

The Use of RT News in the Projection of Putin's Foreign Policy Narrative

by
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Far from the decimated state it was during the 1990s, Russia has risen to become a key player in many international events, often in opposition to the West. In particular, President Putin and his allies have invested heavily in increasing both Russia's soft power, or its attractiveness to other countries, as well as in developing hybrid warfare, which is the use of information technologies as coercive measures. Some claim that RT News, a Kremlin funded english language news source, is a tool for supporting Russian foreign policy aims. Using a database built from RT News articles, this thesis examines the correlation between their coverage and Putin's foreign policy narrative. The data indicates that RT News is an aspect of hybrid warfare, with a specific focus on undermining and delegitimizing Western states. However, the coverage is not universal, but differs greatly depending on the topic and medium. Nevertheless, this use of media as a foreign policy tool is a threat to the integrity of news media and should be viewed as a Russian foreign policy tool that is potentially damaging.

Key Words: Soft Power, Hybrid Warfare

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Introduction

Since 2000, President Vladimir Putin has overseen Russia's return to the forefront of the world stage. Far from the decimated state it was during the 1990s, Russia has risen to become a key player in many international events by reasserting its interests in former Soviet republics, providing support to crumbling regimes in old spheres of influence, and seeking to achieve Russia friendly outcomes in a variety of US and European elections. This rise in Russia's prominence has been accompanied by two critical changes in strategy. During his second term, President Putin abandoned his pro-Western rhetoric and embraced a confrontational stance with the West, as signaled by his 2007 Speech at the Munich Security Conference, where he harshly criticized the United States and the unipolar world order it had established. Secondly, fueled by an influx of petrodollars, President Putin possessed more resources to achieve his foreign policy objective of re-establishing Russian power on the international stage and has subsequently focused on building Russia's hard and soft power capabilities to achieve Russian interests.

Joseph Nye, renowned international relations scholar, is often credited with coining and emphasizing the importance of "soft power" in addition to hard power. While hard power focuses on the coercive tools, such as military strength, a state has at its disposal to achieve its interests, soft power refers to the attractiveness of a nation as a tool to motivate desired actions from other states.¹ For Nye, for example, the United States' soft power is demonstrated by the pervasiveness of US democratic values, free market economies, and human rights ideals throughout the world.² Soft power has become more influential in modern international relations as nuclear proliferation raises the likelihood that direct conflict will result in catastrophic losses

¹ Eric X. Li, "The Rise and Fall of Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*. August 20, 2018
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/20/the-rise-and-fall-of-soft-power/>.

² Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153-71, doi:10.2307/1148580.

for all involved. The contemporary relationship the United States has with both Russia and China is a clear example of this; because the US, Russia, and China all possess nuclear weapons, direct military conflict is unlikely to result from disputes among these states due to the destructive possibilities of nuclear war. In this context, soft power has become one of the most efficient ways to motivate the actions of other states.

Many aspects of Russia's foreign policy under President Putin demonstrate a desire to increase Russia's soft power. State-owned media networks such as RT and Sputnik, which largely target the citizens of Western states, have been an integral part of these attempts. These networks, which attract millions of subscribers and followers, have expanded to include a vast number of countries and languages. While RT (and the Kremlin) maintain that they are a legitimate news source that fully embodies their motto of "question more," others charge that RT is nothing more than Kremlin mouthpiece and foreign policy tool under the guise of an alternative news source.³ Discerning whether this is the case for RT is important due to its large and ever growing audience. Further, given Russia's possible involvement in the elections of several Western states and its pursuit of leadership on the world stage, it is important to critically examine the motivations and actual coverage of RT News.

This thesis explores the overlap between President Putin's foreign policy world view and the coverage of RT News. In other words, to what extent does RT's reporting reflect a "Putin point of view" on foreign policy? In order to answer this, I have coded a select group of RT articles for several key themes promoted by Putin in his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech. These themes include Western hypocrisy, criticisms of a unipolar world, internal problems within Western states, foreign policy failures of Western states, and Russian prowess along with the vilification of Russia by the West. Further, I compare and contrast the prevalence

³ Ilya Yablokov, "Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (November 2015): 301-15. doi:10.1111/1467-9256.12097.

of these themes in two different policy arenas - the Syrian Civil War and the US-China trade dispute - that represent varying levels of importance to Russia's national interests. While the Syrian Civil War is an issue in which the Russian government has a direct interest and clear policy stance, Russia has a far weaker direct interest in the trade dispute between the US and China.

Three major conclusions can be drawn from the data. First, the amount of themes present in the article does vary depending on the intensity of Russia's stake in the issue being covered. Articles about the Syrian Civil War, in which Russia is heavily involved, contain many more of Putin's themes than articles about the global trade war. Putin's worldview is still present in the trade war coverage, but to a far lesser extent than the Syrian Civil War. Secondly, the data indicates that the medium also is significant. Op-eds and shows, which range from recaps of the week's news to comedy news shows similar to the Daily Show, all contain a greater number of Putin's themes. Finally, themes highlighting the failures of the West are far more prevalent than those emphasizing the prowess of Russia. In sum, the extent to which RT coverage supports Putin's narrative varies with both Russia's interest in the topic and the medium in which they appear.

These results demonstrate that the themes present in Putin's narrative on international relations are present in RT coverage and that their prevalence changes depending on the topic. However, I argue that RT News is not so much an extension of soft power, but more closely resembles hybrid warfare through their use of news coverage to spread Russian ideas about the illegitimacy of the Western dominated world order. RT News is not being used as a tool to increase the attractiveness of Russia; the data demonstrates that it focuses more on delegitimizing the West and sowing conflict within Western states. The use of news media as an

aspect of hybrid warfare has a tremendous impact not only on the reputation of journalism within nations, but also on fueling international conflict today.

The Development of a Bolder Russia

For Russia, the events of the 1990s played an integral role in shaping the eventual foreign policy that would arise later during Vladimir Putin's presidency. The transformation of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union was tumultuous. Transitioning from the state controlled economy of the Soviet Union to a new free market economy was an extremely difficult situation and the economy suffered greatly during this period. Inflation was rampant during this period, as the ruble lost nearly all of its value compared to the dollar, which only worsened after the Russian government defaulted on its debts, which in turn led to the economic crisis of 1998.

In addition, the 1990s was a tumultuous political time for Russia. Under Yeltsin, the oligarchs were able to consolidate and control massive amounts of the Russian economy because of their government connections gained as a result of their support of Yeltsin's successful 1996 presidential re-election campaign.⁴ In addition, the oligarchs were largely free from any accountability as long as they remained allied with Yeltsin, who wielded a significant amount of presidential power granted by the 1993 constitution.⁵ The oligarchs' immense wealth and influence illustrated the weakness of the democratic institutions established in 1993. By the end of Yeltsin's reign, the prosperity many believed democracy and capitalism would bring was a dead dream, as everyday citizens struggled through immense economic turmoil while a few

⁴ Michael L. Bressler, "Politics." in *Understanding Contemporary Russia*, ed. Michael L. Bressler (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2018), 105.

⁵ Bressler, 106.

elite oligarchs consolidated extraordinary amounts of wealth and power. This economic collapse led to both internal insecurity within Russia in addition to invoking negative perceptions from various important Western actors, who often viewed Russia at the turn of the century as “a collapsed and criminal state.”⁶

Russia also struggled to maintain its role in the international system in a post-Soviet world, in which it was no longer a superpower but a much smaller and weaker country. Initially, Russia’s foreign policy approach paralleled the West’s, as Yeltsin sought to integrate Russia into the larger democratic, capitalist world through emulation.⁷ However, that integration into the larger democratic world failed to arise. First, as described above, the economic growth expected to coincide with free market reforms failed to appear. Instead of experiencing growth after years of implementing difficult economic reforms, capitalism only brought economic insecurity for the vast majority of Russians. This loss of economic security that coincided with the adoption of capitalism left large portions of the country disillusioned with capitalism and the West in general.

In addition to the economic losses faced after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia lost its prominent role on the world stage. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the land mass under Moscow’s control and influence drastically decreased along with global influence. However, Russia still remained vastly invested in the former Soviet states and satellite states because of historical ties and the significant amount of ethnic Russian continuing to reside within them. Despite Russia’s retention of the USSR’s powerful permanent seat on the UN Security Council, it was not integrated into other international organizations, including the EU and NATO, which further reduced its global influence and heightened Russia’s skepticism of the

⁶ Shleifer and Treisman, 187.

⁷ Allen C. Lynch, “International Relations,” in *Understanding Contemporary Russia*, ed. Michael L. Bressler (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2018), 185.

West. While Russia was not integrated in these international organizations, many states previously under Soviet influence further compounded Russia's tensions with the West. NATO's 1999 announcement of an "open door" policy for membership and subsequent addition of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland shaped Russia's view of NATO as a threat to its influence and security.⁸ Russia's apprehension over EU and NATO expansion resulted in the creation of several collaborative measures to foster cooperation with Russia, such as the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Committee and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Russia, but these largely failed to reduce tensions amidst the expansions.⁹ By the end of the Yeltsin era, increasing economic insecurity and the reduction of Russia's influence following the collapse of the Soviet Union fostered what Margot Light refers to as "pragmatic nationalism," a position that has few illusions about either the West's willingness or capability to integrate Russia...¹⁰ Russian citizens, both within Russia and the larger area of the former Soviet Union, quickly lost faith and trust in Western led democratic integration due to the chaos within Russia and the depletion of Russia's global and regional influence.

Upon assuming the presidency in 2000, Vladimir Putin sought to reverse the weakening of the state that occurred throughout the 1990s. The domestic policy of Putin sought to improve the economy and re-establish the strength of the state. One of the clearest expressions of this is illustrated by the tremendous reduction in public foreign debt, which dropped from 66.8 percent of GDP in 1999 to 2.7 percent in 2007.¹¹ In addition to the reduction of state spending, the export price of oil grew immensely providing a vast windfall for the Russian economy accounting for around 30 percent of Russia's GDP by Putin's second term.¹² In addition to paying off debt

⁸ Margot Light, "Foreign Policy," in *Developments in Russian Politics 8*, ed. Stephen White, Richard Sakwa, and Henry E. Hale (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 224.

⁹ Light, 224-227.

¹⁰ Lynch, 186.

¹¹ Pekka Sutela, "Economic Policy," in *Return to Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, edited by Wegren, Stephen K, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 174.

¹² Sutela, 174.

accumulated throughout the 1990s, this rise in oil prices gave Putin the ability to establish reserve funds that could maintain the stability of the ruble and restore Russians' confidence in the ruble and the state itself. The ability of Russia to have economic sovereignty and security greatly strengthened their position internationally and allowed Putin to adopt a more combative approach with the United States and the West.

The foreign policy of Putin during his first term as president was mostly a continuation of Yeltsin's policies. He accepted Russia's relative weakness and acknowledged the need to avoid conflict in order to remain a part of the larger international political and economic communities.¹³ In turn, Western states believed that Russia could still be integrated and aligned within the Western dominated world order. However, global events pitting the Western world against Russia quickly dissolved this belief and led to a major shift in Russia foreign policy.

The expansion of Western organizations into areas considered by Russia to be in their sphere of influence was a major source of tension between Putin and the West. Previously under Yeltsin, Russia's interaction with NATO is described by Lynch as Russia begrudgingly accepting "what it could not change and in the process negotiated a symbolic compensation with NATO..."¹⁴ For Yeltsin, NATO expansion was something that was inevitable, but still something Russia could mediate or leverage for better terms with the West. NATO expansions into Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia continued to fray US Russian relations through Putin's early years as the US would never grant "an exclusive Russian sphere of economic and security interest along the southern borderlands of the former USSR."¹⁵ The expansion of NATO and Western influence within states previously under

¹³ Lynch, 190.

¹⁴ Lynch, 187.

¹⁵ Lynch, 193.

Russian influence remained a long held source of tension that would continue to fray US Russian relations.

Further, the Color Revolutions, and the ousting of pro-Russian leaders in favor of pro-Western ones, represented a further turn towards Europe for additional states previously under Soviet influence. For example, the people of both Ukraine and Georgia elected pro-Western leaders who actively sought to join NATO.¹⁶ These pro-Western leaders were then seen as more of a threat to Russian influence; in Georgia the subsequent involvement of the US military signaled Russia would no longer be the sole influential power within these states.¹⁷ The Western encouragement of the Ukrainian and Georgian movements to turn towards Europe and the West was seen as a major threat to Russia and drastically deteriorated their relationship with the West.

Vladimir Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, an annual international conference on security policy, is seen by many as Putin's official break from the West and announcement of a stronger and more aggressive Russian foreign policy in support of a multipolar world order. Putin signaled that Russia would not become an integrated part of the Western dominated world order and would instead seek to establish a multipolar system. He described the failures of the existing unipolar system when he said "It is world in which there is one master, one sovereign. And at the end of the day this is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within."¹⁸ This quote also hints at the domestic struggles that plague the US and other Western states face in the existing unipolar system. Putin also charged that the Western world order not only failed to achieve global stability, but in many cases was responsible for an increased amount of global

¹⁶ Light, 222.

¹⁷Light, 223.

¹⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," President of Russia, Feb 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

conflict and instability. His solution is to establish a multipolar world order, which he demonstrates through describing the prowess of non-Western states: “The combined GDP measured in purchasing power parity of countries such as India and China is already greater than that of the United States.”¹⁹ Putin’s Munich speech established the new focus on establishing a multipolar world order that continues to shape Russia’s foreign policy today.

In addition to focusing on undermining the existing unipolar world order, he highlighted the hypocrisies of the US and other Western states. This is demonstrated when he stated, “Incidentally, Russia – we – are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves.”²⁰ This quote also illustrates his critique against the portrayal of Russia by the West as a lesser state that needs to be taught and guided to democracy. Additionally, he emphasized the prowess and greatness of Russia. Specifically, he focused on the immense transformation Russia had made since the fall of Soviet Union by saying “Indeed, we witnessed a peaceful transformation of the Soviet regime – a peaceful transformation! And what a regime! With what a number of weapons, including nuclear weapons!” This quote demonstrates his belief in Russia’s exceptionalism in transitioning peacefully, while also reminding the world of the vast military resources they still possess. Putin’s 2007 Munich speech laid a critique of the US unipolar world order, emphasized the hypocrisy of the West, and sought to counter the Western portrayal of Russia of a corrupt and weakened state.

Russia’s foreign policy after Putin’s 2007 Munich speech projected a much more prominent and combative Russia in international relations. Instead of being integrated into the West, as Yeltsin and Putin had initially sought, Russia sought to counter the West and reclaim their former sphere of influence. To accomplish this, Russia had to push out the Western

¹⁹ Putin Munich Speech.

²⁰ Putin.

influence that had expanded from the 1990s onwards. This laid the foundations for a combative relationship between Russian and the West, and resulted in the Russian attempt to re-establish their influence in their near abroad and reduce the perceived legitimacy of the West.

To achieve this, Russia has implemented several soft power policies to increase its influence. For example, hosting the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup can be seen as attempts to make Russia more attractive to the international community through the demonstrations of their prosperity and prestige. The establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 can also be seen as a Russian attempt to increase their economic attractiveness among neighboring states. However, the results stemming from these policies are minimal compared to Russia's success from coercive policies. Putin has raised energy prices and shut off the supply of energy resources for neighboring states that have failed to pay their energy debts or agree to a new price.²¹ These coercive pressures can also influence states to prevent them from turning to Europe and Western organizations, as can be seen in Ukraine. Russia pressured Ukraine to join the Eurasian Union by using its control over Ukraine's energy supplies in order to "foreclose Ukraine's European option and induce Ukraine to join the Russo-centric Eurasian Union."²² While Russia has attempted several soft power measures to increase their attractiveness and rival the West, these measures have accomplished far less in increasing Russia's influence among neighboring states, so Russia has adopted much more coercive measures.

Many scholars argue that these coercive measures more closely resemble what is known as "hybrid" warfare. The coinage of this term is often credited to Russian Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov and his 2013 article, *The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat*

²¹ Light, 222.

²² Lynch, 201.

Operations. He argues that “The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness”.²³ Christopher Chivvis’ article “*Hybrid Warfare*” and *What Can be Done About It* expounds on this method of warfare and lists three major objectives. These are “capturing territory without resorting to overt or conventional military force”, “creating a pretext for overt, conventional military action”, and “using hybrid measures to influence the politics and policies of countries in the West and elsewhere.”²⁴ Chivvis argues that these objective are critical aspects of Russia’s foreign policy; the use of proxies, economic pressures, clandestine measures, and political influence are the main tools, as we have seen recently in Ukraine and Western elections.²⁵ These information operations, which seek to reshape narratives and spread misinformation through the use of entities including Russia Today, are seen as a threat to Chivvis and something that needs to be addressed further.²⁶ Chivvis argues Russia’s use of hybrid warfare is a crucial aspect of Russian foreign policy that is a great threat to the foreign policies of the US and other Western states.

Putin’s resumption of the Russian presidency in 2012 demonstrated a bolder Putin in combating Western influence by increasing the direct use of force and hybrid warfare. In the near abroad, Russia’s intervention in Ukraine and Crimea demonstrated a far more aggressive Russia. When it appeared that Russia’s coercive measures to maintain its influence over Ukraine had failed, Russia turned to a far more direct approach of using Russian troops during their annexation of Crimea and within Eastern Ukraine throughout Ukraine’s Civil War.²⁷

²³ Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations.” translated by Robert Coalson, in *Military Review* (January 2016), 23-29.

²⁴ Christopher Chivvis, “Understanding Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’ and What Can be Done About It,” Testimony before the Committee on Armed Services United States House of Representatives (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2017): 2-3.

²⁵ Chivvis, 3-4.

²⁶ Chivvis, 3-9.

²⁷ Lynch, 205.

However, a bolder Russia is not limited towards the near abroad, but can also be found in Russia's involvement in Syria. In the Syrian Civil War, Russia has taken a strong stance in support of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. This can be seen from their use of their UN Security Council veto of a US introduced resolution denouncing the human rights violations committed by the Syrian government under Assad.²⁸ The use of Russian troops in Syria and in support of Assad also demonstrates the expression of a bolder Russia under Putin.

Along with an increase in Russian boldness within areas to minimize the global influence of the West, Russia has also made attempts to delegitimize perceptions of the West within the West itself. The clearest example of this can be Russia's interference in the 2016 US elections and in the elections of other Western countries, including Italy, France, and Germany. Lynch describes the motives of Russia's interference in US elections as consisting of three parts: weakening American confidence in their democratic institutions, supporting Donald Trump's agenda, and weakening the candidacy of Hillary Clinton.²⁹ These interferences are Russian attempts to weaken the internal and international strength of these states and the legitimacy of the West more broadly. In addition to election interference, Russia has also invested in alternative media networks within Western states in order to distribute the Russian perspective, or, as some maintain, deliberate misinformation. As part of a bolder Russia, Putin has undertaken greater involvement in Western countries directly in order to pursue the policy of a Russian alternative to the West.

While Chivvis sees these new foreign policy actions of Russia as an expression of hybrid warfare and a danger to the US, other scholars view hybrid warfare as a minimal aspect of Russia's foreign policy. Andrew Monaghan argues in his article *The "War" in Russia's "Hybrid Warfare"* that the greatest Russian threat is their physical military strength, and points to

²⁸ Lynch, 196.

²⁹ Lynch, 195.

Russia's military use in Syria and Eastern Ukraine.³⁰ For Monaghan, Russia's use of hybrid warfare, or non-military tools, is far less of a threat than Russia's actual military strength. Further scholars, such as Peter Rutland and Andrei Kazantsev, view Russia's attempts to increase their soft power and attractiveness as failing due to their embrace of coercive aspects of hybrid warfare. They argue the corruption surrounding Russia's hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup and 2014 Sochi Olympics undermines any of the soft power or attractiveness gained from hosting these events.³¹ They also point to Russia Today as another failed soft power attempt due to its lack of "positive ideas and values which can attract people" and its backing of mixed messages which support "both ultra-left and right-wing forces."³² Unlike previous scholars who have emphasized the Russian threat due to hybrid warfare, Rutland and Kazantsev are critical of Russian leaders, whom they argue do not understand soft power in a Western sense and continue to weaken their own international standing.

Russia's historical legacy and practices have been extremely influential in the development of Russia's foreign policy. The historical purpose of using media to further the interests of those in control of the media continues to shape the role of Russian media today. Several global events, including the expansion of NATO, have also greatly shaped Putin's contemporary foreign policy and Russia's far greater involvement in international events. In contemporary Russian foreign policy, hybrid warfare has been an integral term of discussion. While there is disagreement over the effectiveness of Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, the practice of hybrid warfare by Russia is near universally accepted and RT News remains a clear example of Russia's use of information operations as a part of a larger practice of hybrid warfare.

³⁰ Andrew Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'," *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2015): 68.

³¹ Peter Rutland and Andrei Kazantsev, "The Limits of Russia's 'soft Power'." *Journal of Political Power* 9, no. 3 (2016): 404.

³² Rutland and Kazantsev, 403.

Methodology

The use of media for political purposes has been a long held practice throughout Russia's history. Sarah Oates describes the purpose of media during the period of the Soviet Union to "educate the public in the central tenets of the ideology of the ruling Communist Party and to inculcate support for communist ideals."³³ Media was not meant as a service to inform the public, but as a tool of the state to further its ideology and political aims. Propaganda was a major aspect in the use of media and is something that continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union.³⁴ Sarah Oates describes the journalistic norms after the fall of the Soviet Union as appearing "to have changed relatively little".³⁵ Whether privately or state owned, news networks were viewed as tools for influencing the public and furthering the interests of the owners instead of pursuing an objective truth of information.³⁶ Even in post-Soviet Russia, the media remained a tool to further the political interests of the state or owners.

Once Putin assumed office, he strengthened and entrenched the historical practice of using the media to pursue his own aims. After unfriendly coverage of the Kursk incident, in which a nuclear powered submarine sank to the bottom of the Barents Sea with 118 personnel on board, two of the largest independent news networks (NTV and ORT) fell under state control as their oligarchic owners were forced to flee persecution and the state.³⁷ Critical coverage was replaced with Kremlin friendly commentary, such as the framing of Russia's involvement in Chechnya in a positive light or the complete ignoring of the issue of corruption in the Russian government.³⁸ However, the use of media as a political tool has been less accepted by the

³³ Sarah Oates, "Russia's Media and Political Communication in the Digital Age," in *Developments in Russian Politics 8*, ed. Stephen White, Richard Sakwa, and Henry E. Hale (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 131.

³⁴ Oates, 132.

³⁵ Oates, 132.

³⁶ Oates, 132.

³⁷ Bressler, 114.

³⁸ Oates, 135.

Russian public as can be seen from the 2011-2012 protests. These protests were largely fueled by the new technologies of the internet and rise of journalism outside of the state's control.³⁹ An argument can be made that these events have led to the rise of further Russian censorship of the internet and possibly encouraged Russia's incorporation of the internet as one of their tools of influence.

RT News is a network that has grown and continues to develop its international audience, as it attempts to be perceived as a legitimate alternative to larger Western dominated media organizations. The network launched in 2005 and is "now a global, round-the-clock news network of eight TV channels."⁴⁰ While initially launched to promote Russian culture abroad, RT News shifted to become more of a Russian policy tool in countering Western policy and media coverage in light of the generally negative presentation of Russia provided during Russia's war with Georgia.⁴¹ This has shaped RT News as a counterbalance to "the 'information monopoly' of Western media."⁴² Recently, RT News has continued to grow in reach and is now accessible in over 100 countries.⁴³ The growth in the sheer size of RT News has also coincided with attempts to increase the perceived legitimacy of RT News as well. RT News has had programs with famous broadcaster Larry King and Wikileaks founder Julian Assange.⁴⁴ The use of famous and well respected journalists can be seen as an attempt by RT News to strengthen the international perceptions of RT. This perception is important because of the large international audience RT News boasts. RT claims they have over 100 million weekly viewers with 11 million coming from US viewers.⁴⁵ In addition, RT News has a robust presence on social media platforms, which include Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook. On Youtube, RT claims to be the number one news

³⁹ Oates, 140.

⁴⁰ "About RT." *Russia Today: Question More*. Accessed March 3, 2019. <https://www.rt.com/about-us/>.

⁴¹ Yablokov, 305.

⁴² Yablokov, 305.

⁴³ About RT.

⁴⁴ About RT.

⁴⁵ About RT.

network with over 12 million subscribers across its various channels.⁴⁶ However, these, and other RT claims should be met with some skepticism, as RT's main channel has only 3 million subscribers, which is far below the 6 million of CNN. All in all, RT News continues to grow its already large audience through internet news and other social media sites, but its viewership and media reach is still far lower than the major Western media companies.

In order to determine to what extent RT News coverage mirrors Putin's foreign policy, several themes from Putin's 2007 Munich Conference Speech were extracted to see if they are present in RT News articles as well. Putin's 2007 Munich Conference Speech was chosen because it is often seen as Putin's official public break from cooperating with the Western dominated world order. During this speech, Putin placed great emphasis on the unipolar world order dominated by Western states, specifically the US. He called out the hypocrisy of Western states, the domestic and international failures that occurred under the Western unipolar system, and called for the formation of a multipolar world order. While focusing mostly on Western nations in this speech, Putin also highlighted the vilification of Russia, and himself by the West, and emphasized the strength and prowess of the Russian state. These six themes act as the backbone of his speech and of Russian foreign policy as well.

Next, a determination of which articles to code was made. The two search terms that were chosen were "Syrian Civil War" and "Trade War," with the aim of gaining a larger diversity of news coverage. Russia has a far more invested interest politically in the Syrian war due to their role in the conflict. Russia has been a staunch supporter for Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad with friendly relations between the countries dating back to the Soviet era, which was furthered by Russia's deployment of troops within Syria in the fall of 2015 to combat ISIS.⁴⁷ Russia and

⁴⁶ About RT.

⁴⁷ Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl Cross, *China, Russia, and Twenty-first Century Global Geopolitics*, First ed. (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 180.

Syria have also remained close on aspects outside of the military sphere; before their military involvement, Russia had invested upwards of \$20 billion to develop Syria's energy resources, infrastructure and tourism.⁴⁸ Russia's relations with the Assad regime and Syria has been historically strong, which also greatly increases Russia's interest in the conflict, thereby making it a topic worthy of coding to determine the presence of Russian narratives in RT News' coverage of the conflict.

The other term, "Trade War," was chosen because it captures differing areas than the "Syrian Civil War" term. Articles revolving around the term "Trade War" mostly deal with the economic conflicts between the US and China. This is not to say Russia is entirely absent from this issue, but their direct role is far less substantial than it is in Syria. In addition, "Trade War" is a far broader term that brings up different styles of articles than what appears under the "Syrian Civil War" term. For example, business news articles make up the bulk of what appears when "Trade War" is the search term while none appear when searching "Syrian Civil War." These two search terms were chosen in order to cull a wider variety of articles and topics.

With both search terms decided, the articles were then coded. Each term was searched and every other article was coded beginning with the last one on November 30, 2018 and then going backwards. In total, 69 articles appeared under a search for the "Syrian Civil War" and 76 under the term "Trade War." The articles under "Syrian Civil War" range from January 2018 to November 2018, while "Trade War" articles stretch only from October 2018 to November 2018. This is on account of the much larger quantity of articles that appear under the search term of "Trade War." In addition, the articles were limited to 2018 because of the limitations of the RT search feature in only going back so far. Each of these coded articles were read for the presence of any of the six themes mentioned above. These themes were domestic failures and

⁴⁸ Bolt and Cross, 180.

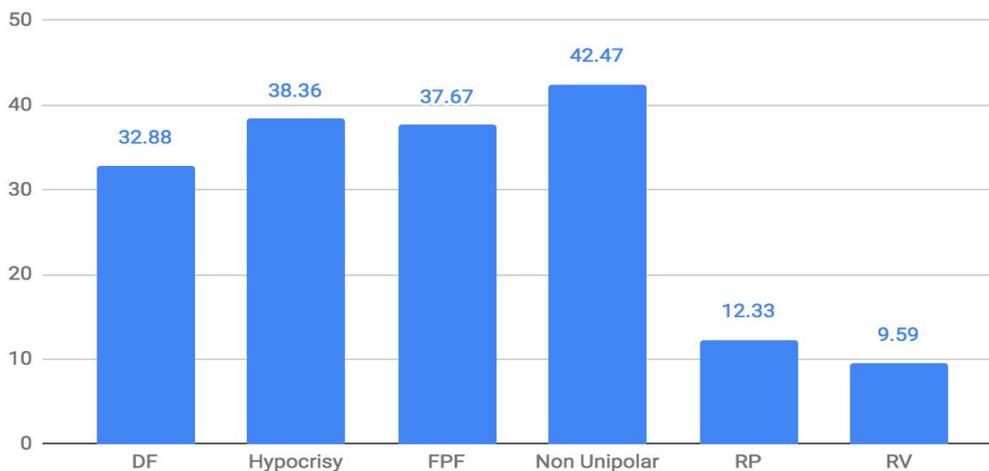
insecurities in Western states, Western hypocrisy, foreign policy failures of Western states, criticism of a unipolar world or support of a multipolar one, Russian prowess, and Russian vilification by the West. The presence, or lack thereof, was then recorded for each theme for each article along with the date, article type, and title.

Results

The data collected illustrates the prevalence of Putin's foreign policy themes found in RT News' coverage. In addition, the data also illustrates the way the specific mediums used by RT News influences the degree to which Putin's foreign policy themes are present in their coverage. From this data, several conclusions can be drawn; some themes are more prevalent than others and the news topic and news mediums impact the prevalence of themes found in the articles.

Chart 1⁴⁹

The Presence of Each Theme in Articles Coded (Percent)



⁴⁹ For tables 1 and 2: DF= Western Domestic Failures; H= Western Hypocrisy; FPF= Western Foreign Policy Failures and Destabilization; Non Unipolar= Criticism of Unipolar System or Support of Multipolar; RP= Russian Prowess; RV= Vilification of Russia by the West

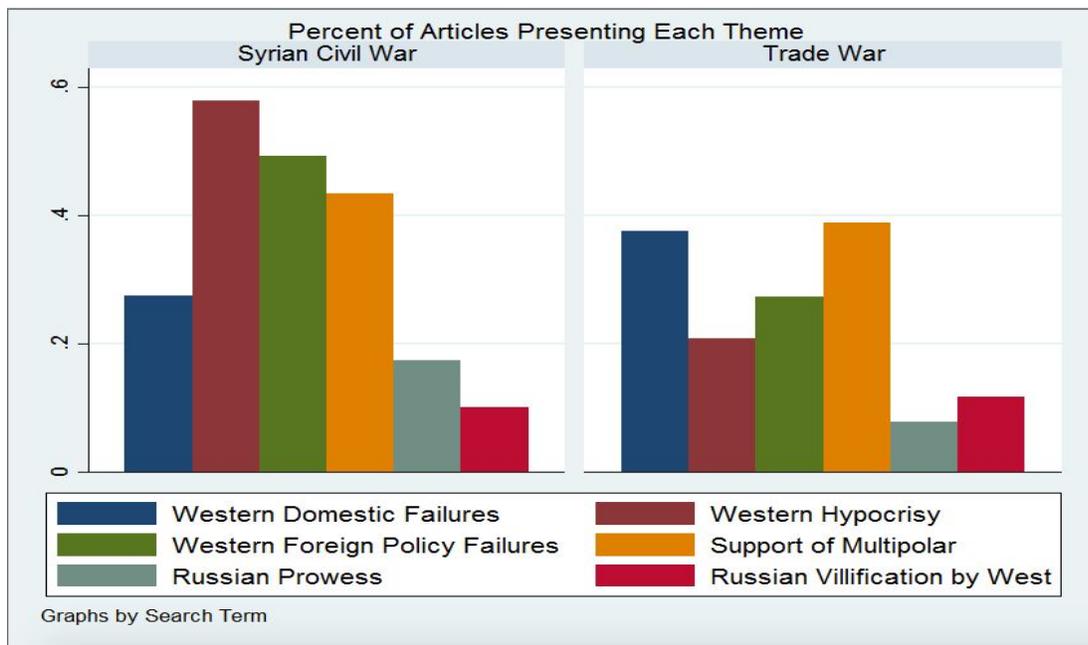
Chart 1 illustrates the percentage each theme was present in the total amount of coded articles. For example, the theme Criticism of a Unipolar World was the most common; it was present in 42.47 percent of all articles coded. Western Domestic Failures, Western Hypocrisy, and Western Foreign Destabilizing Actions or Policy Failure were all similar to this with percentages of 32.88, 38.36, and 37.67 respectively. The difference is seen regarding the themes of Russian Prowess and Russian Vilification by the West, which were only present in 12.33 and 9.59 percent of articles respectively. While all six of these themes play a prominent role in Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference Speech and later foreign policy, the themes specifically addressing Russia have far less of a presence throughout RT's coverage. The lessened presence of these two themes is likely attributed to the fact that RT's target audience is often a foreign one. Articles promoting the strength of Russia are likely to not be as impactful or desirable to a largely Western foreign audience. The same logic can be applied to the theme of Russian Vilification by the West; the foreign audience that RT targets is far more likely to care and engage with articles regarding their own country over commentary on how Russia is portrayed by Western states and media. The lower frequency of themes directly mentioning Russia is likely caused by RT News' target audience of non-Russians; this shapes the focus of coverage to topics outside of Russia.

Chart 2 illustrates the percentage of articles containing each theme according to search term. While the P value of the resulting crosstab between the average number of themes and search term was not significant, this chart demonstrates that different themes were more common depending on the search term.⁵⁰ While certain themes differ drastically between the two search terms, others appear at similar amounts. For example, the expression of Western Hypocrisy occurred at a rate almost three times higher in articles under the search term Syrian

⁵⁰ See Appendix and Table 2 for full crosstab

Civil War compared to those that appeared under the search term Trade War. The theme of Western Foreign Policy Failures is also far greater in Syrian Civil War articles compared to those found under Trade War. The difference between the presence of the Western Hypocrisy and Western Foreign Policy Failures among the differing search terms were the only significant difference. A cross tab by search term for Western Hypocrisy and Western Foreign Policy Failures had a P value of 0.000 and had a P value of 0.006 respectively.⁵¹

Chart 2



Compared to the other themes, these results of significant difference are understandable. On issues regarding the Syrian Civil War, the foreign policy failures of the West are far more likely to be presented because Russia's actions within Syria are often in conflict with or opposed to the actions of Western states in the region. In addition, the same logic can

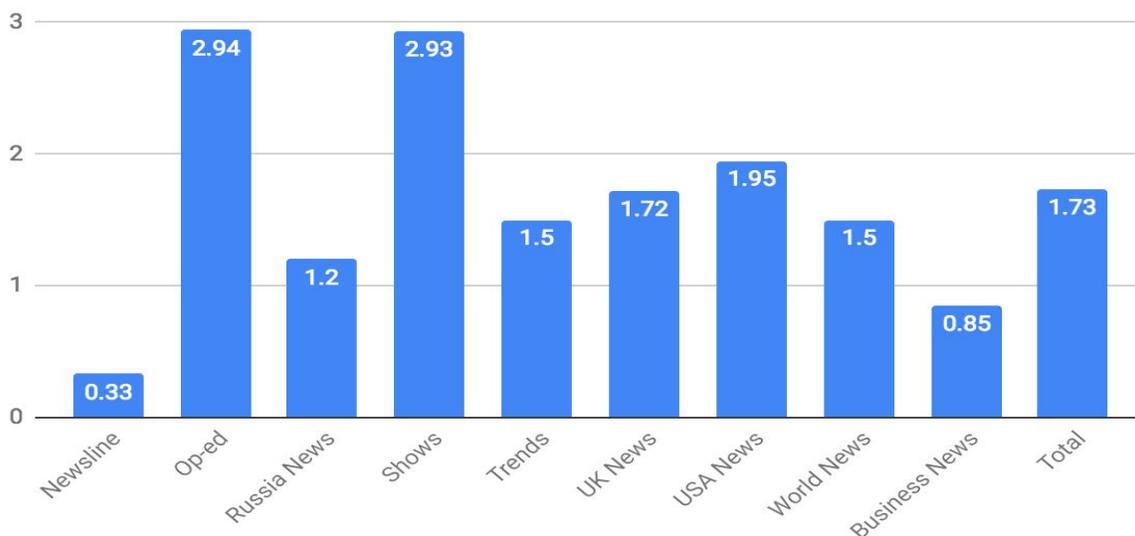
⁵¹ See Appendix and Tables 3 and 4 for full crosstab

be applied to the theme of Western Hypocrisy because the hypocrisy of the US and other Western countries in regard to their policy in Syria and other countries is an established aspect of the Russian foreign policy narrative. This graph illustrates the fact that RT's news coverage differs depending on the topic they are covering and the relationship of that topic with the Russian state.

In a similar vein, the data from Chart 3 reveals the impact that differing news mediums have on the average number of themes found per article. A cross tab of medium and number of themes results in a significant P Value of .002.⁵² The two mediums that had the highest average of themes per article were Op-ed and Shows with an average of just under 3 themes per item. In comparison, the mediums Newslines, Russian News, and Business News were the lowest; all three of them averaged below 1.5 themes per article. The remaining mediums, which include Trends, UK News, US News, and World News all reside somewhere between 1.5 and 2 themes per article. As with the discussion previously regarding the differences between search terms, the source of differences among varying mediums is likely caused by a number of factors.

Chart 3

Average Number of Themes Per Article (Both Terms Combined)



One of the most noticeable differences is based on the length of articles. The longer the article, the more room to integrate more themes, so the longer mediums have a higher average amount of themes per article. This can be seen from the Shows medium, which each ran for approximately thirty minutes. These thirty minute shows provided far more content than the articles found in other mediums, and among this increased content and information was a higher chance of more themes present. The opposite of this can be seen in the Newline medium. Newline articles were limited to a maximum of one or two paragraphs that simply stated newsworthy information. There was very little room for interpretive themes to occur within the condensed Newline articles. All in all, the longer the article, the more room to cover topics that could touch on a greater portion of the coded themes.

While the length of the article has a significant impact on the prevalence of coded themes throughout an article, differences can still be seen between mediums that share articles of similar length. Specifically, Op-eds and Business News articles have a drastic difference in the average number of present themes per article despite being of similar length on average. Articles labeled as Op-eds had the highest average number of themes present per article at 2.94, which is significantly higher than the 0.85 average that was found under articles labeled Business News. Here again, the nature of the news medium impacts the number of themes present. Op-eds, and their inherent persuasive purpose, allows for greater freedom in expressing opinions or value statements. These opinions and value statements are then far more likely to express the themes coded, which also often take the form of value statements. For example, it is far more likely to find the theme of Western Hypocrisy in an Op-ed because the author can make opinionated statements directly that would not be as acceptable under the journalistic norms of other mediums. Another factor in shaping the number of themes can be

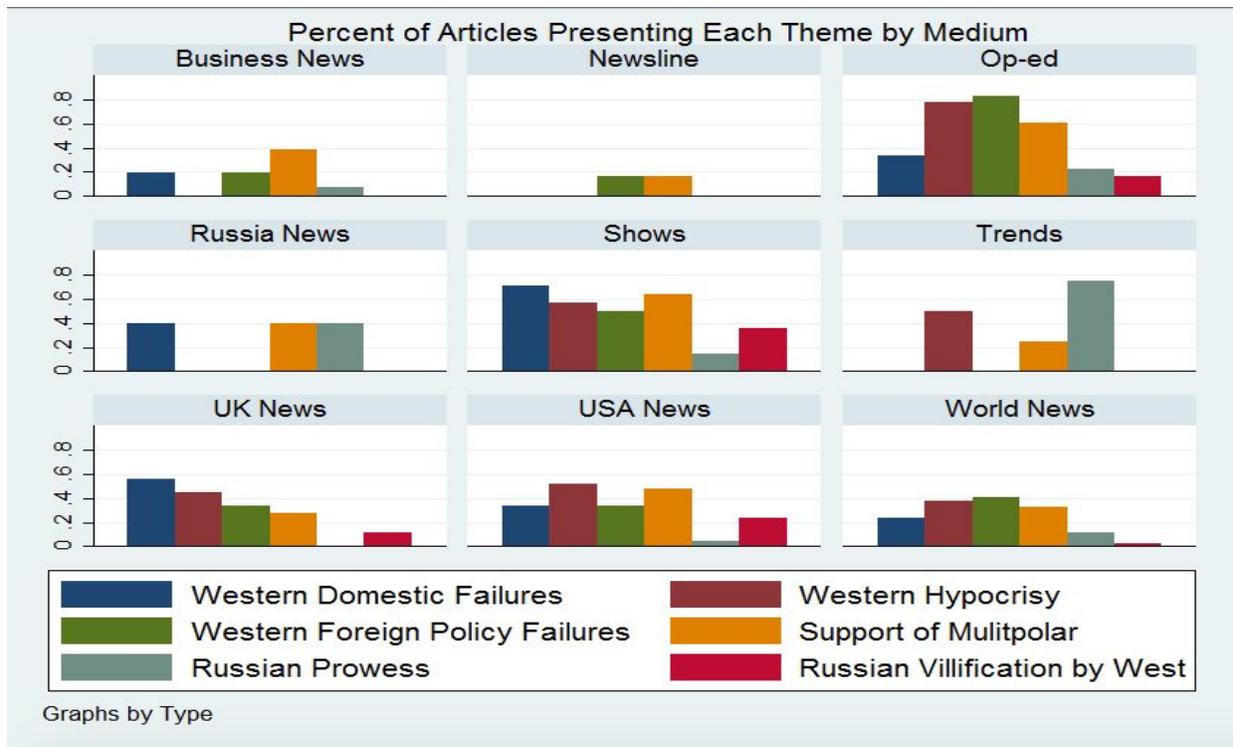
seen in Business News Articles, which had far fewer average themes on account of the level of technical facts and details present in Business News articles. The average length of articles in addition to the specific journalistic norms for each medium play a significant role in determining the prevalence of Putin's themes in RT News' coverage.

Another aspect that is demonstrated from table 3 is the slightly higher average of themes per article for RT articles covering Western countries compared to Russian and World News. While the difference is lower than what was previously discussed, the 1.2 average theme per article found in articles under Russian News is lower than US News, UK News, and World News. In addition, US and UK News articles had the highest average with 1.95 and 1.72 respectively. This difference may be indicative of RT's increased use of the coded themes in their news coverage of Western states. One possible explanation for this could be RT's greater desire to push the narrative represented by Putin on a Western audience, who are more likely to read and become engaged with news that covers the events of their own country. This would also explain why Russian News articles possessed so few themes on average. Since RT News is largely targeted at a foreign audience, the Russian viewership is smaller and less emphasized, which could explain the reduced amount of themes present in Russian News. On the other hand, the difference may also be explained by the fact that the US and UK largely represent Putin's new foreign policy stance critiquing a unipolar world. Therefore, the coverage regarding these countries is far more likely to contain themes emphasized within Putin's largely anti-US/Western foreign policy. In reality, it is likely a combination of Putin's hostility to the West as well as RT's target audience, which mostly resides in Western countries.

Chart 4 further demonstrates how the medium and type of article has an immense impact on the number of themes found within each article. Unsurprisingly, Op-eds and Shows have some of the highest percentages of presented themes due to their extended length and

focus on analysis over news. Chart 4 also shows how certain themes are more closely associated with certain mediums than others. The greatest example of this is Western Hypocrisy, which has a strong presence in Op-eds, Trends, World News, Shows, US News, and UK News. However, Western Hypocrisy is entirely absent from Business News, Russia News, and Newline articles. This is likely on account of the inherent attachment Western Hypocrisy has with the actions of Western states. With this in mind, it is more understandable to see why no articles covering Russian news express the theme of Western Hypocrisy. The specific medium used in RT News' coverage plays an immense role in influencing the number of themes expressed; the increased length and freedom in voicing opinions allows for the presentation of more themes.

Chart 4



Conclusion

While this data is unlikely to conclusively demonstrate the direct impact RT News has on the politics of the US or other Western states, it can help illuminate what the attempted aims of RT News are. From the data collected, three broad conclusions can be drawn. First, RT News coverage overlaps significantly with the anti-Western narrative put forth from the Kremlin. However, the amount of themes found in RT's coverage depends on the topic and the medium. Finally, RT's coverage focuses on highlighting the failures of Western states instead of promoting Russian prowess. These conclusions raise further questions on the legitimacy of RT News and of its impact within the Western states it targets. As the impact of misinformation and fake news becomes increasingly widespread, the ability for RT News to easily portray itself as an alternative, but legitimate news organization must be questioned.

An overall theme found in coding these RT News articles was the commonality of Western failures. RT's coverage highlighted a plethora of Western failures, which included economic insecurity, the domestic failures of Western democracies, and the destabilizing consequences resulting from the foreign policies of Western states. The emphasis given to these aspects can hardly be surprising given the prominence they play in Putin's narrative on international relations. By highlighting these failures, RT News continues the rhetoric of Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference Speech in an effort to delegitimize the West in the eyes of individuals not just within Russia, but around the globe.

Within the unipolar system, so criticized by Russia, the US resides at the center. A unipolar world system dominated by the US creates little room for alternative sources of influence. With this in mind, the attacks on the failure of Western states can be seen as a way to decrease the support for the US globally and their dominance in international relations. RT News is the tool to convey the message of Western failures directly to the citizens residing

within those countries. By doing this, and fanning the flames of existing frustrations within Western states, RT News likely fosters the contempt of many citizens towards their own country. For Russia, the benefits of these sentiments can be enormous. Firstly, highlighting the failures of Western states lowers the moral authority usually afforded to these states. This, in turn, lowers the moral difference between Russia and the US, which affords Putin's authoritarian government further justification and greater legitimacy for their actions, because at RT News and Putin maintain, the actions of the US are also flawed. In addition to this benefit, a populace constantly bombarded by the failures of their own country are far more likely to focus on internal reform instead of calling for a greater position on the world stage. This would be a major boon for Russia because an isolationist United States would be unlikely to condemn or call for action against Russia or interfere within Russia's sphere of influence. Whether RT News is attempting to delegitimize the US dominated world order to reduce the monopoly that democratic institutions have on the definition of legitimate governments, convince foreign and domestic populations within democratic states to support a more isolationist approach, or a combination of both, reducing the security and perceived legitimacy of Western states is a critical aspect of RT News.

While the specific impact of RT News is within Western states has is unknown, the clear championing of Putin's foreign policy creates a danger within the US and other Western states. RT News is directly reflective of Putin's policy. While having Putin's, or a Russian, narrative of events is not inherently dangerous, its presentation as a legitimate news source is. With the continuously rise of the internet and easier access to a far greater variety of media, the emergence of new sources of news has drastically grown. While this can provide pluralism in viewpoint as well as in the coverage of events that may have been previously ignored, the proliferation of these news networks also comes with reduced level of accountability and

credibility. RT News embodies the latter due to its expansive use of the internet to extend its reach in addition to the narratives pushed by its ultimate owners, the Russian state.

Addressing the problem of RT News poses several challenges for Western states. Firstly, RT News uses the privileges of media freedom granted by democratic institutions within Western states to then launch their critique of these states. These various free speech and media protection laws found in many Western states often make removing RT News unfeasible. This is also compounded by the large online presence of RT News. Since RT News is unavoidable for many states, the solution to diminish its influence lies in implementing media education programs for the public. With the consequences stemming from the spread of misinformation becoming more severe and widespread, action needs to be taken to educate the population of these new challenges. The internet has provided millions of people with an infinite amount of information at their fingertips, but limited tools to protect them against the people, states, or other actors that seek to manipulate the spread of information for their own interests. Within the US, the public education system would be the best conduit for countering media disinformation; the existing education that addresses the legitimacy of sources can be expanded to a larger discussion of some of the broader domestic and international conflicts driving the spread of “fake” news. Regarding RT News, it could be as simple as informing the public of its ownership by the Russian state, although a broader education against the common problem of misinformation would still provide countless benefits.

After the events of his first two terms, Putin took a far harsher stance regarding the US dominated Western world. RT News can be seen as one expression of this idea. Unlike the aims expressed under soft power, which are attempts to make one’s country appear more attractive in the international community, the narrative portrayed by RT News is to make the West look worse. While some previous scholarship has portrayed RT News as a failed attempt

at soft power, these critics miss the purpose of RT. RT News is not a simple platform to raise the attractiveness of Russia; it pursues the aims of the Kremlin by diminishing the attractiveness of the West and undermining the global influence and dominance of the US and the West. It should more correctly be seen as an example of hybrid warfare, or the use of nonmilitary means to achieve strategic foreign policy goals, which in the current Russian context, are extremely hostile to the Western liberal world order that has governed much of the multilateral internationalist of the post World War II era.

Appendix

Table 1

# of Themes	Type									Total
	Busines..	Newsline	Op-ed	Russia ..	Shows	Trends	UK News	USA News	World N..	
0	8 30.77	4 66.67	0 0.00	1 20.00	0 0.00	0 0.00	2 11.11	2 9.52	7 20.59	24 16.44
1	14 53.85	2 33.33	2 11.11	2 40.00	4 28.57	2 50.00	8 44.44	7 33.33	13 38.24	54 36.99
2	4 15.38	0 0.00	3 16.67	2 40.00	3 21.43	2 50.00	4 22.22	6 28.57	7 20.59	31 21.23
3	0 0.00	0 0.00	8 44.44	0 0.00	1 7.14	0 0.00	2 11.11	2 9.52	5 14.71	18 12.33
4	0 0.00	0 0.00	4 22.22	0 0.00	3 21.43	0 0.00	1 5.56	4 19.05	1 2.94	13 8.90
5	0 0.00	0 0.00	1 5.56	0 0.00	2 14.29	0 0.00	1 5.56	0 0.00	1 2.94	5 3.42
6	0 0.00	0 0.00	0 0.00	0 0.00	1 7.14	0 0.00	0 0.00	0 0.00	0 0.00	1 0.68
Total	26 100.00	6 100.00	18 100.00	5 100.00	14 100.00	4 100.00	18 100.00	21 100.00	34 100.00	146 100.00

Pearson chi2(48) = 81.9180 Pr = 0.002

Table 2

# of Themes	Search Term		Total
	Syrian ..	Trade War	
0	8 11.59	16 20.78	24 16.44
1	20 28.99	34 44.16	54 36.99
2	17 24.64	14 18.18	31 21.23
3	12 17.39	6 7.79	18 12.33
4	9 13.04	4 5.19	13 8.90
5	2 2.90	3 3.90	5 3.42
6	1 1.45	0 0.00	1 0.68
Total	69 100.00	77 100.00	146 100.00

Pearson chi2(6) = 11.3053 Pr = 0.079

Table 3

Hypocrisy	Search Term		Total
	Syrian ..	Trade War	
0	29 42.03	61 79.22	90 61.64
1	40 57.97	16 20.78	56 38.36
Total	69 100.00	77 100.00	146 100.00

Pearson chi2(1) = 21.2891 Pr = 0.000

Table 4

Wester FP Failures	Search Term		Total
	Syrian ..	Trade War	
0	35 50.72	56 72.73	91 62.33
1	34 49.28	21 27.27	55 37.67
Total	69 100.00	77 100.00	146 100.00

Pearson chi2(1) = 7.5031 Pr = 0.006

Table 5⁵³

Syrian Civil War	# of Articles	DF	H	FPF	Non Unipolar	RP	RV	Sum Themes	Avg themes/ Article
Newsline	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.25
Op-ed	12	3	10	11	9	2	1	36	3
Russia News	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0.5
Shows	7	3	3	3	6	2	2	19	2.71
Trends	4	0	2	0	1	3	0	6	1.5
UK News	12	7	6	6	5	0	2	26	2.17
USA News	10	3	9	5	4	1	2	24	2.4
World News	18	3	19	8	5	3	0	29	1.61
Total	69	19	40	34	32	12	5	142	2.06

Table 6

Trade War	# of Articles	DF	Hypocrisy	FPF	Non Unipolar	RP	RV	Sum Themes	Avg themes/ Article
Business News	26	5	0	5	10	2	0	22	0.85
Newsline	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.5
Op-ed	6	3	4	4	2	2	2	17	2.83
Russia News	3	2	0	0	2	1	0	5	1.67
Shows	7	7	5	4	3	0	3	22	3.14
UK News	6	3	2	0	0	0	0	5	0.83
USA News	11	4	2	2	6	0	3	17	1.55
World News	16	5	3	6	6	1	1	22	1.38
Total	77	29	16	21	30	6	9	111	1.44

⁵³ For tables 5 and 6: DF= Western Domestic Failures; H= Western Hypocrisy; FPF= Western Foreign Policy Failures and Destabilization; Non Unipolar= Criticism of Unipolar System or Support of Multipolar; RP= Russian Prowess; RV= Vilification of Russia by the West

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