

## The Russian World, Post-Truth, and Europe

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In the not so distant past, a large segment of scholarship concentrated on the possibility of institutional and normative cooperation between Europe and Russia. In a drastic shift, many academics are now analyzing Russia's narrative techniques and their impact on EU member state political agendas. Central to the Kremlin's efforts is the Russian World concept. It is a complex umbrella term encompassing a variety of information and communication elements. The concept has an ideological doctrine but it is increasingly a set of manipulative measures meant to influence foreign polities with the aim of securing a strategy for Russia's reentry to Europe. The Russian World holds a primordial role in Russian foreign policy, particularly since the Russia-Ukraine conflict began in 2014. Even though much can be said about the concept in relation to that crisis, the focus in this memo is on the latest iteration of the Russian World and its interchanges on Europe.

### **Russian Messages and Movements**

Russia uses the immigration debate in the EU for depicting all of Europe as being unable to protect its identity, and for presenting Russia itself as a protector of traditional (meaning Christian) values. Russian information campaigns during the peak of the refugee crisis were marked by a highly securitized narrative of taking care of "our people" who are threatened by assorted rapists, terrorists, aliens, and other miscreants. The idea of protecting "compatriots" is an inherent element of the concept. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the leather-clad motorcyclists of the Night Wolves club are examples of Russian World multiple identities, with both considering and portraying themselves as Orthodox "true believers."

The ROC and the Russian government have worked to retrieve or revive Orthodox properties in various European countries. As an example of the nascence of the concept, the Russian government, on behalf of the ROC, retook possession of the Orthodox Church in Nice in 2011. This was shared by the Russian media as an important,

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meaningful, and symbolic event in a country (France) that has a large Russian diaspora and which holds great weight in Europe.

Another popularized event of the Russian World reaching Europe was the historical meeting between ROC Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis in Havana in 2016. The location alone has geopolitical soft power undertones. The wording of the joint declaration was in line with both Kremlin-patronized discourses and that of the Vatican. For example, there was a strong emphasis on protecting conservative values and mentions of the “conflict in Ukraine” rather than the “Russia-Ukraine conflict.”

The Night Wolves motorcycle club, a direct recipient of Kremlin “NGO” funds led by a character nicknamed *Khirurg* (“The Surgeon”), has performed a variety of flamboyant, patriotic activities in Russia, Crimea, and Europe. In 2015 and 2016, the Night Wolves attempted high-profile, provocative biker tours from Russia to Berlin on World War II Victory Day. Apart from participating in commemorative celebrations, the club offered loud, full support for the annexation of Crimea and stated that they were more than willing to take “protective measures” against the “neo-Nazi coup in Kyiv.” These types of activities hope to have resonance both abroad and at home. The Kremlin is adept at using “a picture to speak a thousand words” to rally the populace around leadership policies.

Russian think tanks in Europe are another wing of Russian World output. One example is the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation (IDC) in Paris funded by Moscow and run by Natalia Narochnitskaya, a Russian historian with a religious and nationalistic background. This Institute, which has the same name as an organization based in New York, actively advocated for the “exit” option during the Brexit debates. The [homepage](#) of its website at the time of this writing features its only other staff member, John Laughland, discussing the French elections on *Russia Today* saying, “I personally support an anti-globalization and pro-sovereignty message.” This illustrates the link between Russian World supporters and anti-EU activists.

Another Russia-funded organization, the Berlin-based Dialogue of Civilizations (DOC) Research Institute, is endowed by Vladimir Yakunin, the former head of Russian Railways and a Russian tycoon. The name of this organization is a combination of mimicry to and political appropriation of the United Nations programming concept of “dialogue among civilizations.” An important part of DOC operations in Europe is the annual [Rhodes Forum](#). A front page [report](#) on the DOC website at the time of this writing begins with, “After Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump, the liberal world seems to lie in tatters: economic globalization is in retreat,” which attests to a peculiar blend of illiberal political platform and the articulation of Russia’s civilizational autonomy vis-à-vis the West.

There is also the Valdai Club, which is not a European-based think-tank, but has as one of its chief roles to intensely develop contacts with Western scholars who the Kremlin thinks may have some sympathies for the Kremlin. Regular Valdai attendees have included such well known European speakers as the research director of the German-Russian Forum [Alexander Rahr](#), the former president of the Czech Republic [Vaclav Klaus](#), and Kent University professor [Richard Sakwa](#), among others. Some of them have publicly [argued](#) for a softer Western stance on Russia and claimed that Russia's role in Ukraine is more defensible than often thought in the West, which has become a matter of debate in international academic circles.

### **How do Russian World Policies Operate?**

The media play a critical role in Russian World policies. *Russia Today*, *Sputnik*, and Russian Internet organizations disseminate Kremlin viewpoints. They take aim at foreign political campaigns with half-truths and non-truths. Operatives in this field share incorrect information about peoples' backgrounds and affiliations (smear campaigns) as well as sensitive information that has been hacked. These organs are skillful at intermixing news and opinion, and often aim, at a minimum, to confuse the information space.

Russian World discourses are developed to resonate with foreign television and online target audiences. Messages cater mostly to the right, but also sometimes to the left. One way or another, the status quo—the establishment—is the adversary. Pro-nationalist messages have been played in step with some right-wing European parties. Refugee incidents in European countries with large conservative segments have been highlighted in ways that spark xenophobia, discontent, and anxiety. On the other side of the coin, some Spanish-language *Russia Today* broadcasts have sought to influence left-minded audiences in Spain and Latin America. For example, at times, programming has accented how Europeans are reluctant to take refugee grievances seriously and has lambasted new EU control and inspection measures.<sup>2</sup>

Although some of Russia's strategies resonate, there are limitations and challenges. For example, IDC's open advocacy for Brexit added fuel to that debate, but it did not make the UK a better partner for Russia. In neither the Baltic nor Nordic countries did right-wing nationalists become "Putin understanders" despite information campaigns aimed at mobilizing conservative and nationalist constituencies there.

Germany has high influence in Europe so it makes sense for Russian agitators to focus on it. In Germany's recent election campaign, there was an emotional news incident at the height of the "refugee invasion" when a fake story was spread about the rape of a 13-year-old ethnic Russian girl. This sparked street demonstrations [demanding](#) security

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<sup>2</sup> I am thankful to Nicolas de Pedro from CIDOB, Barcelona, for drawing my attention to this.

and questioning the efficiency of the government. In another, related, example, the tiny German pro-Kremlin Einheit party launched an out-sized media campaign to resettle Russophones in Crimea. There were episodes when pro-Russian activists incited Russian-Germans to vote in the parliamentary elections for the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party. During those elections, *Russia Today* portrayed the government of Angela Merkel negatively and voiced positive support for Frauke Petry, the chairperson of AfD, who in February 2017 visited Moscow. There have been multiple cases of information attacks and negative information campaigns against German experts and diplomats. “Policy experts” with obscure reputations appear on Russian television shows in native languages trying to discredit mainstream reports and genuine experts. If new messages cannot be rooted, at least doubt can be fostered. Russian campaigns in Europe continue. Take, for example, President Vladimir Putin’s brazen hosting of French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen in March 2017, which was a clear gesture of diplomatic support. In the end, however, it was of no help when her far-right National Front lost to Emmanuel Macron and En Marche!

### **Reactions in Europe**

Reactions in Europe to Russian activities vary. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) [emphasized](#) “protecting individuals against liability for merely redistributing or promoting” any information and spoke out against “content filtering systems which are imposed by a government and which are not end-user controlled.” Another comment from the OSCE held that “general prohibitions on the dissemination of information based on vague and ambiguous ideas, including ‘false news’ or ‘non-objective information,’ are incompatible with international standards.”

Other international organizations have been taking the problem more seriously. NATO’s press secretary has been rebuffing fake news spread by Russia. One example was its swift counterstatement on the false “rape” by German soldiers in Lithuania. In Germany, *Die Zeit* has made it a point to reveal fake news stories originating from or reproduced by Russian outlets. One example concerned a false report about 1,000 immigrants lighting a church on fire in Dortmund. French Defense Minister Jean Yves Le Drian [warned](#) in February 2017 of “cyber destabilization” that might cause security concerns. According to the Czech Audit of National Security, the “influence of foreign powers” and “hybrid threats” are two of eleven major homeland security [threats](#). The Czech Interior Ministry created the Hybrid Threat Centre in Prague in 2016. A former UK Labour minister [argued](#) that some of the top-level decisions affecting security in Britain had been “compromised by Russian infiltration.” In Finland, officials [claimed](#) to have documented 20 disinformation campaigns against their country that have come directly from the Kremlin. In January 2016, the prime minister’s office enrolled 100 officials in a [program](#) across several levels of the Finnish government to identify and understand the spread of disinformation.

## Russia and the “Society of the Spectacle”

There is a connection between Russian World discourses and the post-truth/post-fact domain. Since 2014, and particularly since the election of Donald Trump, many scholars<sup>3</sup> and journalists are exploring Moscow’s manipulations of the Western mediascape. The Kremlin has received political advantage from the post-fact/post-truth sphere and will continue to do so, particularly in countries that have laws protecting freedom of speech.

The concept of post-truth politics is grounded in the feeling that major normative Western political pillars are being lost, or should be abandoned. As *The New York Times* [wrote](#): “Facts hold a sacred place in Western liberal democracies.” Discussions about a post-truth society are significantly influenced by the philosophy of post-modernism, which claims that truth is relative and that each voice matters. The post-truth debate revolves around the idea of deconstructing (and ending) the era of prevalent narratives and it perceives positive/verifiable facts in social relations as untenable. In a post-modern vision, social, cultural, and political discourses are semantic constructs with unfixed and even arbitrary meanings. It sees politics as the struggle for filling “empty” signifiers with “appropriate” content that is contextual and situation-dependent.

Russian information policies are well adjusted to the post-truth environment. It places strong emphasis on new possibilities and favors political manipulation, brainwashing, affective language games, and misleading analogies (take, for example, Russian media narratives comparing South Ossetia to Kosovo). It intentionally refrains from discussing many actualities, for example the financial costs of the foreign policy actions of annexing Crimea or the Russian Syria campaign.

Since post-truth technologies are largely based on emotional reshaping of people’s minds, they mainly focus on “human life” issues. Of particular salience in this respect is the aforementioned immigration debate in Europe, which was significantly sharpened by the refugee crisis, which affected all EU member states. Russia, through its information campaigns, tried to place under question European ideas of tolerance and multiculturalism, which by the same token meant questioning the larger dialogue about cultures and civilizations.

The Russian post-truth concept is also connected to the ongoing debate about order and security (this was [touched on](#) at the 2017 Security Conference in Munich titled “Post-Truth, Post-West, Post-Order”). The mechanisms of securitization that many European countries face are embedded in many Russian manipulative information campaigns. This is a particular challenge to countries with sizeable ethnic minorities (Germany,

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the abstracts of the PONARS Eurasia workshop, “[Revisiting Research on Russian Media](#),” April 28-29, 2017.

Estonia, Latvia) that might easily be objects of internal and external propaganda and misinformation.

## Conclusion

The Russian World concept shares company with post-truth narratives and images. It has evolved to embody assertive actions that rebrand and embellish discourses in support of Kremlin needs. Its foreign manipulations range from biased coverage of events, taking sides in political controversies, intentional securitization of narratives, hacking, information warfare, and direct lies. Though the Kremlin stifles free-thinking at home, it takes full advantage of the fact that in Western democracies public opinion matters. It recognized that social media platforms are quick-sharing and connective, and therefore an advantageous tool for propaganda and divisiveness.

Why might this be the case? The answer is beyond the scope of this memo, but essentially, Russia is [weak](#) in becoming a post-industrial society. It lags behind many Western countries in e-governance, e-diplomacy, e-voting and other practical instruments of post-industrial democracy. Choice, efficiency, and transparency are not amiable to the longevity of the Russian leadership. They feel far more comfortable with the idea of “[society of the spectacle](#),” which puts a premium on imagery, performance, appearance, and storytelling that are resistant to hard reality and facts.

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