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11 State propaganda and popular culture in the Russian-speaking internet

Vera Zvereva

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, the Russian-speaking segment of the internet, widely known as Runet, has become a communicative platform and forum for Russian speakers worldwide. Runet has been considered by its users and by scholars as a space for free speech and expression (Gorny 2009; Schmidt et al. 2009; Zvereva 2012; Gorham et al. 2014; Konradova and Schmidt 2014; Digital Icons 2008–2018). Runet has provided its users with a forum for public debate on social and political issues. Blogs and social media sites allow their users freedom of expression hardly comparable with that offered by television channels and newspapers. This, in turn, gives digital social activism the potential to mobilise citizens to take part in acts of protest (Panchenko 2012; Strukov 2012). Besides commerce, entertainment and communication, Runet has also been a place of intensive cultural production and consumption, civil activism and political debate. However, since 2012, the state's burgeoning influence on the internet has inhibited these activities (Kerr 2013; Sherstoboeva and Pavlenko 2015; Soldatov and Borogan 2015).

Particularly given the context of the Arab Spring¹ and the global increase in political activism associated with digital media, the Russian authorities have above all sought to mitigate the risk of political instability and any threat to their own position. Measures undertaken in the 2010s by the Russian authorities and pro-governmental organisations could be described as an attempt at creating a 'safe' internet (see, e.g., Berseneva et al. 2011; Golitsyna 2012). Since the Ukrainian revolution and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian state has increased its efforts to shape Runet into an instrument of propaganda and counter-propaganda, aimed at users both in Russia and abroad.

Various techniques have been used by the Russian state to 're-capture' the internet. Facing little or no opposition within the Duma, the government can make and enforce new rules for communications. These affect the individual and corporate legal persons that form and use Runet, at least within the territorial limits of the Russian Federation. After 2012, the Russian authorities used legislative measures to restrict communication on the internet and prevent access to particular information resources. Laws were adopted that established new filters on the circulation of information in the Runet. The legislative acts of 2012–2018 on the regulation of the internet have been an attempt to introduce censorship of communications and ensure that government agencies have some way of controlling information streams to prevent possible revolution; and of limiting the influence of foreign (principally American) companies on Runet (see also the chapter by Lonkila et al. in this volume).

These 'Laws against the Internet' included the creation of a Unified Register of Prohibited Sites maintained by Roskomnadzor (the Russian Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecommunications, Information Technologies and Mass Communications). In February 2014, a federal law that enabled the blocking of sites inciting extremist action or public disorder without a court ruling came into force (Federal law 398-FL enacted December 2013). The law gave Roskomnadzor the right to immediately block websites by order of Russia's Procurator General without informing site owners for the reasons for barring access to the resource (see also the chapter by Sivets in this volume). This measure was designed to reduce the potential for coordinating mass public events through social media.

In September 2015, a law on the storage of personal data came into force, designed to give Russian authorities access to information on Russian users of foreign online service providers. The law obliges companies such as Facebook, Google and Twitter to record, catalogue and store the personal data of Russian citizens on the territory of the Russian Federation, and forbids storing this data abroad.

The most radical of all the legislative acts was a legislative package that included two anti-terrorist laws proposed by Irina Larovaia (Federal laws 374-FL and 375-FL enacted July 2016). They increase the powers of the law enforcement agencies and introduce new rules for mobile operators, obliging them to store on the territory of the Russian Federation all calls and messages from their subscribers and all information about the sending and receiving of messages and calls (see also the chapter by Lehtisaari in this volume). The same law increases the penalties and widens legal liability for the publication of 'extremist' messages on social networks, for 'recruiting people to organise mass unrest' and for failing to report extremism-related crime.

In 2018, Roskomnadzor initiated a ban on the popular messaging service Telegram, due to its refusal to provide the Federal Security Service with access to encryption keys that would allow users' communications to be monitored, as the anti-terrorism legislation requires. For all the severity of these laws, in practice they are applied selectively. Thus, for example, in August 2016 by decision of a Moscow court, the social network service LinkedIn was blocked in Russia for violating the law that requires user data of Russian citizens to be stored in Russia. At the same time, Facebook and Google continue their work without having fulfilled this requirement. However, in those cases where the 'Laws against the Internet' are applied, they are enforced strictly. For example, in 2014, Roskomnadzor blocked access on the territory of the Russian Federation to three opposition internet publications: Grani.ru, Kasparov.ru and *Ezhednevnyi zhurnal*, and added Aleksei Navalny's LiveJournal blog to the blacklist, blocking them for 'making calls for unlawful activity and participation in mass events held with breaches of public order' (*The Guardian* 2014).

However, while enacting restrictive legislation, the state authorities employ more indirect strategies to disseminate their own messages. These employ sophisticated techniques of digital media marketing. The 2010s have seen an increase in the activity on Runet of multiple pro-state internet organisations (such as the 'Safe Internet League', 'Kiberdruzhina' et al.), PR agencies and social media marketing (SMM) companies undertaking political commissions, online communities (such as, for example, numerous patriotic groups on social networking site VKontakte) and individuals (such as popular bloggers and owners of YouTube channels).

These various groups of very different users can be considered as a collective actor, mobilised whenever the need arises to support a particular state campaign. This collective actor speaks with different voices, and often, on behalf of the state and 'the common people'. Using a wide variety of discourses, it

expresses the interests of the administration, law enforcement agencies, the State Duma and high-ranking officials. These interests consist in preserving the status quo in the presidency, ensuring stability in the domestic political course, and supporting Russia's foreign policy. Two of the most important means of achieving these goals are the suppression of opposition – from both the 'liberal pro-western' and the 'national-patriotic' ends of the spectrum (Soldatov and Borogan 2015; *RBK* 2018; Ksendzov as quoted in Soldatov and Borogan 2015, 211), and the suppression of 'foreign influence' on Runet. Examples of the latter include the law on storage of personal data and more recently the bill introduced by deputy Andrei Lugovoi and senators Andrei Klishas and Liudmila Bokova (No. 608767-7, 14.12.2018) on ensuring the autonomous operation of the Russian segment of the internet (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2018).

This collective pro-state actor seeks to monopolise the interpretation of reality, and employs many creative and innovative methods to propagate its message. One might consider the alleged interference by Russian 'hackers' in the 2016 US election campaign as an example of such creativity. In the 2000s, digital media researchers associated creativity and innovation in new media with the spread of messages that promoted greater individual and civil liberties, development of civic structures and overcoming the violence of powerful institutions (Castells 2012). However, scholars of Russian digital media have now to consider how that very creativity and innovation is used to destroy the communication of opposition and to promote conservative messages in politics, religion, morality and culture.

Since the early 2010s, the Russian authorities and pro-state actors have adopted a hybrid strategy in the media for the dissemination of pro-government messages. It combines elements of the 'soft power' strategy widely used in the 2000s with the techniques that were used more recently for suppressing the opposition movement in Russia and in the conflict with Ukraine (i.e. arresting and imprisoning users for publishing, sharing or re-tweeting texts and images with 'extremist' content, banning certain internet services and sites, etc.). Soft power includes investing in attractive media channels and platforms like RT that popularise the pro-Kremlin point of view, and creating multiple unofficial media resources that communicate each with a particular audience, or focus on culture and entertainment (Hutchings et al. 2015) All together, these methods characterise the current system of production and consumption of political meanings in media. The study of new media propaganda on Runet entails exploring this system.

Description of the study

The aim of this study is to examine the ways in which propagandistic messages are disseminated across Runet in the 2010s. I argue that the new system of dealing with political meanings on the internet is established not only by open demonstration of the state authorities' power, as expressed in their attempts to control information flows. It also involves building a 'grey zone' of communication selectively regulated by law, through which attempts are made to influence the internet. The study attempts to explore what actors contribute to the production and promotion of pro-state discourse on Runet. It also aims to examine connections between the language of propaganda and the forms of popular culture and to discuss how the pro-state messages are positioned as attractive consumer products.

The theoretical approach on which this study is based brings together several trends in research regarding the internet as technology and as cultural form. It uses the methodology of critical discourse analysis to examine how the messages of digital propaganda employ the language of popular culture and convey meanings; and how power relations have been embedded in the discourses of politics and entertainment (Wodak and Chilton 2005; Van Dijk 2008). At the same time, the study focuses on cultural forms which emerge as a result of the activities of multiple actors interacting using digital technologies. It employs the actor-network approach, according to which a given communicative situation – in our case, on Runet – consists of a dynamic network of relationships of individuals, online groups, companies, businesses and state institutions represented online, as well as websites, information flows, communication nodes, internet technologies, algorithms and digital objects (Latour 1996; Goggin 2006). The network structure is non-hierarchical and the circulation of ideas within it is non-linear.

Ideas on Runet are constantly circulating among different nodes and audiences; in many cases, the origination of these ideas and cultural meanings is uncertain, and the agency of state authorities in orchestrating pro-state actors is impossible to prove. Studies exist that seek to establish statistically where the balance of probability lies; and many claims are made in the western press and commentariat, some of which are supported by publicly available data (Helmus et al. 2018). However, these are out of the scope of this study, which focuses on the production and distribution of cultural forms and meanings. Consequently, it is necessary to set out certain working assumptions.

First, the field of digital propaganda on Runet is being constructed both intentionally (e.g. by representatives of the state authorities, pro-Kremlin bloggers, agencies who spread certain ideas or commission materials, trolls) and non-intentionally (e.g. by ordinary users reposting ‘fake news’ and materials they find relevant, as well as by aggregators, bots and ‘digitally born objects’ (Rogers 2009) such as tags, links, search algorithms).

Second, attention to different actors, whether deliberately or spontaneously and accidentally involved in propaganda-related communication, helps us better understand the formation of networks that disseminate pro-state ideological messages and present them across different platforms of Runet as ‘self-evident’. Third, regardless of questions of agency and policy, the form and content of the messages are worthy of analysis in itself, and sufficient to support the inferences drawn here about propaganda and its operation in contemporary digital media.

This study analyses several sets of data collected in 2013–2018. These data were collected from:

- Main pages of Mail.ru² and the social networking service LiveJournal.ru,³ which aggregate news and the most read stories by Russian-language bloggers.
- Twitter account of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation⁴ and the official Facebook account of Maria Zakharova, Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁵
- LiveJournal blogs and VKontakte accounts of the three leading pro-Kremlin new media propagandists – Kristina Potupchik,⁶ Oleg Makarenko⁷ and Boris Rozhin⁸ – which will be discussed later.

- Publications (March 2017–August 2018) on the three most visited websites of the Federal News Agency, allegedly connected with the ‘troll factory’ (Zakharov and Rusiaeva 2017): ‘Ekonomika segodnia’,⁹ ‘Narodnye novosti’¹⁰ and ‘Politika segodnia’.¹¹
- Materials from communities on VKontakte (a social network popular among Russian-speaking users, with more than 239 million accounts) on humour and entertainment and patriotic communities.¹²
- Materials from discussions of two cases: the annexation of Crimea (discussions by users aged between 14 and 25 in 200 VKontakte accounts, February–May 2014); and discussion of the Trade Union House Fire case in Odessa on 2 May 2014 (data collected by key-word search, 2–6 May 2014).

Building a ‘grey zone’ of internet communication

After the wave of political protests of 2011–2012 and the re-election of Vladimir Putin for a third presidential term, the presidential administration set about finding new ways of monitoring social networks and reaching different social groups of internet users (Surnacheva 2015). In this strategy, the new key players are PR agencies and SMM companies that promote commercial products using social networks. The presidential administration and law enforcement structures commissioned such companies to conduct monitoring of the opposition segment of the Runet. They also commissioned them to compile reports on web-users’ sentiments, and to undertake political SMM – i.e. to write and distribute texts, taking into account the targeted users’ styles and interests, that would present the prescribed point of view on significant events, for example on Russian – Ukrainian relations, presidential elections, sanctions imposed by the European Union and so on. Among such companies were the Agency for the Development of Innovative Technologies (Director Artem Kliushin, a member of various public and political organisations, blogger, member of the Public Council of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs and ‘one of the most controversial figures in the history of the Russian Internet’ (Ivanov 2018)¹³), Foundation for Open New Democracy (headed by Kristina Potupchik), Apostol-Media, Social Networks and many others.

In this artificially created grey zone, the right to express the state authorities’ point of view was delegated to third parties: bloggers (users who regularly publish materials on their pages on internet platforms), trolls (users who aim at communicative provocation in order to infuriate other users, to provoke anger and rage or frustration and anxiety) and hackers (skilled computer experts using their knowledge to break into computer systems and gain unauthorised access to data), from unknown users to well-known characters and celebrities of Runet. These actors use a range of different tactics. For example, the pro-Kremlin bloggers, presumably financed by state or state-endorsed structures, actively promote a pro-governmental slant on current events, posting specially commissioned material and sparring furiously with their opponents. They appeal to the patriotic Runet audience, boost the spread of anti-Americanism and promote Russia’s position. Three examples of such bloggers are Krispotupchik, Fritzmorgen and Colonel Cassad.

Kristina Potupchik (Krispotupchik) is an ex-commissar of the pro-governmental youth movement ‘Nashi’, a member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation (2010–2017) and the head of the previously mentioned Foundation for Open New Democracy. She was a popular LiveJournal blogger up to 2017; at the time of writing in 2018 her, Twitter account had 51,800 followers and her account on Instagram had

9,500 subscribers. Oleg Makarenko (Fritzmorgen), an active supporter of Putin's politics, publishes texts daily and broadcasts them on various internet platforms. He is ranked 10th among all LiveJournal bloggers, while his VKontakte account has 60,000 subscribers. Boris Rozhin (Colonel Cassad) was one of the bloggers who played a major role in covering the Crimean campaign; he was the author of the meme 'polite people' (*'vezhlivye liudi'*, which came into circulation at the time of the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and described Russian soldiers in uniform but without insignia, who blockaded military installations in the Crimea before the referendum). He is ranked 3rd among all LiveJournal bloggers, while his Twitter account has 35,000 subscribers.

Bloggers of this sort speak the same language as ordinary digital media users; they write brief, expressive, emotionally charged texts and include memorable images. For instance:

The European Parliament has been reduced to open hysteria. It's quite clear why this is so: despite all the efforts of the 'independent' media, Vladimir Putin, without prior arrangement, has become a worldwide hero of the stature of Che Guevara or Mahatma Gandhi. [...] The international oligarchy that runs the Western world is so out of touch with reality that, in the context of this freakshow, Vladimir Putin seems like not just a talented politician, but an out-and-out superhero [...] As our president rightly noted, we are currently witnessing the degradation of western democracy.

(Fritzmorgen 2016)

Political struggle won't bring Navalny anything, except for a predictable and inglorious defeat. Most of his supporters have long been disappointed in the 'Internet wrestler number one' ¹⁴ [...] Do you remember the last time when as many as 5 thousand participants came to their rallies? [...] So Navalny is quite happy with his image as 'the main Russian oppositionist', who does not even need to prove anything – because they don't let him in! And if they let him in, then, God forbid, everyone will discover that the emperor has no clothes.

(Krispotupchik 2016)

The authors appear to be expressing their own points of view. This gives them the freedom to jeer at or discredit their opponents, to overlook minor and sometimes major inaccuracies in their own material, to use derogatory language and to indulge without shame in aggression and exaggeration in defending the authorities. By inviting such authors to act in their support, the state authorities 'upgrade their own profile': they reach the contemporary audience of users who do not watch TV but do trust social media and who welcome political commentaries written in an informal style.

The top bloggers engaging in propaganda, who attract thousands of subscribers, are merely the tip of the iceberg. Attempts to take over the voice of Runet have also been carried out with the help of bots – programmes which churn out huge quantities of information spam and clog the channels of communication, especially those of the opposition, with texts containing 'patriotic' messages that resemble the ones written by pro-Kremlin bloggers, or with obscene or meaningless phrases (Paulsen and Zvereva 2014). At the same time, pro-government bloggers promote the idea that it is America and NATO that have been flooding Runet with bots, and that it is they who are responsible for the rhetoric of

hatred which has become widespread in web-based communication. Thus, according to Fritz Morgen: 'Thousands of American bots are whipping up hatred on Runet for "khokhly"¹⁵ and "moskali"¹⁶ (Fritz Morgen 17.01.2015).

There is also a multitude of pro-Russian web resources (e.g. the channel 'Novorossia TV', Anatolii Sharii's YouTube channel, anti-Western communities on VKontakte, etc.), and authors who write anti-Ukrainian and anti-American posts and commentaries on social networks and comments on YouTube videos against the European Union, and so on. It is hard to say to what extent these authors are commissioned to promote these ideological positions by the Russian government. This grey zone is fundamentally unclear. Ordinary users have no way of knowing for certain who is behind this or that statement about a given event – whether it is somebody like themselves or a commissioned author. The publications of pro-Kremlin writers are reposted and spread through social media by ordinary bloggers and social media users. Individuals who share content from the above-mentioned sites in good faith are involuntarily contributing to the maintenance of the grey zone of communication.

One should bear in mind that the number of internet users in Russia in 2016 was estimated at between 84 and 86 million people – 70.4 per cent of the population over 16 years old (*Meduza* 2017). This population, most of whom support the authorities, has begun to coincide with the political majority within the country, the electorate that supports Putin and votes for the ruling party in elections to the state Duma (Volkov and Goncharov 2017). In this context, when the majority of users who are interested in politics tend to take a pro-governmental stance on events (*ibid.*), these users' own posts and commentaries frequently echo arguments found in the texts written by pro-Kremlin propagandists, and they join the debate with often genuine conviction. At the same time, against the backdrop of laws which either prohibit or restrict the online expression of oppositional and minority views, the pro-Kremlin actors' active campaigning on the internet allows them to present Runet in their texts as an exclusive space for the pro-governmental majority, proclaiming its support for the annexation of Crimea and for Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine, for the arrests of opposition campaigners and for reprisals against dissidents.

Some scholars writing about propaganda on the internet use the notion of 'information war' (Pomerantsev and Lucas 2016). The term refers to the contest between opposing sides, each seeking to promote its own version of reality on media platforms and to campaign using all available media channels to discredit its opponent's values and version of reality, while asserting its own. Information and communication technology in information war is turned into a battlespace to gain advantage over the 'enemy'. In recent years, this term has gained much attention from politicians, journalists and scholars in connection with the growing awareness of the threat of warfare in cyberspace (Friis and Ringsmose 2016) as well in more specific contexts such as debates about the annexation of Crimea, Russian military action in Eastern Ukraine and the alleged Russian interference into the 2016 USA presidential election ("Assessing Russian Activities..." 2017).

In an information war, the duty of its soldiers, whether they are fighting foreign or domestic 'enemies', often consists not only in disseminating a particular version of events but also in persuading ordinary media users that nobody is able to understand what has actually happened. Their task is to normalise the idea that it is impossible to find out the truth, thus generating a state of uncertainty (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). Researchers have written of the 'weaponisation of information' not only by means of

propaganda but also by discrediting the objectivity of information itself, by 'injecting' disinformation in the form of personal opinion under the conditions of freedom of speech and by supporting conspiracy theories.

The most widely cited and investigated group of pro-government actors engaged in disseminating pro-state information on Runet is the so-called Olgino Trolls. They were described in a report issued by the United States Intelligence Community as having interfered in the American presidential election campaign in late 2015–2016: 'a network of quasi-government trolls contributed to the influence campaign by serving as a platform for Kremlin messaging to Russian and international audiences' ("Assessing Russian Activities..." 2017, 3). In 2013, the 'Agency for Internet Research' was established in St Petersburg; initially, it seems in the suburb of Olgino. The agency hired internet-operators to work in what was effectively a 'troll-factory' – a conveyor belt of paid pseudo-bloggers writing mass posts and comments on prescribed topics: against the opposition, against America and Ukraine and in support of the Russian president. The trolls' work was intended to increase the circulation of pro-governmental views on social networks, to counter quickly any criticism of the Russian authorities and their actions and to use aggression to deter opponents of the government from online communication (Garmazhapova 2013).

The subject matter of the trolls' posts generally coincided with the agenda of the Russian state television channels. The same or similar text might appear hundreds of times, ostensibly posted by different users on different user accounts in the course of a single day. The agency was allegedly financed by Evgenii Prigozhin, a businessman and restaurateur known as the 'Kremlin cook'. Later, it was absorbed into a larger group of businesses, the 'Media Factory'. Its main structure, the Federal News Agency, includes at least 16 online information resources, nine of which are registered under the official category 'mass media' with Roskomnadzor. According to an investigation by journalists from the Russian media company RBK, the Federal News Agency has a monthly audience of more than 36 million people (Zakharov and Rusiaeva 2017). Hundreds of Russian-language pages and accounts associated with these resources were deleted by Facebook and Instagram in 2018 (*Meduza* 2018).

In a situation where freedom of expression on the internet is being constrained, trolls present themselves as the mouthpiece of that freedom (which is restricted on Runet, according to their logic, by pro-American 'liberal' journalists and bloggers). Trolls justify their upsetting and threatening statements by reference to their own characterisation of reality as upsetting and threatening. In texts and comments scattered across social media, trolls claim merely to be articulating the suppressed truth, aligning the expression of their position with freedom of speech.

The construction of a grey zone of communication on Runet gives a tacit permission to supporters of the Russian authorities to attack the communications of the opposition (for example, of Navalny's supporters, organisers of protest rallies and various groups discontented with the Kremlin's politics). Both official supporters, such as the registered online pro-Kremlin movements, and unofficial ones, such as the above-mentioned anti-Western communities on social media, privately owned You-tube channels, etc., as well as sympathisers, amateurs, semi-criminal 'fishermen in muddy water' and those who for any reason are willing, are invited to participate. In these circumstances, certain statements can be published online, while others cannot; some posts are distributed by hundreds of bots, while others are muffled; similar looking materials such as online images and jokes posted online can, depending on their political orientation, be considered by the courts or Roskomnadzor as either satire or as extremism

liable to legal proceedings.¹⁷ Major online portals such as Mail.ru and LiveJournal.com, and popular online newspapers such as Komsolmolskaia Pravda often publish 'ideologically correct' messages. These are presented as news, op-eds by journalists or private opinions. The same messages are also distributed daily through websites that serve up entertainment and scandal, the digital yellow press and among online groups with hundreds of thousands of subscribers on the popular social media network VKontakte. They are also spread in the form of advertisements and spam.

New media propaganda and popular culture

In recent years, the state authorities have sought to address a complex challenge: on the one hand, they have tried to increase their control over communications in Russian society, despite the fact that, due to the spread of digital communication and the diversity of information channels, full control is no longer possible. On the other hand, attempts to bring the internet under state control in an overtly authoritarian way, following the Chinese model, would undermine the image of Russian democracy which, as Putin himself has stated, 'is a priority for Russia's development' (*Tsargrad TV* 2018). In this situation, state regulation of the internet is not enough to solve the problem. The state also needs to create a propaganda model that works in digital media, in order to target its diverse audiences with messages they will readily consume. To achieve this, the ideological message must be made to appeal to users in the same way as other consumer products are marketed. It is attractively presented and packaged – as a story, image, game, video or as merchandise, so that it will be consumed and shared. The actual choice of meanings among the texts available on pro-state Runet platforms is quite limited. However, the limited choice of meanings is masked by the variety of packaging – the genres, tones, themes and types of information products in which those meanings are made available.

On the Russian internet, many users describe themselves as uninterested in politics (Kuznetsova 2017). Those targeted by the pro-state propaganda in digital media see themselves as free from ideological influences, as distinct from the TV audience ("Kanali informatsii" 2018). However, they are consuming propaganda nonetheless. It is transmitted through the language chosen to describe reality, and in the forms of, from popular culture that the messages assume. These include headlines, jokes, funny or scandalous stories, memes and viral pictures, YouTube videos, etc. For example, on the front page of Mail.ru, the day's top news stories are listed. Mail.ru Group controls and operates Russia's three largest social networking sites, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and Moi Mir. Its sites reach about 77.7 million users in Russia and 95 million users of VKontakte, monthly ("Mail.ru Group..." 2016). At least half of these stories contain ideological messages that recur, whatever the news may be, from day to day, packaged in different ways. The user can choose from the feelings and emotions expressed in the headlines: pride ('Europe was advised to learn from Russia', 'We will feed the whole world. How Russia has become an agricultural superpower'), indignation ('In Ukraine, Russian-speaking citizens are called "mentally retarded"'), suspicions confirmed ('Kiev's power operation in the Donbass changes its format'), schadenfreude ('Europe has been deprived of Russian oil, to China's delight') or amusement ('Trump fought with an umbrella and lost'). These were the top headlines appearing on Mail.ru/Novosti on 30 April 2018. The different texts share the same metanarrative, which says: in spite of US and EU sanctions and the hostility of Ukraine, Russia is still a superpower, the strongest country in the world; meanwhile, Europe and America are experiencing countless problems and their politicians are incapable of solving them, and the American president is not a real rival to the Russian president.

This system of producing and disseminating attractive propagandistic messages works by employing the repertoire of popular culture. Popular culture can be defined as a way of producing and circulating meanings which is employed in cultural forms and practices familiar to and shared by a majority in contemporary society (Storey 2012). Popular culture messages are semantically accessible; their distinctive feature is their ability to combine and amalgamate any meanings, including those that are contradictory and mutually exclusive (Dubin 2010). Thus, popular culture functions as a universal mediator between habitual and unfamiliar meanings. Popular culture aims at socialising individuals within culture and society; most often, it broadcasts socially approved messages (ibid.). Its texts should be both understandable and engaging; they are often based on narrative formulas and employ the techniques of storytelling (Cawelti 1977); they are spread by media, and oriented towards the market and mass consumption.

'Pop-cultural' ways of endowing things with meanings have spread to other spheres, such as politics, law, science and education (Debord 1992). The principles of popular culture increasingly permeate political language, logic and rules (Van Zoonen 2000; Murray 2010). The rise of political populism in Russia, the USA and several European countries (Norris and Inglehart 2018) has also been accompanied by a more active use of the repertoire of popular culture for political purposes.

Populism in politics usually involves a politician or faction claiming to express the will of the people, emphasising the role of 'the people' in politics, their authenticity and morality, and exploiting a contrast between 'the people' and a 'corrupt elite'. When talking about Putin's Russia, scholars often note that the regime in Russia differs from what is understood as 'authoritarian populism'.

Putin's governance is not characterised by a genuine anti-establishment and anti-corruption agenda. Moreover, while populist leaders in other countries aim to mobilise and politicise their supporters, Putin's regime is based on the demobilisation and depoliticisation of the Russian population.

[...] Populism can also be quite an elitist movement, especially 'populism in power', where governmental leaders use populist rhetoric and practices to gain popular support and maintain their positions – as is the case in Russia.

(Mamonova 2018)

Populist propagandistic messages as addressed to 'the people' often employ vernacular language, which is understood by its audience as the language of common people and uses common sense arguments. In the Russian media sphere, political messages are often presented in the form of pop-cultural texts; expressed in the language of popular culture, the audience can more readily consume them.

Populist political discourse translates complicated ideas – i.e. the workings of modern social systems – into simple categories that are clear to everyone, while its arguments are often based on the 'politics of fear' (Wodak 2015). Its simplified, black-and-white constructions around 'the people', their 'enemies' and the 'dangers' they bring are borrowed from the genres and formulas of popular culture, with noble heroes and innocent victims, scheming enemies and evil powers; stories of crime, conspiracy, salvation delivered and justice restored.

Besides populism, pop-cultural resources are used in Russia to spread propagandistic messages that support the attempts of the Russian authorities – as can be inferred from the statements of the president and top politicians – to depoliticise the population and remove politics from the public discourse (Zamiatin 2018). For example, the Chairman of the Russian Duma, Viacheslav Volodin, articulated this position in a commentary on the ‘Oscars’ ceremony to RIA Novosti: ‘The world is becoming more and more politicised, and the United States is putting so much effort in this direction that tomorrow there will be nothing left of art or sports. The trends that they have imposed play a negative role for these spheres [of life]: they leave creativity behind, and honesty and objectivity as well’ (RIA Novosti 2018). Thus, the state authorities try to present politics as either too complicated for ‘ordinary people’, or as a battleground of malevolent forces, or a stage for eccentric individuals. This strategy helps to marginalise the political voices of the opposition and exclude the very possibility of critical public discussion of domestic and foreign policy issues. At the same time, it leads pro-governmental actors to use a non-political discourse that aligns them with non-politicians and ‘ordinary people’.

In these circumstances, the language of popular culture offers boundless possibilities to speak about the things of politics without naming them directly, by means of metaphors, citations, mockery and deliberately inaccurate labelling. This sort of language allows its users to assume a distanced position, above the fray of political competition, as ‘observers of the discussion’. In so doing, they present themselves as responsible officials who care about the public good. At the same time, the seeming lightness of the popular culture discourse, when it replaces political discourse in the public sphere, conceals actual violence and coercion of opponents in the real world.

It has long been noted that the political discourse in communication employed by the Russian president and top politicians, with all its circumstantial variations, shows proximity to vernacular language with its free use of elements of criminal slang, obscenities and collective labelling of opponents (Guseinov 2017). After the start of the Ukrainian crisis, this trend was combined with an extensive use of strong pejorative vocabulary equating Ukrainian politicians, supporters of revolution and soldiers with ‘fascists’ and ‘Nazis’. Thus, the very language of politics became an effective weapon (Ryazanova-Clarke 2015). On the internet, the simple, cheerful, mocking and aggressive tone for discussing domestic and foreign political issues has spread widely through all levels: from the social media accounts of high-ranking Russian officials to those of trolls and bots, and further to communities on VKontakte with hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of subscribers. Noticeably, the Twitter account of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides examples of the interpretation of political events in ‘common sense’ categories that are clear to even the least sophisticated reader:

MID Russia @MID_RF #Zakharova: Against the background of bullying of Russia in the West, common-sense voices look as if they’ll be drowned in the flood of indiscriminate attacks against our country. Fortunately, this does not happen, and voices not infected with Russophobia bacillus do break out and find a wide audience.

(MID Russia 2018)

The simplification of the message and the translation of politics into popular culture formulas – and their use by the state authorities – was well shown in the Russian presidential election campaign of

2017–2018. The president did not participate in political debates in the media (thus, he positioned himself above the fray, an observer of his rivals' antics). Instead, campaign messages circulated on Runet in the form of humorous and offensive texts and videos that jeered, for example, at 'liberals', 'gays' and 'Americans' and expressed unreserved admiration for the current president. A typical news headline read: "'Girls are going crazy". How a song about Putin won a Grammy: Double Oscar laureate writes song after seeing photo of Putin on a tractor' (Argumenty i fakty 2018). Songs and clips in support of Putin went viral on Runet. One example is a video by the pop group Fabrica with their song 'Vova Vova' dedicated to Vladimir Putin. The song is about 'beloved Vova', whom the three female singers call 'our boss' and 'handsome'. Members of Fabrica wearing only underwear kiss his photo (the world-famous image of Putin on horseback) and evoke some of his celebrated deeds by embracing a pike, caressing a hockey uniform, playing with a labrador, lying in bed with a copy of Time magazine with Putin on the cover and so on. The humour is intentionally ambiguous: it appropriates hypermediatised images of the president that are widely ridiculed. However, the more the video develops, the more straightforward its message becomes: the members of the group express nothing but admiration for their mediatised hero, and the clip ends with the image of the room empty but for a poster of Putin captioned 'My choice'.

In the same election, the role of competitor for the presidency from the liberal opposition was performed by Ksenia Sobchak, known primarily as a media personality, political journalist and, previously, a glamorous celebrity and presenter of a scandalous reality TV show, 'Dom 2'. Her participation in the presidential campaign in October 2017–March 2018 prevented Putin's potentially more serious rival, Aleksei Navalny, who had been disqualified from contesting the election, from declaring it to be illegitimate. On the internet, Sobchak's campaign attracted users' attention: some of her fellow celebrities mocked her videos, while her actions allegedly mobilised conservative-minded users to come to the polls to vote against her (Shchukin 2017). During a televised debate, Sobchak was involved in a confrontation with the LDPR party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. He swore at Sobchak, and she threw water at him in response. Later, while Sobchak was campaigning in Moscow, she had water poured over her by a Zhirinovskiy supporter. Against that background, Putin seemed to the media audience to be the only 'normal' candidate. Ideological messages are easily absorbed when they are delivered in the form of entertainment. Many users receive information about the prescribed position on America, Ukraine and EU through communities on social networks devoted to 'positive vibes' and humour. The technique of posting paid material to order, in the form of offensive, humorous images and texts on popular social network platforms, is widely practised. Large communities on VKontakte with hundreds of thousands or even millions of subscribers, who post and share jokes and comic pictures, often receive commissions to post such material ("Polnyj Al'bac ..." 2017). For instance, in May 2017, the journalists of Meduza published a report claiming that some of the larger communities on VKontakte ('You won't believe it!' and 'The Illusionist' among others) had been commissioned to post similar materials ridiculing the politician Aleksei Navalny. According to Meduza, 'the campaign is organised by some unknown "advertising agency"; Navalny himself believes that the president's administration is responsible' (Shpil'kovskaia 2017).

Jokes from online groups, which poke fun at Ukrainian politicians, the US president and Russian opposition leaders, are enthusiastically shared on users' pages on VKontakte. For example, this happened with a post from the VKontakte group called 'USA – sponsor of world terror (16+)':

Obama is bored in retirement. He decides to go to Russia. He returns from Russia, very happy.

His wife asks: How was it in Russia?

BARACK: It's beautiful there, I'm moving there to live!

WIFE: But why?

BARACK: Every second car there has 'OBAMA-CHMO' [VZ: 'Obama is a schmuck'] written on it.

WIFE: What's so good about that?

BARAK: Well, the good thing is that unlike the United States, Russia remembers me!

(“Bored Obama Has Retired” 2017).

Thus, political propaganda in digital media is disseminated following the model of viral commercial advertising. This technique involves distributing ideological materials that give the sender of the message social capital among his/her followers, which incentivises its receivers to propagate the message still further (Camarero and San José 2011). Political attitudes infiltrate the daily lives of users in seemingly innocuous forms.

A significant place belongs to storytelling (Couldry 2008). Stories can take the form of celebrity gossip ('Barack and Michelle are going to divorce'), or of simple, innocent reports and videos ('Putin is chasing a pike'). All kinds of story featuring the supremacy of Russia over America, and Putin over Obama and Trump are spread in online communities, on YouTube, on news resources and on private accounts. The world in these stories is being presented as a great stand-off between powers: Cold War 2.0. According to this logic, 'we' (Russians) have a powerful enemy pitted against us – the USA – but we are winning in the struggle. We have the strongest, and the 'coolest and toughest' president; he is eternally youthful, strong and cares about his own people. A title like 'Putin fools Obama again' or the story of how Trump has been appointed 'Official Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for the District of North America', replicated on multiple websites, creates the impression of a continuous story, spread across Runet. The formulaic construction common to popular culture texts enables the same idea to be repeated with slight variations. An already well-known premise (that the President of Russia is the world's strongest superhero) is presented repeatedly, combined with the latest news.

Reality is interpreted through the convenient framework of popular culture. On VKontakte users' account pages, pictures of superheroes from comics and films (Deadpool, The X-Men and other heroes of popular culture) are combined with images of Putin in a Superman costume or as a hero with a light-sabre. Screenshots from computer games showing fantastical weapons and military equipment are posted alongside photographs of real soldiers and military operations in the (self-proclaimed) Donetsk People's Republic. There is no clear dividing line between these images: they all represent heroes and winners.

On social networks, for instance, a picture was circulated that mockingly compared Obama to Putin. Real photographs of the US president were used in sequence to show how the leader has aged, ending

with the picture of a skeleton. Side by side with these was a series of pictures showing Putin 'in the Middle Ages' in the early 20th century, in our time, and 'a hundred years from now', full of strength, in the gleaming armour of a combat robot.

Popular culture formulas are global, and anti-Westernism in Russian digital media is expressed using the same cultural forms as are used in Marvel comic books and Hollywood films (Zvereva 2016). It might be supposed that Russian users' consumption of international media would reduce the influence of national propaganda by connecting them to a global culture that transcends nationalisms; however, this does not happen. It is another quality of popular culture that holds sway here – its ability to absorb and sustain disparate elements even if, outside the popular culture system, they may seem contradictory. Ideology blends perfectly into the emulsion of popular culture, in which the very idea of contradiction is an irrelevance.

The circulation of information on the internet constantly mixes different types of texts: news, journalism, stories about fashion, about consumer goods, business propositions, reports of military activity, game reviews, sports reports and forecasts. The propaganda messages in digital media mix ideological content with any and all of these text forms (Farkas and Neumayer 2018). As a result, at the level of reception, mutually exclusive elements can be seen side by side on the accounts of social media users.

For instance, a young user of VKontakte posts pictures portraying the cute, pastel-coloured characters of the animation series 'My Little Pony' on a background of military equipment from 'Novorossia', at war with America and the 'fascists'. The owner of the account calls himself a 'brony' (a member of the fan subculture, a 'brother of My Little Pony'). The combination of pictures of the fighter-bomber Su-34 with a map of military operations in the Donetsk People's Republic and My Little Ponies coloured in the livery of fighter planes, or a series of pictures of Putin, weaponry and My Little Ponies with the caption 'Russia and Ponies are Brothers Forever' does not seem incongruous either to the user, or to his friends.

Another feature of new media propaganda is its link with consumer culture (Veroni 2014). New products, be they images, memes or characters who have appeared on the internet, are immediately commodified and offered to users as consumer objects. For example, the Prosecutor General of the Republic of Crimea, Natalia Poklonskaia (who has since become a member of the Russian State Duma) became a star of the internet after giving her first press conference in 2014. Many depictions of the brave Prosecutor in the anime style spread across the global internet. There appeared a YouTube clip entitled 'Niash Miash', in which fragments of the interview with Poklonskaia set to music were arranged as a song with the words 'the Power... the Blood.../ Niash-Miash / the Blood... the Power.../ Crimea is ours'. Some commercial companies started using this image and slogan. For example, the company Nival, producer of a popular Russian online game 'Prime World', introduced a character based on the Poklonskaia image, Obviniashka, a fighter against the forces of evil.

Another example is the euphemism 'polite people', coined by the above-mentioned blogger Colonel Cassad. It became not only an internet meme but also a successful consumer brand, which was trademarked and used from 2014 onwards by the Russian Ministry of Defence and the army store Voentorg as a logo on its products. There is a line of clothing called 'Polite People' and t-shirts with the same logo. In 2015, the Russian maker of games and models, Zvezda, issued a set of 'Modern Russian infantry "Polite People"'. Commodification of the internet meme allowed the transformation of a set of signs endowed with ideological meanings ('Crimea is ours') into a commercial product and a quasi-

neutral part of popular culture, whose consumption has become independent of its origins in recent history.

Conclusion

The Russian-speaking internet has been transformed since 2012 by restrictive legislation, information war and the large-scale deployment of propaganda, amounting to a campaign, rolled out on social media platforms. The Russian state authorities have attempted to make Runet a 'safer' and more manageable space, especially in the sense of preventing users' protest activities. It is still difficult for the state to establish control over the means of communication and large-scale information flows, despite the bans and restrictions on certain web resources and services and the deployment of anti-extremist legislation against digital media users. However, in many respects, the multi-targeted activities undertaken on behalf of the Russian authorities to increase their influence on Runet have been successful. The strengthening of the state authorities' influence in the digital space is being achieved not only with the help of legislation. Various actors who are ready to spread the pro-governmental message on Runet have been enabled to fulfil this task regardless of what methods and forms they use. A grey zone of communication has been created on Runet, in which the right to express the state authorities' point of view is assumed by different 'volunteers' – pro-Kremlin authors writing in blogs and social media, paid propagandists and amateur supporters, trolls and 'soldiers' in the information war. In this zone, the law is applied selectively. It is often difficult to recognise who is articulating certain ideas and whose positions are being articulated, especially when the official voice of the authorities can assume the forms of vernacular speech. Ordinary internet users themselves are an important part of this system, consuming and spreading the messages that circulate in this grey zone.

Digital propaganda techniques on Runet include spreading the pro-state message in the form of entertaining stories, jokes, funny visuals and consumer goods. Using commercial advertising strategies and the framework and repertoire of popular culture, digital propaganda becomes interesting and attractive. The consumerisation of propaganda is used to invite the audience of digital media to choose the propagandistic product voluntarily. Propagandistic messages in social networks are tailored for digital media users, including those who consider themselves politically non-aligned and not susceptible to the effects of TV propaganda.

On Runet, propaganda helps to construct a grand narrative, whose elements are scattered across different internet platforms. The narrative revolves around the person of the president of the Russian Federation and presents Russia as a great superpower with powerful, unscrupulous opponents – the USA, EU, NATO and their allies, against whom it has to struggle. Its main message is the construction of a distinctive type of identity – the identity of the majority, imagined as 'winners' who are united around the figure of the Russian national leader. This sort of propaganda, enhanced by commercialisation, pretends to be devoid of ideology, though a political agenda is at its very centre.

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¹ The Arab Spring refers to the wave of revolutions and protests (late 2010–mid 2012) in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Social media played a crucial role in the organising of protesters and spreading of this revolutionary wave (Skinner 2011).

² <https://mail.ru/>.

³ <https://www.livejournal.com/media>.

⁴ @MID_RF.

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/maria.zakharova.167>.

⁶ <https://krispotupchik.livejournal.com/profile>.

⁷ <https://fritzmorgen.livejournal.com/profile>.

⁸ <https://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/profile>.

⁹ <https://rueconomics.ru/>.

¹⁰ <https://nation-news.ru/>

¹¹ <https://polit.info/>.

¹² 'MDK', over 10 million subscribers; 'Chotkie prikoly', 8 million subscribers, 'Ne poverish', over 6 million subscribers; 'Uboinyi iumor', over 6 million subscribers; 'SSHA – sponsor mirovogo terrora', over 250,000 subscribers; 'Vezhliyve liudi', approx. 250,000 subscribers; and 'Rossia – nashu stranu ne pobedit', 194,000 subscribers. Available at: <https://vk.com/mudakoff>; <https://vk.com/oroom>; <https://vk.com/ne.poverish>; https://vk.com/fucking_humor; https://vk.com/anti_usa_news; <https://vk.com/vegchelru>; <https://vk.com/rusmotivators>.

¹³ According to the statistics of his Twitter account, '@ARTEM_KLYUSHIN has 1,005,339 followers on Twitter. This account is #1,380 in the worldwide rank of the most popular Twitter users'. Accessed 12 October 2018, https://twittercounter.com/ARTEM_KLYUSHIN.

¹⁴ Aleksei Navalny is a Russian political activist, a founder of the Anti-Corruption Foundation (created in 2011). He has risen to popularity on the Russian internet first through his blog, then on YouTube and Twitter and other internet platforms including his website <https://navalny.com/> and the Foundation's site <https://fbk.info/>.

¹⁵ Russian derogatory word for Ukrainians.

¹⁶ Ukrainian derogatory word for Russians.

¹⁷ In recent years, the number of criminal cases against users who reposted or 'liked' internet memes has grown significantly. Despite such memes being qualified as 'extremist', legal proceedings are brought against them only inconsistently and they still circulate widely online. See Zotova (2018).