

THE POST-TRUTH AGE, THE FAKE NEWS INDUSTRY, THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN AREA

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Abstract: In this text, I first come up with the conceptualization of the terms 'post-truth age', 'news' and 'fake news'. I explain the difference between news and fake news in a larger context of the post-truth age. In this regard I argue that for the contemporary period there are some –although not revolutionary – differences from previous forms of manipulations and propaganda. I'm also convinced that there is not a such radical difference between news and fake news. Further, I define the fake news industry and its linkage to the related soft-power strategy as manufactured and disseminated by the current Russian Federation and its allied forces in Central European countries with some examples from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. I argue that social and identitarian dimensions play an important role and may be explained by new societal cleavages as well as by activities conducted by homegrown patriotic campaigners, citizen curators of information and useful idiots.

Keywords: Central Europe, fake news industry; patriotic campaigners, Russia

JEL Classification: H89, M39

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I first conceptualize the 'news' and 'fake news' phenomena in the context of post-truth age. Further, I analyse the Russian 'soft-power' strategy in regard to production and dissemination of fake news in to Central European environment. I argue that – side by side with official Russian circles as political elites being equipped with social media and state-sponsored media ready to produce and disseminate fake news 24/7 – in the Central European context homegrown patriotic campaigners are important too. Further, identification of societal cleavages in this area would help us to focus on Russian propaganda which major goal is to weaken enemies as NATO and the EU and to strengthen social and identitarian dimension of its allied pro-Kremlin circles.

1. THE POST-TRUTH AGE, (HALF-)TRUTH AND JOURNALISM

There is no common agreement on the post-truth age among scholars. To take it simply, two basic contradicting views on the post-truth era can be identified – first, the status quo approach claiming that the current era is not sharply different from the previous one, second, the revolutionary approach, which holds the view that the contemporary age differs significantly from the previous era.

Commonly, the post-truth world can be defined on the basis of raising meanings of peoples 'emotions and beliefs' or appeals to both of them (Cambridge Dictionary Online; Oxford Living Dictionaries Online) and feelings (Oxford Learners Dictionaries) they already hold (Collins Dictionary Online) rather than on facts (Cambridge Dictionary Online). In concrete terms, objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion. 'In addition, truth is being neglected or ignored' (MacMillan dictionary). As for the scholars, they are focused on lying or, more precisely, on the art of the lie (Economist, 2016) and do mention populist politicians in both democratic and non-democratic regimes. Timothy Snyder says that in the post-truth age there is a common effort to destabilize the term 'truth' as such. On the other hand, Peter Stokes claims that agents are bullshitters, [who] do 'not care (and may not know) if what they say is true; they just care that you believe it [what they say].' And, there is a key difference between bullshitters and liars in the sense that despite of the fact that both of them 'speak in their own interests', it is not possible to lie

unless the liar knows the truth, nevertheless bullshitters do not need to have such a knowledge (Collins, 2019, p. 54).

Journalism has been adapting itself strongly to the taste of consumers. The media industry, in order to attract the attention of its recipients, is currently focusing on producing the news in an emotionally strong tone (Suiter, 2016). In general, news in a contemporary hybrid media system are founded, on the one hand, in the potential for dissemination of social media, activities of bloggers and TV reality shows, and on the other hand, it goes side by side with the strong scepticism towards political elites and the media establishment (Tsipurski, 2017; Tallis, 2016, p. 9). In the contemporary age, the prestige of mainstream media has been consistently under attack and, simultaneously, the role of traditionally and serious gatekeepers weakened significantly by the expanse of trolls, hackers and those spreading hoaxes (Fukuyama, 2016). In this environment, the strongly fragmented spectre of news contributes to the establishment of an atomized world in which lies, hoaxes, rumours and gossip spread with unprecedented speed (The Economist, 2016). Unlike the facts, stories have a great potential to become successful if they become viral in the social media environment as narratives wrapped into emotions as e.g. fear or anger can contribute to the production of stories with a strong impact on irrational group behaviour (Hendricks, 2016). Finally, users of social media can often barely differentiate between authentic sources of information and media producing fake news which applies in particular – but not necessary only – to the elderly generation (Tsipursky, 2017).

2. NEWS AND FAKE NEWS

News can be defined in many ways, nevertheless, taking it simply, it is 'information that is published in newspapers and broadcast on radio and television' and is 'about a recently changed situation or a recent event' (Collins dictionary). Merriam Webster considers news to be a 'report of recent events' (Merriam-Webster dictionary); Collins dictionary defines information as being 'about a recently changed situation or a recent event' (Collins dictionary); the BBC defines 'news' as 'journalism based on facts, either observed and verified directly by the reporter, or reported and verified from knowledgeable sources' (BBC, 2017). Further, four attributes of reported coverage are emphasized by the BBC – to be impartial, accurate, independent (BBC, 2018), fair (BBC, 2017) and, following Kovach and Rosenstle, also comprehensive (see in Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2017, p. 4).

As for fake news, there is a common perception that, firstly, the post-truth era, raising the power of social media and the ambitions of – let us say – Russia in global PR games, have been tied to the fake news phenomenon contrary to the mass press age or subsequent golden age of TV. Nevertheless, it is difficult to draw a line which would divide hoax, lie and gossip in the modern age from 'fake news' in the post-modern age. Secondly, fake news has been generally assigned to 'false stories' (online dictionary cambridge.org), 'most extreme form of misleading information' in which the 'content is intentionally and verifiably false' (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). Fake news may be generally considered as false news typically containing one (or more) piece of disinformation(-s) fabricated intentionally. Disinformation media publishing fake news pretend – whether openly or unintentionally – that their content is reliable for recipients (Transparency.cz, 2019). They frequently emphasize that their news is exclusive and that others, commonly mainstream or public media, either do not dispose of such info or – if they do know it – they are not willing to publish it for their absurd devotion to political over-correctness. Commonly, such fake news is necessary to view under a clearly defined propagandist campaign wrapped up either in financial or political purposes.

However, the situation is not as black-and-white as seems. Fake news – as it has emerged from connection of the words 'fake' and 'news' – can hardly be 100% false (news) as news shall be factual information. As news is based on truth, fake news cannot be based 100% on a lie (see in Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2017). In another words, fake news is only suggesting 'informational or epistemic deficits, to the extent that these communications are not just factually deficient' (Jensen, 2018, p. 116).

3. THE FAKE NEWS INDUSTRY AND CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

In fact, there are two major motivations for producing (and subsequent disseminating) fake news: the financial and the ideological (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2017). For the scope of this article, we will put aside initiatives without ideological (or political) ambitions, which are manufacturing and have interest in spreading fake news solely based on financial interests.

Generally, there is no doubt that current Russia's strategy is free from disinformation based on a fake news agenda. Nevertheless, as the Cold War modus operandi of the Soviet propaganda was ideological, Russian propaganda is currently lacking such a dimension as it used to be during the time of Soviet Union and Cold-War. Primarily, it is not aimed at promoting Russia but, first, it is carefully designed to appeal to 'the full political spectrum' and, second, 'it focuses on undermining Western institutions' (Sukhankin, 2019, p. 1).

Although there is joint agreement among scholars on the advent of contemporary strategy of Russian fake news propaganda as it started back in the 2008 'Information war' in Georgia (Sukhankin, 2019, p. 4, 10) and was fully triggered during the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 (Asmolov, 2018, 71; Reston, 2017), it is emphasized that there can be a clearly identified continuation of Cold War propaganda strategies orchestrated in the Soviet Union era by the KGB (Piore, 2019; Reston 2017, p. 7). In the time of Cold War, the Soviet Union attempted 'to influence political dialogue in the West'. Concretely, directed by the 'KGB's resident spies scattered around the world, a small division called Service A planted false stories in newspapers, spread rumours, and worked to stir up racial tensions' (Reston, 2017). Yet there is a difference.

Generally, the major goal of the state-sponsored manipulative strategy is not to 'shape perception about reality', but to 'trigger and sustain the phenomenon of "unfriending" as an outcome of conflict-dominated social categorization' (Asmolov, 2018, p. 74). In concrete terms, such disinformation campaigns are aimed at the 'toxication of civil society' (Mujanović, 2019) and at undermining the key principles of liberal governance as the value of democracy by attacking the trust of citizens in their political representatives, mainstream and public media and state institutions (Bradshaw, 2018, p. 24). The fake news industry is aimed at manipulation and can have damaging consequences for democratic politics as 'it undermines the development of organic political narratives from within a population because it politicizes and colonizes social identities' and can 'undermine capacities for collective problem-solving, as social divisiveness prevents persons from coming together to address common problems' (Jensen, 2018, p. 116).

In this regard, Russian propaganda – using classic Cold War strategy – proved its ability to work effectively also on social media platforms 'from the alt-right subreddits to the far-left Twitter threads' (Piore, 2019). In fact, the internet made Russian propaganda easy to produce and disseminate (Reston, 2017, p. 7). The Kremlin identified that the internet and social media environments are powerful weapons for its propaganda strategy (Sukhankin, 2019, p. 4) and shifted from its ideological narrative to adapt its strategy to the post-truth age which means that by its character the following five issues gained relevance (Sukhankin, 2019, p. 4-7):

- flexibility and de-ideologization,
- straightforwardness and simplicity,
- persuasion through dissuasion, which means that the goal is not to persuade the audience about the advantages of its model, but rather to discredit its opponents,
- strong engagement of the military and intelligence community,
- the industrial scale of current propaganda.

Although social science scholars and experts use different terms for the current Russian communication strategy e.g. 'disinformation campaigns' (Asmolov, 2018, p. 74), '(dis)information machine', 'industrial scale' (Sukhankin, 2019, p. 6), 'information warfare' (Kalpokas, 2017), 'propaganda machine' (Reston, 2017, p. 6) or, eventually, frame it into a larger context tied to the 'hybrid war' phenomenon which emphasizes conventional forces, guerrilla and 'information warfare' in mutual combination (Golovchenko, Hartmann & Adler-Nissen 2018, p. 980), they are in agreement that fake stories both in their intensity and extensity and a large and sophisticated industry network which – consisting of the tight linkage

between the Russian media network and its disinformation outlets – reached unprecedented high levels (Sukhankin 2019, p. 4-7). I call it the ‘fake news industry’ and in the following part of the text I will introduce actors which play significant roles in such propaganda.

First of all, a line can be drawn between the official and semi-official (pro-Kremlin) Russian media networks and allied disinformation outlets (Sukhankin, 2019, p. 6). Explicitly, there are openly state-sponsored media such as RT, Sputnik etc. and, of course, institutions representing Russian political elite e.g. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence in the first group (Sukhankin, 2019, p. 9). Nevertheless, apart from these cyber troops as state-sponsored organizations aimed at the fake news industry (Brandshaw, 2018, p. 24), a significant role belongs to a large and rather ‘grey’ zone to which the latter mentioned ‘disinformation outlets’ belong, which is not officially and visibly linked to the Russian political elite (Sukhankin, 2018, p. 8): numerous actors can be counted as state-sponsored foundations and authorities (Russkiy Mir Foundation), religious groups (the Russian Orthodox Church) and Russian-funded political parties and organizations (Sukhankin, 2018, p. 9). A crucial role can be attributed to various agents active in digital platforms which are focused on disseminating disinformation online and that includes – though often hidden – Kremlin-friendly web sites, blogs and social media profiles (in some cases fake accounts), trolls, botnets, influence campaigners, hackers (Golovchenko, Hartmann & Adler-Nissen 2018, p. 980) and lone-wolf coders (Brandshaw, 2018, p. 24).

Importantly, participants in the fake news industry can certainly be financially motivated in troll farms or for their hacktivism, however, there is a strong – but rather overlooked in social science research – social or identitarian dimension of that phenomenon which is a significant part of the fake news industry as one can hardly become a ‘patriotic hacker’ or devoted pro-Russian troll by being supported financially. Further, there is the phenomenon of citizen curators and patriotic campaigners. Specifically, the rising power of social media ‘has enabled citizens, social movements, voluntary [italic by author] groups and citizen journalist collectives to move from being passive audiences to active curators of information’, which has led to a significant shift in gatekeeping roles, which moved from the mainstream to curators active in the social media sphere in which they could produce, select and spread information without being controlled or edited by anybody (Golovchenko, Hartmann & Adler-Nissen 2018, p. 981).

Finally, and unfortunately beyond scope of this article, there are important phenomena, such as ‘peer-to-peer propaganda’ and ‘crowdsourced information warfare’ (Asmolov, 2018, p. 71). Peer-to-peer propaganda is a situation in which a person ‘posts something shared by their own trusted friends, perhaps with comments or angry reactions, shaping their own opinions and assumptions’ (Asmolov, 2018, p. 71) while crowdsourced information warfare ‘highlights how the response to disinformation campaigns relies on the digitally mediated mobilization of a crowd’s resources’ which is commonly based on affective content aimed at provoking emotions of social media users (Asmolov, 2018, p. 71).

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR CENTRAL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

I assume that social and identitarian dimension of the fake news industry produced and disseminated (in Central Europe) by Russia and its allies can be properly interpreted through the new societal cleavages. Russian political elites, official and non-official media networks as well as ‘patriotic campaigners’ are ‘using multiple tools of influence’ to weaken NATO and the EU (Karlsen, 2019). This new style of propaganda works towards reshaping social identities based upon strengthening polarisation between friends and allies on the one hand and enemies on the other hand which can be explained primarily by pro–Western vs. anti-Western dividing lines alongside following societal cleavages:

- the national identities x cosmopolitan cleavage (Novák & Vlachová, 2001; Kitschelt, 1998; Egedy, 2009) which includes condemnation of disliked minorities, immigrants, Muslims and Islam and in general multicultural policies with their NGO’s advocates, opposition to same-sex marriages (Rohac, 2015);
- EUrosceptics x EUro-optimists (Novák & Vlachová, 2001) which is focused on weakening the role of the EU and eroding the impact of EUro-optimists in society – in this regard the media content

is critically focused on European political elites as Angela Merkel and head of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker;

- nostalgia towards communism x advocates of economic liberalism (Kitschelt, 1998);
- the non-educated segment of society x educated elites reinforced by dividing lines around settlement size and urban x rural or based on the classes and ageism – young x elderly (Whitefiled, 2002).

4.1 Media

The above mentioned interrelated network of official actors includes a sophisticated system of official and semi-official blogs, podcasts and (hyper)active social media accounts including videos (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube). To make the picture of the network (almost) complete, Slovak teacher and activist Juraj Smatana created a list of conspiracy websites which manufacture and/or spread pro-Kremlin disinformation. The list contains numerous websites of which many bear reliable, attractive and by far not pro-Kremlin titles (e.g. Free Newspaper, Important, Prime News, Mr. Citizen etc.) (see Smatana, 2015). Additionally, mainstream commercial media in Central Europe are also not immune to pro-Kremlin disinformation propaganda. In another words, they proved an ability to influence strong agenda-setting prior to key parliamentary elections with the issue of mining for lithium in the Czech Republic. At the beginning of October in 2017, immediately after signing the memorandum between the Minister of Industry Jiří Havlíček and Australian private firm European Metals Holdings (EMH), pro-Kremlin online news server Aeronet.cz triggered a far-reaching campaign with text signed only by the acronym VK (the Czech language abbreviation for 'Vedoucí kolotoče' [Chief of the Carousel]) covered by the spectacular headline 'Megatunnel for 3 billion crowns only 17 days prior to elections to lower chamber?' which helped to spread another pro-Kremlin (Aeronet, 2017) message and criticized the allegedly irresponsibly and incompetent Czech minister for giving away a Czech national treasure almost for free to a powerful capitalist company from the West. Subsequently, allied social media networks, of which some are most likely closely knitted to Kremlin-friendly web sites, although unofficially, while some others, to say it precisely, seem to be homegrown (e.g. Svobodné rádio, Parlamentní listy, Protiproud, Vlastenecké noviny, We Are Here at Home and the communist daily paper Haló noviny) helped to spread the information to make it viral and to attract the attention of politicians not only from the populist-extremist party SPD but also from the ANO party and the communist party which directly competed with social democrats over the electorate (Syravátka, 2017, p. 9).

Similarly in Slovakia, after the murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his girlfriend, the fake news industry attempted to discredit subsequent rather spontaneous demonstrations and its organizers from the rank of university students who called themselves the For a Decent Slovakia Initiative and who were demanding resignation of (not really anti-Kremlin politicians) the Minister of Interior Robert Kaliňák and of the Prime Minister Robert Fico. Consequently, pro-Kremlin social media triggered a campaign in which participants on demonstrations and their key organizers were described as guilty for the Maidanization of Slovakia (Zem&Vek, 2018), for Slovakian Spring 2018 organized from abroad and by the media in Slovakia owned by foreign enterprises which could cause the fall of the coalition government and subsequently the destabilization of Slovakia with direct consequences in the form of pro-immigrant President Kiska as only leader on the political scene in the future (Aeronet, 2018).

4.2 Politicians

Most importantly, the *Russian fake news industry* also reaches its audience abroad through the strong support by – mostly homegrown – patriotic campaigners. These can be further sorted by their position in the societal hierarchy in targeted countries. Certainly, in this sophisticated propaganda network, this prominent position is enjoyed by pro-Kremlin figures at the top on the scale. The head of the government in Hungary, the Prime Minister Victor Orban is favourably accepted in Moscow for his authoritarian form of governance, anti-EU, anti-Semitic and strongly anti-immigration views. Orban gained control over both mainstream and alternative media networks in the country and 'since 2015 a domestic network of trolls, fake profiles, and Facebook sites has spread disinformation in Hungary, mostly coming from the Kremlin'

(Szentpéteri, 2019). Even further, the Hungarian government under the leadership of Orbán launched an anti-EU billboard campaign accusing the EU commission of supporting illegal immigration with the liberal US-Hungarian billionaire and Jew George Soros and the Head of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker featured on posters. The campaign was officially condemned by the EU as fake news. Mr. Soros, a founder of the Central European University in Budapest and grand supporter of NGOs linked to human rights agendas including the support of minorities, is a common target of the Hungarian government as was shown by the recent campaign slogan 'Don't let Soros have the last laugh' (BBC, 2019).

Similarly, the Czech President Miloš Zeman with his openly pro-Kremlin views and fake news statements e.g. that 'Novichok was made in the Czech Republic in 2017' enabled the official Russian propaganda with the help of the RT to condemn Western accusations blaming Russian secret services for being behind the poisoning of agent Skripal in UK territory (Robinson, 2018). Back in 2017, Miloš Zeman gave an interview to the Slovak conspiracy online news server Hlavné Správy and published it on his official presidential website (see Hrad.cz, 2017).

As for the former Prime Minister of Slovakia, Jan Čarnogurský, a head of pro-Kremlin Slovak-Russian society, is in consonance with the Kremlin fake news industry as he – interviewed by a disinformation online news server – claims that the western type of liberalism is worse than communism and that the West and the U.S. in particular are guilty for the influx of refugees into Europe from the Middle East (Kříž, 2019).

Further, there are homegrown citizen curators with lower positions in the societal hierarchy which contribute to the dissemination of Russian disinformation into the public sphere through social media. For example, celebrities such as popular singers in the Czech Republic, although in some cases most likely unintentionally (as they most likely are against Kremlin policies – see Rosůlek, 2018) which is why they do not accurately fit into the 'homegrown curators' or 'patriotic campaigners' categories and could be perhaps linked to 'useful idiots' only (Rohac, 2015), spread strong dissatisfaction with the EU political elites and animosity against immigrants, Muslims and Islam and are backing their personal posts and comments by making reference to the websites of media orchestrated directly or indirectly by the pro-Kremlin disinformation agenda (Rosůlek, 2018).

Of course, there are numerous other grassroots' patriotic circles and lone wolves operating on the internet and social media in compliance with the desire of the Kremlin clique; they do it either systematically or ad hoc, either intentionally or unconsciously, yet they can be certainly linked to the fake news industry too as they help to manufacture and spread information within the agenda, however, analysing of their activities would be far beyond the scope of this article.

CONCLUSION

In this text, I described how Russia in its soft-diplomacy attempted to influence global public discourse and that Kremlin does not ignore Central European territory. First of all, apart from my argument based on the fact that news does not revolutionarily differ from fake news, I also argue that the post-truth era is not significantly different from the previous era and, if so, then it is only because of the internet and social media which enables states such as Russia to trigger multiply strategies in which it combines official, semi-official and guerrilla tools of communication. Moreover, a very important – if not crucial – role belongs to the patriotic campaigners, citizen curators as well as useful idiots from different social strata. I argue that these sorts of special and not invariably purposeful activities can be explained by relevant societal cleavages in respective countries such as the Russian fake news industry is – as I further argue – aimed primarily at reshaping social and identitarian groupings (e.g. anti-EU, pan-Slavic, pro-Kremlin etc.) in order to achieve its primary goal – to delegitimize the EU and NATO and pro-Western political elites (and to support supporters of the Kremlin) to influence public opinion in Central Europe.

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