself, during his national address (Shlapentohk 2007: p. 218-9). Moreover, a number of Russia's most contentious projects, including the Eurasian Union, Russia's support for Iran, its dissemination of anti-Western messages, and its paranoia that the West is plotting the disintegration of Russia, can all be found in Dugin's writings (Shlapentohk 2007).

There is little reason to doubt Dugin's sincerity in advocating the relativist position nor the appeal of his conclusions among the Russian elite. But the question is whether the reasons he gives for those conclusions are the same as those motivating Russian policy. And it is clear they are not. In the fist place, as Shlapentohk notes, Dugin has become increasingly disenchanted with Putin (2007: p. 229). As time has passed the latter's policies have drifted further and further from the tenants of Dugin's thought, exposing a distance seen so often in history between theorist and statesman. More

telling has been Dugin's downfall, culminating in his 2014 dismissal as the head of the sociology department at Moscow State University (March 2018: p. 85). Though Dugin's form of 'civilizational nationalism' proved useful for a while, especially in the lead-up to the 'Five-Day-War' with Georgia, Putin and Medvedev were quick to realize the dangers of letting nationalist fervour get out of control and he was dumped (March 2018: p. 90). In retrospect the thinker some commentators took to calling 'Putin's brain' (Barbashin and Thoburn 2014) appears to have been much more a mere tool of the regime than its guru. We should thus be careful not to conclude too much from thinkers like Dugin, widespread though their influence might appear to be; as Dugin's recent career makes clear, they don't often have the sway a politician's rhetoric might imply.

More to the point, however, is the fact that the relativists' neo-imperial claims simply fail to stand up. Calls for modernization, economic and political, have been a perennial feature in Russia's development since Peter the Great, as Russia's historically mimetic relationship with Europe can attest to; and more often than not these calls emanate from within. As Neumann argues,

> as long as some Russians see the adoption of some variant of [Western] models as a question of making their state able to compete in the international system… [the charge of neo-imperialism] remains shallow and gratuitous. (Neumann 1996: p. 207)

The demands of international economic and military competition require countries to adapt and innovate or lose their seat at the table; and rising living standards and good human rights records have long played a role in a country's prestige and soft power capabilities. Thus while the introduction of European policies might prove unpopular amongst some segments of the population – Dugin included – it is quite clearly in the interests of the state, and in the interests of its leaders, to implement them. This suggests that while Dugin's positive proposals have appeal, the charge of Western imperialism underlying them is not what motivates the Putin regime to implement them. The relativist fails to explain why, if it is in the interest of the state to copy the

West, and if the decisions of Russia's political elite have traditionally reflected this interest, this pattern of behaviour should suddenly have changed. The realist position provides a much stronger interpretation.

Motivations for Multipolarity: The Realist Interpretation

In Russia, argues Sherr, '"national interest" means *regime* interest (Sherr 2013: p. 96). This point is echoed by Inozemtsev, who writes: 'according to the basic ideas supporting Putin's "power hierarchy," the state is a Hobbesian Leviathan, which has no burden of responsibility to the people and pursues only its own interest' (Inozemtsev 2009: p. 44-5). One striking way the truth of these claims has manifested itself is in Russia's defence spending. The regime's preoccupation with its own vulnerability to domestic threats has led it to focus a disproportionate amount of state resources on internal security. Despite its rhetoric of Western encroachment a review of state expenditure reveals that during Putin's first term in office Russia spent more on internal security than it did on its military (Cooper 2007). As Blank notes, these actions fit into a broader pattern of behaviour, typically observed in Asian and Third World countries, where the policy of the state is determined more by concern for regime stability and internal security than it is with defence against foreign attack (2008: p. 509-10). Significantly, these concerns are typically associated with high levels of corruption and low levels of perceived legitimacy.

At the centre of Putin's unease, then as now, is his regime's reliance on a socio-economic system particularly vulnerable to criticism and popular discontent. A system of 'patrimonial capitalism' developed in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union, in place of what liberals and Westerners had hoped would be a functioning law governed market economy. Understood as a network of informal practices, it is based on intricate webs of personal relationships binding employee to employer, buyer to supplier and business owner to bureaucrat in relationships of mutual dependence (King 2003: p. 19). At the centre of it all – holding everything together – is the president. As Ledeneva notes, these informal practices have allowed Putin to secure his regime

an immense amount of power, but they have also ensnared it, 'creating its dependence on them' (2006: p. 193).

This is particularly apparent when it comes reform (Wood 2018: p. 4-5). Putin's *sistema* permeates and distorts Russian politics to such an extent that even attempts to reform the system itself must be pursued through its channels (Ledeneva 2013). The result of this is a modernisation trap that has left the regime unable to adapt, even in times of crisis (Wood 2018: p. 4-5). While economic reform is desperately needed to alleviate the deteriorating conditions of the Russian population, such reforms would require liberalizing large parts of the economy currently controlled by Putin's clients — that is, by nodes in the network on which his power is built (Giles et al. 2015: p. 55). Unsurprisingly, this is something the regime has refused to contemplate. 'The result over the past six years has been to further consolidate the dependence of business on the state, and the corruption that goes with it' (Wood 2018: p. 6) — in other words, an intensification of the current system at the expense of the Russian economy. This cannot go on forever. No longer able to rely on the prosperity generated by massive oil revenues and unable to reform, Putin's legitimacy problem has only intensified, leaving him ever more vulnerable to a revolt among the people he governs.

These continuing concerns about the illegitimacy of the patrimonial system and the vulnerability of the regime to criticism and revolt are absolutely central to understanding Russia's actions abroad. What Putin and his associates saw in the colour revolutions of the 2000s was the vulnerability their of type of system to the mobilization of the masses. The protesters' calls for an end to corruption and the rule of law showed the power Western ideas and values had to disrupt. It became as apparent as ever that to preserve itself and 'to preserve its legitimacy, [the regime has to] ensure that no alternative takes root on its doorstep' (Sherr 2013: p. 98). As Sherr points out, this requires tight control over the population's access to information at home; but 'globally, [it] requires… an architecture of multipolarity and multiple values systems and their recognition by others as principles of international order' (Sherr 2013: p. 98).

Instituting this 'preventative counter revolution' as Horvath calls it has meant a complete rethink of the regime's security policy (2013) — including a reversal of the spending patterns with which I began this section (Cooper 2014). Revolution in the former Soviet space relocated the locus of the threats facing the regime from internal to external forces. As Horvath writes, from the perspective of a number of Russian commentators, 'if there was a precedent for the "coloured revolutions", it was not the democratic surge of 1989, but US-orchestrated coups in Latin America' (2013: p. 2). The result has been the externalization of Putin's domestic security concerns, with the military and Russia's informational resources taking up the bulk of the work. As before, it is regime rather than national interest that motivates Russian policy, and this includes its pursuit of multipolarity.

The realist interpretation of the motivations behind Russia's drive for multipolarity provides important insights. In the first place, by disconnecting regime interest from the interests of state as a whole, and by making the former the focus of our thinking about Russian foreign policy, it allows us to bring together into a coherent account Russia's rhetoric of Western incursion and its early preoccupation with internal security. More importantly, however, it allows us to see the later connection between multipolarity and information war in the wake of the colour revolutions.

Part II: Information War and Russia's Postmodern Offensive

In the eyes of the Putin regime the greatest threat they face comes from what they call 'information warfare' (IW). IW designates the strategic use of information for the purposes of destabilizing rival political structures, involving 'the competition of ideas and information' along with the 'latent information management of the opponent's internal, economic and cultural processes' (Wilson 2014: p. 36); it also designates the use of information to defend against such attacks. According to its theorists, it has the power to destabilize 'an entire military force, bloc, or state' (Blank 2008: p. 506). In the

past, in their view, it has been used to discredit Russia's actions abroad; more significantly, however, is the Russian perception that it played a role in provoking the 'colour revolutions' in Russia's neighbouring countries. As I said earlier, the potential these revolutions have to spread into Russia has caused a great deal of anxiety for Putin and his regime. And in their eyes this is precisely what the West aims to bring about. As Gorenburg reports,

> The May 2014 Moscow Conference on International Security (MCIS), sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Defence, was focused on the role of popular protest, and specifically colour revolutions, in international security. The speakers, which included top Russian military and diplomatic officials such as Defence minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, argued that colour revolutions are a new form of warfare invented by Western governments seeking to remove independently-minded national governments in favor of ones controlled by the West. They argued that this was part of a global strategy to force foreign values on a range of nations around the world that refuse to accept U.S. hegemony and that Russia was a particular target of this strategy. (15 September 2014)

According to this theory, Western NGOs, human rights groups, and media organisations, provoke dissatisfaction, unrest, and eventually revolt in countries ruled by 'unfriendly' regimes. In cases where these efforts prove insufficient for regime change their countries simply intervene militarily, invoking respect for human rights or opposition to oppression.

Though it was intensified by the colour revolutions, the Russian preoccupation with IW predates them. In the post-Soviet period a series of crises seemed to confirm Russia's vulnerability to IW. The first Chechen War, for instance, proved a PR nightmare for the regime, with foreign and domestic media portraying the Chechen cause as one of justified resistance to Russian aggression. Opinion polls at the time showed a negative perception of the war amongst the Russian population (Sieca-Kozlowski 2009: p. 304), undermining the government's ability to carry out its designs. The 'Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation' (2000), a document initiated under Yeltsin and signed my Putin, identifies the 'monopolization of

individual sectors or all of the Russian information market by domestic and foreign information entities', and the 'blocking of activities of state media in providing information to Russian and foreign audiences' (Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2000) as central security concerns. And in doing so reveals what Vázquez Liñan calls an almost 'obsessive concern' with American and European intervention in Russian's cultural and informational spheres (2009: p. 144).

The Russian government and its officials have been clear about their preoccupation with information war and the need to wage it. The 2013 'Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation', for instance, states that Russia 'will take necessary measures to ensure national and international information security, [and] prevent political, economic and social threats to the state's security that emerge in information space.' While the Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, writes 'the very "rules of war" have changed… The information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy… It is necessary to perfect activities in the information space, including the defence of our own objects' (Galeotti 6 July 2014).

Though there are no detailed or explicit statements about the exact features of Russian information attacks it is possible, I believe, to construct a broad outline from the variety of documents and statements in which they appear. The following three claims are common to Russian accounts of information warfare and its potential use. First, it operates by 'influencing the enemy's information system and psychic condition' (Weiss and Pomerantsev 2014: p. 12); second, it does this both in order to 'reduce [an enemy's] fighting potential' and to defend oneself from informational attacks (Galeotti 6 July 2014); and third, it is powerful enough that its use has the potential to destabilize enemy regimes. If we limit ourselves to Russian offensive capabilities in the European context these claims can be spelled out in the following way. Russian use of IW will (1) influence European information systems and the psychic condition of Europeans in such a way that doing so promotes the development of a multi-polar global system. (2) They will deploy IW in order to reduce Europe's threat to Russia, namely, by the

spread of their values and colour-style revolutions. And (3) their tactics are believed to be powerful enough to destabilize the EU and/or individual European countries.

This provides a useful structure for our analysis of Russian behaviour in the European 'information sphere', and by using it as a guide it is possible isolate a set of tactics at work. In the next section I will outline an interpretation of Russia IW strategy using the three features above as adequacy conditions for my theory.

Information War on RT: Applied Postmodernism

Applied postmodernism as it is practiced by Russia has two features. The first is an attempt to promote a sense of epistemic insecurity amongst targeted populations by undermining existing bonds of trust between them and the sources of information on which they rely (Giles 2016: p. 37). The second is the promotion of 'alternative' or 'anti-hegemonic' perspectives or narratives, especially those in line with Russia's foreign policy objectives (ibid.). Earlier I drew attention to a parallel that exists between Russia's calls for multipolarity and the politics of identity. It will be useful to return to this example for the parallels that Russia's IW strategy – aimed at bringing about multipolarity – has with an important aspect of postmodern theory, namely poststructuralism, and its relationship to identity politics.

Poststructuralism is a theory about language that stands in a subtle but important relationship to the politics of identity. It makes two central claims. The first is that words and phrases get their meanings not by referring to anything in the world, but by occupying a place within a network of relationships internal to a language. As an example, the term 'funny' gets its meaning by being the opposite of 'unfunny' and by standing in more complex relationships with 'sarcastic' and other related terms. Its second claim is that the place a term occupies in this network is fluid not fixed and that meaning is therefore also fluid. On such an account it is impossible simply to 'report the facts' of a given situation, because it is beyond the scope of language to refer to anything outside of itself. 'Facts' are therefore always constructed.

Such a view supports a politics of identity in two ways. First, it politicises language. Claims about the world are attempts to shape that world and they are thus intimately tied to power. And second, it places the perspective of the speaker or writer centre stage. In attempting to shape the world without the ability to reference any agreed or objective set of facts or standards the questions 'for whom?' or 'in whose interest?' naturally arise. What masquerade as neutral policies, language, even scientific studies, can then be severed from their claims to objectivity or their pursuit of the common good, and placed in the context of dominant or minority perspectives. The perspectives or narratives from which they emerge then partially determine their validity, something that can have a profound effect on the way people evaluate claims, with both liberating and dangerous implications.

I call Russia's IW tactic 'applied postmodernism' because it plays an analogous role in their pursuit of multipolarity that postmodernism, and specifically poststructuralism, did for the emergence of identity politics. Poststructuralism severed the ties between empirical fact and language and replaced truth with 'truths', encased in an ever-proliferating set of narratives and perspectives. Russia's strategy is to recreate this phenomenon at the international level. Significantly, a strategy that could achieve this would meet the three criteria I outlined above. (1) It would constitute an attempt to manipulate an enemy's psychic condition and it would use informational systems to accomplish this. (2) In achieving its goals it would go some way towards neutralizing Europe's ability to spread its values and undercut its justifications for intervention. And (3) an intensified politics of identity among the EU's member states would be anathema to its proper functioning as an institution. Applied postmodernism, if effective, would thus have the power to destabilise enemy regimes. In the sections below I will attempt to explain how this strategy works in practice by examining one of Russia's most important tools in its IW arsenal: its foreign broadcasting network, RT.

Before I do this, however, it will be useful to get a couple of things straight. The first is to note how applied postmodernism differs from traditional forms of propaganda.

Russia's strategy is fundamentally an asymmetrical one, born of its relative weakness on the world stage compared to the Soviet era. Where traditional propaganda aims to promote the truth of one side in particular, applied postmodernism aims to promote a view of the world in which truth is itself relative. This is a fundamentally different aim. It should also be stressed that by 'applied postmodernism' I do not mean the aggressive advocacy of a set of intellectual postulates. What Russia aims to implant in European minds is not a theoretical conviction but a psychological wariness—a wariness that, *in effect*, implants the postmodern perspective in those it affects. As Butler notes, 'a great deal of postmodernist theory depends on the maintenance of a sceptical attitude' (Butler 2002: p. 13). It is this *attitude* that Russia seeks to promote.

Applied Postmodernism: Part I

The first part of the applied postmodern tactic is the promotion of epistemic insecurity. Russia's foreign broadcasting network, RT, pursues this aim by undermining the trust its audiences have in the information authorities they rely on, especially the European mass media. The particular strategy it uses to achieve this, I argue, relies on a socio-psychological phenomena best illustrated with reference to a famous set of psychological studies called the Milgram experiments.

The original Milgram experiment tested the effects of perceived authority on decision-making. Participants accompanied by a 'scientific expert' were asked to administer a series of electric shocks to another participant (played by an actor). To the surprise of the experimenters participants continued to administer shocks despite screams and pleas from the recipient, provided that they were asked to do so by the expert. In a variation on the experiment, its designers introduced a second, dissenting, expert. In these trials participants began to refuse the orders they were given much earlier. It appeared that the simulation of debate and disagreement among experts undermined the perceived authority of the experts in the eyes of the participants.

With an increase in the presentation of scientific disagreement in the mass media (on climate change, for instance) this observation has been generalized. As Stef Aupers

notes, the mass media have 'made [previously closed] disputes transparent and available for a larger, less educated public' confronting 'citizens everyday with incompatible theories and inconsistent study results' (Aupers 2012: p. 26). Over time this focus on conflict and dispute, so central to the increasingly commercialized media systems in the West, has had worrying effects. 'Empirical studies demonstrate' for instance 'that there is growing scepticism among western citizens *vis-à-vis* scientific authorities, the knowledge they produce and the (technical) solutions they propose' (Aupers 2012: p. 26). Nothing in the substance of the way science is practiced has changed, of course, nor have any theoretical arguments been put forward in the mass media to discredit it; nevertheless the public's faith in them has been severely undermined.

This decline in the perceived authority of science was incidental, one of the unintended consequences of commercialization, but the fact that it has worked out in this way, points to a potential strategy for those looking to weaponize scepticism. I argue that RT can be seen as doing for the European media, what the Western media has done for science, employing the same conflict-based model to this end and adding to it more direct challenges to their authority and reliability.

Consider the following report from 23 March 2014. An episode of RT's 'The Truthseeker' aired a report claiming that the BBC had staged a chemical weapons attack in Syria. A voiceover reads, 'The British Broadcasting Corporation is accused of staging chemical weapons attack' over footage from the report it alleges was faked (*The Truthseeker* 23 March 2013). Its claim has never been substantiated, nor was it picked up by any major British publications, including publications typically highly critical of the BBC. *The Telegraph*, for instance, which has printed stories about fake footage on the BBC in the past (e.g., *The Telegraph*, 18 December 2011; Mendick and Malnick, 2011), published nothing about its coverage of the attack in Syria.

That the claim is dubious is beside the point. Just as in the Milgram experiments a relation of trust exists between the one lacking knowledge or expertise and the one

who possesses it. As non-experts, participants in the Milgram experiments have no factual basis on which to object to the claims made by the experts. Similarly, having never stepped foot in Syria, most viewers have to take the BBC at its word for information about any potential attacks. In both cases a dissenting expert, against whom again a non-expert has no basis to argue, undermines the basis for trusting in the authority of the first expert, and once this occurs it is nearly impossible to re-establish. Without the ability to confirm the claims made by either party the only information one has to rely on is the claim of the other party; but their reliability is precisely what is at issue.

Consider a second example: on 28 May 2014, the show *On The Money* aired an episode entitled 'Who pays the price for InfoWars?', on which its panellists discussed the need to break through the Western 'informational hegemony'. The show's guests—primarily Europeans—joined the host in praising RT's struggle against the Western monopolization of information, with one panellist saying, 'finally we are watching the emergence of global public opinion, not only in English but in different languages, telling a narrative that is completely different from the one manufactured by the "ministry of truth", which happens to be located between Washington, New York, and Brussels, with an extension in London and Paris' (*On The Money* 28 May 2014). Another lamented the unfair and ideologically driven narrative on Russia in the UK media, giving the following advice: 'if you need to know about Russia, go there; that's the only information you can rely on' (*On The Money* 28 May 2014). While the focus here isn't on any one network or paper in particular, or on their coverage of a particular event, the effect is the same. The viewer is presented with a panel of 'experts' all agreeing on the chronic corruption and unreliability of the European and American media, especially in their reporting about Russia. And again, the fact that nearly all of these guests have direct ties to the Kremlin—as Weiss and Pomerantsev have pointed out—is almost entirely irrelevant (2014: p. 16-7). Only a handful of viewers can be counted on at any point to fact-check the stories they read or hear, or to look into the

backgrounds of the guests the media present as 'experts', and as long as this is true RT's strategy will be effective.

The same sorts of stories also appear on RT's online print content, as in the following selection of stories from 2014 - 2015: 'A journalist's duty is to inform. Have western press forgotten this in Ukraine?' (MacDonald 2014), 'How mainstream propaganda works' (Simonyan 2015), 'Three years of confronting Western propaganda' (Vltchek 2015), 'BBC bias, "heinous" US support for Israel attacked in Gaza War anniversary protest' (*RT* 10 July 2015); and '"BBC bias": EU referendum coverage to be independently monitored by watchdog' (*RT* 10 June 2015). Some of these stories are of course true, though they are usually already reported on in the Western press. But again this is mostly irrelevant. While delivering a steady stream of accurate information is essential to the maintenance of some sense of reliability, and while exposing *actual* abuses helps its cause, the truth or falsity of what they report on is of less concern than the function a particular story performs. We have to keep in mind the fact that a good deal of the science reporting discussed above was accurate, but just as in the Milgram experiment the public is in no position to discern this, and the overall effect remains the same.

Of course, the airing of fake news stories can also serve a short-term tactical function, allowing Russia to neutralize potentially damaging stories coming from the West by obscuring them in controversy and dispute. One prominent example of this technique in action is RT's activity in the aftermath of the downing of flight MH17. Stories were aired, for instance, suggesting Ukrainian forces shot down the plane after they mistook it for a plane carrying Vladimir Putin (Blake 2014). Other reports raised the possibility that the plane was shot down by a Ukrainian fighter jet (*RT* 21 July 2014). The finger was even pointed at America. On an episode of *CrossTalk* from 23 July 2014 entitled 'MH17 Spin', its host claimed the American government had information it refused to release, a claim echoed and reinforced by its panel of 'expert' guests. At one point the host even goes so far as to claim it is withholding information because it knows Ukraine is responsible: 'It looks very clearly [sic] to me' he says 'that the United

States… does not really want an investigation because, well, that investigation would probably show something that they don't want to see. And… common sense says the Ukrainians did it' (RT 23 July 2014). The aim of all of this 'expert' speculation is to deepen people's sense of distrust towards their media; and as Pomerantsev reports, this is exactly the effect it had.

> Take Estonia, where viewers who followed rival Russian and western stories about the downing of flight MH17 over Ukraine last year ended up disbelieving both sides. Something similar is happening in Kharkiv, a Ukrainian city near the boarder with Russia, where polls showed a high number of people cynical about all media, whatever the source. (Pomerantsev 4 August 2015)

Even in these cases, where the intention of the fake news stories was tactical in orientation, the long-term effect of this sort of coverage is still the promotion of a more generalized epistemic insecurity. And this is exactly what it is designed to do.

The promotion of scepticism in this way is absolutely central not just to understanding RT but to understanding Russia's IW programme in general. This can be seen in the campaign to influence the 2016 presidential election in the United States, which made use of a wide variety of IW tools, including not just traditional media but also social media and cyber weapons, and which had the same effect. Here too, excessive focus on any apparent tactical aims can easily obscure the true strategic importance of such attacks. As Nocetti writes, 'Russian maneuvers aimed less at influencing the outcome of the election than at the perceptions (*soznanie*) Americans have about the reliability of their rulers and institutions… Moscow's larger goal is to strengthen the doubt in public opinion toward Western policies and values: liberal democracy, multiculturalism, and interventionism under the guise of "responsibility to protect"' (Nocetti 2018: p. 193). If those in the United States who imagined a *decisive* role for Russian interference in the victory of Donald Trump were wrong to draw on such an exaggerated picture Russian of capabilities, they were also mistaken in their assessment of the fundamental aims of that interference. *That* doubt in the legitimacy of the current president, the American media system, and so on, has been generated

on such a large scale — that was the aim of Russian efforts. In this they were remarkably successful. The victory of a candidate much more favorable to their interests was, as it were, the cherry on top — if a rather large one.

To reiterate, the promotion of epistemic insecurity among the populations of Russia's enemies constitutes the first part of the applied postmodernism tactic. This function benefits the Putin regime in at least two ways, one tactical and one strategic. In the short term, the spread of confusion allows the regime to diminish or counter negative coverage of its actions. In the long term, however, it works to undermine the perceived objectivity of Western positions and values, turning them into just one among a number of self-interested positions in a swarm of competing narratives. This serves to undermine the perceived legitimacy of Western criticisms of Russia, neutralising what it fears most, the spread of Western values and practices and a colour style revolution at home.

Applied Postmodernism: Part II

The second feature of applied postmodernism is the spread of 'alternative' and 'anti-hegemonic' voices. Like the first, the mechanism that allows it to work can be seen in the failures of Western reporting on science. As Aupers notes, in the West the psychological effect of Science's decline in authority has not been limited to widespread cynicism; it has also had the effect of lending credibility to what we might call 'alternative sources of explanation'. 'Established science may have lost its monopoly on truth' he notes 'but this has opened up a market for experts producing knowledge that is often labelled as unscientific, irrational or dangerous by regular scientists, but is nevertheless massively embraced by late-modern citizens' (Aupers 2012: p. 26). The rise of homeopathy and other 'alternative' medicines, which now compete with standard medical techniques, is a testament to this fact (Aupers 2012: p. 26). In postmodern terms, we might say that the demise of the grand narrative of science has led to a proliferation of micro-narratives, and the rise in respectability, at least among some groups, of 'subjugated knowledges', 'knowledges' as Foucault puts

it 'that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated' (Foucault 1980: p. 83).

A related phenomenon is the rise in respectability of conspiracy theories. Aupers identifies a relationship between the erosion of trust in the media on the one hand and the proliferation in conspiracy thinking on the other, which, he claims, has become so mainstream in the past couple of decades that one can now properly speak of a 'conspiracy culture' (Aupers 2012: p. 23). Aupers is writing primarily about America, but a recent study of conspiracy thinking in Europe confirms his finding. Its authors studied attitudes in Hungary, Slovakia and France, and found 'that very significant numbers agree that it is not the government that governs, but that someone else is pulling the strings' citing 'institutional distrust' and 'perceived loss of control' as chief among its explanatory factors (Gyárfášova et al 2013: p. 2).

This relationship between epistemic insecurity and acceptance of 'alternative knowledges' is of great interest to the Russian government. The weakening of scientific dominance in favour of a plurality closely mirrors Russian designs on liberal hegemony at the international level. The same applies to the incursion of conspiracy thinking into the ground previously occupied by rational liberal political debate. Again, to put this in post modern terms, once Russia has 'exposed' the dominant discourses of the West for what they are—lies and distortions—the (psychological) ground is clear for the rise of 'alternative' discourses, 'alternative knowledges', all of which are, at least in principle, equally valid.

One example of this tactic in action is RT's penchant for anti-mainstream politicians, granting 'extended coverage to party leaders and their views, as well as portraying key common enemies, such as the US and global capital, in a negative way' (Grätz 2015: p. 43). Nigel Farage, for instance, the then leader of Britain's Eurosceptic Ukip party, appeared on RT at least seventeen times between December 2010 and April 2014 (Wintour and Mason 31 March 2014). As Patrick Wintour and Rowena Mason at the Guardian note, 'The Ukip leader has appeared so frequently that he is cited in

literature for the TV station Russia Today as one of their special and "endlessly quotable" British guests. "He has been known far longer to the RT audience than most of the British electorate," Russia Today claims' (31 March 2014).

Populist parties like Mr. Farage's Ukip are on the rise across Europe, and have earned their popularity in large part because of their status as outsiders, as alternatives to an unresponsive and overbearing 'political elite' (Panizza 2005: p. 9). RT supports this narrative in at least two ways. First it lends support to their case against mainstream politicians by presenting them as corrupt, manipulative and deceiving; and second it gives them and their views extensive positive coverage in their programing. These parties all represent political 'alternatives' and typically alternatives in line with Russia's interests. As Grätz concludes,

> For Putin, these new anti-mainstream parties represent a huge opening for his effort to undermine the EU. They are exactly the force that he needs for realizing his goals: they are mostly opposed to the US and NATO, while advocating stronger ties with Russia. In most cases, they also want to dismantle the EU, striving for a Europe of self-sufficient sovereign nation states instead of rules-based integration… [And even] if such parties do not come to power they will lead to a more cautious approach in the EU… as they will be a credible threat to existing elites. (2015 p. 42)

Strengthening the position and the plausibility of these alternatives within Europe has direct and obvious implications for Russia's aspirations to global multipolarity, and applied postmodernism as I have described it provides Russia with just the set of tools it needs to do this.

But as I have said, Russia's promotion of alternative perspectives is not limited to fringe political groups; through RT it also engages in the promotion of 'subjugated knowledges' in the form of conspiracy theories. In fact, these form a regular part of its coverage, especially on shows like *The Truthseeker* (Yablokov 2015: p. 306). On one episode of the show, for instance, its host claims that 'investigation finds the FBI practically behind every so-called terrorist plot in the United States. Agents find someone poor enough to bribe and set up the plot for them from start to finish' (quoted

in Bruk 2014: p. 12). And, as Weiss and Pomerantsev report, one of RT's Spanish-language programs recently 'considered whether the US was behind the Ebola outbreak', while 'during the Syrian conflict… RT broadcast programs about an alleged massacre by rebel forces at Adra—a massacre that appears never to have taken place' (2014: p. 16).

While RT often voices open support for conspiracy theories, as in the cases above, at other times it brings conspiracy theorists on as guests and lets them do the talking. One frequent guest, for example, is British 'New World Order' conspiracy theorist Peter Eyre. In one interview on the war in Syria, Eyre is introduced as a 'middle east consultant' before espousing his view that the whole war is 'all a false charade'. 'You've got to understand' he says 'that at the top of all this is a very strong Zionist implication, who control the politics of America, in the UK, and in Europe, and they're actually playing the cards' (NeedToAwaken 2011). All of this, of course, goes unchallenged.

While with the promotion of epistemic insecurity serves Russia's ends in a negative sense, by undermining confidence in Western values and practices, the promotion of 'alternative' and 'anti-hegemonic' narratives serves its ends in a positive sense. It fills the new void with a plurality of competing narratives that give apparent alternatives to the explanations on offer in the Western press. As with the rise of alternative medicines, the rise of alternative explanations for political events is a predictable consequence of the loss of perceived authority among the Western media. Russia is seeking to fuel this fire by making itself a source of such explanations. Though many of the perspectives they offer are in the direct interest of the Putin regime, many are not. And this is because the primary aim is the establishment of a new thoroughly relativistic set of standards, not the promotion of any specific Russian position.

Applied Postmodernism: Summary

As I have said, Putin's chief foreign policy preoccupation is the threat that it faces from information warfare with the West. Unfavourable coverage of its actions undermines

its ability to act and to remain in power and liberal criticism threatens to stir the Russian masses into revolt against their system of power. The scepticism RT promotes and the alternative perspectives it gives voice to, however, have the potential to stem the flow of these attacks. By undermining people's faith in the information they receive, RT promotes the idea that there are always at least two sides to every story and by providing another side to the story that fits their interests, RT is able (at least in some instances) to turn the tide of criticism and critique in the direction in likes.

Once the authority of the media has been undermined, as the authority of the scientist was undermined in the variation of the Milgram experiment discussed above, opinions can no longer be formed on the basis of truth or falsity but have to be based on the weighing up of different perspectives. But unless you're an expert, you have no basis from which to criticize. If I find I can't trust the BBC, for instance, what can possibly justify accepting its version of the events in Ukraine over Russia's? Perhaps there *is* another story; perhaps we *can't* escape past our perspective.

In the Europe Russia wants to create, the Putin regime presented on the BBC—authoritarian, and built on corruption, control, and violence—simply hasn't had had a fair chance to speak for itself, and perhaps the BBCs narrative is simply insensitive to the intricacies of a culture Europeans couldn't possibly understand. All of these doubts breed an introspection that takes the focus off of Russia, and puts it onto one's own assumptions, prejudices and preconceptions, creating a sort of moral paralysis perfectly suited to Russia's multipolar aspirations, mirroring trends already present in domestic identity politics. If it succeeds at turning Europe's gaze inwards it will have won the information war, neutralizing its opponents weapons at their source, and securing for Russia an ideological safe zone free of foreign interference.

Part III: Objections and Replies

Together Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky have made a number of claims pertinent to my argument. Here I would like to look at just one. Their seminal *Manufacturing Consent* puts forward a 'propaganda model' for the Western media.

> The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda. (Herman and Chomsky 1988: p. 1)

In familiar terms, the objection to my argument might be spelled out as follows: Yes, but aren't we doing it too?

Herman and Chomsky argue that in the Western media a number of 'filters' stand between the public and truth: the cost of running a newspaper or a television network, for instance, ensures that the media will be concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few; the prohibitive cost of investigative journalism, to take another example, ensures that journalists depend increasingly on 'reliable sources' like government and corporate spokesmen, giving the latter a degree of control over the former; finally, the pressures exerted by advertisers to sensationalize and to produce entertainment content, they argue, has the tendency to dilute the quality of the information the public ends up receiving from the media by the time it makes it to market (Herman and Chomsky 1988). The cumulative effect of these filters is to limit the frequency and forcefulness of criticisms directed against the interests of those in power, and to exaggerate the critiques that further those interests.

As the authors note, however, 'this is normally not accomplished by crude intervention' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: p. xi); or, at least, this is not how things are done in the West. While it is 'difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent', 'in countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy,' on the other hand 'the monopolistic

control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of a dominant elite' (Herman and Chomsky 1988: p. 1). The authors thus distinguish between different types of media manipulation, and by implication, different degrees of severity. While the Western media may *tend to* favour particular interests, state controlled systems do so *directly*.

This distinction between what we might call 'passive' and 'active' propaganda is perhaps the most significant factor to consider when it comes to comparing the Western media to RT. While institutions like *The Guardian* may reflect in their reporting a particular set of assumptions about the world, and while they may rely for some of their information on government press releases, they are nevertheless free from direct political control over what they report. It is because of this that *The Guardian* can print articles critical of British foreign policy, as they did in their coverage of the Iraq war. The same is not true of RT.

In Russia the media operates according to what Olga Khvostunova calls a 'state commercialized model'. On the one hand, 'the state… manages the political agenda to guarantee favourable public opinion and necessary public support for the President and his allies. On the other hand, [it] allows for the free growth of the profit-driven, commercialized entertainment media' (Khvostunova 2014: p. 9). The fact that the state has direct and, in Russia's case, far reaching control over the content its media produces points to a—or perhaps *the*—key difference between networks like the BBC or papers like *Der Spiegel* and RT. RT is a tool of the state, and this affects the way its programing needs to be understood.

While manipulations in the Western media are, according to Herman and Chomsky, the result of incidental features inherent in the structure of their commercialized media systems, the manipulation of information on RT is more often than not the work of direct state control. In fact RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan has acknowledged this point, stating that RT is a tool Russia needed in its service if it is to win the next information war (Bruk 2014: p. 13). As she put it in an interview with *Der*

Spiegel, when Russia goes to war 'then we will join them in battle' (Bidder 13 August 2013).

Ultimately then, any objection to the effect that 'we're doing it too' fails because it equivocates between two levels of manipulation, and it is this sleight of hand that gives efforts to identify RT and the BBC their air of plausibility. Once we distinguish the two, however, we see that any claims of equivalence are groundless.

Part IV: Conclusions

Above I have argued that Russia is waging an information war against Europe and that in doing so it has been making extensive use of a set of techniques I have called 'applied postmodernism'. The Putin regime feels vulnerable to the potentially disruptive spread of European values and ways of thinking about the world. In response it has lashed out, striking at the heart of the European mind with a weaponized scepticism and standing ready to pick up the pieces with a set of 'alternative perspectives'. The ultimate aim of all of this, as I explained above, is the creation of a new world order centered on an international politics of difference. The hope is that in this sort of world the system of corruption at the foundation of the Putin regime will be allowed to exist unchallenged, tolerated by conscientious Westerners as the manifestation of cultural difference rather than condemned for being unjust. The implications of my analysis are potentially wide reaching. But with the space I have left I would like to consider just one.

The Russian assault on the European media and on perceptions of objectivity is made possible largely because the Western media *is* flawed. The best thing Europe can do is to address this problem at home. Though efforts are being made to confront Russian propaganda abroad—Germany's promise to train Russian language journalists to counter propaganda in Eastern Europe, for instance (Troianovski 17 April 2015)—less attention has been paid to the root causes of public susceptibility to RTs message. A bond of trust needs to be re-established between the populations of Europe and the

mainstream media outlets that serve them, and this means countering some of the worst effects of commercialization.

The introduction of new EU wide media regulation emphasizing the duty to inform would be a step in the right direction. At a more fundamental level, however, the news media needs to be given a place in the division of power at the core of the state and, ideally, the EU. It has long occupied this role functionally but the slide towards commercialization and sensationalism that has occurred over the last few decades represents a decline in standards that we would find intolerable were they to occur within executive, legislative, or judicial institutions. As I have argued above, the news media is an absolutely essential part of modern society, and central to the proper function of democracy. If the EU is to remain a bastion of democracy, truth, and progress then it is going to have to confront the privatization of information.

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